

Localized Bargaining: The Political Economy of China's High-Speed Railway Program

By Ma Xiao. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 248pp. £19.99 (paper)

Saul Wilson

Brown University, Providence, RI, USA

Email: saul_wilson@brown.edu

(Received 30 March 2023; accepted 21 April 2023)

Localized Bargaining uses the fragmented authoritarianism framework to shed light on China's central–local relations. The book argues that localities have wrangled stations along China's sprawling high-speed rail network by bargaining with the central government. Localities with privileged positions in the bureaucratic hierarchy have been able to extract such infrastructure most quickly, while localities less well placed in the bureaucratic hierarchy have sometimes resorted to mobilizing the masses to strengthen their bargaining position.

Ma Xiao makes this argument with a pragmatic mixture of qualitative and quantitative evidence. Drawing on interviews with local bureaucrats, Ma lays out a model of how local governments seek resources from their superiors in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Seeking ways to test his model, the author is resourceful: he surveys a broad national sample of leading local cadres when they are accessibly concentrated at training programs, and he measures the success of localities by examining provincial Five Year Plans and construction dates for high-speed rail stations. Recognizing that his theoretical contribution is to intergovernmental bargaining and not to the study of high-speed rail infrastructure *per se*, Ma uses a detailed case study from a redistricting conflict to uncover the mobilization of public protest by local governments—a bargaining tool local officials have every incentive to hide from prying researchers.

While the author makes clear that he is building on the fragmented authoritarianism literature, he orients the book's theoretical discussions around more contemporary and comparative debates about resource allocation under authoritarianism. Emphasizing that the comparative scholarship has come to highlight how central officials purchase or reward loyalty by distributing resources to select subordinates and, alternatively, how national officials can allocate resources to further technocratic programs of economic development, Ma contends that these theoretical orientations are inadequate to explain how Chinese localities have gained access to high-speed rail. Instead, Ma returns to the fragmented authoritarianism literature of the 1980s to explain resource allocation. This roundabout introduction to a framework that remains widely popular in the Chinese politics subfield makes the book accessible to those primarily versed in the comparative literature, but it may leave Sinologists wishing to skim chapters 1 and 2.

Although widely used, the concept “fragmented authoritarianism” has long suffered from several significant shortcomings. It makes a mystery of the obvious, and otherizes China in the process: any large bureaucracy involves specialization, and specialization necessarily implies fragmentation. The specific cleavages along which fragmentation occurs—and the bureaucratic politics that results—are the intentional or unintentional results of bureaucratic design. Whether individual localities were intentional or unintentional beneficiaries of bureaucratic design is crucial to *Localized Bargaining*. Ma’s consequential assertion that the geography of resource allocation stems from demands by localities is only accurate if the distribution of political power across localities is itself unintentional. The book does not, however, rule out the possibility that bureaucratic power—especially the higher ranks granted to the leaders of certain cities—may have been intended to concentrate resources in precisely those cities. Indeed, such works as Harding’s *Organizing China* (1981) contend that bureaucratic design in China is very intentional.

The book thus misses an opportunity to improve on the fragmented authoritarianism literature and to fully engage with more recent literature on China’s political geography. By attributing resource allocation to bottom-up demands, Ma’s thesis is in tension with Jaros’s *China’s Urban Champions* (2019). Whereas Ma focuses on how county and municipal governments shape resource allocation, Jaros contends that higher levels of government—especially provincial authorities—are often able to impose their own schemes for resource allocation. Importantly, Jaros argues that provincial resource allocation plans do not *mirror* existing economic strengths; rather, they seek to *shape* economic and political geography. While the two authors agree that the distribution of political power across municipalities shapes provincial policies, they disagree on whether those provincial policies can themselves reshape China’s political and economic geography. *Localized Bargaining* could have pushed forward this debate by more clearly engaging with Jaros’ competing framework to show how commonly bottom-up pressure is able to shape resource distribution.

Nonetheless, *Localized Bargaining* is an important contribution to our understanding of local government bargaining practices. Its description of the local government toolkit—everything from outposts in Beijing filled with lobbyists to government-sponsored protests back home—is not only interesting in its own right, but also will help explain the distribution of other resources far beyond the high-speed rail system. Indeed, the localized bargaining framework would lead us to expect local governments to continue undermining efforts to impose “rational” planning on the distribution of resources. For example, local governments will surely use every opportunity to reel in resources from China’s ambitious high-tech industrial policy, likely undermining the rationalist aspirations of planners at the center.

doi:10.1017/jea.2023.11