

BOOK REVIEW

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# Ma, Xiao. (2022). Localized bargaining: the political economy of China's high-speed railway program. Oxford University Press

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The book is the first work to offer a systematic and detailed account of the political process behind China's high-speed railway program, the largest state-directed infrastructure program in human history. The author addresses the following central question: what accounts for the significant geographical and temporal variation in railway investment across the country? Conventional wisdom offers two explanations for such subnational variation in the distribution of public goods: loyalty purchasing and technocratic solutions. However, the author argues that neither theory can explain the spatial and temporal heterogeneity of China's high-speed railway program. Both overestimate the policy-maker's will and information capacity, underestimate the policy recipient's agency, and ignore the credible commitment problem that is prevalent in authoritarian countries. Accordingly, this book describes a novel theory of distributive politics in China: localized bargaining, the bottom-up solicitation of policy benefits by local authorities.

The author argues that solicitation activities on the part of local governments significantly shape the allocative decisions of their superiors. China's fragmented bureaucracy prevents rulers from allocating policy benefits at will and creates space for localized bargaining. In response to the mismatch between policymakers' and policy recipients' resources and responsibilities, local officials address the central government by proposing and demanding policy benefits (such as the high-speed railway program) in their jurisdictions. The bargaining power of different local officials in the political system is the main factor explaining the uneven distribution of high-speed railway projects in China. The author empirically confirms the importance of localized bargaining in achieving program success through detailed interview analysis and list experiments involving local officials.

Why, then, do some local officials have more substantial bargaining power and thus receive more policy benefits than others when competing for the benefits of the high-speed railway program? The author argues that the administrative configurations of the party-state regime bestow differential bargaining power on local officials. The author thus classifies local authorities into two types based on institutionalized advantage: "Cardinals" and "Clerics". Cardinals are those local officials with higher institutional

bargaining power because of their dual appointments, i.e., the leaders of some localities (or functional departments) are appointed to concurrent leadership positions at a higher rank. The benefits of dual appointment are apparent. Dual appointment not only makes it easier for local voices on high-speed railway programs to reach the ears of superior policymakers but also increases the likelihood of success by coordinating conflicts among different functional departments or directly participating in the process of allocating policy resources. By exploring the provincial five-year plans and an original dataset based on the construction of China's high-speed railway program, the author finds that cities whose leaders hold dual appointments receive more policy attention in the provincial policy agenda and that cardinals are more likely to secure a high-speed railway project from the center and start construction earlier than clerics.

Since a cardinal's localized bargaining power is predetermined and embedded in consolidated institutional arrangements, what is the weapon of the weaker clerics? The author suggests that although local officials who do not hold dual appointments are at a disadvantage within the system, they are able to use noninstitutionalized tools to extract policy concessions from their superiors. This book thus introduces consent instability as a possible strategy, where some local officials strategically tolerate bottom-up mass mobilizations to strengthen their bargaining power to pursue a pro-locality policy. When the demand of the masses demand is congruent with local official's priority, the local official can translate the power of the masses to strengthen localized bargaining power. A case study of a county merger perfectly illustrates the dynamics of such consent instability, which follows the same political logic as the high-speed railway program.

This book is therefore a substantial contribution to the extensive literature. First, the book offers a novel and reasonable account of distributive politics amid comparative politics. In contrast to conventional wisdom, this "demand-side" story illustrates how local authorities are not simply passive policy receivers and implementers; their bargaining power plays a crucial role in shaping policy processes and soliciting policy benefits. Second, this book elaborates on an interactive pattern of multilevel governments that is prevalent in many political and economic activities in China. The author also informs us that the existing fragmented authoritarianism makes this interactive pattern a self-enforcing arrangement. Third, the book inspires us to reconsider state-society relations in contemporary China. Oversimplified but popular analyses often deem the state an abrupt and repressive actor that intends to shut down any mass protests. This book, however, depicts a more complex and diversified political reality, where mass protests empower local elites to bargain with their superiors.

Notably, this work's empirical evidence is laudable. The author employs rich empirical materials to test his theoretical hypotheses, including first-hand qualitative materials from face-to-face interviews with government officials to fine-grained case analysis of county merger, as well as quantitative data on provincial five-year plans and the construction of China's high-speed railway that the author collected. Such mixed methods foster a more convincing conclusion. Specifically, in Chapters 3 and 6, the author describes his surveys of local government officials who are difficult to reach and how he designed his list experiments and endorsement experiments, respectively. These empirical strategies are in line with recent trends in social science research that emphasize more rigorous causal inferences.

If you are interested in the distributive politics in an authoritarian country, the logic of local governmental processes in China, or China's high-speed railway program, this book is an essential and must-read work. The book is overflowing with very enlightening ideas that are worth exploring further. I look forward to the author's advanced study of and ongoing journey through the political economy of this excellent infrastructure program.

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