

Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 179 pp. ISBN 0-521-67852-8.

For more than a decade, O'Brien and Li have published widely on such crucial aspects of Chinese grassroots rural politics as village elections, political attitudes and trust, popular resistance, and conflicts between farmers and local officials. In this book they summarize their rich empirical observations and interpret them in the light of larger theories of contentious politics. The result of this encounter between high theory and Chinese rural life is the concept of 'rightful resistance', which is developed and explained from different perspectives in the six chapters of the book.

This concept, which James C. Scott in a cover note calls a major 'new species' in the study of resistance, was introduced by the authors as long ago as the mid-1990s. It describes a special form of protest where subalterns, in this case Chinese farmers, make use of laws, official policies, and statements from political leaders to confront the authorities. Farmers 'act as if they take the values and programs of political and economic elites to heart, while demonstrating that some authorities do not' (p. 5).

After introducing the concept and placing it in a comparative context, the authors demonstrate how this type of resistance finds particularly favourable conditions in present-day China. More and more aspects of Chinese life are covered by legislation, and information about these laws and about the central government's policies spread quickly through the media to a literate population increasingly aware of its rights. In the multi-layered Chinese state, the authorities at the higher levels need mechanisms to control and discipline subordinate officials, and in this context 'rightful resisters' can serve as useful watchdogs against local corruption, power abuse, and incompetence. Farmers can therefore to some extent rely on support from above when they challenge local officials. This creates structural opportunities for resistance, although local cadres do their best to stop it.

Much of this resistance is what the authors term 'boundary-spanning'. It operates somewhere between lawful political behaviour, which would often just serve to make the regime appear more legitimate, and open confrontation with the authorities. Resisters skilfully make use of the fact that *some* officials at *some* levels of the state apparatus are willing to support their claims for whatever reason. Thus popular forces and state actors sometimes confront each other and sometimes cooperate

in patterns that may become evident through detailed studies at the local level. Such studies reveal the Chinese state to be a 'hodge-podge of disparate actors' (p. 66). Disgruntled farmers may escalate their means of resistance from simply making other villagers aware of the existence of certain laws and policies, to demanding a dialogue with officials, to open defiance and confrontation. The authors show how such tactics are developed over time as protesters gain experience and evaluate the outcome of their actions. These outcomes are not always positive, of course, but the book presents examples of how resistance affects policy implementation, as well as the life and outlook of the protesters, and therefore how it plays an important role in Chinese rural politics. In a final chapter they point to potentially more far-reaching effects of the normally local and limited rural protests: a growing sense of citizenship rights among the rural population; an increased awareness among central leaders about the necessity of political reform; and maybe even a fertile ground for more radical types of resistance in the future – although the authors are careful not to make hasty conclusions or predictions about this issue.

The book is a pleasure to read. Practically every step of the argument is solidly supported by empirical data – either the authors' own interviews or material from a huge bulk of Chinese and Western scholarly literature on rural China – and practically every observation is interpreted in the light of the general social science literature on popular movements, protests, resistance, etc., and then used to question, expand, and revise general concepts and perceptions. In this sense, the book shows how the study of China can contribute to social science theory, rather than just testing whether general concepts fit or do not fit the Chinese case. It is lucidly written, and will certainly be a landmark for future debates about Chinese rural politics. For these reasons it is also well suited for teaching purposes.

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