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What Kind of International Order Does China Want?

Yongshun Cai, *State and Agents in China: Disciplining Government Officials*,

Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2015, 264 pp.

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job tracing the initial statement in 2005 of Hu Jintao's slightly more flexible policy towards the island, it does not mention the important change adopted by the CCP in October 2007, which elevated the priority of the "peaceful development" of cross-Straits relations (as opposed to "peaceful reunification"), an idea that goes back to the first point of Beijing's 17 May 2004 seven-point statement⁽¹⁾ and means that Beijing can accept the status quo for the time being. It is a policy priority that has not been questioned by Xi Jinping, even if the new Chinese president has demonstrated more impatience regarding leaving the issue unresolved for future generations.

China and Taiwan closes just before the November 2015 Xi-Ma summit in Singapore and Taiwan's January 2016 presidential and legislative elections. However, it includes all the ingredients that observers need to be aware of in order to understand the current state and uncertain future of cross-Straits relations. A *tour de force*, as we say in English... and in French.

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1. Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America website, "Taiwan Affairs Office Issues Statement on Current Cross-Straits Relations," 17 May 2004, www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/twwt/t111117.htm (accessed on 27 April 2016).



Yongshun Cai,
State and Agents in China: Disciplining Government Officials,
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JÉRÔME DOYON

This book by Yongshun Cai, professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, is concerned with the ways in which the Chinese Party-state ensures internal discipline. Presenting the issue in the formal framework of the theory of agency, he stresses the problems of information asymmetry and moral hazard at the heart of the relationship between the state and its agents. As the state is not omniscient, it does not always know what its agents do or will do, and this could lead the latter to adopt behaviours other than those expected in implementing public policies. In this situation, the state is obliged to adopt methods for disciplining its agents while taking into account possible political costs. By targeting its own cadres, the Party-state risks alienating the main supporters of a regime not based on popular elections. Keeping this risk in mind, as well as its own limited resources, the state can hardly afford to attack all its undisciplined cadres and might be obliged to be selective with rewards and punishments. Thus the state does not need to punish all violations, but only needs to make agents aware of the high level of risk they face and to induce fear of this uncertain discipline.

Major issues regarding the functioning of the Chinese state and its efforts at formalising the conduct of its actors are considered in this work in a com-

parative context. However, the stylisation of conduct is double-edged: with the state set as a "principal" controlling its "agents," it appears disembodied and monolithic. While the book takes into account the different levels of the Chinese administration – this selective discipline applying to the central as well as provincial, municipal, and local levels – it is not quite clear who at each level acts as the "principal." Is it the Party secretary? Or is it a larger leadership, including the divergent interests within it? This is a fundamental question, as it would help determine the intentionality behind the disciplinary actions. This lack of clarity in defining the "principal" thus leads to a certain imprecision as regards the objectives. For Cai, the state's aim is to guarantee its effectiveness as well as its legitimacy among the public. This legitimacy concept is only vaguely defined, as a sort of moral hegemony of the state, and it is therefore difficult to grasp its motivations and link them with the interests of a particular actor. Nevertheless, the numerous cases and mechanisms detailed in the book facilitate an understanding of what underlies the selectivity in the state's discipline.

Two chapters bring detailed focus on the types of undisciplined behaviour that have grown in the contemporary Chinese state and on the political logic that explains selective and differentiated discipline. Cai pointedly notes the large number of violations reported by citizens' petitions (about 60,000 a year in Guangdong during the 1990s, p. 23) and the vast variety of acts in question, ranging from abuse of power to corruption, as well as the pursuit of irresponsible projects or a lifestyle deemed immoral. The lack of correlation between the number of complaints and the number of cadres hauled up shows the selectivity of investigations linked to a singular political logic. Whereas before the 1980s, the Chinese Party-state mainly relied on major political campaigns to bring its cadres in line, a dedicated mechanism has since been set up. In the early 2000s, nearly 300,000 cadres were in charge of internal discipline (p. 49). The model of the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, re-established in 1978, was replicated at the local level. A decentralised system of inspections was then established, with each level of the administration being in charge of disciplining the next lower level. In Cai's view, two main variables are considered in deciding to punish an agent or not: the seriousness of the consequences and the agent's level of responsibility. While this seems self-evident, this approach appears to be put in doubt by numerous cases that on the contrary point to the existence of a variety of questions being considered before arriving at a decision to punish an agent: Has the transgression been made public by the media? What factional support does the agent enjoy? What effect would such punishment have on the administration's image and agents' morale?... Thus the agent's responsibility appears to be a highly malleable element depending on the result sought by superiors and the information obtained, or not, by the press, which remains on a tight leash. Power struggles over defining the objectives of the discipline process are not to be underestimated, while the functional rationality of the state that wants to punish an agent for his transgression is not to be overestimated, as Cai tends to in the book.

In the next two chapters, the author plunges into granularity by differentiating the types of transgressions and thus punishments. Focusing at the outset on professional errors linked to the exercise of a function, as opposed to cases of corruption, he notes the large panoply of punishments possible, and the flexibility the state enjoys. By concentrating on cases of social conflict management, Cai brings out the complexity of elements at play in judging a professional error and those responsible. A cadre could well be held guilty of being responsible for a protest, but if that were not the case, he

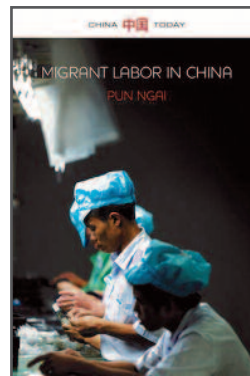
could also be accused of having mishandled the event. Besides, the seriousness of the event from the state's viewpoint depends on a variety of factors, especially the number of protestors, the potential material damage, and the extent of media coverage. The latter is a key element in the management of these crises by upper-level authorities. Media pressure on local cadres can in fact render punishment inevitable despite the high political cost. In such cases, it is important to convey an appearance of disciplining to the public, although the decision may be mitigated eventually. There is less elbow room in corruption cases, and discipline cannot amount to a simple transfer, for example, but could mean the end of a career and legal proceedings. Cai shows the important role that information transmitted by the public to the authorities plays in such cases: between 60% and 80% of the cases examined by the courts originated from such tips (p. 106). However, only a small portion of such information leads to an inquiry, as most is not sufficiently supported or goes against political considerations. This is especially true with regard to high-level cadres, as proceeding against them requires the discipline inspection commissions to obtain permission from higher authorities, and a political consensus thus becomes necessary. As a result, high-level cadres of the Party-state are rarely disturbed. But when they are, it is with the institution's full might and with serious charges. As a result, despite its differentiated treatment of cases, the regime manages to convey the impression of a certain determination in the anti-corruption struggle.

Finally, Cai deals with two more original aspects of this selective discipline. The first is the circumvention techniques of the cadres themselves and what this implies in terms of tolerance of infringement. Cadres do not remain mute in the face of the disciplining state. To avoid punishment, some suppress information, be it through censoring the press, blocking petitioners, or manipulating inspection teams. They evade blame by playing off different levels of administration and by accusing their colleagues. Besides, some use the relative tolerance of the authorities by playing with the rules in order to advance local reforms. This aspect highlighted by Cai is interesting, as it shows that going against the rules can have a positive effect on local governance. However, by not differentiating the types of reform and thus the potential economic and political impact, the analysis remains superficial, and it is difficult to understand why cadres would take such career risks.

To bring out these different mechanisms, Cai relies on a vast set of written material relating to hundreds of cases of transgressions by agents of the state. While he has occasionally relied on interviews, he gives no details regarding the types of people questioned. Overall, Cai's work offers a good view of the totality of the Chinese Party-state's internal discipline mechanism, detailing its institutions and logic. It also rightfully locates the issue of corruption in a larger framework of state control over its agents, thus going beyond major campaigns with large media coverage.

■ Translated by N. Jayaram.

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Pun Ngai,
Migrant Labor in China:
Post-Socialist Transformations,
Cambridge, UK, Malden, MA, Polity
Press, 2016, 204 pp.

ERIC FLORENCE

Noting in the very first chapter that China's socialist development model was challenged systematically for its inability to generate prosperity for its people, Pun Ngai proceeds to explain that she felt compelled to "explore new subjects such as migrant workers" who have paid the "historic debt" of the new economic development model of the post-Maoist era centred on labour commodification and exports (p. 17). While the condition of rural migrant workers remains at the heart of this work, it should be noted at the outset to what extent the book marks a departure from her previous *Made in China*,⁽¹⁾ published in 2005, which helps explain the intellectual path she has traversed since.

First, while *Made in China* essentially relied on an ethnographic study of a specific factory in Shenzhen and sought to show how the subjectivity of rural migrant workers was constituted, *Migrant Labor in China* constitutes the fruits of ten years of work based on several vast research projects that the author and her team initiated and conducted in China. Among them was a major study that brought together 20 tertiary institutions from the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan conducting more than 3,000 interviews with workers at the Foxconn group following a wave of suicides in 2010 at several of its factories.

Second, in *Migrant Labor in China*, Pun considers both male and female workers. Moreover, while continuing to focus on the manufacturing industry, she has over the past five years enlarged her investigation to include the construction industry and its workers. Pun shows how different institutional measures and political decisions starting in 1984 allowed the development of a pyramidal system of subcontracting in which a decoupling occurs between higher levels of construction project managements (property developers and construction companies) and the implementation of projects left to different subcontractors, a system notably leading to numerous instances of non-payment of wages, the absence of contractual relations between the worker and the employer, and the impossibility of direct contact between construction workers and the boss. Pun also shows how this political economy of the construction sector shapes the ways of protestation – in general violent and often outside legal avenues (pp. 41-56). As for forms of contestation in the manufacturing sector, which is tending towards radicalisation, Pun documents how migrant workers profiting from a process of long-term accumulation of experience have managed to proactively mobilise in their daily struggles a range of increasingly vast resources, institutional and non-institutional, individual and collective. Globally, in both the construction and manufacturing industries, different forms of alliances have

1. Pun Ngai, *Made in China*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2005.