

Christian P. Sorace, *Shaken Authority: China's Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017; xii + 231 pp. with maps, notes, glossary of terms and phrases, bibliography, and index: 9781501707537, US\$45.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Lauri Paltemaa, *University of Turku, Finland*

Christian Sorace's book on the reconstruction after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake is an excellent study on Chinese communist ideology, governance and politics. Based on solid empirical research consisting of fieldwork, interviews, surveys, and archival work, Sorace offers a lucidly written piece of research that has relevance well beyond disaster management studies.

As Sorace himself describes it, the 'book studies how ideology and discourse determined the official decisions and responses to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake' (p. 149). Sorace calls this 'discursive path dependence' and argues that it explains why the grand reconstruction plans laid down by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after the earthquake failed to produce full recovery. Sorace further contends that the CCP's discourse about itself and its role in Chinese society made the party frame the reconstruction as a 'miracle' of the party, a gift to the people for which they were expected to be grateful. However, it was a gift few really wanted.

Sorace's book has a clear structure and is organized according to three case studies in the different counties and townships in the disaster area, all of which implemented their own distinctive schemes for reconstruction. The main policy was to re-engineer local economies through the so-called three concentrations (i.e. of people, industries, and land), which is also a key notion in the government's current vision of regional development. The scheme for industrial rebuilding was based on the metaphor of a 'blood transfusion' from the sister provinces and regions which were paired to help the earthquake-hit areas. However, when the blood transfusions ended, the 'marketization' (i.e. profitability) of the newly constructed industrial zones mostly failed to materialize. Furthermore, pressure from the party centre to create a quick miracle and frequent leadership inspection visits made local cadres focus on building Potemkin villages instead of really useful projects. All this was demanded by the CCP's script for disaster management.

Another feature of the reconstruction plan was 'rural-urban integration': the concentration of population in urban centres. Sorace sees this as 'urban utopianism' on the part of the CCP. It is a key to economic development in the government's strategy to turn peasants into urban workers. This policy, which according to Sorace was quite unpopular, was already in place before the earthquake in 2008, but the earthquake offered a rare opportunity to the CCP to push through the implementation of the rural-urban integration policy. Once again, as Sorace shows, (re)constructing new urban housing and moving peasants into reconstructed urban centres has not made cities viable. Instead, most farmers remained, or became, dependent on the state when they lost their livelihoods in the villages and could not find sustainable livelihoods in the new cities. Sorace also documents the inadequacies and shortcomings of earthquake tourism and ecological construction which the local authorities used to revive local economies.

The overall picture that Sorace paints of the Wenchuan earthquake reconstruction is therefore far removed from that of a miracle. Rather, he shows how it was nearly impossible for the people affected by the earthquake to participate in the planning process for reconstruction, and that the reconstruction improved the party's image more than the lives of the common people. Indeed, as he argues, this natural disaster probably bolstered the party's legitimacy because it became an opportunity for the party to remind people of the government's efforts and generosity through tireless propaganda.

Sorace's book is robustly empirical, and its understanding of contemporary Chinese politics and the role of ideology is theoretically significant. It is easy to agree with Sorace's main argument that ideology is very much present in the way the party makes its decisions even today, and scholars would do well not to neglect the influence of ideology on the way policies are formulated, implemented, and propagated in China. However, Sorace could have referred to more literature on disasters in Chinese history for a more robust historical perspective to his findings. Indeed, the party has a long history of arguing that it can 'turn bad things into good ones', and most of the propaganda devices used in the 2008 disaster were vintage Chinese Communist Party propaganda. Emphasizing discursive path dependency may also hide what has changed. Today's party ideology is not Maoism in its 1950-1970 jacket when mass mobilization was the key to disaster management. In the 2008 case, mobilization did

take place, but this time it was through the party-state and private companies. Indeed, the party-state had difficulties in deciding its response to the spontaneous popular mobilization that arose. This is important to note since Sorace attributes Mao as the source of thinking on contemporary Chinese disaster management. While Sorace's book shows that in general he is not wrong in his attribution to Mao, what exactly is left of Maoism in Chinese politics and governance could have been discussed in greater depth in an otherwise brilliant book.