

Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard (ed.). *Chinese Politics as Fragmented Authoritarianism: Earthquakes, Energy and Environment*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017. 228 pp. ISBN: 9781138190894 (HB).

The 'fragmented authoritarianism' (FA) model used by scholars to analyse decision-making in China has proven durable. Devised in the 1980s as a means of understanding how, in such a vast polity, policy was negotiated and implemented, it created a framework in which an increasing number of stakeholders in Chinese governance can at least be recognised as having influence, despite the fact that everything happens under the auspices of a one Party state.

As the contributions in this volume make clear, however, the model is now being extended in ways that bring into question the conceptual neatness of the FA model. We now have non-state actors, civil society actors, and different groups within the Communist Party itself that all have distinctive views on crucial issues like the role of the market in the economy, the place of state enterprises, and the ways in which China can best relate to the outside world. All of these have inputs into the decision-making system. And they have also created clusters of vested interests that have impeded reform, as highlighted by some of the accounts in this volume. The current situation, as the editor Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard points out, seems to be more fragmented than authoritarian.

In view of this, as Brødsgaard goes on to make clear later in his contribution, one of the key tasks now is not so much to find evidence of disunity in this vast, complex, multi-layered system, but rather to identify where the remaining levers of control remain. The political centre in Beijing has ceded increasing amounts of fiscal powers down to the provinces and other levels of government. But it is the power of appointment in the nomenclature system that still has real clout. Here the all-important Party Organisation Department is able to place people within the State Owned Enterprise (SOE) system. This has created a new class of Party cadres who have been corporatized and are able to introduce a big business strand into elite Party leadership. These are not oligarchs on the Russian model, but they are defenders of vested interest, people who in Party positions earn up to a maximum of US\$ 8,000 a year (as does Xi Jinping as the head of the Party), and yet as heads of SOEs take in up to US\$ 250,000. Making sense of the incentives that might lure officials serving in such lucrative posts to go back into politics is part of the task of this useful, tightly focused study.

The vagaries of the Chinese system of administration has tested theoretical models to their limits. For Christian Solace, in his interesting chapter on post disaster reconstruction, focusing on the central and local government response to the Great Wenchuan earthquake of 2008,

the hunt for coherence is doomed. His aim is to intentionally support contradictory assessments. This is a bold epistemic enterprise. To some extent, he does succeed in showing the great tensions in the system between local officials, for whom local knowledge is power, and higher level officials, who maintain control over resources and other kinds of expertise. There are some rich and provocative insights gained through Solace's approach to the age-old battles between centre and localities within China. However, his conclusion that 'the political regime can be improved but it cannot be reformed because the Party cannot by definition survive its own institutionalisation' in fact raises more questions than it answers.

Other contributions look at the health and energy sectors, both of which are under enormous pressures because of demand in China. The disease profile of Chinese people is changing as the country gets more developed and wealthier. There is a need for a wider-reaching, better-funded health system. However, as Yoel Kornreich and Daniele Brombal demonstrate in their respective contributions, trying to live up to the expectations of the emerging Chinese middle class in efficient and affordable ways has proven no easier in China than anywhere else. Pharmaceutical companies have worked in collusion with doctors in hospitals, leading to major over-prescription of medicine or, worse, mis-prescription in order to push people towards more expensive drugs. Health is big business. It is also, through doctors and health professionals, a potentially hugely important lobbying group that any government learns to fear dealing with. For the Party state in China, therefore, the last two decades have seen a dual track approach where public demands for care have to be constantly balanced with financial reasonability and political feasibility. This has proved a painful process, and one that is no closer to a clear end point.

For Jiwei Qian, the impact of smoking on the health system offers a natural opportunity to ask why the government does not do more to cut back on levels of smoking. China is home to a large portion of the world's users of tobacco, and yet the Chinese government has made only half-hearted attempts to implement policies like banning smoking in public places, or address tobacco pricing or cigarette packaging. Qian quotes one particularly staggering statistic: that no one has been fined for smoking in no-smoking places. At the heart of this, he finds a classic battle between vested interest – the immense revenues that local governments get from the sale of tobacco – and the ways in which the state tobacco monopoly has managed to insert itself into the regulatory system in ways that head off any threats. Here things are not so much fragmented as starkly confrontational and opposed.

Nis Grünberg produces a meticulously researched account of the state

policy decision-making system on energy. For Grünberg, the issue is how a Ministry of Energy, which existed in the very early years of the People's Republic, was then phased out as central and local bureaucracies carved out their own areas of interest. Even today, a National Energy Commission, lacking national ministerial status, remains a locus of conflict between contesting state and non-state entities. For Jørgen Delman, the case study of climate change offers an opportunity to see how even at city level, in this case Hangzhou, there are competing interests and modes of negotiation, now with the added complexity of both civil society and commercial actors to add to the mix.

Even in the area of finance, Yang Jiang shows that for the Party State in China careful control over information on interest rates, and the exchange rate levels of Chinese RMB are crucial spaces for clashes between the liberals, who want more marketisation, and the conservatives, who fear instability and believe in more extensive state intervention. Yang shows how entities like the Ministry of Finance and the National Development and Reform Commission have a clear commitment to maintain control over the rates of marketisation, while they battle with banks, companies and investors who want greater liberalism and less control.

The final chapter, by You Ji, looks at the ways in which the Party's civilian structure has managed to buck one trend that clearly did not work in the Soviet Union, and that is to keep clear control over the military. Again, this is not a straightforward story. While no military leaders now sit on the Party Standing Committee, the People's Liberation Army has its own personnel appointment system. It also has a command structure which is potentially parallel to that of the Party, and which is only really resolved by the Party head also being head of the Central Military Commission.

This book successfully addresses one of the most important issues of political science in China, but in a manageable way, focusing on three very different, but important areas of policy. Rich in detail, and often stimulating and thought provoking, this is an excellent up-to-date contribution to the field.

Kerry Brown
Professor of Chinese Studies and Director, Lau China Institute
King's College, London