

Book Review

Jennifer Y.J. Hsu and Reza Hasmath (eds), *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaption, Survival and Resistance*, New York: Routledge, 2013, 150pp + xix.

How comparable exactly is the Chinese political system? David Goodman, a senior China scholar, in his foreword to this book, warns against two methodological fallacies. One is to take China as completely *sui generis* that defies meaningful comparison, and the other is to take China as totally fungible that assumes China is just like all the other comparable countries. The book attempts to avoid both: to take a concept that has been developed elsewhere (corporatism, or more specifically, state corporatism) and apply it to the Chinese case. It attempts to see in what aspects the basic insights about state-society relations a state corporatist lens could generate, and on the other hand examines how the Chinese system differs from the state corporatist model.

Corporatism is known to comparative politics scholars as a system of organizing interests that is in contrast to pluralism. It puts a much stronger emphasis on the role of the state in organizing and channelling societal interests in the policy process. A hallmark of such a system is that in each societal sector that is only one non-competitive, compulsory and hierarchical organization. It is more likely to be organized top-down and it tends to have a monopoly representation in the government's policy process toward that particular sector. Two variants of the corporatist system are generally noted: a societal version which is much more accommodative toward liberal democratic systems, and a state version that is likely (but not necessarily) to be associated with authoritarian governance. State corporatism was also applied in examining the successful economic development of some of the East Asian states – its insights were somehow incorporated into the concept of the developmental state.

China's successful economic take-off since the late 1970s has been compared to the economic experiences of those East Asian developmental states. This also brought those scholars interested in the theory of corporatism to China. On the appearance, China does appear to be corporatist. As Jennifer Hsu and Reza Hasmath, the editors of the volume, note in their introduction, "(w)ith the state regulating social change through its control of social organizations from non-governmental organizations to entrepreneurial associations, we see the manifestation of corporatism in practice" (p. 3). However, beyond this impression, the conclusions drawn from the substantive

chapters in this volume, in my view, are mixed about the usefulness of the concept of state corporatism.

In Barbara Schulte's chapter on the educational organizations in Republican China, she argues that the consistently weak regime in the early years of the Republican era rendered corporatism "more imaginary than real", despite the willingness of societal actors (in this case, Chinese Association of Vocational Education, or CAVE) to associate with the state. Somehow CAVE was able to have some kind of semi-corporatist arrangements with the government of Jiangsu. But once a much stronger state emerged (first the Nationalists in 1928 and then the communists in 1949), the semi-corporatist arrangement was immediately replaced by a more Leninist fashion of state-society relations. Gerry Groot, in the next chapter, examines the limitations and failures of the kind of corporatism associated with the United Front work of the Chinese Communist Party. The United Front system has several parts but the most important are the minority parties (the so-called eight democratic parties) and groups and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Each of the party is designated to represent and articulate the interests of certain sectors of the society (professionals, intellectuals, overseas Chinese, etc.), while CPPCC is a platform for societal elite to provide policy input to the ruling elite. In each case, corporatist features can be detected. Yet Groot finds that these corporatist features are mostly overshadowed by the monistic conception of state-society relations animated by Marxist-Leninist ideology. For example, the leaders of those democratic parties basically have to first accept the party's views, thus creating a gap between the leadership and the sectorial interests they are supposed to articulate to the party. In short, the corporatist structures are a highly dysfunctional one.

Similarly, Keming Yang's chapter on the relationship between the state and association of business associations finds that while certainly there are some corporatist elements inside these relationships, the organizational control and penetration of the party, together with the very limited role voluntarily played by the business associations in public policy process, suggest that the traditional concept of state corporatism only captures a partial picture in this arena. Another chapter that also looks at relationship between the state and entrepreneurs, by Lei Wang, examines more specifically the role of the local state in economic development. In short, this chapter discusses how the local state, in order to boost economic development, has used methods such as generating housing demands and the conversion of farmlands to commercial and residential lands. However, what is missing in this discussion is what role does corporatism play? In fact, the author acknowledges that "corporatism may not be an accurate portrayal of the contemporary Chinese entrepreneurial local state" (p. 99). In the religious sector, which is examined

in Carsten Vala's chapter, corporatism also turns out to have a relatively weak explanatory power over state-religion relations. State corporatism does not deny that that societal associations have associational legitimacy, that there are clear boundaries between the state and the associations, and there is mutual respect that sustains this "system of interest representation" and does not turn it into a "system of interest subordination". Along these three dimensions, what Vala finds is that the party's hegemonic agenda overshadows any corporatist structure that could be found.

Two chapters in this book are more agreeable to the utility of the concept of corporatism. Xian Huang examines collective wage bargaining – a policy area that corporatism has been applied often (and developed from). It is perhaps in this policy area that one finds the clearest manifestation of Chinese state corporatism: it has a tripartite bargaining structure (state, capital, labour), the bodies in the structure are hierarchical and enjoy jurisdictional monopoly, and they play important roles in policy formulation and implementation. Huang finds that while economic conditions, ownership types of the enterprises, and the relationship between the local state and enterprises are variables that account for different phases or patterns of collective wage bargaining, overall the three sectors have worked together finely under the state corporatist framework. Finally, Hsu and Hasmath contribute a substantive chapter by looking at the state's relations with migrant NGOs. They first postulate a useful distinction between "overt sanctioning" and "tacit sanctioning" in terms of how the Chinese party-state regulates societal actors. The latter behaviour is said to have corporatist institutional features such as state's creation of social organizations, granting of such organizations certain privileges in mediating interests to the state on behalf of their societal constituents, and the strict adherence to the state-created rules and regulations by these organizations (pp. 121-122). China has since the reform era largely adopted "tacit sanctioning." They proceed to discuss local migrant NGOs in Beijing and Shanghai, and conclude that the picture confirm their contention. They suggest that local states also have a stake in promoting this kind of corporatist arrangements with NGOs as they contribute to efforts to promote harmonious relations.

Finally, the concluding chapter by the editors revisits the question of the utility of the state corporatism as a framework to understand China's state-society relations. Overall they answer affirmatively, but with qualifications and acknowledgment of limitations of the model. Some readers may still find the corporatist lens not very satisfying. Indeed, in several chapters it is clear that features of Leninism may have more explanatory power than corporatism in understanding state-society relations in China.

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