

The Art of Political Control in China. By Daniel C. Mattingly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 244p. \$105.00 cloth. \$34.99 paper.

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There are relatively few studies of local governance in authoritarian contexts that seek to develop a theory with potential applications beyond the site of study, in part due to the prevailing belief that local politics are irrelevant to the overall durability of authoritarian regimes. Challenging this view, Daniel C. Mattingly shows how the presence of strong civil society organisations in autocracies – and perhaps beyond – does not always indicate a broader shift towards democratic governance; on the contrary, his research explores the ways in which non-state groups and their leaders are recruited by local officials in order to assist in the imposition of unpopular policies on citizens. This leads to the counter-intuitive conclusion that communities with strong social institutions are more likely to suffer from the imposition of unpopular policies, while those with fragmented and disconnected social institutions may be better placed to resist it since they are at lower risk of manipulation by the state. These findings raise a challenge to the seminal works on associational life from Tocqueville to Putnam, which argue that civic groups create forms of social capital that underpin the democratisation process.

In order to demonstrate this, Mattingly sets out the Chinese Communist Party's 'governance challenge' in rural areas: local officials must implement highly interventionist and generally unpopular policies while maintaining a stable and protest-free environment, yet citizens do not trust CCP representatives and are unlikely to vote for them in local elections. To overcome this challenge, officials engage in practices of 'informal control', whereby they 'exploit the social bonds created by strong civil society groups to collect information on individual behaviour and to apply social pressure on individuals to comply with the state' (p. 11). This exploitation occurs in three ways: by cultivating civil society groups that can advance the state's agenda on its behalf; by co-opting influential civil society leaders into local political institutions in order to use their moral authority to influence society; and by creating small cells of informants able to infiltrate civic groups and report back on instances of non-compliance. While democrats and civil society promoters will undoubtedly find this a bleak picture of associational life in authoritarian conditions, Mattingly is careful to state that civil society organisations are not solely used

for political control by the authoritarian state; rather, ‘they can strengthen social trust in ways that facilitate collective action *and* help autocratic regimes infiltrate and control society’ (emphasis in original). However, of these two functions, ‘their more significant role in autocracies like China is top-down political control’ (p. 19).

Mattingly demonstrates his theory of informal control through an exploration of two particularly interventionist policy areas: the requisitioning of land from village farmers and the enforcement of the One Child Policy. Land requisitioning has mushroomed since the turn of the millennium, as China’s urbanisation project has gained pace, with local officials acting as key brokers between poor farmers and developers, often providing low levels of compensation. Successful implementation of the One Child Policy, while varying in practice across provinces, has been deeply unpopular among citizens but is closely tied to the career path of local officials. Taking a wide definition of civil society, Mattingly focusses on two groups common in rural areas that form part of what Mary Gallagher has termed ‘unofficial civil society’ (p. 7) – lineage organisations and folk religious organisations. The former are extended kinship groups that trace family trees from a common ancestor and engage in ritualised ancestor worship, while the latter perpetuate local religious culture. The two groups do not have identical effects on policy implementation: while leaders of local lineage groups are often closely tied to local politics, this is less likely to be the case with folk religious leaders, given the proscription of religious activity during the Maoist period.

The book is accessibly written and carefully structured, with original empirical analysis spanning three chapters, each with a focus on one of the theoretical elements of informal control: cultivation, co-optation and infiltration. Of particular merit is the skilful combination of qualitative and quantitative materials within each chapter. Sensitive, ethnographic fieldwork pairs two villages with contrasting levels of linkages between social organisations and the local authorities and, consequently, differing rates of land acquisitions and the fulfilment of birth quotas. Quantitative data consisting of original field experiments and regression analyses of existing datasets then examine the extent to which the conclusions drawn from the qualitative material can be generalised across the rest of China.

The research presented here provides further ammunition with which to challenge the persistent view that the presence of civic organisations is a sign of democratisation. Even the presence of local elections should not be taken as evidence of a functioning local democracy since voters are more likely to select members of their chosen informal group than members of particular political parties; Mattingly states, ‘elections are an effective way to determine which villagers have the most social authority and therefore help local officials project state power’ (p. 67). These conclusions are not in themselves new – they were articulated by the early critics of the transition paradigm in the 1990s, who showed how institutions that appear ‘democratic’ through a Western lens may take on very different meanings in different political and cultural contexts. The novelty of the present research lies in its lucid exposition of the specific ways in which these different meanings are forged and operationalised in service of authoritarian governance. It explains why we see growing numbers of civic organisations while also seeing greater levels of authoritarian control.

Throughout the book, Mattingly raises the question of the generalisability of the theory of informal control beyond rural China. Two interesting avenues for further research stand out in this regard. First, given that lineage and folk religious organisations are far less prevalent in cities and that land appropriation is less relevant for the majority of city dwellers, a demonstration of the theory to urban China necessitates a follow-up study focussing on different organisations and policy spheres. One wonders whether other non-state groups suffer from the same tripartite strategy of manipulation in order to implement different types of policy. Second, Mattingly presents brief examples of similar practices both democracies and non-democracies, including the United States, Scotland, Venezuela, and India of the Middle Ages, raising the question of whether the theory can extend beyond authoritarian regimes. But there are qualitative differences in the way in which civic organisations interact with the state in democracies and non-democracies; hence a deeper elaboration of informal control within types of authoritarian regime would be required before exploring its iteration in democracies.

The wealth of new data presented in the book will be of great value to students of associational life and local politics in rural China. But the theory of informal control also raises important questions for promoters of civil society around the world: should they pack up and go home, since their activities risk having the reverse effect to the one they intend? Clearly, this would be a win for authoritarian leaders, who have criticised Western support for non-governmental groups since the Colour Revolutions swept Eurasia during the early 2000s. We are left with the conclusion that authoritarian governance is far more robust and adaptable than previously thought and, perhaps, ultimately undefeatable.