

Book review on Bin Xu, *The Politics of Compassion – The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China*. Stanford University Press, Stanford (2017). In *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 25(4) December 2019, 837-838, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13157>

Bin Xu (2018). *The Politics of Compassion – The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic engagement in China*, Stanford University Press, Stanford

The 2008 Sichuan earthquake was followed by the largest social mobilization in China to take place after the Tian'anmen Incident in 1989. The number of volunteers participating in emergency relief activities rose to millions and came as a complete surprise to the ruling Communist Party. One of the volunteers was Xu Bin himself, who used this as an opportunity to study Chinese civil engagement in time of national crisis. Research in the book is based mainly on the ethnographic interviews of other volunteers and activists, participant observation and primary documentary sources collected during this spell of volunteerism/fieldwork. The result is a balanced and dispassionately written social scientific work, which is an important contribution to our understanding of the relation between natural disasters and civic engagement in authoritarian context, as well as contemporary state-society relations in China.

Xu Bin presents his study in a form of a narrative in four parts from the early consensus crisis through to collective mourning, the breakdown of the consensus, and finally contention. The key concepts in the study are consensus crisis, civic engagement, civil society and public sphere, which Xu Bin uses skilfully to explain the conditions which both enabled social mobilization and later led to its demise. At the same time, Xu Bin also lets Chinese volunteers speak in their own voices about their activism. Lucidly written, text moves effortlessly between grassroots interpretive and macro level explanatory analysis while staying sharply focused on its topic.

Consensus crisis is the key concept in the first chapter about the emergency period. Using it, Xu Bin is able to explain convincingly why during the first weeks of emergency relief activities both the state and civic organizations were able to co-operate. As Xu shows, most volunteering was not organized by the state, but was spontaneous and come from the already existing groups and networks in the nascent civil society. Volunteers also explained their participation in ways that mostly ignored official explanations offered by the Party.

The second chapter studies the public mourning for earthquake victims. Here the nature of Chinese public sphere is analysed, and the way public opinion, especially on-line, forced the party to accept public mourning is highlighted.

In the third chapter about the reconstruction period, Xu shows how civic mobilization was ended through the reimposition of political controls that squeezed civic organizations out of action one by one and replaced them with corporations. The romance between the state and the civil society was over.

In the fourth chapter Xu analyses the contention over the issue of collapsed schools which resulted in the death of thousands of schoolchildren. Here activism came mainly from the already existing

“tiny public” dissidents. The state responded with a combination of repression, paying compensations and silencing public debate on the issue. However, as Xu also shows, most of the civic organizations and volunteers did not engage in contention, but choose non-engagement and were thus content to “live in lie” as Vaclav Havel has termed living under (post)-totalitarian reality.

Xu’s study shows how the Reform Period China has become full of grassroots groups and networks of people. Mostly they are small and apolitical, but under right conditions they can quickly amalgamate into larger organizations, such as during the consensus crisis of 2008. However, when the conditions for consensus faded, the party-state was able to regain control and the public by and large returned to “normal apathy”. Therefore, as Xu argues, the case shows how China does not have a civil society in a Neo-Tocquevillian sense, but much more modest ‘contingent symbiosis’ between the state and civic groups.

Xu Bin’s book is an excellent scholarly work, but providing a more comprehensive historical background would have helped explaining better the structural conditions for the emergence of the 2008 mass mobilization. Arguable, it was the erosion of Maoist disaster management structures and techniques, workunits and mass campaigns, which had left authorities with little tools to cope with the crisis. Although far from perfect, Maoist disaster management work was not as weak or secretive as Xu Bin let us to understand and disasters could become propaganda moments for the Party. In 2008 very similar propaganda practices could still be detected. The propaganda slogan “turning crisis to opportunity” (p. 154) has at least as long history as the PRC has. However, as Xu’s book shows, in the end this meant an opportunity for the state and not for the people.

Lauri Paltemaa, University of Turku