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Xi Chen (2011) *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book is highly dense with compressed arguments and meticulous detail at every turn; The work starts out with one major question 'why [has] there been a dramatic rise in, and routinization of, social protests in China since the early 1990s'; specifically as Xi maintains, this question is puzzling given that: 1) firstly these protests began immediately after the Tiananmen Crackdown of 1989, and 2) secondly that current theories of authoritarianism, demonstrate that routine social protest in authoritarian states is usually highly unlikely. As Xi points out, then, what this phenomenon tells us is that China is a unique case that escapes traditional analyses, and subsequently demands a fuller contextual investigation. Specifically then, Xi, contends that China's situation is one of 'contentious authoritarianism', which refers to the idea of a 'strong authoritarian regime [which has]... accommodated or facilitated widespread and routinized popular collective action for a relatively long period of time' (page 6).

To unpack these arguments, Xi's book is divided into three, sections on: (1) Chinese society, (2) political structure, and (3) protest strategies and tactics. As well as the introduction, Section 1 entitled a 'Contentious society' contains a chapter outlining the surge in social protests in the last twenty years. Evaluating numerical data collected through the xinfang system, (a system designed to handle public petitioning and complaints), Xi contends that collective petitioning 'is a relatively new phenomenon in Chinese history' (page, 53); and specifically, Xi connects changes in the reform period, including economic reforms and the decline of traditional welfarist work-unit structures (such as pensions and employment), corruption amongst local officials, and a growing lack of local political representation, as key factors in the surge of contemporary complaints. In Section 2, Xi develops these issues through two chapters entitled 'Market reforms and state strategies' (chapter 3) and 'the Xinfang system and political opportunities' (chapter 4). In chapter 3, Xi argues that changes in state strategies (including traditional repression, concession and persuasion) are a

product of economic reform; and specifically Xi suggests that changes in state tactics are down to the end of the work unit system, and divisions in government and state agencies which has in turn reduced 'petitioners fear, and oft-used expedient concessions have made trouble-making attractive' (page, 86).

In Chapter 4, Xi develops this argument even further through a closer inspection of the xinfang system. As Xi points out, in the last twenty years an increasing use of the system has taken place as protesters have seen opportunities for higher political impact as a result of internal political changes to the institutional configuration of the system. Firstly then, as Xi seems to suggest with the demise of the work-unit system, in the last twenty years divisions between higher and lower state officials have become more apparent; while new political coalitions have emerged linking higher officials and public petitioners together. As Xi points out, these coalitions have often been highly effective in promoting public political goals, and in these coalitions 'local officials [have been held] accountable' (page, 130). Furthermore as Xi suggests changes in the configuration of the state, has also led to local openings where traditional institutional channels (to communicate with the authorities) have been appropriated from within; particularly as Xi contends often institutions can be *re-orientated* through 'personal connections' between officials and petitioners (page, 130).

Whilst section 2 deals with institutional re-configurations, section 3 explores the actual agency of the protesters and aptly titled 'Protest Strategies and Tactics'; The first chapter of this section 'Between Defiance and Obedience', opens up with a fascinating exploration of the way petitioners can often have an impact over local leaders by simultaneously producing 'individualised resistance while feigning obedience' (page, 136). As Xi proposes 'Chinese protesters have a strong tendency to operate close to authorized channels and to take dramatic actions to demonstrate their obedience... [but]... are ready to engage in very troubling activities... staging large-scale, public and disruptive protests, establishing cross sector ties, or forming semi-autonomous or autonomous organisations' (page, 136). In Chapter 6, Xi explores these questions of protester agency even

further via an exploration of 'troublemaking tactics'; Specifically, Xi focuses on four kinds of troublemaking tactics that include *publicity tactics* (including marches, petitions and sit-ins), *persuasive tactics* (such as staged acts of supplication and self-inflicted suffering), *disruption of social order* (including traffic blocking, attacking opponents and vandalism) and finally *disruption of government operations* (including public commotions, sit-ins and gate blocking at government events). After outlining these different modes of protest, Xi proposes that as opposed to one form of tactic, it is usually the size of the protest which is critical to gaining a response (page, 184).

Finally in the last section, Xi concludes his book with the important claim that rather than another authoritarian regime the Chinese state and the central government is relatively unique in that it 'accommodates widespread and routinized collective protests' (page 189). However, as Xi subtly suggests, the production of a contentious authoritarianism, should not lead us to the conclusion that the Chinese state and the government are a much maligned actor that has long been misunderstood (see for instance, Jacques, 2009). Moreover, as Xi states 'no matter how routinized and efficacious their actions are, Chinese protesters do *not* enjoy regular and low-cost access to political arenas. Their mobilisation is both stressful and somewhat risky' (page, 198). Thus in concluding this work, Xi raises the question of whether the Chinese state is 'An alternative to liberal democracy' as some recent commentators (such as Jacques, 2009) have suggested. Against this position, Xi very clearly states that the Chinese state is still unresponsive to its citizens, and whilst Xi does not explicitly support liberal democracy, he notes all the same, that its 'institutions... ensure a relatively high level of political responsiveness' (page, 209).

All in all then, this book is excellent and will be of interest to a range of scholars interested in Chinese politics and the state more generally. Moreover, for new students keen to get a grip on Chinese politics the work neatly challenges many common-place western stereotypes that suggest there is no protest in China, or that protest in China will be met by hard repression or physical force. Moreover, this work also challenges the assumption that the Chinese state and the Chinese

Communist Party more specifically, is a homogenous and unified entity that works towards Orwellian goals in unhesitating harmony. Indeed, as Xi's work illuminatingly demonstrates, with the collapse of the work-unit system, divisions both vertically and horizontally in the state are unambiguous and opportunities are everywhere for protesters and activists to exploit various tensions and disunions in the system. If the work has one failing however, it is possibly the lack of wider historical socio-cultural explanations for the rise in protests; indeed, whilst Xi suggests that changes in the state has led to an increasing surge in protests, one cannot help but feel that wider influences (particularly globalisation, increased travel, tourism and new kinds of consumption) have also played a part in contemporary Chinese culture and politics. Indeed, as recent commentators in sociology, have suggested, China cannot be read apart from wider shifts in global culture and new kinds of global flows that have permeated and unsettled its borders and cultures (see Tyfield and Urry, 2009).

References

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