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Book review: Elfstrom, Manfred, “Workers and Change in China. Resistance, Repression, Responsiveness,” Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 232 pp., 77.89\$

This excellent book by Manfred Elfstrom provides a novel perspective on Chinese labour relations by examining how the dynamic interaction between workers’ recipes for resistance and the state’s bureaucratic incentives lead to distinctive regional models of control. Through his study of two similar cases – the Yangtze River Delta (focus: Jiangsu) and the Pearl River Delta (focus: Guangdong) – he finds that while in the former, workers employed contained forms of resistance which resulted in orthodox modes of control, in the latter, worker resistance was transgressive and boundary-spanning, due to which the state’s mode of control displayed more risk-taking. Ultimately, however, increasing labour resistance over time has resulted in the simultaneous growth of state repressive *and* responsive capacities which prove to be unsustainable since their maintenance is costly and coordination is difficult. As Elfstrom argues, worker resistance is thus fuelling a paradoxical growth of state capacities which may strengthen the state’s ability to manage worker resistance in the short-term but fails to build alliances with workers or capitalists which would be needed to enhance state legitimacy and support in the long run.

To demonstrate these points, the book proceeds in a step-by-step manner, outlining the causal process just described. Chapter 1, the Introduction, acquaints the reader with the book’s key arguments and research design before outlining these and the prevalent literature in greater detail in Chapter 2 ‘Recipes for resistance’ and Chapter 3 ‘Bureaucratic incentives’. The subsequent two chapters each present one regional model of control, starting with the Yangtze River Delta in ‘Orthodox control’ (Chapter 4) followed by ‘Risk-taking control’ in the Pearl River Delta (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 then provides a comparative analysis of the repressive and responsive capacities identified in the previous chapters and discusses alternative explanatory factors and limitations of the research. Digging deeper into one of these factors, Chapter 7 then explores whether elite politics may explain differences in state responses to worker resistance by examining the case of Chongqing. It finds that worker resistance – not elites’ personalities or interests – trigger specific state responses. Finally, the book’s findings are summarized in the Conclusion (Chapter 8) which compares Chinese worker resistance to other countries, in particular to post-state socialist authoritarian regimes.

The book’s key contribution to the literature is its analysis of processes and outcomes underlying worker resistance in China, which is not only carefully explored empirically but used to develop a novel and dynamic theoretical framework. In addition, its focus on workers as a distinct group in two Chinese regions differs from other work in the field of contentious politics, which has compared resistance of different social groups (e.g. Teresa Wright, *Popular Protest in China*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018, and Yanqi Tong and Shaohua Lei, *Social Protest in Contemporary China, 2003–2010: Transitional Pains and Regime Legitimacy*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014) or taken a historical approach (Elizabeth J. Perry, *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015). Another merit is Elfstrom’s meticulous analysis of a diverse range of materials (such as interviews, government handbooks, and statistical data) and the

continuous probing of the argument by exploring alternative explanations. Finally, throughout the book Elfstrom draws comparisons to other cases of social unrest in China and beyond – which demonstrates the transferability of his findings beyond the cases examined.

While the book has many merits, it also includes a few areas which could have been further explored or explained. First, although the analysis is meticulous, a reader interested in the methodological approach could want for more information about how the analysis was conducted. For example, it was a bit unclear which ‘within case’ method of analysis was used (e.g. how interview material was systematically examined) and how the qualitative and quantitative methods were combined to create a sound mixed-method approach. In addition, while the outline of the book suggests that the author used a deductive approach, in Chapter 2, an inductive approach is mentioned (p. 22). Which approach was taken and why could have been spelled out a bit more clearly in the beginning. Second, while the book covers both the Hu–Wen and Xi Jinping eras, data on labour protests, yearbooks and so on mostly cover the former era (specifically 2003–12), due to which the current era receives comparatively less attention. Similarly, the role of different government levels, especially at the grass roots, in shaping regional state responses is less explored. Finally, although a key argument of the book is that the contradicting growth of state capacities could lead to the ‘warping of the state’, it is also mentioned (p. 151) that worker resistance could warp as well. It would have been interesting to hear more about under which circumstances the author expects either of these outcomes to occur.

Overall, however, the book’s in-depth, process-oriented causal analysis demonstrates a valuable contribution to the literature on Chinese contentious politics and labour relations, providing an excellent read for scholars and students of Chinese politics alike.