Preface

This book seeks to fulfil the timely need for a better understanding of how social mobilisation works in present-day China, and the changes that have occurred with this important socioeconomic and socio-political mechanism since the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially since the mid-1990s, when more fundamental reforms of China’s party-state system and governance have been undertaken. Social mobilisation has long been considered a key characteristic of modern Chinese life, which has been so apparent over the course of past decades that many analysts even define China as a nation of mobilisation. The existing scholarly literature on social mobilisation in China, however, is largely characterised by studies of pre-1978 Chinese socioeconomic and socio-political situations, many of which are also scattered and fragmentary. These problems have not only resulted in misjudging the crucial role of social mobilisation as a process of social change and a key analytical construct, but have also overlooked the work of many researchers in the fields of socioeconomic and socio-political activities in China, which is rather different from what we have known from the past and even what we can read in English these days.

Through careful and thorough analysis of new empirical evidence from both primary and secondary sources, this co-authored book aims to contribute to the discussion in academic literature on contemporary China in the midst of competing views. Those views cover the ways in which the social mobilisation mechanism is used at different levels of government and society at different times for different purposes, how meaningful mass socio-political participation is, and the ways and the extent to which China’s governance has been transformed as a result of many fundamental shifts in its economy and politics, as well as whether China’s state capacity has declined since the early 1990s.

The research focus on social mobilisation emerged in the 1960s and 1970s when waves of socio-political activism were spreading, especially in the United States, China and several European countries. China became a subject of intellectual interest and inquiry soon after the concept of social mobilisation emerged, though China closed its door to the West in the 1960s and through much of the 1970s. Despite this, there are not
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many big countries like China where social mobilisation has been systematically employed as a useful and effective mechanism for socioeconomic development.

In recent decades, China has experienced rapid economic growth and many other crucial socio-political changes. China has not only transformed itself into a rapidly urbanising industrial economy as defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2015), but has also already quietly entered its post-industrial stage of economic development. In 2015, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC, 2016), the service sector in China already accounted for more than 50 per cent of its GDP (gross domestic product), about five percentage points higher than the GDP contribution from the manufacturing and construction sectors. At the same time, China’s domestic political structure, political power relationships and politics have all been substantially transformed, though many have not yet fully realised it or refused to accept it, entering what researchers in China have frequently called the new era of boyi, political bargaining games among interest groups or various social forces (Liang, 2014, p.119). As will be further discussed in Chapter 1 and other chapters, Chinese politics are no longer based on ideology, but on political bargaining and negotiation among various competing interest groups seeking to maximise their shares of material benefits and political power.

All these rapid and far-reaching changes in China are of immense interest to many researchers and observers, both in China and in other countries, resulting in a growing number of academic publications on a wide range of issues relating to a rapidly changing China and the diversification of research interests and perspectives. However, China’s rapid and never-ending transformations, as well as its complexity and scale, have tended to mean that much of our understanding quickly becomes outdated, and research efforts are too broadly scattered to focus on the essential clues to understanding the changes and the important enduring characteristics of Chinese life.

Social mobilisation is one such important theoretical clue and characteristic that is fundamental for a good understanding of present-day China, but it has also been overlooked by researchers for decades. This co-authored book distinguishes itself from other books on present-day China in the following ways.

First, this book is exclusively about social mobilisation, one of the most important and regularly used socioeconomic and socio-political mechanisms in rapidly transforming China. As mentioned, despite the broad and fundamental changes in the country, this crucial social mechanism has not been systematically studied for a few decades, and
almost no book-length study on it has been published in English since the early 1990s, the only exceptions of which are those based on China’s birth control (White, 2006) and the mobilisation of emotions (Perry, 2002, 2011; Y. Liu, 2010).

Second, this study presents an historical account of the changes that have taken place because of the social mobilisation mechanism in China since the early reform era after the late 1970s, including crucial changes in China’s socio-political system, bureaucratic structures at different levels and politics, central–state relations and state–society interactions, and policy-making and implementation processes at different levels of government and society. Special attention is given to two parallel processes: China’s decentralisation efforts of the past decades and the emerging power of its market or private economy. This specific feature of the book is important to enable readers to understand what changes have occurred in recent decades, how the mechanism of social mobilisation has been slowly transformed over the past decades, what steps have preceded and what may follow.

Third, this research book reveals a dynamic process that challenges both the oversimplified views of Chinese political life and culture and the misunderstanding of mass political participation, if not democracy, in China. To clearly present the dynamics that emerge from, as well as drive, the ongoing deep changes in China, this book also gives more attention than earlier studies to the complex interactions between top-down and bottom-up processes, and among different sets of motivations, market forces and active participation of community members. The complexity of rural urbanisation in a heavily populated country like China makes such analysis possible.

Fourth, this book will be distinguished by its interdisciplinary points of view and the richness of new empirical evidence on social mobilisation in China. This study will draw on the work of researchers from the fields of sociology, public policy and administration, political science, human and economic geography, and other applied economic disciplines. The authors’ long-time research interests and experience in these areas in China – rural areas and the upper levels of bureaucracy – have made it feasible to conduct such a high-quality and comprehensive analysis.

Finally, and importantly, because of the above unique and important features, this book aims to fill the intellectual void left by few thorough studies on social mobilisation in post-Mao China and little systematic discussion of how social mobilisation has been used in China and the changes that have occurred to this crucial mechanism over the past decades. Among new data and perspectives, this book also provides a new explanation of the nature of social mobilisation in contemporary China, where there
has been a trend away from ideology-based rule and social mobilisation, and toward a new politics based on shared needs, material interests and benefits. The book aims to be stimulating and rewarding.

As will be detailed below and in Chapter 1, this analysis of social mobilisation in present-day China is primarily based on its recent rural urbanisation push, which is, according to its various features, a unique and typical social mobilisation campaign that involves almost all levels of government and society. In fact, there has been no other nationwide campaign in China in recent years that can reveal more about the social mobilisation mechanism used in post-industrial China.

In general, this research is based on the idea that issues regarding social mobilisation in present-day China are in urgent need of systematic study. Social mobilisation is no longer employed in China in the ways it used to be, but is more dynamic than is often thought. Similarly, China is no longer a country that can be simply defined as communist or a centrally planned economy, but has over the past few decades been transformed beyond recognition. We can safely assume that few readers in English-speaking countries are familiar with all the recent developments in China, the changes to its governance and practices, and implications for its future, as well as that for the rest of the world. We may also safely assume that many English readers are interested in learning more about what has taken place in China, in its hierarchical socio-political system, and how its governance have been transformed. Since social mobilisation in China has not been analysed for a long time. Because this study focuses on recent empirical evidence and theoretical implications, this book will not only be able to renew our understanding of what has happened in China in the areas of governance, bureaucratic structure and political culture, policy-making and implementation, state or administration interference, private sector development, institutional capacity-building, mass protest and political participation, but will also provide readers with some new perspectives on these important issues in a rapidly changing China.

The idea of writing this book originated a few years ago, when I was first contacted by Su Yuanyuan who was recommended by Professor Zhou Xiaohong, her doctoral supervisor at Nanjing University, China, for a position as a visiting PhD scholar at the Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne.

At the time, two of my university colleagues and I had just completed editing Transforming Chinese Cities (Routledge, 2014), and another edited volume entitled Global Media and Public Diplomacy in Sino-Western Relations (Routledge, 2016) was well underway. Through these projects, my research attention has gradually been drawn back to what has been taking
place in China. My second major monograph on the new Chinese migrant community in Australia, entitled *Chinese Migrant Entrepreneurship in Australia from the 1990s* (Elsevier, 2015), was near completion, which made it possible for me to shift my attention away, at least momentarily, from the rapidly expanding, and increasingly interesting and important, new Chinese migrant community in Australia, on which I have conducted a series of research projects over many years.

What intrigued me from the time I started giving attention to what is happening in China is the research question initially put forward by Professor Zhou Xiaohong and Su Yuanyuan, which is how Chinese peasants have been mobilised in many regions to accept and move to live in new modern apartment buildings. The latter is often called *nongmin shanglou* in Chinese, referring to ‘the campaign to make peasants live in storied buildings’ according to Looney’s translation (Looney, 2012, p.281). Our discussion of the issue of rural urbanisation in China and the entire policy process led us to conclude that a thorough review and analysis of the role of social mobilisation as a key socio-political and socio-economic mechanism in present-day China was urgently needed. We decided to work together on this book based on the campaign of *nongmin shanglou*.

For a long time, since the time when I was working in China, I have been mainly interested in various issues related to China’s public opinion, social reactions to governmental initiatives, political dynamics, bureaucracy and elite dominance and ideology. As a young lecturer in social psychology and sociology at Beijing-based Renmin University of China, I was actively involved in a range of social psychological and sociological studies in post-Mao China. Because of my involvement, I was awarded the first and only national academic prize in sociology by China’s National Commission of Education and Hong Kong-based Fok Ying Tung Foundation in 1988. It was in the mid-1980s that Professor Zhou Xiaohong and I were active researchers in the fields of sociology and social psychology in China. These academic fields and the 1980s seem to be nothing unique to the current younger generations, but as general background to this book, it must be stressed that these fields were new at the time in China after being banned for a few decades.

It was also in the 1980s that I developed research interests in social processes and the mechanisms behind various forms of social action and change. As discussed in my earlier publications, I favour the idea that ‘process matters’ over the thinking that ‘structure matters’ (Gao, 2015, p.20), and therefore I have been interested in research looking at the ways in which social dynamics work. Because of our shared research interests, Su Yuanyuan had subsequently conducted the first part of her research
project in Australia in 2015, during which we decided to not only work together on this project, but also expand the discussion to consider more levels and aspects of the whole issue to fill the gaps left behind by researchers for decades.

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