

**Conference Synopsis: “Rural Discontent, Rule of Law and Social Unrest in China: Implications for U.S. Policy”
December 5, 2006**

On December 5, 2006, the Freeman Chair in China Studies sponsored a conference entitled “Rural Discontent, Rule of Law and Social Unrest in China: Implications for U.S. Policy.” The event focused on the recent rise of social unrest in China and featured four experts that discussed the sources, nature, and implications of social unrest.

Carl Minzner, Visiting International Affairs Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, provided the opening remarks. He was also the first presenter and discussed the topic “*Origins of Chinese Social Unrest*.” Minzner addressed three main points: 1. The linkage between rising social unrest and existing CCP political controls; 2. Consequences of social unrest, including increasing numbers of collective citizen protests and petitions and increasing levels of radicalism; and 3. The importance of these trends to US-China relations. He concluded by noting that the recognition of the institutional links between China’s political controls and increasing levels of social unrest will allow for a more meaningful, cooperative dialogue between the United States and China on the topics of human rights and political liberalization.

Kevin O’Brien, Professor of Political Science, Chair of the Center for Chinese Studies, UC Berkeley, addressed the topic “*Protest Leadership in Rural China*.” O’Brien discussed the role of protest leaders, ways in which villagers become protest leaders, and the surprising effect of repression on protest leaders. In particular, he commented that protest leaders have 7 main roles—including “leading the charge” and shaping goals—can be either long-time public leaders or newcomers spurred by private grievances, and that repression often increases public support for protest leaders and may actually lead to more radical, organized protests.

Ben Liebman, Associate Professor of Law, Director of the Center for Chinese Legal Studies, Columbia Law School, commented on “*China’s Courts: Restricted Reform?*” Liebman examined the effects of rising social unrest on the role of courts and discussed recent reforms of the court system. He concluded that reforms were not resulting in a fundamental change to the authority of courts and questioned whether the courts are able to be fair. He also noted that the courts do not play the role of agents of change but that their roles are a subject of much current debate.

Murray Scot Tanner, Senior Political Scientist, RAND Corporation, spoke on “*Implications of Chinese Social Unrest for the United States*.” He noted that the United States is increasingly interested in social unrest in China and that social unrest incidents raise the stakes in China’s dealings with the international community and will lead China to feel it has less room for diplomatic maneuver. Fears of unrest have also added an element of caution to Chinese interaction with bordering countries (particularly North Korea) and have undermined Party willingness to make necessary political and economic reforms. He concluded by noting that the United States needs to consider how it will respond to any future episodes of violent repression by the Chinese, especially in light of increasing ties between US and Chinese police forces.

The keynote speaker was **Dennis Wilder**, Senior Director for Asian Affairs, National Security Council, who spoke off the record.