China Perspectives

2009/2 | 2009

1989, a Watershed in Chinese History?

Andrew C. Mertha, China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change

Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 2008, 192 pp.

Christoph H. Steinhardt

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4817>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.4817

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2009

Number of pages: 114-117

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Christoph H. Steinhardt, « Andrew C. Mertha, China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2009/2 | 2009, Online since 01 June 2009, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4817> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.4817>

This text was automatically generated on 22 September 2020.

© All rights reserved

Andrew C. Mertha, China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change

Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 2008, 192 pp.

Christoph H. Steinhardt

- 1 Andrew C. Mertha's book takes us into the world of large-scale dam projects in southwestern Chinese rivers. His research digs into resistance movements against some of these projects in the search for answers to a puzzling phenomenon: apparently powerless contenders defeat large-scale industrial developments that enjoy the outright support of the mighty Chinese party-state — a state that is arguable more in control of all means of coercion than any other non-totalitarian polity in the contemporary world.
- 2 This phenomenon recently caught widespread attention in the highly publicised protests against a Xiamen chemical plant project in 2007. Mertha's cases, however, take place a few years before "Xiamen PX." The author provides careful fieldwork accounts and novel ideas to make sense of them through a most-similar comparative design. The three cases in his study, located in the Dadu River (Pubugou) and the Min River (Dujiangyan) in Sichuan, and in the Nu River in Yunnan, show varying levels of successful resistance (the dependent variable) while unfolding at roughly the same time (2003-2006) and place. Hence, broad structural changes alone, which affect all of them equally, cannot possibly account for their varying success. Consequently, Mertha's argument, which he summarizes in Chapter 1, revolves around policy entrepreneurship and issue framing. Both can unfold because of a broad structural feature of China's contemporary polity, which Mertha identifies as "fragmented authoritarianism" – a framework previously coined by Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg. It provides "the 'spaces' necessary for [policy entrepreneurs] to exist without being snuffed out by the coercive apparatus of the state" (p. 18). The book's main argument (pp. 18 ff) thus claims that policy change is possible when policy

entrepreneurship is high (his necessary condition), and while the framing tactics these entrepreneurs engage in dominate the public sphere (his sufficient condition).

- 3 An unarguably outstanding aspect of Mertha's analysis is that he situates discourse in a very concrete institutional field. This makes language and the role of meaning-making in the Chinese policy process tangible. The author can therefore convincingly argue that the use of symbolic devices can actually result in very concrete policy shifts. Although language has been debated in relation to contention in China, the discursive aspect of concrete cases of conflict has probably not been examined in such detail previously. This volume may thus be regarded as an additional step in establishing the "politics of signification"¹ in the field of China Studies.
- 4 Mertha argues that policy entrepreneurs appear in the form of "disgruntled officials," journalists, or NGOs activists.² His entrepreneurs come across highly agentive and strategic: "Policy entrepreneurs bide their time until chance opportunities arise, perhaps indicating that they are not simply providing a solution in response to an existing problem but waiting for the appropriate problem to arise ... so that they can plug in their already well-developed solutions" (p. 6). They promote their ideas mainly through articulation – picking "symbols that can be packaged in such a way that they offer an alternative perspective by which to understand and appreciate events, objects and situations" – and amplification -- "boiling down the core components of the narrative in order to carry the frame from one set of individuals to another" with catchphrases, metaphors, or analogies (p. 7).
- 5 The author makes his argument with the framing school from contentious politics, which he cites in explaining that the most important function of framing is "to mobilize" people (p. 14) – particularly those "outside of the core group of activists" (p. 15). Hence, when political entrepreneurs do their job well, their framing results in the "expansion of the political sphere of conflict [and mobilises] coalitions and broad-based support" (p. 16). Here Mertha relies on Paul A. Sabatier's advocacy coalition framework.
³ Overall, the distinction between policy entrepreneurship and issue framing is somewhat blurred. Policy entrepreneurs engage in articulation and amplification – speech-action that essentially seems to be what framing is all about.
- 6 In Chapter 2 the author outlines the issues at stake: economic development, resettlement, cultural heritage, and environmental issues. Finally, Mertha introduces the major actors, composed of government ministries and agencies at different levels, government-organised (GO) NGOs, and environmental NGOs. Given the crucial role the media play in the book's argument, it is not entirely clear why they are absent from this list. The first two chapters stretch over 64 pages; it sometimes seems that the organisation of arguments here could have been a bit more straight-forward and condensed.
- 7 Chapters 3 to 5 analyse his three cases in detail. The first case, the Pubugou Dam project in Sichuan, involves a large-scale resettlement of a third of the surrounding county's population. Resistance, including large-scale and violent protests, was largely caused by grievances over the very low compensation offered for the relocation of local farmers. Largely spontaneous and lacking any apparent strategic planning, it ultimately failed to halt construction of the dam. In his explanation, Mertha points out that in the three months before the protests occurred, some media reports about the problems of resettlement appeared in the national media. Yet, no strategic policy entrepreneurship in his terms took place. No attempts to co-opt parts of the state

bureaucracy and the media were undertaken. Mertha also believes that the framing of the issue as a problem of social injustice contributed to the defeat of the opposition.⁴ According to him, injustice simply lacked “power to attract the broad support necessary for policy change” (p. 93), because similar problems were experienced by many Chinese and empathy was therefore difficult to invoke. As soon as mass protests broke out, the state converted to repression mode, dispatching large-scale military and police units and declaring the issue a threat to social stability. Once the event was declared political, reporting on it became risky, closing all doors to meaningful adjustment, not to mention successful resistance. Pubugou consequently turned into a politically highly sensitive non-event.

- 8 The unfolding of events in the case of Dujiangyan, Mertha's second case, is almost diametrically opposite to what happened in Pubugou. The place is home to an ancient irrigation system, a UNESCO world heritage site, and has since gained additional tragic recognition from the 2008 earthquake that buried hundreds of children under the rubble of their schools. The issue took off in 2000 with plans for a dam at the nearby Zipingpu taking concrete shape.⁵ However, in 2003 local Dujiangyan officials discovered what seemed to be preparations for a dam construction at Dujiangyan's Yangliu Lake by the Zipingpu developer. Upon discovering the secret preparations, Dujiangyan's municipal government bureaus soon realised that they had many reasons to oppose the project – the most striking one no doubt being tourism revenue-loss due to “vision pollution” (p. 100) of the heritage site. Subsequently, two environmental affairs journalists visiting Sichuan were “fed” with insider information by the Dujiangyan World Heritage Office. Their report was the birth of a frame arguing that the dam would endanger China's national cultural heritage. It was the first among a small flood of media reports that picked up this frame and finally caused the project to be shelved by October 2003. Mertha argues that the cultural heritage theme resonated with the Chinese public, effortlessly tying into “larger notions of nationalism, the one ‘ism’ that Beijing has allowed to coexist alongside Marxism” (p. 107).
- 9 Chapter 5 contains an intriguing account of unfolding events surrounding the Yunnan Province Nu River Dam project(s). The dispute began in 2003 and remains unresolved today. A key policy entrepreneur was the environmental NGO Green Watershed, led by Yu Xiagang. A remarkable individual in many respects, Yu and environmental activist/journalist Wang Yongchen – who was already involved in the Dujiangyan controversy – masterfully employed and widened the space provided by legal regulations and informal political conventions. They documented and revealed information and perspectives on the issue at stake (e.g., by letting a representative of local peasants speak at an international conference on the topic, and by distributing films of resettled, uncompensated locals without land who have to make a living by collecting rubbish) that government officials normally took pains to keep out of public sight. In the process, the national media began to intensively report on the issue. Other NGOs, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, individuals from other government agencies, a National People's Congress delegate, and even Premier Wen chimed in or were drawn into the issue.
- 10 Yet, the supporting alliance did not remain passive, either. On the local level, the Yunnan authorities were largely able to gag any meaningful critical voices within the reach of their authority. Moreover, the project proponents also began to actively engage in framing. They found a skilful spokesman in physicist Fang Shimin, who was

instrumental in a de-legitimation campaign that framed the opposition and their arguments as irrational, unscientific, elitist, or self-serving. The author argues that the scientific front in particular is the resisters' "Achilles heel" (p. 146). Scientific knowledge is effectively under the control of the authorities, and engaging in a scientifically informed debate is therefore impossible. Mertha comments on this mechanism by referring to a Foucaultian insight: "Knowledge really is power" (p. 147). The opposition's framing attempts thus never dominated (Mertha's sufficient condition), and the resistance outcome of the episode is much less victorious than in the preceding case of Dujiangyan.

- 11 This review will continue by recapturing and further debating some selected points of Mertha's analysis. Firstly, in the beginning section, the author maintains that his examples are "'critical cases' in which policy change as a result of bottom up pressure [were] least likely to occur." He supports his rationale with "the importance of the issue and the immense political power of the more ardent supporters of this policy" (pp. 38-39). However, this argument is only convincing before one has read his analysis; the book's insights suggest rather the opposite. Only because of the high stakes and high profile of these large-scale projects was it possible to initiate a nationwide media debate on them, which in turn made successful resistance possible. We may assume that the average industrial project with support from the largely unchecked authority of local Party secretaries has a very slim chance of being challenged by the mechanisms Mertha outlines. While this does not negate the importance of his analysis, it may indicate that the cases are critical in a different way that remains to be defined.
- 12 Secondly, it seems that some assumptions of the theoretical approaches Mertha employs are not fully in line with his actual analytical results. For example, the author maintains that the main function of frames is to mobilise (p. 14), and that frames therefore need to resonate with the general public. However, this function seems not entirely apparent in his analysis. Who is actually mobilised by the frame that defeated the project in Dujiangyan? The frame might have resonated, but how do we know that (p. 108), and why is it decisive? Yet, Mertha also hints at another function of frames when he introduces the concept. Frames can de-legitimate or "overwhelm the official state frame" (p. 23) of a policy. What is decisive seems to be the de-legitimising function rather than resonance, not to mention the mobilisation part of the equation. However, the relationship between framing, political power, the state, and its legitimacy discourse is still a largely neglected issue in framing theory. The approach is primarily concerned with the discursive interaction between social movement actors and their (potentially mobilisable) constituent audience. This might call for theoretical expansion beyond framing in future analyses of discursive resistance in China.
- 13 In the concluding Chapter 6, Mertha compares his work to that of O'Brien and Li,⁶ pointing out differences with their work that will not be disputed here. However, this reviewer thinks both approaches share a common key insight that might deserve further attention. Both monographs highlight how power can be subverted by the means of language, by juxtaposing the actual practice of power with legitimacy principles of higher order that the Chinese state claims guide the exercise of its authority. The more public this attack with legitimacy claims, the stronger the political momentum.
- 14 This leads to another fundamental issue highlighted by Mertha's analysis. Convincing accounts of successful resistance against powerful opponents must explain how the

seemingly powerless may overcome the powerful. Mainstream scholarship from contentious politics, for example, solves this basic problem by empowering actors with resources (resource mobilisation) or political opportunities that make the coercive capacity of the state less of a threat. Since the 1980s, framing theory adds discursive meaning-work as an aid to mobilising supporters. What all these concepts have in common is that they perceive power and its resistance essentially in material terms. When contenders have resources, exploit opportunities, or appear in large numbers, it seems more plausible that they can overcome a materially powerful opponent. However, the crucial part of Mertha's study does not indicate that this type of empowerment is decisive. Conversely, his resisters are not empowered with resources, nor do they rely on strength in numbers. Although his contenders are not independent of what he calls fragmentation and what might also be analysed as political opportunity, he shows that fragmentation needs to be made into an opportunity by policy entrepreneurs who engage in meaning-making. In the final analysis, the subversion of the mighty Chinese state seems to depend crucially on manipulating the meaningful sphere of politics. Power is overcome by contenders who are empowered symbolically rather than materially.

- 15 Consequently, China's Water Warriors might indicate that analyses of Chinese politics (at least those seeking to understand the potential for bottom-up policy and political change) might need to broaden their theoretical scope and take political power and resistance against it more seriously in its symbolic/linguistic dimensions. It seems Mertha's research highlights the enduring utility of Stuart Hall's 1982 insight that emphasises: "The more one accepts that how people will act will depend in part on how the situations in which they act are defined, and the less one can assume either a natural meaning to everything or a universal consensus on what things mean – then the more important [...] becomes the process by which certain events get [...] signified in certain ways. [...]"
- 16 The power involved here is an ideological power: the power to signify events in a certain way."⁷ Andrew C. Mertha's study is a thought-provoking piece of research firmly grounded in detailed fieldwork. It opens the door to an understanding of the Chinese political process that seems underresearched. China's Water Warriors should be part of the standard literature for anybody interested in the fields of Chinese policy studies, contentious politics, environmental politics, and Chinese politics in general. Given the author's fresh approach to the subject, the book has the potential to inspire further studies.

NOTES

1. Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': The Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in *Culture, Society, and the Media*, Michael Gurevitch (ed), London, Methuen, 1982, pp. 56-90.

2. He mentions that the latter two often have a particularly close relationship or even work in personal union (pp. 10-11, 13).
 3. Mertha describes the formation of this coalition by highlighting that the frame or discourse “link[s] these entrepreneurs to another” (p. 16). Yet, later he follows Sabatier, who argues that the coalition is linked by a “set of normative and causal beliefs” (p. 17, also p. 156). It may be noted here that his initial argument, which highlights discursive linkage, is largely in line with Hajer’s concept of discourse coalitions. Hajer, however, explicitly criticizes Sabatier’s assumption of shared norms and beliefs. Particularly in the Dujiangyan case it is obvious that the shared norms and beliefs assumption is very difficult to uphold. Here Mertha provides no reasons to assume that the anti-dam coalition is bound together by anything but the shared goal to obstruct the dam project and by the discursive frame that was wrapped around it. (Maarten A. Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 68 ff.).
 4. This raises the question of why appeals to social justice seem to be so highly effective when, for example, retired workers fight for their pensions. (William Hurst and Kevin J. O’Brien, “China’s Contentious Pensioners,” *The China Quarterly*, vol. 170, n° June, 2002, pp. 345-60)
 5. This dam has recently been debated as a possible trigger for the 2008 earthquake.
 6. O’Brien, Kevin and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
 7. Hall, “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology’: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies,” art. cit., p. 69.
-

AUTHOR

CHRISTOPH H. STEINHARDT

Ph.D. Candidate at the Department of Government and Public Administration of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Associate Researcher at the CEFC, Hong Kong.