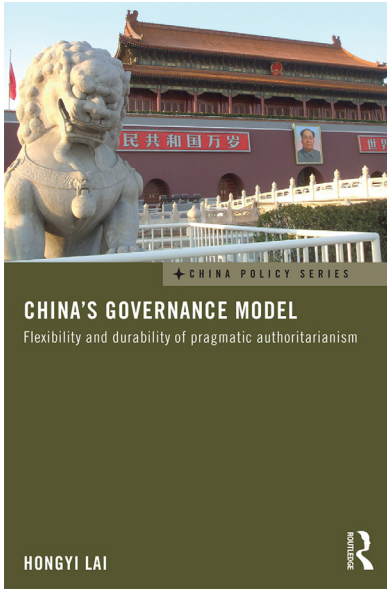


BOOK REVIEW



Hongyi Lai. *China's Governance Model: Flexibility and Durability of Pragmatic Authoritarianism*. London: Routledge, 2016; 364 pages including bibliographical references and index. ISBN 978-0-415-73447-9 (Paperback)

Hongyi Lai, a professor at the University of Nottingham, provides a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the Chinese political regime in the reform period. Fundamentally, *China's Governance Model* aims to address one critical puzzle: that is, what

explains the longevity of the Chinese Communist Party?

The author coins the term 'pragmatic authoritarianism' to explain China's political development in the reform era, especially since 1992. Two elements are key to his proposal. Firstly, the Party state is flexible, practical and adaptive. To improve its institutions and governance, China is not reluctant to take into consideration effective policies and practices from various sources and countries. Secondly, the sole definite goal of the state in China is to maintain the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

Pragmatic authoritarianism, according to Hongyi Lai, consists of three components, namely, economic governance, social governance and political governance. In accordance with the economic aspect, he maintains that pragmatic authoritarianism has delivered plausible outcomes to the country. The highest growth in GDP, Chinese people's higher quality of life and the biggest poverty reduction are hard evidence, whereas downgraded public welfare and rising income inequality are severe downsides. For social governance, he examines the state-societal

relationship, that is, the state's relationship with social groups and with social activities. His argument is that China has relaxed much of its social regulation to facilitate economic growth. Mostly annihilated during the previous Mao era, many social groups and activities have revived in the reform age under the name of NGOs, the majority of which, nonetheless, cannot escape from the state's tethers. Regarding political governance, the author gives a concise illustration of ideological reformation from Mao's times to Xi Jinping. In spite of the dynamism and change, it is stressed that the Party's sanctioned line of ideology is still solely legitimate and it must not be challenged by any other liberal values. Then, he touches upon the topics of the overhaul of crisis management, the leadership succession, the Party's control of principal state branches and the Party's censorship of the media and the Internet. At the end of this part, the author points out that the CCP has come a long way in renewing itself and faces no immediate deadly challenge.

The subsequent parts of his book delve deeper into each model of governance by providing systematic analyses and case studies. Although economic governance seems to be the strongest segment of Chinese pragmatic authoritarianism, it has multiple flaws. Against the basic assumption that the better the living conditions, the less the consent from people to the state, the case of China shows that people with a better quality of life and economic affluence tend to be more aware of their personal freedom and rights. In respect of social governance, he illustrates through the religious implications in China, that the Chinese state is a rational monopoly. China in the reform period changed from the totalitarian regime that it previously was and relaxed its regulations governing the social sphere. Notwithstanding the recurrence of social groups and the wider practice of local rituals, the CCP still holds on to monopolising the military, judicial, legislative and administrative arms of the state, in so far as it is able to cope with different public gatherings with different approaches.

Hong Yilai's China's Governance Model is worthy of two strong accolades. Firstly, its comprehensive review and classification of both English and Chinese scholarship, in the first part, establishes a solid background not only for understanding the ongoing scholarly debates beneficial for reading this account but also for further studies which

certainly benefit from the interesting and diverse cited works. Secondly, the writing style of the author as well as the organisation of the book allows readers to grasp the main arguments easily and, at the same time, encourages them to investigate supporting evidence and consider the counter-arguments. In each chapter, he has provided the background to the topic, supplemented by the debates and followed by his argument. This demonstrates that his arguments do not come out all of a sudden but from loopholes within the literature.

Nevertheless, there exists some room for improvement. Firstly, in the case of politics, he seems to downplay the external crises or threats that have strongly impacted Chinese leaders' policy choices, for example, the decision to wage war on Vietnam or the plan to modernise its military after the failure to take control over Taiwan in the wake of US intervention. Although the focus of the book is on domestic politics the clarifying of Chinese political dynamism without mentioning outside events could easily cause confusion or even misunderstanding in the reader. Secondly, in the concluding part, he does not display sufficiently how China's past can be related to 'pragmatic authoritarianism' and how scholars can predict China's future behaviour and fate based on the historical narrative. In addition, I wonder how the author would respond to the political changes during Xi Jinping's era since his book was launched, particularly the swift and dramatic change in leadership succession and norms which constitutes part of his strong faith in China's transformed political institutions.

With a clear and detailed presentation of 'pragmatic authoritarianism', this book serves as a guidebook for lay readers and as a debatable account for specialists. Overall, *China's Governance Model: Flexibility and Durability of Pragmatic Authoritarianism* is to be recommended to those interested in China's domestic affairs, particularly with regard to its models of governance and future direction. It helps the reader grasp how China has been transformed from a poor, isolated nation to a confident country standing firmly at the centre of the international system. Therefore, government strategists, business decision makers, journalists, academics and students could and should make use of some aspects of this account.

Reviewed by Attawat Assavanadda, visiting research fellow,
Chinese Studies Center, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn
University.

I can be reached at Attawat.A@alumni.chula.ac.th.