

Contentious Politics in China: Causes, Dynamics, and Consequences

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This is a short paperback edition, 60 pages of text plus 30 pages of references, simultaneously published as issue 4.1 of *Brill Research Perspectives in Governance and Public Policy in China*. Such a book form can be exceptionally useful, and the Brill series editors deserve congratulations for bringing it out. Manfred Elfstrom and Yao Li have done the scholarly community a great service by providing such an extensive, balanced and astute overview of the existing literature on contentious politics in China.

Largely within the Tillyan theoretical framework of social conflicts and social movements, and comparative with cases in other countries wherever meaningful, the book adopts “a more dynamic process oriented perspective” (p. 31) to capture the complex, multifaceted characters and significations of “mass incidents” in China. The authors ask why such incidents occurred so frequently, how they were organized, and where they led. In response they survey the broad landscape of social ferment, exploring structural and contingent explanations, and analysing diverse effects of different strategies and framings of issues, arguing that “skillful framing is key to success” (p. 26). Delineating repressive, tolerant, concessionary and mixed patterns of state response, they assess the efficacies and impacts of each approach. Major debates are duly reviewed along the way. This physically thin book is thick in substance. It is a concise guide for mapping the field and its most advanced scholarships.

Elfstrom and Li organize social protests in contemporary China into six categories: *labour unrest*, of both earlier SOE workers resisting industrial restructuring and massive layoffs, and currently dominant migrant workers’ unrest over wages, conditions and at times unionization. *Rural conflict* that was initially triggered by excessive levies and land grabbing by local governments and private developers; now, as protests against levies have receded, they continue over unending land expropriation and imposed demolition. *Environmental advocacy*, a trend circumstantially converging toward or diverging from government agendas, including contentions caused by destructive mining in the minority regions. Varieties of *nationalist demonstrations*; here, it is probably inaccurate to hold that “Chinese leaders clearly downplayed nationalist rhetoric in favour of class struggle during the Mao era ... contemporary nationalism is thus a new phenomenon” (p. 8). For national liberation/sovereignty has always been core to the Chinese communist ideology; the difference between the two eras lies rather in the repositioning of nationalism today as it is no longer an integral part of socialism and internationalism. *National self-determination struggles* of the national minorities and in Hong Kong. This reference to the Hong Kong SAR can be especially confusing, if only because events there have little to do with Beijing’s controversial “nationality” policies. Finally, *emerging areas of conflict*, such as religious, feminist and other discontents, from unfulfilled LGBTQ rights to welfare deficiencies of demobilized veterans.

The authors examine economic structural, opportunity-based and organizational explanations for these movements. They recognize certain Maoist mass campaigns as having “offered citizens powerful opportunities to assert their needs,” rooted in a popular trust in the authorities (pp. 16–17). Since the old forms of social

organization such as work units and other horizontal ties have largely dissolved in the marketplace, “the pattern of isolated resistance has persisted in the reform era” (p. 18). The space for joint struggles as well as for NGOs and semi-autonomous civil activism is shrinking, except in those areas of “welfarist incorporation” between officials and societal groups (pp. 18–20). Borrowing the notion of micro infrastructural power from Michael Mann in evaluating state management of social contestation, the book distinguishes between the coercive *weiwen* system and the conciliatory institutions to include methods of “buying stability,” legal and petitioning channels, and union mediation. In addition to the elaboration of hard and soft repressions and censorship, worth noting could be government sponsored online tools of credit earning/losing APPs intended to boost “positive energy” – *Qiangguo luntan* (Strong China Forum) comes to mind. The last two sections summarize the implications of contentious politics under an authoritarian regime for both the state and protesters. The remark that contention is often not zero sum in China thanks to its culture and history (pp. 54–55) is questionable in light of a history full of uprisings and insurgencies. One of the greatest modern social revolutions is Chinese, after all. The optimism of negotiations depoliticizing confrontation, dissipating contention and improving policies is thus contested as a matter of transformative politics. The conclusion makes some valuable suggestions on future research.

Analytically, “authoritarianism” is a common but insufficient concept. The “Chinese one-party state” or “authoritarian resilience” taken for granted in the book is too general to discern a state before and after its neoliberal global integration. The two passages of this state are incompatible in their power base and policy stance. In other words, the PRC state is obviously not only authoritarian, but also (nominally) communist. It is still to a considerable extent path dependent on its former self. Contextualized, the thesis of “rightful resistance” (Kevin O’Brien) is worth expanding. The fact that the aggrieved can appeal to formal rules, proclaimed ideology and normative expectations and articulate their demand on the regime’s own terms is a unique advantage as well as a source of confusion. Discrepancies between what is formally pledged and yet indefensible actualities compel remedies, peaceful or violent. While windows have narrowed for even the most rightful resistance, it continues to be morally validated by the axiom of just rebellion. This paradoxical situation of legitimacy and legitimation, easily complicated by an enduring cold war discourse and agitation, is vital for today’s struggles in China to be understood. I have duly added this title to the reading list for my class.

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The Overseas Chinese Democracy Movement: Assessing China's Only Open Political Opposition

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The Overseas Chinese Democracy Movement is an excellent book on the Chinese opposition in exile, a topic that is usually overlooked, although recent history has demonstrated that transnational social movements can play a major part in the