

# China experiments

Post-Mao China has long been viewed by many as a case of economic development without political liberalization. While more than three decades' market-oriented economic reforms have transformed China into the second largest economy in the world, the process of political democratization has never seemed to fully take off. In *China Experiments*, Florini, Lai, and Tan challenge this conventional wisdom by treating China's political trajectory as a slow-motion, bumpy transformation of authoritarianism – regulated, and often led, by the Communist Party of China (CPC) since 1978. Arguing that political change in China is much deeper and more extensive than is commonly recognized, the authors decide not to focus on policies and political initiatives from Beijing, but rather to look for hints from the myriad of local experiments.

Junpeng Li

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SINCE 2000, the China Center for Comparative Politics and Economics at the CPC's Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, Center for the Comparative Study of World Political Parties at the Central Party School, and the Center for Chinese Government Innovations (CCGI) at Peking University, had administered a biennial awards program for best practice in local governance innovation (the award has been solely administered by the CCGI since 2009). This book largely draws its empirical evidence from the cases of the winners.

There have been a large number of inquiries into the democratic future of China, which can be categorized into four speculative directions, as summarized by the authors: authoritarian resilience, collapse, democratic evolution, and trapped transition. Readers will be disappointed if they look for a definitive answer, prediction, or endorsement. Instead, the book is intended as a roadmap that describes China's changing local political landscape. It identifies the respective progress and obstacles of each governance innovation, and points out its divergent likely trajectories. As the authors insist, China's political future is unpredictable; the emergence of contemporary China is an unprecedented phenomenon, with the blend of rapid economic growth and political authoritarianism in a large polity, its unique and continuous culture, its deliberate experimentalist approach to governance, or so-called "crossing the river by feeling the stones", and the complex international environment it is facing. Therefore, they find the existing predictions on China's democratic future unconvincing, and in turn take a bottom-up approach by examining what local actors are doing and their implications for China's national rules. As they reveal, with the notable exception of the sacrosanct one-party rule, China has been undergoing a wide range of local experiments involving and entailing the competition between various interests, which often have national repercussions, and the corresponding implications are more reliable than the grandiose conjectures.

More specifically, the book investigates four key areas of political reform: administration, elections, civil society, and transparency. Since the late 1990s, China has undergone a prolonged process of streamlining its bureaucratic structure, first by simplifying administrative procedures within some local authorities, and later by promoting the reform agenda beyond the selected localities. The authors present two interesting cases, one in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, the other in Xiaguan District, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province. For the first case, beginning in 1997, Shenzhen took a series of initiatives to downsize its administrative approval procedures, cutting the items in need of administrative approval first by 42 percent, and later by a further 38 percent. The municipal authorities soon realized, however, that many government agencies were not following the improved procedures, at least not efficiently. To fix this problem, in 2005, after a two-month trial operation, the Shenzhen government implemented an electronic supervision system to monitor

relevant license-granting activities and processes. As the authors claim, the system has greatly reduced the abuse of bureaucratic power, and has been imitated in at least ten other localities. In the second case, Xiaguan moved most of the scattered administrative and bureaucratic agencies to one single location, the so-called governmental affairs 'supermarket'. The one-stop government building provides more than fifty types of public services, and has smoothed the administrative process.

Open and competitive elections are the sine qua non of democracy. While the CPC has been very cautious in introducing a full-scale electoral mechanism into China, in recent years it has allowed for and experimented with 'semi-competitive elections', namely elections with candidates, but without organized groups or campaigns. The CPC itself has promoted intra-party democracy by bringing voting mechanisms into the party, although in a highly controlled and secretive manner. Indeed, Xi Jinping, China's presumptive next top leader, emerged from a vote by hundreds of high-ranking party officials in 2007.<sup>1</sup> Three local election experiments are examined by the authors. In the early 2000s, the local leaders in the county of Rushan, Shandong Province, attempted to increase the participation of party members in the decision-making process by regularizing the meetings of the party congress. To improve the accountability of local officials to the residents, the leaders have adopted opinion polls at the annual party congress – those who consistently receive unfavorable votes will be removed from their positions. Furthermore, the local government has introduced semi-competitive elections for the representatives to a few township party congresses. In Ya'an, Sichuan Province, two counties were selected to conduct pilot experiments for semi-competitive elections for representatives to the county party congresses in 2003, and quite a few incumbent leaders lost the elections. In Qianxi County, Hebei Province, the Women's Federation set up direct elections to the Women's Congress, which opened up new channels for women to play a role in the political process.

As a check and balance to state power, civil society organizations have grown slowly in China under tight state control. However, after examining the ways in which local governments are engaging with those organizations, the authors reveal a fluid space for negotiation and partnership. In Shanghai, the government realized that it could no longer provide social services all by itself and needed to collaborate with local NGOs. The Changzhou Road Municipal Office of Putuo District set up an NGO service center, which walks a fine line among providing assistance to NGOs, purchasing services from the NGOs, and making sure that these organizations operate under its watch. Traditionally, government organized

non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) have functioned as a branch of the government to govern, rather than serve, their constituencies. The situation is subtly changing in China, as shown in the cases of the Quanzhou City Federation of Trade Unions in Fujian Province and the Yiwu City Legal Rights Defense Association in Zhejiang Province. For the former, the GONGO worked with private sector workers, improved their living standards, and increased their political participation. For the latter, the GONGO aimed at working with the government to defend the workers' rights.

After a close look at the local experiments, the authors devote a chapter to the implementation of similar policies at the national stage. Based on the discussion of the case of the national regulations on 'Open Government Information', the authors discuss the difficulties in the scaling-up efforts, such as the tension between openness and secrecy, the lack of citizen awareness, the lack of truly autonomous civic organizations, and weak enforcement. While significant progress does exist in certain arenas, the resistance makes China's democratic transition a daunting task.

Probably due to its co-authorship, there is a bit of repetition throughout the text. Some cases, such as environmental NGOs, could have been explored with more depth. Statements like "[the] trade unions have also received the government's financial support and are thus better equipped to protect the rights and interests of workers" (p. 113) left me confused. My biggest complaint, in fact, is the book's lack of deeper analysis. While the authors make it very clear that they are not interested in predicting China's political future, it did frustrate me to keep reading statements such as "[it is] unclear what might happen in the future" (p. 159) and "all of the predictions for China's political future have a degree of plausibility" (pp. 168-169). The analysis typically stops here without digging deeper to compare and decipher the possible paths forward.

While warning that the local experiments may have a spillover effect, the authors fail to tell us the likelihood of such an effect, under what conditions the effect would be significant, and what the unintended consequences would mean for China and the world. They tell us that thus far the CPC has done a fairly good job at "absorbing politics by administration", but I wonder how sustainable the strategy will be and whether administration can entirely replace politics, which are both left underexplored. In addition, with the exception of the first chapter, the book rarely engages with the existing literature, which may contribute to its thin analysis. Notwithstanding the drawbacks, overall, this is still a highly informative and well-written book, and without a doubt provides many insights into the thorny issue of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Filled with illuminating cases, this original and provocative book will become an essential resource for those working in the field of Chinese politics.

Junpeng Li, Columbia University. (jpli3023@gmail.com)

## Notes

1 This review was written in 2012 – prior to Xi Jinping becoming the President of China.

Local Government Buildings Nanshan Shenzhen China. (Photo reproduced under a creative commons license, courtesy Flickr.com)

