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Iza Ding's *The Performative State* is essential reading for those wanting to learn more about the less visible reality of the daily challenges faced by street-level environmental bureaucrats in China. It lends flesh and blood to a phrase I encountered repeatedly in China in the mid-2010s when interviewing environmental activists: "Well, there is the law, but then there is the application of the law in dealing with pollution cases." Ding's rich and in-depth observations transport readers back to the "airpocalypse" hailstorm and anti-corruption episodes of 2013, when she began her field research in Lakeville, a bustling and developed city on China's central coast. Given the developed context of Lakeville, Ding anticipated that bureaucratic behaviour would be all the more apt to achieve substantive governance, a "governance that is geared towards delivering the fruits of effective rule that people demand and deserve" (p. 7). In fact, it is recognised that authoritarian regimes like China often rely on performance legitimacy (Gilley 2009; Holbig and Gilley 2010; Zhu 2011). If they cannot meet people's demands such as economic growth or a healthy environment, the regime could be undermined by popular dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, Ding didn't find that. What Ding found instead, and this is the book's central claim, is that high levels of "external scrutiny" by the public, coupled with the bureaucracy's low logistical and/or political capacity, led bureaucrats not to deploy substantive governance, but to resort to performative governance, a "deployment of visual, verbal, and gestural symbols of good governance for the audience of citizens" (p. 7).

The book illuminates the theatrical side of environmental governance in everyday Chinese politics. The author bases her definition of performativity on Merriam-

Webster's definition of performative as a means of image cultivation or the conveying of positive impressions, but also on Judith Butler's understanding of performativity as language, gesture, and all sorts of symbolic social signs (p. 8). On a theoretical level, Ding develops a subtle exploration of the intricacies between Goffman's and Butler's understanding of performativity to arrive at a nuanced but clear definition of performative governance, which she uses throughout the book to examine how state behaviour is and is not performative. Ding's deep insight into the everyday life of bureaucrats helps to analyse a certain type of performativity, namely as a symbolic achievement of good governance, which she defines as a broad national and societal consensus on how a given government should behave, and, ultimately on its sources, characteristics, alternatives, and consequences. If much of the book focuses on theories of performativity in the Chinese context, it also offers new opportunities to reflect on the longevity of "performance legitimacy" despite ineffective policies and all the challenges to state capacity that have been extensively explored in the "fragmented authoritarian" literature (Lieberthal 1992; Mertha 2009).

The book has seven chapters divided into two parts. Part One consists of chapters One to Three, and Part Two of chapters Four and Five. After the introduction, in which the author defines and highlights important keywords such as "performative" or "good governance," Chapter One analyses the internal complexity and diversity of the state by focusing on two essential components of the "governance cocktail" (p. 25): capacity and scrutiny. Ding uses these two components to analyse and classify state-bureaucratic behaviour into four types: inert, paternalistic, performative, and substantive. This typology is extremely valuable for understanding how bureaucrats respond to national and international circumstances and navigate between different governance logics that are not mutually exclusive. This becomes even more tangible in the following chapter, when Ding uses concrete examples from the environmental bureaucracy to explain how elastic state behaviour is and how it changes if necessary. I found it particularly valuable that the chapter not only deals with recent history, but also looks at the development of environmental problems in imperial and modern China.

While all chapters have their qualities, I was especially intrigued by Ding's rich and detailed ethnographic analysis in Chapter Three, as one delves into the day-to-day struggles and endeavours of Max, the nearly forty-year-old Chinese bureaucrat who works at the Lakeville environmental protection bureau (EPB). Based on a five-month ethnographic case study at Lakeville's EPB, the reader is brought into the less visible reality of their organisational life. A series of detailed examples, from night-time inspections, to the long overtime hours and pressures bureaucrats face to respond to the deluge of citizen grievances, to the attention they give to the way they dress and what they eat in public for fear of being exposed on social media and accused of corruption, allow the reader to truly grasp the intricacies and complexities that bureaucrats must face. Ding focuses on "the little things," on attitudes, gestures, or intentions (p. 76). In performing performative governance, Max and his colleagues must appear *responsive* to public opinion, demonstrate the *benevolence* of the state's intentions, and make these efforts publicly *visible*.

The following chapters, which mark the second part of the book, focus on citizens' perceptions of performative governance. As Ding explains throughout the book, the main purpose of performative governance is to promote the image of substantive governance. In Chapter Four, she specifically assesses the victories and defeats of

performative governance on the battlefield of public opinion (p. 110). The analysis particularly highlights the mistakes of bureaucrats and how they learn to perfect their theatrical performance. A key focus is how EPBs learn to deal with the impact of the news media in order to present themselves in a favourable light. Although EPBs' ability to perform "good governance" can improve public assessment of environmental governance, as Chapter Four shows, the following chapter addresses performative breakdown, "when performative governance ceases to occur or fails to work" (p. 135). Ding particularly addresses the cynicism of the audience and the consequences of "performance disruptions" when the state fails to control information. Through several case studies that go beyond the environmental and Chinese realms (Vietnam, United States), Ding sheds light on the power of whistleblowers to spread destructive information, such as Dr Li Wenliang 李文亮, the whistleblower of Covid-19. Overall, Ding succeeds perfectly in showing the importance of distinguishing "'government performance' and the government's *theatrical representation* of its performance" (p. 154). If the rich, exhaustive, and varied theoretical discussions in the opening chapters may discourage some readers, this book makes interesting reading for anyone interested in the history, development, and context of China's environmental policies over the past two decades. At a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to make room for dissenting voices, Ding's analyses make a significant contribution to ongoing debates about what sustains an authoritarian state in an Anthropocene era.

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