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China’s Modernization II

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Manufacturing Dissent: Domestic and International Ramifications of China’s Summer of Labor Unrest

Francis Schortgen and Shalendra Sharma

Abstract

With the onset of heretofore unprecedented instances of labor unrest in the summer of 2010, it has become readily apparent that China’s economy has reached a critical juncture. Perceptions of rising social inequity and redistributive injustice are indicative of strains of economic growth that have proved as inevitable as they are consequential. Against the backdrop of an impending leadership transition and a global economy emerging from recessionary throes, changing labor market conditions will shape economic development and growth in substantive ways as first-tier cities and provinces are beginning a transition from take-off to early maturity stage of development. In its effort to mitigate regional disparities, China is locked into a precarious socio-economic balancing act with far-reaching consequences for domestic stability and international competitiveness. What are the short- to medium-term implications for China’s domestic political economy space? What is the likely effect on China’s global labor cost arbitrage and international competitiveness?

As it enters the second decade of the 21st century, China is displaying all the signs of transitioning into a new stage of economic development. The economic opening up of China in the early 1980s had sowed the seeds for “the most successful joint venture in world history” – the combination of Western capital and purchasing power and Chinese low-cost labor (Steingart 2008, 105). Throughout the initial reform period, policymakers focused most of their time and energy on crafting policies aimed at sustaining economic growth and development at all costs. On the surface, China’s economic transformation is nothing short of an economic miracle. However, on closer analysis, the sustainability of its newfound status as a powerful engine for economic growth in Asia and the world critically depends on the government’s ability to mitigate potentially destabilizing side-effects of rapid economic growth. Moreover, the breadth and depth of the expanding fault lines in China’s economic terrain serve as powerful reminders of the precarious nature of China’s political economy and an economic development trajectory punctuated by social, institutional or political
pressures and challenges. As a newly-recognized lower-middle-income country\(^1\), the economic policies that suited China’s take-off stage of development and helped to dispel the image of a low-income country need to be recalibrated to effectively ensure the realization of a well-off society (xiaokang shehui, 小康社会) and harmonious society (hexie shehui, 和谐社会). In recent years, the Chinese government has begun to openly acknowledge the urgency of charting a new economic course in order to address rising levels of social stratification and the emerging middle class dynamics (Li 2010; Whyte 2010a, 2010b).

From a macro-economic perspective, the Chinese economy is also beginning to display noticeable strains. In an uncharacteristically blunt assessment indicative of Beijing’s heightened sensitivity to economic conditions, Premier Wen Jiabao described the prevailing macro-economic conditions as “unstable, unbalanced, uncoordinated, and unsustainable.” Amid rising concerns about the sustainability of an export-oriented development paradigm in light of the recent global economic downturn, ramping up domestic consumption is rapidly emerging as a first-order priority of 21st century economic reform. Commenting on the country’s contemporary “consumption conundrum” Michael Pettis, a professor at Peking University’s Guanghua School of Management, states that “China has come to depend on exports, especially to the United States, to absorb that excess capacity – something U.S. consumers were happy to do especially over the past decade. But the effect of jitters over the strength of that U.S. consumption shows that one of the most important reforms China needs now is to reduce its vulnerability to U.S. consumers by boosting consumption at home” (Pettis 2009). Indeed, the need to rebalance economic growth is assuming a new level of urgency ahead of the 2012 leadership transition.

In 1986, Deng Xiaoping was quoted in an interview as saying that, “[T]o get rich is no sin. However, what we mean by getting rich is different from what you mean. Wealth in a socialist society belongs to the people. To get rich in a socialist society means prosperity for the entire people. The principles of socialism are: first, development of production and second, common prosperity. We permit some people and some regions to become prosperous first, for the purpose of achieving common prosperity faster…” The resulting capital and wealth accumulation not only created vibrant growth poles and agglomeration

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\(^1\) The World Bank classifies national economies into low income (US$995 or less) lower middle income (US$996 - $3,945), upper middle income (US$3,946 - $12,195), and high income (US$12,196 or more) categories (see: http://data.worldbank.org/about/country-classifications). Judging by the per capita GNI (calculated based on the World Bank Atlas method) levels in 2008 (US$2,930) and 2009 (US$3,650), China is on track to achieving upper middle income status within the next few years. See also. http://data.worldbank.org/ for details.
China’s Economic Transformation: The Good, the Bad (and the Ugly?)

The adoption of an “Open Door” policy in 1978 put the Chinese economy on a path of fundamental transformation and vitality, eventually surpassing Japan as the world’s second-largest economy in late 2010. Over the course of four decades of economic reform and restructuring, China’s GDP has risen from Rmb362.4 billion in 1978 to Rmb33.5 trillion in 2009. The incidence of extreme poverty has also been in noticeable, albeit uneven, decline throughout the reform period. According to a study conducted by World Bank economist, the rural poverty rate declined from 76 percent in 1980 to less than 13% in 2001. Meanwhile, urban poverty rates dropped from 6 percent in 1981 to 0.5 percent in 2002 (Ravallion and Chen 2007). Finally, the ‘middle class’ phenomenon is
rapidly taking hold in China as well. McKinsey & Co. estimates that the share of urban households falling into the lower and upper middle class segments, at 22 percent in 2005, could reach 71 percent by 2015 and 79 percent by 2025 (Farrell et al. 2006).


Overshadowing the obvious success of economic reform, however, is the fact that break-neck growth in the post-Mao era has also contributed to a widening of social inequalities (see figure 1). As Mancur Olson aptly noted, “… rapid economic growth means rapid economic change, and that economic change entails social dislocation”. As a result it is conceivable that “both the gainers and the losers from economic growth can be destabilizing forces”, which in due course may lead to political instability (Olson 1963). In short, China’s post-Mao economic reform and restructuring efforts may well have sown the seeds for eventual social mobilization and pressurization of the political sphere.

China's gradual discrediting of the communist moral order in favor of a more market-conforming economic and social order was an early litmus test of Beijing’s general commitment to economic reform and restructuring. Against the backdrop of the ideological end-of-history perspective, efforts towards deepening economic and social development – which Deng Xiaoping reaffirmed in
his 1992 Nanxun (Southern Inspection) tour (Wong and Zheng 2001), urging renewed efforts at opening up (kaifang, 开放) assumed a heightened degree of urgency by the early 1990s.

Seen from the perspective of the Chinese leadership, it was seen as instrumental in helping to address institutional uncertainties and weaknesses as well as build a new foundation of political legitimacy (Zheng 1997; Zheng 2004). Committing to sustaining economic growth, deepening economic development and improving people’s overall livelihood came to be seen as the only remaining option for consolidating political legitimacy, while at the same time minimizing pressurization of the political sphere. From a societal perspective, meanwhile, the emergence of a “post-communist personality”, defined by its “ethos of consumerism and unprecedented opportunities for individual wealth and pleasure” (Wang 2002) provided an additional imperative for deep reform (shenhua gaige, 深化改革) (Dittmer and Liu 2006).

The socio-political and socio-economic ideologies adopted by Beijing since 2000, including Jiang Zemin’s ‘Three Represents’ (san ge dai biao, 三个代表) and Hu Jintao’s ‘Scientific Development Concept’ (kexue fazhan guan, 科学发展观) underline the government’s keen appreciation of the latent dangers of rising income inequality. In light of the very real possibility of “growing old before growing rich”, popular support for deepening marketization is progressively coming under strain (Fang and Wang 2009). Seen in conjunction with obvious growth and income disparities between coastal and rural regions, it is hardly surprising that perceptions of distributive injustice are on the rise.

Sweeping state-owned enterprise (SOE) reform efforts, begun in earnest under Premier Zhu Rongji in 1998 accentuated feelings of relative deprivation in Chinese society. The resulting privatization drive largely coincided with the gradual phasing out of the ‘iron rice bowl’ (tie fan wan, 铁饭碗) – essentially a cradle-to-grave social contract that amplified the declining profitability woes of many SOEs (Green and Liu 2005, Holz 2003; Hughes 2002; Yusuf et al 2006). Apart from this economic policy shift, other contributing factors behind China’s strains of economic growth include changing social attitudes as reflected by an emerging middle class (Li 2010; Goodman 2008), rising expectations of a new generation of (migrant) workers, structural challenges of China’s pension system, mounting employment pressures (Gold et al 2009; Shi and Sato 2006) and the specter of rising inflation.

In recent years, the social challenges related to SOE layoffs have been exacerbated by placement problems for college graduates. Beginning in 1999, the government embarked committed to an expansion of higher education, partly to offset temporary employment pressures for high school graduates compet-
ing with laid-off SOE workers (Bai 2006; Cao 2009). As a result of aggressive commercialization, the number of college graduates increased from 850,000 in 1999 to just over 6 million in 2009. The Ministry of Education estimates that roughly 25 percent, or 1.5 million of the 6.3 million students who graduated in 2010 have failed to secure a job (Roberts 2010).

From a short-term perspective, the socio-economic pressures of graduate unemployment will present the Chinese government with a serious challenge as it aims to create a ‘harmonious’ and ‘well-off’ society by 2020. Without immediate prospects of a job, many college graduates of rural families decide to remain in China’s larger cities – where they have become known as the ‘ant tribe’ (yi zu, 蚁族) – in the hope of eventually landing a job. Against the backdrop of thirty years of reform and economic development, people in the lower social strata are no longer content with resigning themselves to ‘let some people get rich first’ (rang yi bu fen ren xian fu qi lai, 让一部分人先富起来). Rather, in the contemporary setting, Deng Xiaoping’s ‘to get rich is glorious’ (zhifu guangrong, 致富光荣) dictum appears to instill a sense of entitlement in China’s working class. Not content with delaying gratification in the face of perceptions of relative deprivation, and considering changes in social attitudes, demands and expectations among China’s new generation of migrant workers and masses of unemployed graduates, a scenario whereby these (and other) ‘social underdogs’, driven by a sense of entitlement to at least partake in a comfortable lower-middle class lifestyle, are channeling their general social discontent into an “angry youth” (fenqing, 愤青) consciousness, thus posing a clear and present danger to social stability and challenging the political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, is becoming an increasingly distinct possibility. “Once this consciousness takes root,” notes Yu Jianrong, director of the Social Problem Research Center, Rural Development Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “it will cause more social unrest at the grass-roots level. We can see this budding mentality at Internet forums where views opposing mainstream values are expressed with regard to political proposals or controversial social issues. These defiant opinions reflect the social underdogs’ dissatisfaction and protest, and if not checked, will aggravate hatred against the bureaucracy” (Yu 2010, 8).

Rather than gradually ushering in political liberalization and higher levels of accountability, if not strengthening the prospects for democratization, China’s sustained economic reform has reinforced a perception of socio-economic entrapment among China’s less-fortunate social groups. A perception that is further aggravated by the government’s failure “to create employment conditions and expand employment through promotion of economic and social
development,” as stated in Article 10 of the 1994 Labor Law. Viewed against the backdrop of a “decentralized predatory state” (Pei 2008, 138) and endemic institutionalization of corruption (Wederman 2004), the intensifying assertiveness of China’s working classes is as much an indication of civil society stirrings and democratization ambitions as it is a manifestation of frustration over unfulfilled or delayed economic gratification.

Deliberate yet cautious pragmatism – famously captured by Deng Xiaoping’s observation that “it doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white; as long as it catches mice, it’s a good cat” (bai mao, hei mao, neng dai hao zi jiu shi hao mao, 白猫, 黑猫, 能逮耗子就是好猫) and “Crossing the river by feeling for stones (mozhe shitou guohe, 摸着石头过河) – has become a hallmark of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the course of three decades of economic reform and restructuring.

In light of a rising incidence of labor unrest, public order disturbances (扰乱公共秩序犯罪) and other so-called 'mass incidents' (群体性事件), reliance on such pragmatism alone, while necessary, may not be sufficient to deal with the broader consequences of China’s remarkable economic transformation, global economic integration, and disruptive changes in social attitudes (Guthrie 2008; Hu 2007). Labor unrest, disputes and strikes are no longer just limited to regions that experienced widespread economic and social dislocation as a result of SOE reform efforts, nor are the grievances limited to layoffs or social welfare and insurance concerns. A significant number of mass incidents, which have risen roughly ten-fold since 1993 to reach 87,000 in 2005, meanwhile, are fueled by frustration and anger against corrupt and heavy-handed practices of local and/or regional government officials (Fewsmith 2008).

The accumulating challenges and pressures in China’s social sphere carry highly consequential levels of cumulative and systemic risk. Failure to embrace and implement more sweeping, pro-active and broad-based policy initiatives would inevitably increase the pressure on the political sphere to a level not seen since the events that led up to the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989. At present, the documented incidents of social unrest have been geographically dispersed, without any real evidence of broader coordination between or feelings of unity among the people involved. This does not, however, detract from the possibility of such incidents triggering large-scale mobilization and potentially coalescing into a broad-based and coordinated movement (Tanner 2004, 142). In short, on the eve of a leadership transition in 2012, China has arrived at a critical juncture in its development.

tal path, with far-reaching consequences for political, economic and social stability.

China’s New Labor Regime: Good Intention, Bad Timing?

Aware of simmering tensions among the working class over the cumbersome and time-consuming labor arbitration and redress process, and wanting to pre-empt disruptive waves of labor activism, China’s National People’s Congress promulgated the Labor Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo laodong zhengyi tiaojie zhongcai fa, 中华人民共和国劳动争议调解仲裁法) on 29 December 2007 (effective 1 May 2008). This followed the earlier adoption of a new Labor Contract Law (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo laodong hetong fa, 中华人民共和国劳动合同法) on 29 June 2007 (and effective 1 January 2008), designed to “improve the labor contract system, specify the rights and obligations of both parties to the labor contracts, protect the legitimate rights and interests of the workers and construct and develop a harmonious and steady employment relationship.” Finally, the government published its first-ever white paper on human resources development on 10 September 2010, outlining policy measures to deal with employment pressures, appeared intended to convey the institutional commitment to creating an effective and efficient human resources development legal system.

In what would appear to be an ironic turn of events, these new laws – adopted in the hopes of reducing rapidly expanding fissures in China’s socio-economic firmament and streamlining labor mediation and arbitration processes – have also proved instrumental in lifting the lid of a cauldron of long-simmering discontent, amid renewed concerns about the real redistributive capacity of the country’s developmental model.

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China’s labor regime has entered a new phase. Although the new regime is not without lingering flaws and while concerns over “effective protection of workers’ rights” in light of much-needed improvements with regard to “respect for the rule of law and commitment to fundamental rights in general” will persist, it nevertheless presents a marked improvement over the previous regime (Lu 2008, 273). For their part, and judging by dramatic uptake of labor disputes in 2008 (see figure 2) – possibly influenced to some degree by the onset of the 2008 global economic crisis and its fallout in China’s manufacturing sector – workers have signaled a new sense of empowerment to put demands on a system that for far too long had been overly dismissive of their concerns.

Figure 2. Labor Disputes in China: 1994–2008. Source: China Labour Statistical Yearbook, various years.

Labor strife in the mid- to late 1990s was primarily a response to the government’s gradual privatization efforts as well as a reflection of concerns of economic and social dislocation experiences by laid-off SOE workers. This ‘first wave’ of unrest was largely centered on the Northeastern (Dongbei, 東北) region – Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang provinces, also commonly identified as China’s rustbelt. The dramatic jump in labor disputes in 2008, culminating in the dramatic labor mobilization in the summer of 2010, however, reflects the ever-increasing scope of social dissatisfaction. No longer geographically limited to the rust belt, labor discontent has been manifesting itself throughout the country, including most notably in the summer of 2010 in China’s ‘sunbelt’ (i.e.
Guangdong province) region (Ching 2007). By 2008, ‘accepted’ labor disputes in Guangdong province accounted for 22% of the national total, up from 13% in 2001. Over that same time period, Guangdong registered a staggering 650% increase in the number of disputes, compared to a national average growth of 348% (see table 1). Concerns over the implementation of labor contracts, meanwhile, have consistently taken primacy of place among the various causes of labor disputes (see figure 3).

Table 1. Labor Remuneration as a Causal Factor: 2001–2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>National Level</th>
<th>Guangdong Province</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Labor Disputes</td>
<td>Labor Remuneration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>154,621</td>
<td>45,172 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>184,116</td>
<td>59,144 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>226,391</td>
<td>76,774 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>260,471</td>
<td>85,132 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>313,773</td>
<td>103,183 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>317,162</td>
<td>103,887 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>350,182</td>
<td>108,953 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>693,465</td>
<td>225,061 (32%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Labour Statistical Yearbook, various years.

From the national level perspective, wage remuneration has only marginally increased as a causal factor in relative terms. However, the unusually sharp uptake in remuneration-related disputes Guangdong province in 2007–2008, resembles a heretofore unprecedented rejection of the compliant labor myth. Nowhere would this be more disconcerting than in Guangdong province, which has long been described as the world’s factory floor. Moreover, the very notion of cheap labor, and by extension China’s primacy of place for global low-cost manufacturing is likely to be affected by the trends emanating from the summer of labor unrest. As such, the ripple effects of China’s summer of labor unrest extend beyond the domestic sphere and could conceivably constitute a credible challenge to the sustainability of China’s rising primacy of place and ambitions in the global economy.
From Domestic Concerns to International Ramifications

From a policy perspective, China is facing a consequential ‘two-level game” (Putnam 1988) political economy dilemma. The most immediately viable options to defuse the rapidly accumulating domestic pressures invariably limit Chinese policy flexibility on important trade and currency issues on the international stage. After years of unquestionably reaping the benefits of global economic integration, the “globalization straightjacket” has caught up with China. The solution to the policy conundrum is anything but clear-cut: how to mitigate labor unrest and wage pressures without weakening China’s global labor arbitrage? How to simultaneously address domestic concerns while also deflecting the growing chorus of international criticism and policy pressures directed against a rising China? Judging from contemporary reality, the Chinese government, keenly aware of its precarious political legitimacy, is trying to balance developmental/foreign investment pragmatism with economic mercantilism.
Table 2. Wages and Welfare Overheads in Chinese Cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City, Province</th>
<th>Avg. Salary (RMB)</th>
<th>Total Minimum Employer Contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First-Tier Cities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>4,037</td>
<td>44.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangzhou, Guangdong</td>
<td>4,101</td>
<td>33.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>3,566</td>
<td>44.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second-Tier Cities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chengdu, Sichuan</td>
<td>2,273</td>
<td>36.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalian, Liaoning</td>
<td>2,859</td>
<td>38.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dongguan, Guangdong</td>
<td>3,549</td>
<td>25.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanjing, Jiangsu</td>
<td>3,008</td>
<td>39.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qingdao, Shandong</td>
<td>2,116</td>
<td>36.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzhou, Jiangsu</td>
<td>2,986</td>
<td>40.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tianjin</td>
<td>2,793</td>
<td>44.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhongshan, Guangdong</td>
<td>3,014</td>
<td>19.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third-Tier Cities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changshu, Jiangsu</td>
<td>3,355</td>
<td>38.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dandong, Liaoning</td>
<td>1,653</td>
<td>30.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Datong, Shanxi</td>
<td>1,742</td>
<td>39.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foshan, Guangdong</td>
<td>2,842</td>
<td>22.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiangmen, Guangdong</td>
<td>2,759</td>
<td>23.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jinzhou, Liaoning</td>
<td>1,505</td>
<td>35.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shantou, Guangdong</td>
<td>1,154</td>
<td>16.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wuxi, Jiangsu</td>
<td>3,552</td>
<td>37.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yantai, Shandong</td>
<td>2,068</td>
<td>34.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yichang, Hubei</td>
<td>1,610</td>
<td>34.40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whither Chinese labor arbitrage?

True convergence of wages will be a long time in coming, and yet the rising assertiveness of Chinese workers is beginning to prompt fears of an impending cheap labor shortage, with consequential implications for foreign businesses. In a recent 2010 report, the U.S.-China Business Council (2010) identified cost increases – including wage hikes and tax increases – as major operating concerns. With the growth in number of labor disputes fueled by demands for wage hikes between 2011 and 2008 exceeding the national average growth by nearly 180%, China’s global labor arbitrage is likely to be strained. The very notions of an abundance of cheap labor and the ‘China price’ will be in need of reappraisal (Chan 2010; Hamey 2008). In recent years, a gradual but consistent hollowing-out has befallen China’s low-end manufacturing activity, with neighboring economies, including Vietnam, India and Thailand being lower-cost competitive beneficiaries (Jung and Wagner 2008; Leung 2010; Yang et al. 2010).

In the near- to medium-term, China will still be in a position to defend its global labor arbitrage position through an internal “flying geese” developmental approach (Fang et al. 2009). The Chinese government’s 10 April 2010 publication of “Opinions of the State Council Concerning Further Improving the Work of Utilizing Foreign Investment” is an attempt to moving up the value-adding chain – partly by encouraging investment flows into “high-end manufacturing, high-tech, modern services, renewable energy, energy conservation and environmental protection industries”–while also retaining a competitive low-cost manufacturing advantage by encouraging foreign companies to locate labor-intensive, low-end manufacturing activities to its second- and third-tier cities that still enjoy a comparative labor-cost advantage (see table 2) (Ding and Neumann 2010). The ability to sustain that advantage, however, is intricately linked to a highly controversial issue at the international level – China’s position on currency revaluation.

The Labor-Yuan Nexus

The leadership in Beijing is fully cognizant that key to mitigating labor unrest is constant job creation and keep incomes rising. And, at the heart of this strategy is ratcheting up exports. The oft-mentioned phrase that China is the “world’s factory” is both a blessing and a curse. China is not only the world’s largest exporter of manufactured products, but also a major exporter of agricultural
commodities and other raw materials. This means that the Chinese economy is structurally dependent on exports. China’s share of merchandise exports increased from about $10 billion in the late 1970s to $326 billion in 2002. More precisely, China’s total share in world trade expanded from 1 percent in 1980 to about 6 percent in 2004 (Sharma 2009). In 2004, China’s merchandise trade with the world totaled around $1.3 trillion – the result of annual growth rates above 30 percent in some years. By end-2004, China had become the third-largest trading nation in dollar terms, behind the United States and Germany and just ahead of Japan. By 2008, net exports (or the trade-balance surplus) were about 12 percent of GDP (up from 2 percent earlier in the decade), and exports represent about 40 percent of China’s GDP. Overall, with the sum of exports and investment representing about 80 percent of GDP, China’s aggregate demand depends on its ability to sustain an export-based economic growth.

Thus, Beijing not only has an enormous stake in its export-led strategy, it is willing to engage in mercantilist economic policies – much to the chagrin of the United States and other countries – to further advance it. As is well known, to the United States, the origins and persistence of its massive trade deficit with China is due to Beijing’s mercantilist economic policies (see tables 3 and 4). The U.S. contention regarding China’s mercantile behavior is rather straightforward: Beijing engages in gratuitously unfair trade practices via outright protectionism, and most perniciously, by deliberately manipulating its currency. Specifically, in maintaining an undervalued exchange rate, Beijing has been able to dramatically increase its export growth and pile-up large current account surpluses – the latter by aggressively intervening in foreign exchange markets to keep its currency from appreciating. This in turn has resulted in a massive build-up of foreign exchange reserves (Goldstein and Lardy 2005). On the other hand, if Beijing allowed market-forces to determine the value of its currency, its current account surpluses would be much lower and American trade balances much healthier (Morrison and Labonte 2009).

### Table 3. U.S. Merchandise Trade with China: 1980–2007 (USD in billions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>U.S. Exports</th>
<th>U.S. Imports</th>
<th>U.S. Trade Balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>-10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>-33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>100.1</td>
<td>-83.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>102.3</td>
<td>-83.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>125.2</td>
<td>-103.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>152.4</td>
<td>-124.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>196.7</td>
<td>-162.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>243.5</td>
<td>-201.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>287.8</td>
<td>-232.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>321.5</td>
<td>-256.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: US Congressional Research Service (2008, 2)*

### Table 4. U.S. Merchandise Trade Balances with Major Trading Partners, 2007 (USD billion)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/Trading Group</th>
<th>U.S. Trade Balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>-791.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>-256.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Union (EU 27)</td>
<td>-107.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)</td>
<td>-127.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>-82.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>-64.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>-74.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)</td>
<td>-50.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: US Congressional Research Service (2008, 2)*
Not surprisingly, American manufacturers with the backing of lawmakers in Congress have long argued that the artificially low yuan has placed American companies at a huge competitive disadvantage _inter alia_ contributing to the bankruptcy of U.S. companies and the loss of tens of thousands of American jobs. The contention is that the yuan is so undervalued (by some accounts as much as 40 percent) that it amounts to an unfair trade subsidy. This unfair advantage permits a flood of cheap Chinese-made goods into the United States, but makes American products expensive in China. Thus, it is claimed that if the yuan was traded at its true market worth the bilateral imbalance between the two countries would be substantially reduced, if not altogether eliminated. This is because China’s exports to the United States would become more expensive in dollars and would therefore decrease, while China’s imports from the U.S. would become less expensive in yuan and therefore increase.

To make matters worse, China’s unwillingness to allow the yuan to appreciate has, in turn, made other Asian Pacific Rim countries reluctant to allow their currencies to appreciate because of their fear of losing further export sales to China. As the U.S. trade deficit with China soared to record levels, the Bush

---

7 From its peak in early 1998, the United States has lost over 3.3 million manufacturing jobs. While not all of the job loss can be attributed to China, the U.S. manufacturing sector, despite significant productivity growth could not overcome the huge trade advantage China gained by having an undervalued currency. The decline in manufacturing employment has led both Democratic and Republican senators to threaten the Chinese with substantial tariffs on Chinese imports to offset the Chinese currency advantage. For details, see Gary Clyde Hufbauer and Yee Wong, “China Bashing” _International Economics Policy Briefs_, no. PBO4–5 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 2004).

8 Some economists claim that the yuan is anywhere from 15 percent to 40 percent undervalued against the dollar, making Chinese exports to the United States cheaper and contributing to China’s trade surplus with the United States. Of course, no one really knows the true extent of the undervaluation. This is because in not letting the market decide a currency’s value means the nominal exchange rate – literally the number of units of one currency you can get for one unit of another – is essentially made up. It is whatever the government chooses it to be, so long as the regime can be feasibly maintained. For a good overview, see Nicholas Lardy, “China: The Great New Economic Challenge” in C. Fred Bergsten ed., _The United States and the World Economy: Foreign Economic Policy for the Next Decade_ (Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 2005); Arvind Subramanian, “New PPP-Based Estimates of Renminbi Undervaluation and Policy Implications,” _Policy Brief_, no. PB10–8 (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, April 2010); and Anthony J. Makin, “Does China’s Huge External Surplus Imply an Undervalued Renminbi,” _China and the World Economy_, vol. 15, no. 3 (2007): 89–102.

9 Indeed, following the Chinese revaluation, Malaysia responded by shifting its own currency regime from a dollar peg to a basket peg. However, given the very small initial change in the yuan’s value, most countries in the region seems to be waiting for a more substantial yuan revaluation before taking action.
administration and now the Obama administration, have come under intense pressure to take unilateral action to address the problems associated with the artificial undervaluation of the yuan. If earlier, U.S. lawmakers called for an immediate Chinese exchange rate adjustment, now many are increasingly calling for punitive tariffs on cheaply priced Chinese imports unless China sharply revalues its currency. Yet, we claim that the imperatives of creating jobs and mitigating potentially destabilizing labor unrest is so strong that Beijing is not going to abandon its mercantilist economic policies anytime soon.

Conclusion

Current disagreements as to whether or not its developmental model has reached the Lewisian turning point notwithstanding (Fang 2008; Fang and Yang 2009), China has reached a critical juncture, with obvious and far-reaching implications for the country's labor market equilibrium and sustained global economic competitiveness (Knowledge@Wharton. 2010; Wall Street Journal 2010). The Chinese government may delay but cannot prevent further emancipation of a labor force harboring rising expectations and an unwillingness to accept social dislocation and relative economic deprivation in the name of national economic growth. In the long-term, the expectations of this new generation of workers and the changing labor regime will prove a highly complicating combination for the competitive sustainability of China’s global low-cost labor arbitrage, and consequently, low-value added manufacturing. Thus China’s political elite is facing a truly consequential policy conundrum, given that resorting to mere symptomatic treatment of social dissatisfaction cannot and will not negate the need for carefully recalibrated economic and social policies.

It would be equally ill-advised to eschew broader contextualization of the implications of current socio-economic dynamics for global economic competitiveness in the medium- to long-term. While it may be a near-term comfort that the rate of labor productivity growth – estimated at 13 percent per annum over the 2003–2010 period in apparel manufacturing – “comfortably outstrips that of Brazil, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Turkey” (Jacob and Waldmeir 2011), the government can ill-afford policy complacency at this stage. And while it may be contextually unwarranted to draw comparisons between the recent developments in Egypt and the broader Arab world and the potential for stepped-up democratization pressures in China (Pei 2011; Schortgen 2012), it is nonetheless
pertinent to reflect on the distinct possibility of recent socio-economic stirrings in China potentially reshaping the country’s political economy space in fundamental ways. The path ahead is irreversibly and intricately linked to the policy choices and abilities of the Chinese leadership to come to terms with the demands and expectations of a new generation of workers in a changing China. Anything short of that carries the distinct possibility of jeopardizing the twin goals of achieving a well-off society (xiaokang shehui, 小康社会) and harmonious society (hexie shehui, 和谐社会). The challenge for China’s incoming fifth generation of leaders will lie in their willingness to embrace a whole new degree of pragmatism, as the country embarks on a new chapter in its developmental path in the aftermath of the summer of discontent of 2010.

References


Contributors

Steffen Borge, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Philosophy, Trondheim, Norway.

Robert Charles Cummins, Department of Philosophy, University of California, Davis, United States.

Beatriz Carrillo Garcia, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, Australia.

Merle Goldman, Sarah Lawrence College; M.A., Radcliffe College; Harvard University, United States.

Ho-fung Hung, Department of Sociology, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, United States.

Robert Kowalski, The Centre for International Development and Training, University of Wolverhampton, Priorslee, Telford, Shropshire, United Kingdom.

Manussos Marangudakis, Department of Sociology, University of the Aegean, Mytilene, Greece.

David C. Schak, Department of International Business and Asian Studies, Griffith University, Nathan, Queensland, Australia.

Francis Schortgen, Department of Political Science & International Studies, University of Mount Union, Alliance, United States.

Shalendra D. Sharma, Department of Politics, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, United States.

Scott Wilson, Political Science Department, The University of the South, Sewanee, United States.
Ritu Vij, School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB, Scotland.

Qingbo Zhang, Faculty of Law, Macau University of Science and Technology, Avenida Wai Long, Taipa, Macau, PR China.
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