The Dengist regime has transformed China’s politics, economy and society since its inception in 1978. The Leninist one-party state-monopolizing political organization has remained the central political ingredient, with a bitter dash of Stalinistic repression added to the mix. But the state has also engineered significant reductions in the previously high Maoist levels of politicization of economic and social life, mass mobilization and ideological interpellation, while also elaborating new developmental, regulatory and entrepreneurial apparatus. Economic restructuring and the development of new economic institutions have proceeded rapidly though spasmodically, as have growth and inequality. New classes and strata have formed, and society has become far more diverse and fragmented. The country has been opened to the outside world, with significant (though uneven) effects on all these levels. In the first section of this chapter, I adumbrate these transformations.

China has so far defied the liberal model according to which rapid economic modernization leads to the development of civil society and some form of institutionalized representative politics. But society has not been politically dormant in the face of these transformations. In the second section of the chapter, I begin to develop two concepts for describing and explaining society’s political responses to the stresses and strains occasioned by China’s profound and mercuric changes. ‘Nonsocial movements’ refers to the activities of nonstate elites – intellectuals and renowned or well-placed citizens who are not themselves leading Communist Party figures – who engage with state institutions, sometimes as individuals, and sometimes by forming informal, temporary, ad hoc alliances and contacts. ‘Nonsocial’ connotes their elite provenance, and they can be called ‘movements’
because they involve purposive and, sometimes, organized political activity. ‘Social nonmovements’ refers to spontaneous popular protests that lack leadership and organization. ‘Social’ refers to their popular base, whereas ‘nonmovement’ denotes their fragmented and fleeting quality and their consequent lack of leadership, program and coordination. In looking specifically at egalitarian issues, societal (that is, non-state) politics around gender has taken the form of a nonsocial movement, whereas those affecting farmers and workers have involved social nonmovements.

In a concluding section, I evaluate the effects on equality of China’s feminist nonsocial movement and its farmer- and worker-based social nonmovements. While not utterly lacking in consequences, their effects have been negligible at best. More surprising, the workers’ nonmovement, which was, apparently, most feared by the Party throughout the 1980s, has in the end accomplished the least. I offer some possible explanations and questions for further research.

The Dengist regime

Popular politics and the state

In the Leninist mold, state power is still monopolized by the Chinese Communist Party, whose organizations permeate all important government institutions. The party-state strenuously forbids the formation of any alternative party or independent political organizations.1 Citizens may form organizations around apolitical issues, but even these must be registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and allow close supervision by the security apparatus. Dissidents who have tried, cleverly, to establish such organizations around what they thought were safe issues such as corruption, environmental protection or economic development found their efforts frustrated by harassment, arrests, and confiscation of files and materials. Headlines on items distributed by Agence France-Presse (AFP) reflect the situation: on 15 October 1998, ‘Chinese Police Detain Corruption-Watch Leader’; on 26 October 1998, ‘Beijing Police Briefly Detain Environment and Development Activists’. China News Digest (CND) carried similar stories (4 November 1998).

Yet what the state does with its ongoing political monopoly has also changed from its Maoist origins. Elite conflict has moderated, which has encouraged the expansion of bureaucratic pluralism and gone far toward creating a more relaxed political atmosphere within the state as well as in society. In Tang Tsou’s terms (1986, xxiv), the state’s ‘zone of indifference’ has widened considerably. Ideological transformation of