

*China's Governance Puzzle: Enabling Transparency and Participation in a Single-Party State*, by Edmund J. Malesky, Jonathan R. Stromseth, and Dimitar D. Gueorguiev. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 340 pp. US\$34.99 (paper).

Can nondemocracies import and adopt institutions of good governance from democratic states? Or are such efforts doomed by the lack of political accountability that defines authoritarian rule? These important questions speak to the potential of authoritarian regimes to evolve and survive. If nondemocracies can only employ a starter kit of modern governance tools, they are permanently handicapped in responding to the myriad challenges of public administration in the twenty-first century.

*China's Governance Puzzle* deals with these big stakes. This rich study of China's recent reforms to public administration asks whether the world's longest-lasting Communist regime has meaningfully implemented government transparency and stimulated public participation in policy making. It goes beyond documenting the rules and rituals of public administration to seek evidence on whether reforms actually have improved the quality of Chinese governance.

The book methodically builds toward an answer. Yes, authoritarian reforms can improve governance. Drawing on quantitative analysis of China's provinces and case studies in several major cities, it argues government transparency has improved the use of public funds in China even in the absence of democracy. First, reforms increase the information available to society. Then citizens and other nonstate actors use this information, often to question government expenditures. Their efforts are amplified by the press and social media, and this public attention constrains official behavior and reduces misuse of public funds.

The book also argues that increased public participation has reduced social conflict but through a different mechanism. Unlike the mobilization engendered by transparency, China's "notice and comment" periods on proposed legislation place no hard constraints on policy makers. Instead, political leaders find it in their interest to align policies and their implementation with the expressed interests of the public. This diverges from the role of participatory institutions in democracies, where the canonical act (voting) is the primary constraint on the behavior of leaders when in office.

Evidence for these claims comes from several sources, but the centerpiece is a major data collection project. The large research team behind this project collected data about Chinese provinces from official sources and analyzed the relationship between reforms and public administration outcomes, using both cross-sectional and panel estimates that exploit variation within provinces over time. The narrative is transparent and reflective, providing readers with ample opportunity to consider the evidence and draw their own conclusions. This includes publishing all data and analysis files on a public repository, allowing the most intrepid

readers to download and conduct their own analyses of the original data behind the book. This is especially valuable because China is data poor in many ways, especially as we look back in time. The data also make the book more valuable from a pedagogical standpoint, as students have the opportunity to learn not just from the results but also from studying the methods used to arrive at them.

The book moves between high-level theorizing and textured stories about the places where Chinese state and society meet. It weaves local elite politics into discussions of activist campaigns around major government projects. The case studies that illustrate arguments and the characters in these cases are memorable. They include a high schooler fixated by city subways, a blogger imprisoned for satirizing political leaders, local officials attempting to exhume over 2 million corpses, development planners flattening mountains by fiat, and a fisherman whose shoestring organization managed to close over two hundred polluting factories.

These illustrative case studies identify causal pathways that might link fluctuations in transparency to fluctuations in the misuse of funds. They also show the remarkable variation in political culture across Chinese provinces, which produces many differences in local governance. For example, it is difficult to disentangle variations in transparency practices from the broad differences in political culture across Guangdong and Chongqing, two regions compared in the transparency section. First, the comparatively strong civil society presence in Guangdong could influence both the adoption of government transparency reforms and the misuse of funds through its effects on the beliefs of local officials. Guangdong is civil-society rich, a feature aided by its proximity to both activists and media organizations in Hong Kong. The authors clearly recognize this issue. In this quantitative analysis, these concerns are what make the panel models exploiting change within provinces over time more persuasive than the cross-sectional regressions that analyze variation across regions.

The concluding chapter offers visions of China's future, venturing into speculative territory in a refreshing and appropriately cautious manner. The authors discuss the implications of their findings for understanding Chinese governance and the future of China's political regime. Among these conclusions, they view reforms favoring transparency and participation as indications that the Chinese state is pursuing new modes of legitimation. They imply these developments presage a new basis for legitimacy that would be suitable for democratic politics, based on these governance processes rather than single-party political domination.

With the benefit of hindsight since the study's publication, this conclusion is perhaps overly optimistic. Recent years under Xi Jinping have seen a revival of traditional Leninist strategies of legitimation alongside an apparent end to the institutions of term limits and collective senior leadership. The crackdown on civil society organizations certainly limits their ability to use government information in activist campaigns and to amplify their claims. Xi is undoubtedly a reformer, but his flavor of reform pairs poorly with the recipes for good governance

proposed in the book. Other conclusions feel similarly optimistic. The former leader of Guangdong Province, Wang Yang, is praised for his apparent resolution of the Wukan uprising (118), but a foreign journalist returned to Wukan in 2017 to find pervasive surveillance and citizens terrified to speak to journalists—not an inspiring model for transparency and openness (James Pomfret, “In China’s ‘Democracy Village,’ No One Wants to Talk Any More,” *Reuters*, November 10, 2017).

A second prediction of the concluding chapter, that China’s reforms favoring transparency and participation have cultivated a citizenry better suited to democratic processes of governance, remains apt. The new institutions discussed in the book emerged within a rapidly transforming society characterized by the spread of new ideas among young people. As I completed this review, a group of Chinese youth invigorated by Marxist teachings tried to publicize grievances of migrant workers, using the internet to amplify news of rights abuses against workers, paralleling several cases in this book. Their organization and protest exemplified a modern civil society, informed about happenings across the country and using communication technology to disseminate their political views.

Yet China’s security services responded by sweeping up these young Marxists in a crackdown. Many of China’s citizens appear ready for a greater say in governing their country, but it remains unclear whether their leaders are ready to listen.

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*The China Questions: Critical Insights into a Rising Power*, edited by Jennifer Rudolph and Michael Szonyi. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. xi+337 pp. US\$27.95 (cloth).

This landmark collection of essays on China’s past, present, and future has an ambitious basic aim: to address the United States’ “understanding deficit” with China, as Michael Szonyi explains in the introduction. The book commemorates the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of Harvard University’s Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, and each of the book’s 36 chapters is authored by a scholar affiliated with the center. Each chapter tackles one pressing question about the world’s most populous country, ranging from “Is the Chinese Communist Regime Legitimate?” to “How Has the Study of China Changed in the Past 60 Years?”

If the “China questions” are quite broad, the answers are quite short. The chapters are typically less than 10 pages, and one might fault the book for “teasing” the reader with such short essays. Depth was never the point, however. The