

### *Panel Summary: Politics and Society in China*

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The panel “Politics and Society in China” was held on April 29, 2006 as part of the University of Chicago’s two-day *China and the Future of the World* conference. The three panelists were Professor Cheng Li, William R. Kenan Professor of Government and Chair of the Asian Studies Program at Hamilton College, and an expert on China’s leadership and the Chinese Communist Party; Dr. Lei Guang, Associate Professor of Political Science at San Diego State University and an expert on China’s peasants and migrant workers; and Dr. Wang Ping, Associate Professor of English at Macalester College and author of books on contemporary Chinese society including *Aching for Beauty*. The panel was moderated by University of Chicago Professor Dali Yang, Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago and an expert on Chinese politics.

Professor Cheng Li began his remarks with observations on Hu Jintao, arguing that the Chinese president has been widely misjudged and misunderstood. Professor Li said that Hu has proved to be an effective and deliberate political actor with an agenda of long-term incremental political reform and a great admiration for Franklin Roosevelt. In a calculating manner, Hu confused some potential critics by presenting himself as a populist leader, yet he did not threaten the power of the CCP by favoring political liberalization; he increased the transparency of the decision-making process in some areas while strongly controlling the press in other areas; and on the Taiwan issue he warmly received Taiwanese opposition party leaders in their visit to the mainland but supported the harsh anti-succession law. Aware of the limits of his own power and the need to balance market reform with assistance to vulnerable groups, Hu has pursued pragmatic policies to weaken rivals and maintain the power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), according to Professor Li.

Professor Li next discussed his assessment of the current state of Chinese elite politics, centered around a balancing partnership of two coalitions within the CCP, a system he dubbed “one party, two factions.” In Professor Li’s view, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao are part of the populist coalition associated with the Chinese Communist Youth League, with most members from less privileged backgrounds and the less-developed inland regions of China. The leaders of this coalition are much more popular in CCP internal elections than the opposing elitist coalition whose core is known widely as the “Shanghai Mafia.” This second coalition, drawing its members from higher socioeconomic groups and China’s coastal regions, includes Jiang Zemin and the current PRC vice president Zeng Qinghong; it occupies more seats in the Politburo than the populist coalition.

Policy differences between the two coalitions include the fact that the populist coalition seeks to cool down the growth rate with a macroeconomic control policy, focusing on building social cohesion, whereas the Shanghai leaders still believe GDP growth is the top priority, Professor Li said during the question-and-answer period. Professor Li indicated that the two informal factions have about the same amount of power today; the two top positions in each of China’s top five organizations are filled by one leader from each coalition. The era of “strong men politics” in China is over, and the two coalitions must cooperate to maintain the power of the CCP. In response to a question on the likely successors to President Hu and Premier Wen after they step down in 2012, Professor Li mentioned the names Li Kechang, Li Yuanchao, and Wang Qishan.

In his presentation, Dr. Lei Guang discussed the stark inequality between the urban and rural populations of China and the most current thinking about how to improve opportunities for China's rural poor. The urban-rural income gap has increased since the early 1980s, and currently residents of rural areas earn only just over 30% of the income earned by city residents. Dr. Guang expressed the overall problem using the terms of Li Changping, the three-line *san-nong* (three rural problems) phrase: "peasants are really poor, rural life is extremely hard, and agriculture is in real crisis." Since Li published a national bestseller on the subject in 2002, thousands of scholarly articles and three top-level Chinese Communist Party documents have been published on rural reform and this has become a critical priority for the CCP.

After summarizing the extent of the urban-rural problems in China and describing the growing comprehensiveness of the discourse about the rural crisis, Dr. Guang explained that there are two broad proposals for improving the Chinese rural situation. Justin Yifu Lin, a University of Chicago graduate, coined the now-prominent term "building a new socialist countryside" to describe a market-oriented proposal allowing the free market to break barriers to the flow of labor and investment to and from rural areas, assisted by substantial government infrastructure investment. The alternative proposal aims to reduce migration between the poor rural areas and cities by channeling investment into rural areas until peasants have enough incentive to stay on their own land. Under this proposal, peasants' right to farm land is seen as a subsistence guarantee for them.

Dr. Guang pointed out that elements of both plans are evident in current CCP policies, because the central government tends to advocate pro-market policies further integrating urban and rural areas while rejecting the privatization of land and avoiding making fundamental changes to the family farm system. He argued that the deeper structural cause of the urban-rural divide is connected to the lack of proper representation of rural interests. The temporary measures adopted thus far are insufficient to address the structural problem; such measures include the repeal of agricultural taxes and reform of the household registration system, which greatly limited peasants' access to cities in the past. Dr. Guang concluded his remarks by saying that a long-term solution to the rural crisis requires both increasing the strength of markets and repairing the fundamental imbalance of political power. Creating peasant civic associations was described as one way to repair the imbalance.

Dr. Wang Ping began her talk on women in China with slides documenting the evolution of images of women over the past century. Through the first part of the twentieth century, a woman's bound feet were a sign of discipline and the quality of daughter, mother, and wife she could become. Throughout the Mao era, women came to be seen as revolutionaries and model workers equal to men, and their numbers swelled in government and the workplace. Dr. Wang pointed out that Mao also sought to erase distinctions between urban and rural lifestyles, and in one photograph shown by Dr. Wang it is not possible to distinguish between the city girl and the peasant girl.

In the current reform era, the ideal of "beauty, brains, and business" prevails among urban women today, to some extent turning women into commodities, whereas women in rural areas are simply trying to keep their families from breaking up. Some six million younger women, unable to make a living otherwise, are sex workers in China today, Dr. Wang said, citing World Health Organization

statistics. Substantially dependent upon their children, some abandoned older women take their own lives, resulting in suicide rates much higher for women than for men. Dr. Wang concluded by reading two of her poems relating to the theme of challenges facing women in China's reform era, particularly their commodification and the lack of educational opportunities due to financial hardship. In the question-and-answer period, Dr. Wang expressed hope that women in China were now in the process of "awakening," just as the global effort to empower women is gaining ground elsewhere.

In response to a question on the development of democracy, Professor Li identified three areas with "solid progress" relating to Chinese democracy: inner-party democracy, beginning with the two factions he identified earlier, is increasing; local elections are moving slowly up to higher levels of government; and the number of non-governmental and civil society organizations is growing dramatically. Professor Li predicted that the collective leadership system and the two factions will persist for the next 10, 15, or 20 years. He noted that one additional positive sign is that President Hu Jintao has a human rights expert and a civil society expert as top advisors.

In contrast to this optimistic view of democratic change, Dr. Guang noted that in rural areas the trend of organizational decline has led to a serious weakening of the capacity of rural populations to articulate their interests, and he said he did not expect this trend to reverse in the near future. He later pointed out that the CCP recognizes the very serious nature of the widespread peasant resistance that is already taking place, and the government sees the benefit of some limited rural organizations. These rural organizations have a double-edged nature, however: they can provide a basis for organized political resistance just as well as they can channel grievances and prevent unrest. Recent party documents associated with "building a new socialist countryside" include some efforts to create economic and commercial organizations to help channel grievances to the government, Dr. Guang said.

All three panelists acknowledged that corruption is a serious problem in China today, undermining the legitimacy of the government. Dr. Guang noted that the most important attribute of this situation is the perception of widespread corruption that has emerged, centered around local rather than national figures. Professor Li quoted one government official who claimed 90% of Chinese officials are corrupt despite the severe punishment of execution for many kinds of corruption. Dr. Guang said that the public's measurement of corruption is based upon two standards: nostalgic memories of the Maoist era and the standards set by the central government; these standards and the increasing visibility of corruption paradoxically strengthened the power of the central government over local areas. Most people do not see the corruption issue as elevated to the level of the entire CCP. Professor Li commented that China's leaders face a dilemma because so much of the CCP is corrupt that strong anti-corruption measures might alienate the party members the leaders must depend upon. Nonetheless, he argued that corruption is not China's most serious problem at the moment. Dr. Wang called upon the Chinese people to continue demonstrating and speaking out against corruption, since she believes that will force the government to create a more effective anti-corruption infrastructure.

Professor Li noted that the idea of the Chinese Dream is growing in China, inspired by the Ameri-

can Dream—hopes for a good education, a middle-class lifestyle, a car, etc. This dream is a fascinating development that should be encouraged by the United States, Professor Li said; he noted, however, that the U.S. and China have shared responsibilities to combat the energy and environmental challenges that accompany China's economic rise. "We should not let the Chinese Dream become someone's nightmare, but at the same time we should really encourage the country to move along with the world to become one of the most prosperous countries," he said.