Beyond Succession—China’s Internal Security Challenges

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Abstract: China is undergoing a transitional period of rapid economic and social development. The way in which this period is managed will hold significant implications for the Chinese state concerning both its internal and external security. While fundamentally resting upon progressing from a developing to a developed economy, this transition highlights deep issues and tensions affecting China—ranging from rising societal inequalities to various separatism threats to mounting individualism. Regardless of internal succession struggles within the Communist Party of China (CCP), it is critical to focus upon this multitude of (mounting) social and economic issues—particularly outside of the political realm—that China’s new leaders will have to face. Here, we highlight three themes central to this transition—a search for internal stability; China’s multiple, interlocking internal issues; and the longevity, resilience and adaptability of the CCP—in order to assess their potential impact on China’s domestic and, critically, external politics.

The transition from the fourth to fifth generations of China’s ruling elite is certainly a critical time for the state as well as for the ruling Communist Party. With a new generation of leaders assuming power, the spectre of factionalism has again arisen in China, as underscored by the Bo Xilai affair and the internal political uncertainty that it has come to personify. While not as unsettled as earlier power shifts have been (most notably the first to second generation from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping at the end of the 1970s, which saw the switch from totalitarian socialism to authoritarian capitalism), the in-built insecurities of China’s secretive one-party state as largely based upon patron–client relations have again been revealed. Such insecurity has, in turn, revealed the difficulty in predicting the make-up of any future Politburo Standing Committee, as well as the policies to be pursued by any new leader. It is therefore pertinent to focus upon the multitude of (mounting) social and economic issues—particularly outside of the purely political realm—that China’s leaders must face. These are the inherent internal challenges that will increasingly confront the new fifth generation of leaders newly anointed at the Party’s 18th plenum in November 2012. As such, Xi Jinping may yet remain an enigmatic and unknown figure but the future tribulations facing China are much less opaque.

East Asia’s largest state, China is undergoing a transitional period of fundamental and rapid economic and social development. As its influence rises through sustained economic growth, and it becomes of growing centrality to the international system,
how this period is managed will have significant implications for the Chinese state concerning both its internal and external security concerns. While primarily resting upon its progression from a developing to a developed economy, this transition highlights deep issues and tensions affecting the nature of Chinese society—issues ranging from how to cope with rising societal inequalities, to how to successfully counter various separatism threats, to how to respond to mounting individualism in a culture traditionally built upon collective values. Dealing with these issues requires a necessary and continual recalibration by the Communist Party of China (CCP) as to where its legitimacy lies and how to sustain, validate and promote it further. As it has shown from its very origins, adaptability is key to the Party’s survival as it must display balance and equilibrium (ping heng) between conflicting aims, while at the same time maintaining its paramount position as the ultimate arbiter of power, development and security for the Chinese population. It is this adaptability that has also allowed the CCP to remain in power by finding new sources of legitimacy, even if it has meant travelling far from its ideological roots.

Critically, many of the core internal issues facing China also have potential external repercussions for global politics, principally in terms of rising social unrest, nationalism, (internal and global) environmental degradation, resource shortages and differing attitudes towards globalisation. How the CCP responds to these challenges and issues will not only indicate their attitude towards modernity but also how they see China’s self-image as a state aspiring to rejuvenate and re-emerge as a great power in the 21st century. It is in this regard that China’s wider transition is critical to the world—not only due to global interdependencies based upon economics but also how China understands the world order and its place within it. Moreover, the world is not only more reliant upon China than ever before (primarily economically) but is more interlinked with China in an organic and symbiotic relationship. Thus decisions, events and incidents emanating from China have potential global repercussions not only in material economic ways but also in ideational terms, from differing conceptions concerning issues such as democracy and authoritarian development, to individual and collective human rights, and even the functioning of global finance and capitalism.

Underlying these interchanges are three important themes, which will be discussed in turn in this article: (1) the ongoing search by China’s political elites for internal stability and security; (2) the consideration of the multiple, interlocking and complex issues affecting China; and (3) the underlying and intrinsic longevity, resilience and adaptability of the CCP as a ruling political entity. In this last section in particular, our analysis considers how various internal pressures could be potentially transposed via nationalist forces into the external security dimension. Understanding these factors better can help us to appreciate not only the monumental national challenges facing one of the world’s largest and most populated countries, as well as the dominant political presence of the CCP, but also how the (successful) management of these challenges will be of an increasingly vital strategic and international significance.

The ongoing search for stability

Ruling from the centre over a large and diverse territory, the search for national stability and a concurrent fear of its potential negative consequences have been prevalent among Chinese elites, both before and during the CCP era. Often reflected in an enduring practice of national governance resting upon a singular and oligarchic figure or group that dominates the bureaucratic apparatus, the CCP have in many senses continued
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traditions from the pre-1911 imperial period. This continuance has also rested upon an acknowledgement of the same continual concerns regarding the Chinese landmass, the management of its population and the maintenance of centralised authority. Central to these concerns has been a sustained, if tacit, respect for Confucian ideals of a hierarchical (and still largely patriarchal) order with which to maintain a stable society. While this assertion appears at odds with the overarching communist ideal of equality, it is the form of governance and key organisational principle that has remained central to the nature of politics (both within the CCP’s own governing apparatus and across China as a whole) in the post-1949 People’s Republic of China (PRC) era.

Persistent unrest in the centuries prior to the ascendancy of the CCP (through countless rebellions, the 1911 revolution that overthrew the imperial system, and the ensuing Nationalist–Communist civil war) acted as direct examples of the consequences of losing control. The adverse effect of external forces within this narrative only underscored China’s susceptibility to, and the CCP’s fear of disorder. For China’s current leaders, these concerns have rested upon the guiding rhetoric of the ‘Century of Humiliation’ (bainian guochi) propagated by the CCP to foster their role in ‘saving’ China from longstanding outside aggression, which culminated in Japan’s occupation of the Chinese landmass from 1931 to 1945. Often this narrative has rested upon an image of victimisation vis-à-vis the international system, informing modern China’s national identity, and core CCP policies aimed at restoring national esteem and recognition en route to China (re)becoming a great power. Moreover, it has become the hallmark of the CCP’s historical role as the sole legitimate governing force destined to protect, serve and represent the Chinese people. Thus, new leader Xi Jinping, in his inaugural speech to the Party Congress in November 2012, talked of ‘accepting the baton of history and continuing to work for realising the great revival of the Chinese nation, in order to let the Chinese nation stand more firmly and powerfully among all nations around the world’.

During their rule, the CCP have appeared, on a more fundamental level, to mark a continuance with the past. Central to this continuance has been a focus on control as a way to avoid instability, in order to achieve the aims of the communist revolution. Such arguments are reflected in the initial decades of the People’s Republic through the CCP’s early emphasis on a command economy, state ownership and collectivised agriculture administered through a centralised and hierarchical power structure based upon a one-party state. Particularly under Mao, national campaigns and ideological indoctrination were also used to suppress any perceived threats to domestic stability that went counter to the CCP’s dominance of government, people’s lives and economics, as well as an omnipresent and controlling view of the state. Further, embedded in these activities was the notion that the Party innately knew what was in the best interests of China’s population and that they were the most appropriate custodians of these interests. Although reaching its nadir during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, Mao’s totalitarian zeal was reasserted by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), who gradually restored order and stability and ultimately CCP control.

While focused upon economic reform as a way to variously raise living standards, to slowly reassert China in the world and to ensure the CCP’s survival via a newly ascribed legitimacy, the post-Mao era has also maintained these distinctly engrained attitudes concerning a fear of instability. As such, while there has been significant decentralisation over the last 35 years, the ongoing essence of the reform period has (regardless of greater consultation and diversification with more non-Party voices) been that of continued CCP control. This position primarily stems from a desire to
avoid any volatility that could threaten the revolution, and which directly references the memory of past domestic upheaval. Thus, the Chinese state has maintained a highly proscriptive attitude towards any group that deviates from the CCP’s political, national or ideological monopoly, as typified (for example) by potential separatists in Tibet or Xinjiang (who threaten their territorial control), as well as any alternative political, social or religious groupings, such as the China Democracy Party (CDP) (who threaten their ideological control). These considerations have ensured that the CCP’s domination of Chinese politics has continued. In turn, economic, social and legal reforms have often used state mechanisms to assuage the threat of instability—such as Jiang Zemin’s ‘socialist legality’ that is seen to institute rule by law rather than rule of law—themselves becoming an extension of state (and therefore de facto CCP) control. In the same way, sanctioned political participation through grassroots elections in China’s villages since the late 1990s continues to be affected by considerable Party–state control and a lack of independent influence. Such a prevailing attitude is also shown via the CCP’s insistence upon collective rather than individual human rights in China, with the former supplementing their key political control notions of autonomy and monopoly.

Most crucially, the current period of largely economic reform has led to a certain control dilemma for the CCP, as by reducing its economic control to boost production and innovation, the Party’s level of social control has also been invariably reduced. Social homogeneity has resultantly been cut down, as signified by rising disparities in terms of income, mobility and geography. New sources of instability have also emerged—from the unemployed, migrants and organised political opposition (such as labour activists and Falungong)—as relative inequality levels have continued to rise. Critical events like the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests have served to ingrain the fear of instability, as have high and rising annual levels of (especially rural) unrest on a scale that is simply mind-boggling for other states, with 180,000 officially recorded ‘mass incidents’ reported in 2010 alone. Not only are these incidents rising significantly year on year (from 8,700 in 1994 to 90,000 in 2006), but also given that they are official figures from the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), their real number is potentially much higher. Furthermore, increased censorship, internet controls and general surveillance are all exemplars that reinforce the CCP’s fear of instability/desire for control, and the implications of any such instability for its own legitimacy and power. Their stance also appears to be self-reinforcing, for example negating any move towards democratic reform, with senior leader Wu Bangguo recently stating that with such a political transformation, ‘the state could sink into the abyss of internal disorder’.

**Interlocking issues**

Wu’s fears over democratic reform leading to internal instability act as an example of how the major issues facing Chinese governance and domestic politics cannot be seen in a purely isolated manner. As such, it is important to recognise that rather than being singular entities, these issues (which are situated across all major policy areas) are intrinsically interconnected and increasingly interlocked in the sense of being both interdependent and inter-reliant. Such an understanding critically underlines the complex matrix of concerns and problems facing the CCP as it enters its fifth generation, and its ability to manage their heightening interplay. Furthermore, we can see how the Party (despite ongoing battles between reformist and conservative factions within the CCP concerning the rate and direction of reform) has to progressively balance these
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issues against each other (however seemingly contradictory), in order to maintain its current reform agenda and, importantly, to sustain its legitimacy. Such balancing is integral to the CCP’s key concept of building a progressive, equitable and ‘harmonious society’ (hexie shehui), as first introduced by Hu Jintao in 2005.

The most illustrative keystone of this interlocking is that of China’s economic reform and sustaining the high levels of growth that are driving the nation’s domestic development and modernisation. It is high growth that is enabling the current transition from a developing to a developed economy, and which has served (after the debacles of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution) as the primary source of CCP legitimacy in the post-Mao era. Consistently enjoying annual growth rates averaging just over 10 per cent from 1980 to 2011\(^\text{16}\) has cemented the necessity of economic expansion to variously modernise China’s armed forces, healthcare and education systems, infrastructure, and internal security apparatus. As such, economic growth produces the most fungible assets, which can also be freely converted internationally into hard (principally military) and soft (mainly institutional or aspirational) power with which to reassert China in the world. Overall, increasing economic power equates to greater levels of ‘comprehensive national power’, underpins the CCP’s aim to overturn the injustices of the century of humiliation, and therefore helps to restore China as a great power in the international order.

Although the necessity of China’s continued economic growth remains paramount, it has inculcated many of the negative strains and tensions progressively more visible in Chinese society. Economic growth has undoubtedly presaged greater economic benefits for China’s population as a whole but has also transformed society in less than positive ways. Hence, society has become more unequal with previous dependencies on the state being significantly curtailed from the Mao era guarantees of employment, housing and education. Endemic corruption has exacerbated these differences, and in combination with a lack of commensurate political reform, has acted as a rallying point for much of the social unrest affecting China, particularly in more rural areas. Fiscal fragmentation has in turn led to higher levels of differentiation within the population, presaging the emergence of less holistic nationwide social groups, including a middle class, peripatetic migrants and an unemployed stratum. Worryingly for the Party, calls for better political representation increasingly emanate from such groups, and exert greater pressure for political reform upon the one-party ruling regime, as do more fundamental (yet linked) claims for the separation of Xinjiang and Tibet.

Moreover, with a more pronounced capitalist focus has come a more pronounced degree of self-expression via consumerism and materialism, leading to more distinct individualism. In addition, as part of a burgeoning media sector, China now has the world’s greatest number of internet users (513 million at the beginning of 2012)—twice that of the United States and representing a 22.5 per cent share of total global users.\(^\text{17}\) This proliferation of individualism has contributed to a need (within the CCP at least) to aggressively enhance the state’s ability to monitor the views of its population, streamline opinion and shelter itself from criticism.

The overall problem that these interlocking issues pose for the CCP is, however, decidedly double-edged and essentially paradoxical. On the one hand, continued economic growth is the mainstay of the Party’s ruling legitimacy and is inherently tied to its declared national mission to personally spearhead China’s modernisation, development and rising global status. On the other hand, sustained economic growth essentially exacerbates many of the issues noted in the previous paragraph by aggravating societal inequalities, which can in turn instigate more social unrest and sustain pressure on the
Party for political reform (which would potentially downgrade the CCP’s longstanding and overarching monopoly on power). It is between these positions that the Party thus constantly balances—for example allowing provinces some degree of autonomy but not complete independence through greater decentralisation, or experimentally introducing political reform at the grassroots level to increase local (but not national) accountability via village elections and participatory budgeting. In many ways, the CCP’s position and strategy is emblematic of the dilemmas facing any state in transition but which, crucially from an external perspective, are intrinsically heightened by the size and scale of China’s population and economy. In particular, mounting (and increasingly self-evident CCP) corruption is regarded as a central threat to the CCP and Chinese stability as a whole, with outgoing President Hu Jintao stating in November 2012 that, ‘if we fail to handle this issue well, it could prove fatal to the Party, and even cause the collapse of the Party and the fall of the state’.  

Fundamentally underscoring all of these discussions is the critical issue of China’s ability to sustain its current rates of economic growth. In the short term (and despite weathering what is referred to as the ‘Great Recession’ of 2008), at the time of writing in November 2012, China’s interdependence and reliance upon external markets seems threatened by a protracted crisis in the eurozone and a weak US economy (both critical export markets). In conjunction with an expected end to a domestic property boom, China’s annual GDP growth in the first three quarters of 2012 was at a three-year low of 7.7 per cent. Furthermore, China’s current model of growth based upon external markets and high internal development itself appears to be running out of steam, with a push from elites towards heightening domestic consumption, service industries and ‘green goods’. In the much longer term, China faces a major demographic problem with a rapidly aging population (largely as a result of the one child policy but also enhanced living standards and rising life expectancy), which is projected to increase from 200 million in 2015 to 300 million by 2030. Such a change will inherently limit China’s available productive forces and increase necessary state expenditures on healthcare and pensions. Here, continued environmental degradation (the majority of China’s fresh water sources are now irrevocably damaged, and it recently became the world’s largest CO2 emitter), as well as severe resource shortages, also threatens to reduce (at least from a wholly domestic and finite perspective) China’s industrial and manufacturing capabilities. These factors will also incur increased associated costs due to either counteracting or dealing with the consequences (especially in healthcare) of widespread national pollution, as well as having to manage increased incidences of social unrest against corporate irresponsibility.

The CCP’s adaptability, longevity and resilience

While naturally speculative, the examples cited above highlight how continued high Chinese growth is less than guaranteed and, more fundamentally, that falling economic growth has the potential to heighten social issues and unrest. Situated at the fulcrum of the global economy, and thus as a critical global market, any economic downturn in China would also have wider repercussions beyond its borders. High levels of interdependence and inter-reliance in a globalised world economy indicate how important the CCP’s management of these internal issues is. In turn, by slowing or stalling reform, lower growth would significantly compound internal stability issues, potentially increase criticism directed towards the Party and further impact upon the CCP’s legitimacy to govern—a legitimacy that has been, since the 1980s, firmly tied to China’s economic fortunes and capitalist-led transformation. Such a scenario
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(partially if protracted and sustained) may well force the Party to adapt again—just as it did after the Cultural Revolution by refocusing from ideologically driven policies to economically driven policies—and harness a new source of legitimacy.

One alternative source of legitimacy could be through more resolute appeals to nationalism. Via such appeals, China’s high levels of connectedness with the rest of the world, and its necessitated embrace of globalisation and external market forces, could be blamed for any Chinese downturn. Pleas to the memory of past injustices could be employed to simply recast declining economic revenues as a new period of external exploitation, a nascent ‘Century of Humiliation Mark II’. Such claims would also provide an ideal foil with which to funnel internal criticism and internal social unrest (potentially rising in the face of dwindling economic gains) outwards, away from the CCP and towards historically familiar targets—be they neighbouring Japan, the wider West or the international system as a whole. Within the narrative of restoring China to great power status, external powers could be additionally personified (just as they were perceived and characterised to be in the 19th and 20th centuries) as holding China back from its natural primacy and national destiny. As Jervis pertinently notes, ‘historical traumas can heavily influence future perceptions’, and Chinese history provides a wealth of such negative experiences to employ. Any such appeal does, however, come with high risks, with nationalist forces acting as a tap that is easy to turn on but potentially exceedingly difficult to turn off again. A case in point here is the anti-Japanese riots of 2005 across China, which the state had major difficulty in finally controlling after their initial escalation.

Nationalism in China can be seen to rest upon four critical lynchpins—sovereignty, unity, independence and economic development—which are further informed (and emboldened) via the dominant discourses highlighted above concerning the ongoing search for stability sought by all of China’s leaders and the multiple interlocking issues facing the Party. These factors are, in turn, directly replicated in the National Defense White Paper of 2010, which states that the aims of national security in China concern ‘safeguarding state sovereignty, unity, maintaining social harmony and stability, and unremittingly enhancing the overall national strength’ along both domestic and international parameters. In this sense, nationalism forces are symptomatic of the CCP’s historical mission and are just as inalienable to their legitimacy as were the instigation of both the communist revolution and the current period of economic reform. These forces also clearly link to ongoing territorial disputes with Japan, in particular concerning the disputed Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands but also the status of Taiwan (which was also under Japanese control as part of their mid-20th-century occupation). In turn, another historical and contemporary target of Chinese nationalist ire has been the US through incidents such as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the 2001 spy plane collision and various episodes concerning the Taiwan Strait. When one considers the US’s existing security alliances with both Japan and South Korea, which entwine it in the security dynamics of East Asia, the potential for Chinese nationalism to catalyse a negative spiralling of regional and global balances of power is underlined. Furthermore, there is evidence that Chinese territorial claims vis-à-vis Japan may be widening, with a leading figure at China’s National Defense University recently stating that the Diaoyutai claim was ‘too narrow’ and ought to be extended to encompass the island chain including Okinawa— islands that also have an ongoing US troop presence.

Juxtaposed with the CCP’s ability to adapt to new conditions and to find new sources of legitimacy when necessary, is the Party’s own longevity and resilience. With over 80 million members, the CCP is both the world’s largest political party and
the world’s longest ruling political party. In addition, there are currently over 86 million members in the Communist Youth League of China, and competition to join the Party remains high with the CCP in 2010 accepting only 14 per cent of the 21 million applications made to it.\(^{28}\) Being in the CCP thus provides core benefits to around six per cent of the population, benefits that permeate to family members and relatives. The position of ‘princelings’ (gaogan zidi—the offspring of senior CCP leaders, of whom Xi Jinping is one) also underlines the continuance of CCP rule from one generation to the next, especially at the highest echelons of the Party itself whereby four out of the seven members of the new Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) have such a heritage.\(^{29}\) (Although the princelings give the CCP greater political resilience, these gains must be balanced against their often clear personification of corruption, privilege, entitlement, and a sense of exceptionalism from mainstream Chinese society.) Given these figures, membership can therefore be seen as something aspirational and perhaps even necessary for a large tranche of China’s population, and as such the Party has a significant proportion of the populace tied into its fortunes. Importantly, however, membership is not just sought for political ends alone, with financial advancement often overriding strict loyalty to the CCP or its dominant aims. Here too the Party has continued to be adaptive by broadening the demographic make-up of its members and opening itself up to new members from previously castigated groups (especially capitalists who have been allowed to join the CCP since November 2002). This co-option has allowed further societal control through the assimilation of China’s key economic leaders.

We must note, though, that it is through the Party’s longstanding nature and the clearly tangible and visible signs of its (so far) successful economic revolution that the CCP is also able to garner legitimacy. Their previous emancipation of China from external forces through the founding of the PRC in 1949 further bolsters this legitimacy and gives the Party validity as the state’s primary political force (with obvious caveats that come from ruling a one-party state). The ongoing airbrushing out from public and Party discourse of revolutionary low points (primarily the Cultural Revolution but also the Great Leap Forward and the 1989 Tiananmen ‘incident’) also reinforces the continuance of such narratives within the Party’s preferred self-categorisation. These factors, in conjunction with high and rising membership, suggest that the CCP has a residual and honed ability not only to dominate China’s political landscape but also to face down any potential challenges to their desired self-image. Of utmost importance here is to remember that the entire reform period project has been carried out under the auspices of the Party. Often rising from negligible foundations, the CCP has led China’s industrial revolution and its development/modernisation programme, controlling the rate and loci of its expansion, and through this regulation has been able to monitor and direct its benefits and risks either towards the Chinese people or to itself.

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China’s status has never before been of such importance to the world. Through burgeoning financial linkages in the last decade, China has become needed by other states to drive their economies, as it has emerged as the fulcrum of global trade. In this regard, it was largely Chinese growth (and to a degree India’s) that helped the global economy to recover from the crisis of 2008, despite China’s own slight domestic downturn. In turn, China has further become reliant on operating with others for its own development and modernisation, prizing links with its largest trading partners, such as the European Union (EU) and the US, where annual trade in 2011 reached €428.3 billion\(^{30}\) and $503.3 billion\(^{31}\) respectively. Such is the level of interdependence
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and symbiosis, however, that China’s success has also never been so contingent upon others. Reflecting this position, China’s 2008 National Defense White Paper stated that ‘China cannot develop in isolation from the rest of the world, nor can the world enjoy prosperity and stability without China’.\(^3\) In the present period of uncertainty, with the future of the eurozone uncertain and a global recovery inherently weak, the ability of the CCP to surmount its internal obstacles is therefore of critical global significance. As noted here, the risks to China are also high, with stalling growth leading to the possible delegitimisation of the Party’s current economics-driven reform agenda and a subsequent catalysing of greater levels of unrest and uncertainty—instabilities which could be projected outwards to its immediate region (and the world) in a fit of nationalism, and would have global consequences.

Undoubtedly, the challenges facing the CCP and China are multiple, varied and highly complex. Continually magnified by having the world’s largest population and a huge landmass, the last 40 years of reform are in many ways a testimony to the agility, adaptability and reliance of the CCP. Conversely, the escalating number of social issues facing China is also a result of these reforms, and has set East Asia’s largest power on a difficult and troubled trajectory. Only by better understanding the complexity of this trajectory can we better appreciate the scale of the challenges facing the CCP, and the inherent criticality that their decisions on these matters will invariably have for the rest of the world. Finally, despite many uneasy and unsettled periods, the CCP remains in power, as both an unparalleled political entity and a body essential to the current functioning of Chinese society and its ambitions. Managing the country across five generations of leadership, this centrality guides Chinese governance and politics, but it is also how this leadership deals with its inherent national challenges that will crucially guide our understanding of China over the coming decades. Undoubtedly, China’s new generation of leaders have been dealt an unenviably tough hand—something that major external states (such as the US, the EU and India) ought to be increasingly aware of in their interactions with one of the 21st century’s great powers.

Notes

12. Sophie Beach, ‘Unrest Grows as Economy Booms’, *China Digital Times*, 25 September 2011. ‘Mass incidents’ are commonly defined as large-scale protests or riots that usually concern economic interests, corruption and civil rights, rather than political power.