BOOK REVIEW

Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China

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China has experienced rapid urbanization over the past four decades. In the early 1980s, less than 20 per cent of the Chinese population lived in cities. By 2022, China's urbanization rate had reached 65 per cent. A challenging task for the Chinese government is to re-distribute the land among different stakeholders for urban development, such as building houses, roads, bridges and industrial zones. As a developmental state, local governments have strong incentives to promote various urban development projects. However, strong resistance from landowners may arise due to unsatisfactory compensation, corruption and the violence involved in the demolition and land-grabbing process. How does the Chinese party-state deal with this resistance? In her book *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China*, Lynette Ong addresses this important question.

Using data collected from field observation, interviews, content analysis of government documents and media reports, Ong identified three important strategies adopted by local governments to deal with resistance: stick (violent coercion), carrot (economic incentive) and persuasion (psychological coercion). Although one particular strategy may take predominance, the other two were used as complementary measures to get the work done. The three strategies are nothing new. However, the selective use of these strategies may vary in different periods. Ong convincingly demonstrates that, over the past three decades, the Chinese party-state has increasingly relied on persuasion and economic incentives in urban development projects, although forced and violent demolition occurred from time to time.

More importantly, Ong argues that both persuasion and violent coercion take different forms. On the one hand, rather than relying on government officials themselves to conduct persuasion, political brokers, social brokers and economic brokers have been used to mobilize the masses. Political brokers refers to personnel who are closely related, but do not directly belong, to grassroots governments. These individuals include neighbourhood committee employees, residents' small group members, block captains and grid workers in urban areas, and leaders from village committees, village small groups, and production teams in rural areas. Social brokers include grassroots elite volunteers such as Party members, retired cadres and former state-owned enterprise workers, etc. Economic brokers are professional profit-seeking middlemen (*huangniu*) who hold insider information from the government and leverage it on the masses to get a deal for profit. Ong argues that brokers have significantly enhanced the party-state's power in penetrating society.

On the other hand, coercion, in the form of both hard and soft violence, has been outsourced to thugs and gangsters. For local governments, the largest benefit of using thugs-for-hire in forced demolition is to get the dirty work done while avoiding being held responsible for the violence. Ong further argues that the strategy of using thugs-for-hire has also been adopted when local governments faced other challenging tasks, such as preventing petitions, collecting agricultural tax (before it was abolished) and harassing political dissenters. With a broad sociological

imagination, Ong puts the practice of thugs-for-hire in both historical and contemporary comparative perspectives. In Nationalist China, the KMT government utilized the method to crack down on the communist movement. Internationally, thugs-for-hire have also been used by governments in South Korea, India and the US. Ong argues that using thugs-for-hire may not be a practice exclusive to authoritarian regimes. Despite its benefits, over-reliance on thugs-for-hire may also create several risks, such as the excessive use of violence and the principal-agent problem when thugs become too powerful to be controlled.

Based on the above analysis, and inspired by James Scott's everyday forms of resistance, Ong comes up with the concept of "everyday state power" to describe the state's ability to "marshal a segment of society to serve as agents to repress or mobilize the rest of society for state pursuits" (p. 19). Ong argues that China's everyday state power has redrawn the boundary between state and society and created "a new creature of the state" (xvii). Empirically, the book provides much insight into how the Chinese party-state has dealt with the resistance to forced demolition and land-grabbing during its rapid urbanization process. Theoretically, the concept of everyday state power calls for rethinking the nature of state power in authoritarian regimes.

One key issue that could be further explored is to what extent the two practices, namely using brokers for mobilization and using thugs-for-hire for violent coercion, could be neatly incorporated under the framework and the book's title "outsourcing repression." Hiring thugs for their violence to deal with the so-called "nail household" is clear-cut outsourcing repression. However, putting mass-mobilization by political, social or economic brokers under the umbrella of outsourcing repression could be debatable. Thugs and *huangniu* are the agents who actively seek economic benefit when the state outsources the task of repression to them. However, political and social brokers are not economically but politically motivated as the tools of relational repression. Therefore, their involvement in repression could hardly be understood as outsourcing.

Nevertheless, the book makes significant contributions to our understanding of power struggles in China's forced demolition and land-grabbing and the nature of everyday state power. It will be of interest to readers from political science, sociology, criminology, urban studies and China studies.