

Book Reviews

Evolutionary Governance in China: State–Society Relations under Authoritarianism

Edited by SZU-CHIEN HSU, KELLE S. TSAI and CHUN-CHIH CHANG

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This analytically rigorous volume on contemporary state–society relations pushes beyond the prevailing “intellectual cottage industry of adjectives modifying authoritarianism” (p. 12) to describe Chinese governance by drilling down into the sources of authoritarian durability over time; the authors collectively seek to offer a nuanced, dynamic model of evolutionary governance practices in China that balances empirical richness with conceptual precision. Surprisingly, given the complexity of the task, they succeed. Employing a complex framework that combines a 2 x 2 typology of state–society interactions assessed both diachronically and in interaction with each other (hard state/hard society; hard state/soft society; soft state/hard society; and soft state/soft society), the contributors aim to capture the ways in which actors and practices on either side of the state–society dyad are mutually evolving with respect to a particular problematic or issue. The cases present initial dyads that are assessed against nine outcome variables reflecting specific dimensions of political power, governance and policy outcomes across eight issue domains (p. 5). What emerges is a complex portrait of the ceaseless dynamism that characterizes the practices of Chinese governance under Xi Jinping: “connected, contingent, cumulative, yet changeable,” as Elizabeth J. Perry observes in her epilogue (p. 393).

Kellee Tsai’s incisive summary and critique of the proliferating “authoritarianism with adjectives” literature is impressively comprehensive. Within it, she highlights three broad trends that drive recent scholarship: a focus on the information flows between state and society; explorations of the media as a tool for both understanding and remoulding popular opinion; and the “paradoxical vibrancy of off-line contentious politics in an otherwise repressive authoritarian context” (p. 17). Szu-chien Hsu and Chun-chih Chang in their chapter pick up on these themes in their quantitative survey project of 125 cases of state–society interactions published between 2005 and 2015 in leading social science journals on China. Although they unsurprisingly confirm the power of the state to impose its will on society when it elects “strong” strategies of engagement, they note the success of societal actors to effect particular outcomes when the state chooses “soft” strategies (or when both do), highlighting the essential dilemma that resides at the core of authoritarian evolutionary governance: that whereas “strong” (repressive) strategies allow the state to retain political power, it is the “softer” (cooperative, collaborative) modes of engagement with society that appear to actually further resilience by achieving improvements in governance and furthering policy change.

The remaining chapters offer empirically rich and detailed case studies across four domains of governance: community; environment and public health; management of the economy and labour; and social and religious organizations. Yousun Chung tracks the evolving legislative impact of homeowner activism in Beijing, and finds evidence of increasing pluralism in the policy-making process as urban homeowners have become more empowered since the early 2000s. Szu-chien Hsu and Muye Chou track the vast transformations in China’s voluntary sector since

the early 2000s, noting how the reshaping of civil society organizations (CSOs) in various Beijing districts has yielded a highly “cellularized civil society” in which, although local governments retain significant political power, social organizations continue to serve as a bridge to grassroots communities, cultivating participatory methods in the absence of formal political representation. Yi-chun Tao’s chapter on the rise of a rights defence movement to counter rural land requisition in Guangdong’s Nanhai documents the ways that activism was brought to heel through a combination of “regular inclusion mechanisms, and the institutional suppression of rights defense actions concerning trans-local problems” (154).

From the section on environment and public health, Chanhsi Wang documents the wide fluctuations in AIDS governance since the early 2000s, linked to the role of international pressure and involvement of the international community, which pressured the Chinese government into allowing CSOs to participate in policy-making. When international pressure waned and the Global Fund withdrew from China in 2011, the state quickly reverted to its more repressive strategies in dealing with AIDS CSOs. Szu-chien Hsu and Chin-chih Wang’s chapter on anti-incinerator campaigns in Beijing and Guangzhou highlights the critical role that policy entrepreneurs can play in situations where there is no existing institutional basis for building trust between state and society. Although ultimately under Xi Jinping the state has more often resorted to amped-up surveillance and repression to quash such protests, a skilled movement leader cum spokesperson can make some limited gains against local state recalcitrance. However, in contrast to the more interactive governance strategies adopted under his predecessor, the Xi regime has overwhelmingly tended toward “strong” repressive responses and shows no signs of easing up.

The section on economic and labour governance features chapters from Chih-peng Cheng on the administration of labour governance law in the Pearl River Delta, one by Thun-hong Lin on the policy changes with respect to foreign-owned enterprises in the wake of the Foxconn suicides, and a contribution by Christina Chen on the general evolution of labour legislation over time. Cheng details the formation of a coalition between Taiwanese factory owners and local governments in the Pearl River Delta, leading to the underregulation of the Labour Contract Law there – until striking rural migrants made allies of the central government through contestation, and reversed the trend. Lin highlights not only how the regime attempted to use the labour unrest at Foxconn to discipline foreign capital and advance national developmental agendas, but also how various levels of the state ended up pursuing different strategies that punished both labour and capital, which ultimately backfired against the state. Intriguingly, in the next chapter, Chen seems to tell a rather different story, underscoring the fact that there is no unilinear model at play in Chinese governance. Chen shows that not only has the central state become more responsive to workers’ demands between 2000–2010, using “soft” methods to “absorb” and “incorporate” workers, but that even the localized and often uncoordinated protests of workers in the Pearl River Delta were sufficient to push the local state to pass more protective labour legislation.

The chapters in the final section deal with CSOs, including a strong but surprising chapter from Weiting Wu arguing that the partnership between feminist cadres positioned at various levels of the state has yielded meaningful legal reforms protecting the rights of women, even as the party-state overall has continued its unabated harassment of women’s rights groups. Ming-ching Ku’s interesting chapter demonstrates how community leaders and activists were able to leverage UNESCO’s recognition of Mazu belief as a cultural heritage worthy of protection into a broader effort to promote local folk religious practices within a state-sponsored cultural framework; on

the other hand, Ke-hsien Huang's contribution on Christian state–church interactions documents that, although local Christian churches and leaders can enjoy semi-formalized relationships with local authorities characterized by mutual trust and even regard, such practices have not been consolidated into stable institutions (p. 383), and, therefore, are at least potentially subject to variability over time.

As the individual chapters make clear, the contributors to this volume have not adopted a single streamlined model of state–society interactions across a wide swathe of policy domains and cases. The material presented is empirically rich and unapologetically complicated: this is not a volume for those looking for a reductive framework that will “travel well” to other authoritarian contexts, particularly those that lack China's still vibrant revolutionary past. As Perry reminds us, in recognizing the contemporary outcomes documented here as part of a broadly “*evolutionary*” process, we should not lose sight of the fact that baked into the Chinese Communist Party's DNA is its *revolutionary* heritage” (p. 394). Adaptation has not diminished the “complicated ancestry” of the still-recognizable Leninist features of the party-state under Xi. Nevertheless, both the contributors and organizers of this rich collection deserve sincere kudos for digging seriously into the fertile soil of evolutionary governance and unearthing its myriad complexities and contradictions.

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Market Maoists: The Communist Origins of China's Capitalist Ascent

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It is well known that self-reliance was one of the guiding principles of the Maoist era. It had been practised by Communist base areas located in (for example) Jiangxi, northern Sichuan and Yan'an before 1949. The doctrine heavily influenced patterns of trade between China's provinces after 1949 when all were expected to strive towards the goal of self-reliance in grain production, especially after the famine of 1958–62. Perhaps more importantly, the doctrine of self-reliance was exercised at a national level after 1949. In this regard, China was following in the footsteps of the Soviet Union. Not that emulation of Stalin's “socialism in one country” was the principal driving force. Rather, the logic was both strategic and economic. A self-reliant China would be less vulnerable to attack, and economic self-reliance would insulate China from the damaging fluctuations in world demand that laid waste to the Treaty Port economy during the 1930s.

Nevertheless, the Maoist approach to self-reliance was always infused with a healthy dose of pragmatism. The communist base areas traded across their borders with Kuomintang-held territory when they could. The goal of provincial self-reliance in grain production was tempered by a recognition of agricultural realities. Thus, Sichuan and Heilongjiang were large-scale suppliers of grain to other provinces during the 1950s, and both Hebei and Liaoning were consistent net importers. In times of harvest failure, even habitual exporters were allowed to import grain; Sichuan in 1976 was a case in point. There was also a recognition that it was sensible