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Timothy Hildebrandt

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Civil Society under Authoritarianism: The China Model

JESSICA C. TEETS

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014

212 page. \$85.00

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Over the last decade, the rising number of civil society organizations (CSOs) across various issue areas in China has led to a boomlet of academic studies on the topic. What began as rich ethnographies, focusing on a small number of organizations (or those individuals who lead them) has expanded into larger-N, theoretically-driven studies. This is especially true for political scientists in China studies who have written on the topic in recent years. Jessica Teets' wonderful book, *Civil Society Under Authoritarianism*, is both an interesting and important contribution to this still nascent literature.

Teets' research is motivated by a clearly articulated puzzle: why do CSOs, some of which are notoriously antagonistic, exist in authoritarian polities such as China? While other scholars have tackled similar questions, through extensive interviews and careful process tracing in four locales (Beijing, Jiangsu, Sichuan and Yunnan) she arrives at a different, although not necessarily contradictory, answer: while state-society relations in China was once corporatist in nature it has evolved into 'consultative authoritarianism' (CA), a term purposefully rich with paradox. She shows how, due in large part to unfunded mandates from Beijing, local officials have relied upon CSOs to help govern. She highlights how civil society in authoritarian contexts acts as a feedback mechanism both on citizen dissatisfaction and on how well (or poorly) policies work.

Although a key causal factor in the rise of CSOs, this does not entirely explain the puzzle and it is here where Teets' book shines: she posits an explanation of rational 'policy learning,' where government policies can be changed through direct experience with civil society and observation of similar dynamics in other authoritarian regimes. Hers' is a story both of civil society empowerment—a departure from what she correctly describes as a predominance of 'victim narratives' in studies of civil society in authoritarian polities—and the possibility of a cooperative and productive relationship with authoritarian governments; civil society is not just a partner in governance, but a force in making better, more effective policies.

While the introduction posits the idea of consultative authoritarianism and policy learning, chapters one through four represent the book's rich, empirical core. Chapter 1 outlines the political and economic conditions that have given opportunity for CSOs to exist in China at all, and how their presence has provided for this policy learning for government officials. With a long view of history, she shows how decentralization forced local officials to search for innovative policies thus affecting civil society development. Chapter 2 draws the focus on Beijing and Yunnan, the two sites Teets identifies as leading the way for CA in China. Chapter 3, on the other hand, highlights Jiangsu and Sichuan, areas that lacked the large number of CSOs in the other two cases, through direct experience with civil society, local officials learned of their benefits, leading to an

influx in CSOs and a clear evolution from corporatism to consultative authoritarianism. Notable in this chapter is the compelling example of learning in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake of 2008 – a topic Teets has devoted greater attention to in the pages of this journal. Given the book's desire to highlight societal agency, Chapter 4 is particularly important in that it examines the particular strategies CSOs use to 'teach' or otherwise influence policy leaders. For readers interested in comparative analysis, the conclusion is most satisfying. Teets draws upon numerous cases of authoritarian governance elsewhere in the world to show how policy learning through civil society is present well outside of China; she argues that this model of state-society relations is diffusing to other regimes 'in a similar fashion to the Chinese economic model of state capitalism' (p. 178). While she draws evidence from a diversity of countries like Syria, Venezuela, and Cuba, she reserves most space for a discussion of Russia which, in light of recent events, is a particularly timely piece of analysis.

The book does not explicitly focus on any particular types of CSOs; Teets is ultimately more interested in regional than issue variation. In doing so, she is less able to analyse how CSOs working on different issues might affect policy learning differently. In its place, however, we are offered a satisfying descriptive sampling of the various organizations operating in China and how they are contribute to policy learning. Likewise, the book examines international NGOs in addition to domestic grassroots groups. Although this broad view, again, captures the multitude of groups operating in the country, the lack of a more careful side-by-side analysis means we are unable to fully understand the differing effect each type of groups has on governance. Finally, Teets makes a well-reasoned, and necessary, choices in limiting the scope of the project to registered organizations. However, there is undoubtedly another interesting and surprising story to be told about how unregistered groups can have a discernable but different type of effect on policy learning, as well.

In sum, Teets' book makes three particularly important contributions: First, she wisely identifies how relations are in flux and it can evolve over time; 'consultative authoritarianism' suggests there is something after corporatism that better describes the trajectory of state-society relations in China. Second, her attention to how the nature of these relations affect policy change—rational policy learning—is especially insightful. Finally, although this is empirically a China study at its heart, Teets is a scholar who clearly believes that what we learn from China can and should be applied to our understanding of authoritarianism elsewhere. This is great corrective to those who are rightly concerned about the amount of navel gazing in China studies today.

Timothy Hildebrandt, T.R. Hildebrandt@lse.ac.uk