

## Conference Panel Summaries

### *Summary of Opening Remarks by Professor Merle Goldman on the Questions of Politics and Society in China*

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**M**erle Goldman, Professor Emerita of History at Boston University and Research Associate at the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research at Harvard University, delivered opening remarks on the questions of politics and society in China at the University of Chicago's *China and the Future of the World* conference on April 29, 2006. She was introduced by Alexander Graham, the conference vice-chair.

Professor Goldman began her speech by describing China's economic progress of the last three decades as having grown from the advances made by the Communist system that preceded it. According to Professor Goldman, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party laid a foundation that contributed in many ways to the economic improvement that would follow Mao's death. The CCP united China after more than fifty years of disunion, effected a very high literacy rate through statewide education, raised the position of women, developed infrastructure, and provided healthcare services that resulted in increased life expectancy. Professor Goldman identified these factors as very important for the economic reforms that Deng Xiaoping would institute after Mao's death.

Professor Goldman then described the Cultural Revolution as a catalyst for economic reform, because Mao effectively destroyed the institutions of the Chinese Communist Party and de-legitimized it in the eyes of the Chinese people. Following the Cultural Revolution, successor Deng Xiaoping recognized that the only way to regain political legitimacy and maintain a stable society was for the Party to deliver economic benefits to the Chinese people. Professor Goldman points out that unlike the Soviet Union, China's period under Communism had been relatively brief, and there remained a tradition of market-based agriculture that facilitated a rapid rise of small entrepreneurs once economic reforms were enacted. These small entrepreneurs constituted a lower-middle class that provided an engine for economic growth, while also increasingly laying claim to its rights and speaking out on political issues. Professor Goldman noted that although the Chinese regime remains repressive, there is far more personal freedom in China now as compared with the period prior to economic reform; she cited the striking rise in public protests, to 87,000 in 2005, as evidence of a growing awareness of personal rights, demonstrated by demands for fair compensation for labor and land.

Professor Goldman went on to discuss China's future prospects for democratization. She expressed confidence that China, like other post-Confucian countries in Asia, would head in a more democratic direction. She cited Confucianism's emphasis on education and the resulting social mobility, as well as its tradition of criticism of abuse of power, as potentially democratizing forces. She noted that 90% of China's villages now vote for their own village head and council, and pointed to Taiwan in which a similar process took place; elections began at the village level, moved up to the township, then the province, culminating in national elections in 1996.

During the question-and-answer period, Professor Goldman addressed concerns about CCP reliance on Chinese nationalism to maintain its legitimacy, which might potentially foreshadow more aggressive Chinese foreign policy. Professor Goldman said that nationalism alone is not a viable substitute for Marxist-Leninist ideology. The most positive way to unify China, she said, is through a political system that can address the problems of the Chinese people directly.