

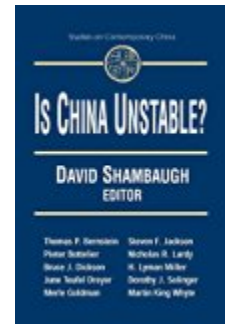
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David Shambaugh, ed. *Is China Unstable? Assessing the Factors*. Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2000. 177 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7656-0573-3.

Reviewed by Roger E. Chapman (Department of Social Sciences, Lincoln Trail College, Illinois)
Published on H-US-Japan (October, 2002)



Gazing Into the Chinese Crystal Ball: “Stable Unrest” instead of Brezhnev/Stagnation or Gorbachev/Implosion

Gazing Into the Chinese Crystal Ball: “Stable Unrest” instead of Brezhnev/Stagnation or Gorbachev/Implosion

In this collection of essays, “stable unrest” is the optimistic projection for China’s future. Stability and unrest, the authors suggest, can be simultaneous realities. Stable unrest, it is felt, might be a safe middling ground between the two extremes of stagnation and implosion. *Is China Unstable?* is the fruit of a conference sponsored by the Sigur Center for Asian Studies at George Washington University on June 10, 1998, a project originally inspired by Professors Kokubun Ryosei and Kojima Tomoyuki of Keio University in Tokyo. This volume is a slightly updated version of the original research report, offering a worthy discussion on the future of China from political, economic, and historical perspectives.[1]

For over a century China has better known instability than stability, so when it comes to peering into the crystal ball there is a tendency for many Sinologists to read a future of unrest for the world’s largest country, which has a population of 1.3 billion. H. Lyman Miller, in the chapter “How Do We Know If China Is Unstable?” (pp. 18-25) suggests that the past is prologue. A cursory examination of China’s most recent 150 years shows a land that has experienced much political and social upheaval. The essayists of *Is China Unstable?* are unanimous in their assessments that “the factors and forces of potential instability in China are strong and growing,” but at the same time they have a hope for “stable unrest” (p. x). In the paradoxical words of Miller, “Fragmentation may turn out to be pluralization; corruption may be commer-

cialization; and disintegration may be decentralization” (p. 25).

The “stability” scenario versus the “chaos” scenario is analyzed by Martin King Whyte, in the excellent concluding chapter “Chinese Social Trends: Stability or Chaos?” (pp. 143-163). On one hand, China in its adoption of a market economy has avoided many of the pitfalls of the former Soviet Union and the old Warsaw Pact nations of Eastern Europe. Overall, there has been a definite rise in living standards, although these standards are low in comparison with the West. As reinforced by the bloody Tiananmen Square crackdown of 1989, there has been on the part of the general Chinese populace a tendency to be accepting of the political status quo. On the other hand, thus far no equivalent moral vision has been presented to the society for replacing the orthodoxy once provided by Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. The revival of neo-Confucianism, as a reaction against Western liberalism, has been offered (p. 117) and some people have sought solace in religion, such as the Falun Gong sect (pp. 158-159, 163n23), but by and large the moral vacuum remains unfilled. The free market has brought about social evils such as foreign ownership, landlordism, prostitution, criminal syndicates, etc. For Whyte, “stability” and “chaos” are truths that should not be singled out and isolated, as otherwise the analysis will be akin to the proverbial picture of blind men groping the different parts of the elephant.

There is a temptation to compare and contrast developments in China with the latter days of the Soviet Union

and the first decade of the Russian Federation's adoption of a market economy. Indeed, parallels seem apparent. As Soviets during the time of Brezhnev had largely lost faith in Marxist ideology, so likewise have Chinese citizens (p. 37). As Russians have long enjoyed telling jokes at the expense of their Kremlin leaders, so now the Chinese leadership is the target of irreverent humor (pp. 147-148). As corruption has been a problem in the Soviet Union and the new Russia ("*nomenklatura* democracy," it has been dubbed), so also is corruption a threat to the health of Chinese society (pp. 24, 36, 48, 49). The nature of *guanxi* in China (p. 36) reminds one of Russia's culture of *blot*. As the Russian mafia has replaced the Soviet *apparatchiki* (although in some cases the players are one and the same), "feudal influences" have replaced Chinese Party control (p. 42). Both societies have implemented economic reform on the backs of the elderly and the poor, the pensioners and the peasants, a sad testimony to nations that had once taken up the cause of Marxism, which, even when practiced poorly, at least had a pretense of economic justice.

Both Russia and China have ethnic problems. These challenges have become more serious in the absence of Marxist rule. During the time of Gorbachev there was ethnic unrest in the Soviet Union and minorities resented Russian hegemony. The war in Chechnya is an example of continual ethnic unrest for Kremlin leaders in post-Soviet times. Serious ethnic tensions are part of Chinese reality and some minorities want greater autonomy or full independence. The Hans are the dominant ethnic group of China, enjoying the best economic and educational opportunities, a situation much resented by the minority regions. The resentment is especially strong when Hans live in minority provinces and enjoy all of the advantages, even though they are essentially foreigners in those localities. June Teufel Dreyer, in her essay "The Potential for Instability in Minority Regions," notes that these minority areas along the borders are potential seedbeds for rebellion, aided by contact with foreigners who visit as tourists or investors (pp. 125-142). Tibetans maintain contact with Nepal and India; Yunan and Dai minorities with Laos, Burma, and Thailand; Xinjiang minorities and Inner Mongolians with their own people inside Russia; Chinese Koreans with South Korea; and Muslims (Hui, Uyghurs and Kazakhs) with the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and Turkey. In the post-September 11 era, China has conveniently categorized the repression of its unhappy Muslim population as part of the worldwide war on terrorism. (Eleven months after September 11, in a gesture of appeasement toward China,

the United States added to its list of terrorist organizations the East Turkestan Islamic Movement of the Xinjiang province.)

Beijing rulers have in their favor the power of nationalism. The intellectuals of China are very nationalistic (p. 117), whereas most intellectuals in Russia stop short of the xenophobia by which Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is known. Both countries are concerned about their prestige and stature at the international level, but whereas China wants to be a great civilization (p. 118), Russia's modest goal is simply to be "normal." Overall, today's Russian thinkers are cosmopolitan in outlook, seeing Western Europe as a model. In China, the economic gains have produced a sense of national pride as well as a deep resentment toward the United States, the number one importer of Chinese goods. The Chinese patriots posit the United States as the "other" and depict it (probably rightly so) as trying to contain Beijing's rising power (p. 118). A Chinese bestseller of the mid-1990s, *China Can Say No*, urged China to resist American hegemony. Later the Chinese government banned the book, as top leaders feared surges of xenophobic outrage that might spin out of control and turn into a backlash against Beijing (p. 118). Similar fears have been voiced in Russia, where fascists like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and the late Aleksandr Lebed have gained much notoriety by denouncing the West in general and the United States specifically as the other. (Zhirinovskiy wrote the classic of Russian demagoguery, *I Spit on the West*.) Most Russians seem to have no burning desire for their nation to return to superpower status, but the Chinese apparently long for their country to emerge from its Third World status and take center stage. Both nations have lobbied hard to be incorporated into global trade organizations and economic summits, taking quick offense at what they perceive to be less-than-adequate respect from rival economic powers.

The USSR had its share of dissidents, and so now China has its own. Western media have been utilized by the dissidents of both countries to exert external pressure on their governments. Unfortunately for the human rights movement in China, the reliance on Western liberalism for legitimization has been a liability in the face of a rising tide of nationalist sentiment that has been embraced by almost all the factions of society (p. 117). Merle Goldman, in her essay "The Potential for Instability Among Alienated Intellectuals and Students in Post-Mao China," observes that there are two groups that could potentially threaten China's stability (at least, according to the leaders in Beijing): the student movement

and the “underground intellectual-worker” alliance (pp. 112-124). The alienated student movement, however, will not anytime soon connect with the general public if it is viewed as aping Western thought. Not taking any chances, the authorities in Beijing monitor the families of the victims of the 1989 massacre and many of the surviving protest leaders remain behind bars.

Nicholas R. Lardy, in “Sources of Macroeconomic Instability in China” (pp. 57-62), states that financial stability is the key to China’s future. According to Lardy, China is at risk due to the lack of control at the macroeconomic level. Should there be an economic slowdown the repercussions on the banking system will be severe because Chinese enterprises are highly indebted. About one-fourth of the loans are non-performing. Many Chinese firms have six times more debt than equity. This is not to suggest that China is lacking in economic advantages. As noted by Pieter Bottelier, in the chapter “How Stable Is China? An Economic Perspective” (pp. 63-78), external economic pressures have little bearing on China. For example, the Asian financial crisis had little negative impact. Since its currency, the *Renminbi* (RMB), is not freely convertible, China is not vulnerable to monetary speculation. The RMB has actually appreciated in value against the American dollar. Also, China has continued to enjoy a high rate of GDP growth (although questions linger about how it is measured [pp. 67-68]) and in recent years the country has enjoyed good harvests.

Although China has some advantages by being sheltered from certain external threats, it nonetheless has its own internal challenges. David Shambaugh, in his essay “The Chinese Leadership: Cracks in the Façade?” (pp. 26-39), suggests that there is little political or military instability. The real threat is the growing ranks of the unemployed due to the economic reforms, which have led to wildcat strikes, sit-downs, protests, etc. Despite such problems, Dorothy J. Solinger, in her chapter “The Potential for Urban Unrest: Will the Fencers Stay on the Piste?” (pp. 79-94), believes that China will maintain a course of overall stability. Thomas P. Bernstein, in “Instability in Rural China” (pp. 95-111), reaches the same conclusion despite some growing unrest in the rural sector.

Greatly fearing any development that might potentially lead to a Polish-style solidarity movement, China insists on gradualist reform (pp. 66, 121, 123, 154-155). There has been much protest in China, such as farmer and labor disputes (pp. 49-51, 154), but the government responds with a carrot-and-stick approach. Small con-

cessions are granted to the mass of protesters, while the leaders are arrested and imprisoned. The government works hard to prevent the isolated demonstrations in the various provinces from turning into a nationwide movement. Bruce J. Dickson, in the chapter “Political Instability at the Middle and Lower Levels: Sign of a Decaying CCP, Corruption, and Political Dissent” (pp. 40-56), points out that the base of support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has shifted from workers and peasants to educated urban elements. Consequently, laborers and farmers have found alternative forms of authority, chiefly managers on the workshop floor, village clan leaders, and even religious groups. The response of the CCP to these emerging power bases has varied, from violent crackdowns to cooperating or co-opting.

As long as students, farmers, and workers remain in their own separate worlds, ignorant about the big picture of dissatisfaction, Beijing can maintain this course. This is partly why the Internet is rigidly controlled, to prevent protesters from making links and better mobilizing. It remains to be seen if China can emerge into a first-rate economic power and have its citizenry remain in the dark about what is taking place inside its borders. Most Chinese are not informed about what took place at Tiananmen Square in 1989, despite President Bill Clinton’s statement in a broadcast over Chinese television that the crackdown had been “wrong” (p. 121). Unfortunately, since the barbarity of Tiananmen did not lead to instability (pp. 49-50, 66), the Chinese leaders doubtless believe that they made a wise decision. Can there be *perestroika* without *glasnost*? Can there be economic greatness without great emphasis on the welfare of the individual? Will history simply not matter for the Chinese people of the twenty-first century? The contributors to this volume seem to sympathize with the Chinese leadership’s rationale for stability, as if the end justifies the means. At best, the authors regard the challenges facing China during this time of change as like Beijing holding a tiger by its tail, an acknowledgement that modernization is no easy task.

Overall, *Is China Unstable?* is a handy assessment and offers heuristic analytical tools. The appendix, which is part of the book’s introduction by Steven E. Jackson, consists of a very useful and interesting “Stability Typology” chart (pp. 16-17). The chart breaks down the population into the following segments: elite, military, students/intellecuals, workers, unemployed, farmers, and minorities. The ramifications of hyperstability, stability, and instability are spelled out for the listed population segments. The line from hyperstability to instability is

clarified with the following range of descriptive terms: stagnation, stasis, dynamic equilibrium, disruption, rebellion, revolution, and collapse. Such an analysis could be used for studying any society.

The book does have some shortcomings. Due to its very dry approach, nearly void of anecdotes and people narratives, the book would be of limited use in the classroom despite what the publisher suggests on the book's jacket. Although it might be a feat persuading undergraduates to read this collection of essays, graduate students should find it an informative source. The material covers history, sociology, political science, international studies, and economics. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the ideas of *Is China Unstable?* with Robert Strayer's *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?* (1998).

The eleven essayists seemingly represent a narrow range of scholars. Three of the authors have past or

present ties with George Washington University. At least two (Thomas Bernstein and Merle Goldman) have co-authored a book. The editor has ties with the Brookings Institution, as does Nicholas Lardy. The conservative outlook is underscored by the fact that Pieter Bottelier is a retired economist of the World Bank—in fact, in China he headed the World Bank's mission outpost from 1993 to 1997. H. Lyman Miller's professorship at the Naval Graduate School in Monterey, California, is another example of the conservative credentials of the contributors. One wonders why Kokubun Ryosei and Kojima Tomoyuki, the two Keio University professors who inspired the book, were not a part of this final project. Did those Japanese scholars lack a certain prerequisite optimism? Although China's problems are duly noted, perhaps the authors' collective desire for the giant of the Far East to integrate itself into the international capitalist order causes them to underestimate the potential for regression and revolt.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-us-japan>

Citation: Roger E. Chapman. Review of Shambaugh, David, ed., *Is China Unstable? Assessing the Factors*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. October, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6796>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.