retention, but also raises thought-provoking questions on some of the key contentious issues in Chinese elite politics.

Disruptions as Opportunities: Governing Chinese Society with Interactive Authoritarianism
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How has the Chinese Communist Party managed to remain in power over the last 40 years without democratization, despite the fall of so many other communist states? What is the source of its authoritarian resilience (to borrow Andrew Nathan’s term)? How does a non-democratic, top-down state build flexibility and adaptability into its governance practices? In Disruptions as Opportunities, Taiyi Sun offers a compelling answer with his new theory of interactive authoritarianism. Sun’s theory is based on an impressive wealth of rigorously analysed empirical data, and the resulting conceptual framework has the potential to be of great use for researchers studying state–society relations in China.

According to Sun, the strategy of interactive authoritarianism has three stages: toleration, differentiation and legalization. He illustrates the framework through three case studies: civil service organizations in Sichuan, social-media publications censorship and rideshare protests in Hangzhou.

The first stage is toleration. When state actors become aware of a new type of civil society organization or activity, their first reaction is to wait and see – even if these new activities are technically illegal. This allows local governments to collect information on the new organizations and allows them to develop to the point where they could be potentially useful. The toleration stage explains why Chinese NGOs were allowed to proliferate in the early 2000s, even though most of these organizations were in violation of laws and regulations. When rideshare drivers demonstrated against officials who tried to arrest them in the 2010s, the state did very little to intervene. Instead, state actors chose to sit back to see how the industry would develop.

In the second stage, differentiation, state actors sort out the new organizations, determining their capabilities and their intentions. In this stage, local governments also try out different interventions on the new organizations to see potential results. For example, the state eventually differentiated between the NGOs that serve the state by complementing its weaknesses (like environmental organizations), and the NGOs that could potentially threaten state legitimacy (such as human rights organizations). It differentiated between the social media topics that could lead to harm, and those that were harmless. It also differentiates between the interventions that are useful and the ones that are not. For example, the state has a wide array of censorship tools available, as state actors try to prevent social disruptions without suffocating useful discourse.

Legalization is the third stage. Here the state codifies the most useful practices into law and policy. In 2016, the new Charity Law made it easier for certain types of NGOs to become fully legal, while Foreign NGO Law restricted the activities of international organizations. Around the same time, the state instituted a new licensing system for rideshare drivers, as well as practices to defuse
tensions with unlicensed drivers, thereby making protests unnecessary. Legalization is not the end point; the process is iterative, allowing the state to continuously adapt to new circumstances.

This theory offers a persuasive explanation for other mysteries of state–society relations that political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists and historians of China have been wrestling with for years. It offers a compelling reason why protests and demonstrations are so common, even under Xi Jinping (China Dissent Monitor). For that matter, it can be used to explain government policies tracing back to the beginning of market socialism. When Deng Xiaoping permitted small businesses to flourish in the 1980s when they were technically in violation of the law, his regime was practising toleration and differentiation. This allowed the blossoming of Chinese entrepreneurship that led to the Chinese economic miracle.

The data Sun gathers for each of his three cases is impressive in breadth and depth. For the first case, Sun examined the effect of two earthquakes (Wenchuan and Lushan) on civil society organizations in southern Sichuan. Sun surveyed 1022 villagers across dozens of villages and interviewed over 60 organization leaders and a dozen government officials. He also conducted a field experiment, sending an inquiry to 114 county governors about registering a civil service organization. For the second case, Sun utilized two self-media publications that he founded, following the censorship experiences of 971 articles across Weibo, WeChao and TouTiao. For the third case, Sun joined three drivers’ WeChat groups in Hangzhou and interviewed over 100 rideshare drivers in four cities. Because each of these case studies is so well researched, this book would also be highly useful for scholars in any of the relevant subfields.

My criticisms of the book are minor. The writing is reasonably clear, but too dense for most undergraduates. (However, there is a lovely appendix with tips for conducting fieldwork in China that would work well for students of all levels.) Sometimes the bigger argument gets lost in the details. Several of the chapters were previously published as articles and could be better integrated into the manuscript. Given how much Sun covers in this book, it feels churlish to ask for more, but I did have some questions that remained unanswered. Therefore, I hope that future studies using this framework provide more thorough analysis of the ways that the different layers of government interact with each other through the process, sometimes to the point of contradiction. I would also like to see an analysis of why the system sometimes fails to contain citizen anger, such as in the recent White Paper protests against zero-Covid restrictions. Lastly, this book focuses on the state’s strategy, but I hope future studies examine the strategic ways that Chinese citizens take advantage of the system in order to accomplish their own goals.

The Left in China: A Political Cartography


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This is a necessary book. It is neither an “objective” academic work nor an anodyne journalistic one. Instead, and vitally, it is the product of the author’s many years of activist engagement with “the