
5a. Book Review of *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* by Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden

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State-sponsored economic reforms have swept across the Chinese landscape in recent years, permanently restructuring the lives of millions of Chinese citizens in both rural and urban locales. No sector of society has been untouched by the thorough, systematic, and yet in many ways improvised changes. Though discontent runs deep and countless residents engage in everyday acts of resistance against the state, interestingly, no large-scale political party or social movement has arisen to challenge the dominant Party rule since the violent suppression of the 1989 student-led pro-democracy movement.

Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance, edited by political scientist Elizabeth Perry and sociologist Mark Selden,¹ takes an inter-disciplinary approach to analyzing the roots of conflict in reform China by identifying new structures of social inequality. It also takes a critical look at popular methods of confrontation and accommodation employed by the Chinese populace that challenge conventional notions of the Chinese economic miracle.

As stated in the introduction of the book, by the 1990s some analysts concluded that China moved from one of the world's most egalitarian societies in terms of income, wealth and opportunity to one of the most unequal in a period of a few decades (p.5). Though not meant to simplify the vast changes occurring throughout modern Chinese society in comparison to an idealized past, this statement is included to show that social and economic reform is causing dissatisfaction in new and distinct ways that are leading to increased overt and covert acts of resistance. Though intentionally left open-ended, 'resistance' as conveyed by this book appears to point to any actions taken by average citizens to defy the state or what are perceived to be confining social, economic, or cultural structures.

The various authors of this book focus on the politics of protests against state policies being enacted by groups such as political dissidents, workers, women, migrants, parents, religious practitioners and ethnic minority groups. This poignant and thought-provoking analysis of social change in China deconstructs pockets of organized resistance by highlighting the linkage between rising life expectations, an emergent sense of entitlement amongst citizens, and a history with a long-standing tradition of rebellion. An added benefit is the inclusion of a helpful abstract at the beginning of each chapter.

In order to comprehend the differential effects of reform on Chinese residents over the past two decades, it is necessary to recount the major state-sponsored changes that have been enacted in the countryside and the cities in the name of economic efficiency. In rural areas, the economy was effectively jumpstarted at the end of the 1970s through the creation of the household responsibility system, in effect a return to individual family

¹ Perry, Elizabeth, and Mark Selden. (eds). 2000. *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*. Routledge.

farming. Simultaneously, the state encouraged the development of small-scale industry in the countryside and also relaxed restrictions on rural-urban migration, which has created unprecedented mobility, access to resources, and economic opportunities for rural residents. However, the countryside has also been hit the hardest by family planning policies and unregulated destruction of the environment, which has contributed to considerable strife and tension between citizens and officials.

People in the countryside are employing creative and often vocal means to resist a powerful and repressive government. Jun Jing discusses the recent increase in environmentally related social protests in rural areas, showing the interplay between a heightened public awareness of the environmental crisis and popular protests demanding ecological improvements for the sake of human livelihood.

Acts of rural defiance also speak to the social and cultural limitations of life in the Chinese countryside in an era of heightened expectations. Sing Lee and Arthur Kleiman describe this reality by analyzing the case of the incredibly high rates of suicide amongst young rural women. David Zweig analyzes the interactions between new political institutions and a 'rights conscious peasantry' that is using legal means to demonstrate public grievances against damaging state policies.

More problematic is Tyrene White's analysis of the effects of the one-child policy, ensuing administrative control and different forms of resistance by rural residents. She argues that resistance to family planning policies takes the forms of direct confrontation with officials, evasion of enforcement or accommodation of state power-- meaning "those acts of resistance that appear to signal compliance with state power, but on terms that simultaneously defy state power" (p.102). According to White, couples that seek to bear a son rather than a daughter often use the tactic of accommodation to resist the state by abandoning infants or sex-selectively aborting unwanted female children. Due to the tremendous human and societal cost of these actions, White's argument seems out of place in a book written to recognize, celebrate and support everyday acts of resistance that empower the populace.

Urbanites, meanwhile, have been severely and often detrimentally affected by the reform of state-owned enterprises. Profit-based motivations and the move toward privatization have led millions to lose their 'iron rice bowl', the previously taken-for-granted lifetime employment and pensions ensured to urban workers through socialism. Downsizing of the public sector has been noticeably gendered, with women bearing the brunt of economic reform. Wang Zheng gives a lucid account of the upsurge in gender discrimination in the workforce, which is causing a new gender consciousness and has laid the groundwork for the rise of feminism. Wang writes that women in the present day are once again embracing the Maoist ideology of gender equality as a means of linking gender equality with modernity.

Overall this exceptionally well-written and concisely edited volume deepens our understanding of the real-life effects of economic reform, though at times it can fall into oversimplifying varied situations as an issue of underdog (Chinese citizens) versus bully

(the Chinese state). Though resistance takes many disparate forms in modern day China, the common thread tying them together is a generally increased sense of entitlement to make decisions regarding one's own individual situation and to actively defy victimization. While it is not possible to predict the sources and scale of future conflicts, this book succeeds in illuminating changing attitudes toward empowerment amongst certain groups and individuals in China that are being reflected in a new era of popular protest.

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