

‘The state’ in change: processes and contestations in local China: an introduction

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The state is best understood, it is said, through local ‘practices’ and the production and reproduction of its images (Gupta 1995: 375–6). Day-to-day interactions between the multitude of petty officials, local service-providers and social groups in the community shape the popular image of the state, and the arisen discourse about the state feeds the subsequent practices. The state is more than its constituent organizations, instruments in use (for example, monopoly of legitimate coercion), or the actors involved. Above all it is *not* an autonomous and monolithic entity above the society but, as described in Migdal’s ‘state-in-society’ approach, is constitutive of the processes of negotiation and contestation over the rules of daily behaviour, and reflected in the images as perceived among multiple actors (Migdal 2001: 11).¹ This stress on the discursive nature of the state, and the fluidity of state images and practices as a product of contestation in a specific time–space, finds echoes in Bourdieu’s discussion of social space and the relational (Bourdieu 1998: 3–4) and Foucault’s ‘state as governmentality’ (Burchell *et al.* 1991: 103).

Three interrelated messages as regards research on ‘the state’ as the ‘relational’ and ‘process’ consequently emerge. First, more attention needs to be paid to the lowest echelons of the state organization where the majority of the people had their first-hand experience with the state, and where decisions made ‘high-up’ in the state hierarchy are translated into practices in society.² Second, research needs to adopt an approach that sees processes and actors on either side of the state–society boundary – which is essentially blurred and permeable – having similarly important, if different, roles in the shaping of ‘the state’, and society. Finally, given the fluidity and contingency of existing state practice and image, the researcher needs to be modest in the conclusion drawn from substantive observations obtained at a specified time–space. As Hirschman (1970: 339) warned more than thirty years ago,

'the immediate effect of social analysis is to convert the real into the rational or the contingent into the necessary'. This may be a sin impossible to escape from, since any statement – or language – requires a degree of generalization. What is demanded is perhaps self-awareness on the part of the social analyst, and with it a difference in the *kind* of statements (and thus the level of generalization) produced, and a modesty in what we as the analyst may imply for future action.³

Research on the Chinese state has placed premium on the province and the locale, not least because the continental scale of the territorial boundary adds a further dimension. Size brings, potentially, greater substantive diversity in endowments, actors, attitudes, practices and discourse. The 'Provincial China' project was spearheaded by David Goodman and involved a good portion of those in the China field in the 1990s, for example, exemplified the need to disaggregate China into provinces and localities, and the unitary Chinese state into multiple, and often competing, local states.⁴ Papers in the current theme issue add to this legacy by dwelling on the complexity and fluidity of processes of contestation amongst multiple actors in and out of 'the state'.

Three interrelated clusters of themes are addressed here, whilst each paper focuses on a different policy area – cultural strategies, housing, land politics, corruption, peasants' burden and cadre reforms. First, in light of the abundance of local entrepreneurialism as noted in the literature, how have local initiatives impacted on local governance, in terms of an improvement in welfare, sense of well-being, or procedural propriety? How are we to understand the local initiatives in their contexts? Second, given the desirability of some policy outcomes, how could they be made to last – especially in well-entrenched areas of state practices historically resistant to change? How is institutional change possible? Lastly, with many local officials criticized as corrupt, how is corruption defined and contested? Why are some behaviours defined as corrupt and others not? What constitutes the contestation process behind the delineation of rules of propriety, desirability and legality? How does the contestation over the normative implicate on the processes over competition for desired resources?

These questions follow and build on one another. Taken together they explore the meanings of the local initiatives as embedded in the entirety of contexts from where they emerge, assess their contribution to improving local governance, question how they may possibly sustain, and reveal the political nature of normative standards. Permeating the enquiry are observations of the multiplicity of actors, their embeddedness and differential capacity of actors to disembed, the fluidity and specificity of the situation, and thus diversities across situations, the pervasiveness of the discursive and the rhetoric in the contestation processes.

Making sense of, and assessing, local initiatives

It is a nice coincidence that two papers in this volume have as their focus local initiatives in Guizhou, a poor inland province in southwest China with

a relatively high ratio of national minorities. As Tim Oakes notes in his paper on cultural strategies of development, 'Guizhou was [a province] established for military reasons. . . . It was a frontier region with no economic base, and no dominant cultural system or coherent society'. It is thus reflective of the local entrepreneurialism that, short of other more traditional endowments in the province, Guizhou officials from province to village have responded eagerly to the 'cultural turn' in the central policy on economic development, and produced a multitude of local projects and a new industry of cultural tourism within a relatively short time. Noting some apparent parallels between Guizhou's cultural strategies and 'entrepreneurial cities' in recent North America, namely the co-involvement of the 'public' and the 'private', the question arises whether the critique of the neoliberal turn in North American cities for local governance – 'privatization' of public spaces and the subsequent erosion of the ground of democratic governance – applies also to cultural 'theme-parks' in Guizhou's towns and villages. The constitution of the Chinese state, the 'public domain', the 'private' and thus 'state-society' relations in China is, however, significantly different from the contemporary Western situation. The specificity of the Guizhou cases is such that, the paper notes, *Tunpu* culture is 'not a public good subject to privatization because it has itself been *created* within the process of privatization' (emphasis added). The challenge of cultural strategies in Guizhou, Oakes observes, 'lies not in preserving Zukin's public-private divide, but in insuring a just regime of privatization'. A just regime of privatization, of course, still requires the participation of the public, and the appropriate designation of state authority. So the central question is, what implication is the cultural strategy of development for local governance – the public domain?

Also drawing parallels with neoliberal developments in the developed economies, James Lee and Ya-peng Zhu tell us that neoliberalism has, apparently, taken root in a major social policy in formerly, and still formally, Socialist China. Housing was traditionally provided out of state coffers in the days of the central plan, though managed locally and dispersed in hundreds of thousands of state-funded work units. A programme of housing commodification, set in place in the recent decade, sees housing increasingly 'privatized', with market volatility and exclusion replacing the arbitrariness of state bureaucracy. Through a case study on Guiyang, provincial capital of Guizhou, the authors assess the efficacy of housing commodification in alleviating previous inadequacies in housing provision – and thus its relevance to improving urban governance. They find that to the contrary of expectations and official rhetoric, housing reforms have aggravated housing inequalities. They also observe a stark indifference, if not ignorance, on the part of Chinese officials, of the problems of neoliberal housing policy in the developed market economies.

Whilst both papers similarly draw on the neoliberal framework in their analysis, differences over the substantive nature of the initiatives under examination contribute to differential emphases in the papers' discussions, and

in their conclusions. To the extent that 'culture' was 'used' instrumentally as yet another factor of endowment to enhance local economic development—thus the emphasis on cultural tourism as the core of the strategy—the question became one of equitably distributing economic benefits and costs across the community. As the three local cases show, how benefits and costs were distributed, as well as the process leading to such, has a salient bearing on the *perceived* legitimacy of the cultural projects in the local communities. The communal sharing pattern in Jin Family Fort, where the cultural project went under a village communal organization with broad participation, is contrasted with two other cases where benefits were perceived by local villagers as being privatized – and ripped off – by either the town leader or a private company.

Improved local governance involved more than the material side – that cultural strategies of development served their intended function as an alternative route to economic well-being. A sense of ownership amongst local villagers, or lack of it, alienation of the cultural resource was also part and parcel of the quality of governance, and this extended beyond the ownership over the 'product' of cultural tourism, or the benefit out of it. These two aspects, material and socio-psychological, were interrelated and often mediated by institutional arrangements and governance structures that premised participation. The question was: did the *kind* of product matter? Would the use of culture, as against other resources, in the local strategy of economic development make any difference to the processes of contestation over ownership and governance?

If the nature of local culture and cultural tourism itself may have made a difference, it could be because culture essentially requires some degree of communal participation and cooperation to thrive. Villagers may thus be prone to feel their 'old' local culture – a free public resource normally available to all residents – distorted and even lost in the new, commercial cultural projects, and become more inclined to air their grievance. At the same time, the project managers may be better placed to see the benefits of enlisting the support and participation of villagers for greater commercial success – thus the company staff in Azure Dragon had talked at length about their commitment to 'communal tourism'. Whilst the commitment may be rhetorical, as Oakes suggests in his paper, rhetoric should not be entirely ignored – in terms of whether anything substantive would eventually result from it.⁵ In this vein, contrary to the Western critique of neoliberal privatization, exploiting the public resource of local culture in Chinese villages may ironically provide the structure *conducive* to the emergence of participatory governance, and subjects demanding such.

The account on Housing Monetization Policy asks a direct question: whether the replacement of in-kind benefits with cash subsidies contributed to better provision of housing goods, and thus enhanced the quality of urban life. Here the parallels with neoliberal developments in the West appeared to be close. State actors were similarly preoccupied with fiscal stress and

assumed that the market would fill up what the state retreated from; Chinese cities were going down a familiar path, as in the West, with commercial robustness of the housing market on the surface barely masking the increasing marginalization of the poor. It does not mean, however, that the shortfall of the market in Guiyang was the same in Liverpool, nor could a simple reversion to housing-in-kind benefits provide a remedy. The biggest problem with the commodification reforms in China, as Lee and Zhu point out, was its limited scope – the reform had as its targets only those urban residents working in the state sector, whether in the government, party organizations or state-owned enterprises. Housing-in-kind benefits had previously been available largely to this privileged segment of the urban population only, and thus a reform that focused on monetarizing the in-kind benefits was necessarily of limited value when assessed in terms of improving urban governance on the whole.

This inherent weakness of the reform was compounded by the developing socio-economic situation in Chinese cities – the traditional state sector was on the decline, either in terms of economic robustness or the proportion of the urban population working therein. Ironically this decline of the state sector had precipitated the centrality of fiscal stress in the design of the housing reform. The more the state sector was weakened the more housing reforms were motivated, from the supply side of policy, by the need to minimize *burdens* of the state, than by considerations over how to fulfil better the state *responsibility* in the provision of housing as public good to an expanding, and increasingly heterogeneous, urban population. The assessment of housing monetarization reforms in the paper therefore stretches beyond the story of the state actors, or the immediate recipients of the reform. The policy has failed to reduce housing inequalities, despite progress in achieving objectives intended on the part of the suppliers. Social policies, as products of state practices, are constituent of the acts and perceptions of heterogeneous actors 'in' and 'out' of the state – not as subject *vis-à-vis* objects, but as co-subjects contesting the definition of the boundary of a policy: its meaning, relevance and assessment.

How may changes last?

What impact an initiative may bring is contingent not only upon its relationship with the totality of context it is embedded, as discussed above, but also upon its durability. A change needs to 'last' in order to have sustained impact of *any* sort. This sounds so 'common sense' that the temporal dimension has often been assumed and swept into the background. The literature on institutional change tells us, however, that sustainability cannot be taken for granted, and that many emergent changes have failed to take root. Path-dependence writers have argued that accumulation of small differences in the sequence of events tends to lock history in arrangements which, though subsequently found to be suboptimal, would still be resistant to change for

the better (Bassanini and Dosi 2001). In this light, whether novelty will occur – breaking away from the historical path – becomes a matter of contingency and serendipity, something ‘just happened’ and not thought of before (David 1985; Arthur 1989).

Omission of the temporal is less likely when we place emphasis squarely on the ‘process’ when interpreting state practices, as papers in this theme issue do, given that the concept of ‘process’ implies a time dimension wherein ‘things take place’. My paper on Hubei’s rural tax and government reforms explicitly addresses the issue of reform sustainability – which is seen as the largest challenge of the ongoing rural tax reform within China. The paper sketches the limits of the fiscal initiatives in sustaining the reduction in state extraction on peasants – and thus the danger of the possible collapse of the reform – and points to the potential of a local reform initiative in another institutional field (transforming the human agent) in sustaining the change. The emerging literature on ‘path creation’ has suggested the mobilizing capacity of the ‘embedded’ human agent in change (Garud and Karnoe 2001: 12–15). In this case, the capacity to mobilize includes both the ability of Xianan’s local leaders in launching innovative cadre reforms, as well as the resultant agency of the returned officials – a product of the cadre reforms – in sustaining and facilitating further change in the locality.

Insofar as the agency-structure debate has pervaded social science literature for generations (e.g. Archer 1988, 1995, 2000, 2003; DiMaggio 1988; Layder 1994), specificities in the contemporary Chinese situation brought further complications to the discussion in the context of China. For one, the role of agency in Chinese politics appears to be at the same time overwhelmingly large and indeterminate. The authoritarian nature of the Chinese state and the coarseness of many laws and rules have given rise to a conventional wisdom which assigns a dominant role to leadership and personalities in making things happen.⁶ On balance, after considering all factors affecting change, it is often argued, it is still the leaders, and the top central leaders in particular, who call the tune. On the other hand, *how* agency works to effect change is somewhat unclear, as there is a simultaneous emphasis on the web-locks of constraints on the leaders, and consequent ambivalence as to the circumstances whereby leadership *can* make a difference. This in fact indicates the underdevelopment of a theory of agency in the understanding of Chinese politics, despite previous attempts to articulate the genesis of politics in terms of various models.⁷

Given the scale of change witnessed in China since the late 1970s, it is surprising to find the tonnes of pessimism in the literature: reforms are said to be on the brink of collapse, governance problems running out of control, and the socio-political structure about to collapse (e.g. Chang 2001). It seems that as reform progresses into the ‘core’ arenas – government and political reform, state sector reform, rule of law, etc. – the web-locks of constraints are posing greater difficulties to change, to the point that the whole reform

process would, soon, grind to a halt. It is in this context that the rural tax reform was widely seen to be doomed almost as soon as the central government announced it (Qin 1997, 2000). At the same time, there are also analyses which see an alternative picture of dynamism, of change and of actors *looking for* improvements.⁸ These analyses tend to focus on the process, and see the making of reform and change from *within*. The differences in perceptions are analogous to what Garud and Karnoe (2001: xii, 8–9) say of the path dependence *vis-à-vis* path creation analyses. In the case of path dependence, change is seen from the vantage point of the 'outsiders' using the 'logic of consequentiality'. Any departure from current accepted practices is considered as a 'mistake' whose survival is suspect. Mistakes that survive are seen as 'accidents' of history – products of contingency – whose significance can only be known in hindsight. On the other hand, path creation sees departures from current practices as conscious, 'mindful deviations' of entrepreneurial actors, who possess the intellectual capacity to 'disembed', or break away, from existing practices, including the capacity to withstand the pressures arising from the dissonance of the departures with the rest of the existing practices and negative feedback of other actors.

The difference is not, I shall argue, one of seeing or not seeing change, but whether the analyst sees sufficient thoroughness of the processes unfolding. It is about the *kind* of change that is perceived. The 'insider' perspective of the 'path-creation' strand of analysis allows the analyst to peep into changes-in-the-making, embedded in their historical context. It is thus better placed to lead the analyst to ask questions regarding how specifically the actors (and which groups of actors) make changes possible, what considerations lead them to 'break away' from previous practices, against what resistance from whom, and how the resistance is gradually mitigated. Garud and Karnoe so describe the challenge of these 'entrepreneurs' in making change:

In sum, the embeddedness of action generates several challenges for entrepreneurs. Not only do they have to disembed from embedding structures, they have to also overcome the resistance they may generate in the process. Moreover, they have to mobilize elements of the network in which they are embedded to further their efforts while preventing the process from spinning out of control. It is no surprise that path creation processes are fraught with failure.

(Garud and Karnoe 2000: 12)

Previous life experience of the party secretary in Xian-an made him a 'boundary spanner' – he had been a state cadre as well as a 'free' man in the market in coastal cities. Having crossed over the state-society boundary himself he was likely to imagine the potential benefits of encouraging a similar 'cross-over' of identities amongst local officials. At the same time it was also obvious that local circumstances at that historical juncture had largely

precipitated the events, or at least supplied the motivation to seek change. The county was facing harsh governance problems in the late 1990s – huge debt, mounting financial crisis and a failing economy – making change, *any* sort of change, appear mandatory. Actors, leaders or rank-and-file, in or out of the government, may have become more receptive of the *idea* of change under such a dire situation, though at the same time may also feel weary of the prospect of *actual* change given the shortage of resources – as change costs. The main contribution of Secretary Song, as other ‘entrepreneurs’ on other occasions, lies in the redefinition of costs and benefits – making otherwise costly and unaffordable reforms ‘profitable’ and thus worth doing.

Distinguishing the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’, and making a profit from it

Assessment is essentially an evaluative exercise fuelled with normative judgements. Assessing initiatives assumes we know what we want, that which defines ‘good’, as against ‘bad’, results. Such judgements are likely to vary across actors for a single subject, so that in assessing initiatives the analyst needs to be sensitive to the question: whose judgements are dominant? Another question is: why these judgements? What are the underlying considerations? Whatever the judgement and whoever holds it, the constitution of the judgement, its context and background are *not* to be taken as facts but part of the *problematique* – themselves requiring explanation.

Ting Gong in her paper problematizes the phenomenon of pervasive corruption and, in particular, the relationship between corruption and decentralization. As a phenomenon and a concept, corruption carries an essentially ‘bad’ connotation: it is something undesirable and even morally wrong, despite what the functional school says about the constructive role of corruption in specific contexts. But why are some acts corrupt and others not? How do some acts become perceived as corrupt? Are there differences across actors over the definition of corruption? Gong’s paper focuses on the linkage between decentralization and corruption when addressing these issues, given the empirical coincidence of the two in contemporary China. ‘What explains the proliferation of corruption at mid- and lower government levels we witness in post-reform China, when wide powers are devolved to local officials?’, the paper asks. Gong argues that decentralization *per se* is not to blame; the ‘incompleteness of power devolution’ is. The ‘structural limitation’ of China’s decentralization process – namely the weakness or absence of downward accountability – has produced a peculiar situation since the 1980s wherein local state actors doubled as both the agent of the central state as well as *de facto* principal in many areas of governance, and in economic management in particular. This Gong describes as the ‘double identity’ phenomenon in post-reform China: local government actors being *agents* entrusted with widened yet *delegated* authority by their principals at the upper levels of the state structure, whilst being quasi-independent

principals themselves with own interests and objectives at variance with those of the superiors.

This double identity has resulted in intense tension between state actors at various levels, a process You-tien Hsing describes in her paper on inter-governmental dynamics – province, city, county, township and village – over rural land interests. The urban-based city governments have sought to expropriate rural land-use rights, and thus profits therefrom, through state regulations and administrative practices giving themselves a legal right in some cases, and *de facto* monopoly in others, over the transfer of rural land-use rights. The nature of land as a locally-based resource accords, however, township leaders added premium in the struggle for control of this valued resource, giving rise to a variety of regulatory, spatial and organizational strategies the paper elaborately illuminates on.

These 'strategies' and 'brokering' tactics by township leaders in the two 'in-between spaces' between the townships and the urban-based upper levels at one end, and between townships and the quasi-autonomous villages at the other, became forms of local 'corrupt' practices in Gong's discussion of corruption and decentralization. As Hsing points out, nationally ordained rules require all rural land, which is collectively owned, to be first converted to state ownership before its land use can be transferred to outside investors. The distribution of quotas for farmland conversion across levels of government was so designed that literally township governments were deprived of any room to convert farmland to other uses. Most decisions at the township levels regarding transfer of land-use rights or changes in land-use purposes are therefore pushed to the brink of illegality.

The political embeddedness of the normative is further revealed in local fiscal management practices. Local state actors are found to be invariably hoarding and developing resources in the extra- and off-budget sectors at the expense of the budget – in order to buttress local fiscal autonomy and economic well-being, in both institutional and individual terms. Whilst such practices have their roots in the broader institutional contexts – fiscal, political and administrative – wherein local state actors are situated, and where central state actors play a major role in their constitution, the lack of downward accountability, or the 'incompleteness of decentralization', has led to these practices being swept to the grey zone between the outrightly corrupt and illegal, and the ambiguously 'inappropriate'. How the line between the illegal-corrupt and the tolerable inappropriate is to be drawn is subject to all sorts of political manipulation and contestation, the configuration, and the results of which vary from case to case.

The two papers have different starting points: Gong seeks to explain corruption and its relations with decentralization, and Hsing elaborates on the processes and configurations of territorial politics over rural land. Yet together they display to us the political nature of the normative as well as how the politics is played out between multitiered state actors. The two papers converge on calling for a more complex treatment of the decentralization

processes beyond the unilateral top-down compliance approach to power. Not only that each tier of state actors is simultaneously a principal of the lower levels and agent of the upper levels – the ‘double identity’ – but how the principal–agent relationship plays out in any one context is far more fluid than a focus on compliance can reveal. What is at the crux is the relational nature of politics, and the actors therein. As Hsing notes, ‘the political and organizational characteristics of the local state (actors) lie in its *relationship* with (actors) in other local states’ (emphasis original), and by extension with the central and societal actors. This has pushed the notion of the state as a relational process between actors one step further – *since the actors whose interactions define and constitute ‘the state’ are in fact themselves also a product of the relations with other actors*. An interesting result of these interactions is, as the papers note, how the politically embedded normative further impacts, in a ‘feedback loop’, on the unfolding struggle for substantive interests. The normative – what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ – is itself underlined by struggles over interests and also feeds the subsequent contestations.

Let us now turn to each of these papers in turn and see the details of the processes.

Notes

- 1 Philip Abrams (1988) talks about the state as a structure or system, and an idea, but often in social analyses the state is reified – made into an ‘entity, agent, function or relation over and above the state-system and state-idea’. The diverse social actors disappear behind the veil of a reified state.
- 2 On this Gupta (1995: 376) complains of the scarcity of ‘rich ethnographic evidence’ on ‘what lower-level officials actually do in the name of the state’; and Bourdieu (1998: 2) asserts that ‘the deepest logic of the social world can be grasped only if one plunges into the particularity of an empirical reality’.
- 3 On a related concern, James Scott (1998) talks of the impossibility of capturing in text local practical knowledge, or *metis*, which is knowledge resultant from the constant interaction of the human mind with the time–locale specific situation. Codification and description of the practice necessarily involves simplification and thus distortion. A decision contingent of a historical situation becomes a rule, which is then employed independently of the totality of context in which the original decision is embedded.
- 4 The project organized a series of annual conferences in China, produced several edited volumes, a series of background outlines on provinces, and gave birth to the *Provincial China* journal, just citing its major direct outputs.
- 5 Scott (1990: 18) talks about how the receiving end of rhetorical commitments could still extract some concessions from the other party even in the extreme case of asymmetrical power relations between slave and master.
- 6 See, for instance, Fewsmith (1994: 6) where the top leaders were explicitly attributed the key role behind reform process *in general* in China.
- 7 See Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988) for a discussion of the rationality, power and bureaucratic politics models. The theoretical inadequacy of the understanding of the agency role of central government actors is discussed in Li (1997), in the context of central-provincial relations.
- 8 Some examples are Daniel Kelliher’s story on early rural reform in the late 1970s (Kelliher 1992), my paper on rural tax reform in this theme issue and two other

papers on pioneering local reforms (Li 2004, 2005), the papers in Cheung *et al.*'s edited collection on provincial leaders and strategies (Cheung *et al.* 1998), and the edited volumes under the 'Provincial China' Project (Goodman 1997; Hendrischke and Feng 1999; Fitzgerald 2002).

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