

*Activating China: Local Actors, Foreign Influence and State Response*

Setsuko Matsuzawa

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Clocking in at just over 160 pages, Setsuko Matsuzawa's *Activating China* is a pithy but theoretically-driven and engaging read that makes a timely contribution to knowledge about the dynamics state-society interaction. The book takes a quintessentially anthropological approach to the question of how foreign NGOs exercise influence in China's challenging political-legal landscape, framing this question in the context of the recent Foreign NGO and Charity Laws, both of which make that landscape more difficult still for international actors. Crucially, the book also flips the causal arrow to examine how foreign NGOs are themselves influenced by the local and state actors they encounter and the contexts they inhabit, leading to a range of interesting findings.

In terms of research design, the book is based on a purposive sample of activist campaigns in post-1989 Yunnan: The Ford Foundation's poverty alleviation project, advocacy against the Nu River hydropower dam (which took the form of a forged alliance between local Chinese organizations, NGOs like International Rivers, and the State Environmental Protection Administration), and the establishment of China's first national park in 2007, which was a collaboration of domestic organizations, NGOs such as the Nature Conservancy, and the Yunnan Provincial government. These case studies comprise the empirical heart of the book, (chapters 4-7), but considerable space is also devoted to the development of the NGO sector in China—including state supervision and management of it, and suspicion of foreign influence—as well as the particulars of development work in Yunnan. In order for the effects of formal bilateral ties to be held constant, all international NGOs considered in the book are US-based.

At the crux of the contribution is entrepreneurialism by local, non-state actors who interface with foreign organizations, values, and tactics through a process called “transnational activation”—the “process through which both foreign NGOs and Chinese local actors intend to activate local spaces based on their own conceptualization and realizations of global discourses” (p. 4). In clear contrast to the “boomerang” model of activism, in which domestic actors link up with like-minded global ones to apply the resources of transnational space to struggles at home, Matsuzawa demonstrates the selective interpretation of global activist rhetoric by Chinese local actors. In this sense, local actors are more like “users” than allies of their global interlocutors, a contention that yields several implications of theoretical import.

First, the argument that local actors were “entrepreneurial and savvy” is a bucket of cold water on the more conventional sense that the Chinese NGO sector is underdeveloped, donor-dependent, and plagued by low organizational capacity. In turn, this implies that efforts to improve NGO capabilities—for example by reducing donor dependence and increasing self-sufficiency—may be more successful than we think. Second, the focus on local agency creates analytic space to highlight a values gap (“hyper differences”) between Chinese actors and their global interlocutors. In turn, this implies that there is more than Party control or mistrust of foreign influence at work where international NGOs encounter difficulty in China, since such difficulties may arise at least in part due to genuine cultural or ideological differences between local and global NGOs, irrespective of official views. At the same time, the ability for local actors to assert themselves with greater force than many

studies allow for does not necessarily make them any easier to govern. Matsuzawa argues that, indeed, this tendency may actually accentuate provincialism and regionalism, leading to further mistrust between them and the authorities.

The main points of critique pertain less to the execution of the final product and more to the inherent limitations of this (or any) research design. The author makes no effort to generalize beyond the three Yunnan-based cases, nor any attempt to situate Yunnan in a larger national context. Nevertheless, I often found myself wondering just how typical or deviant from national patterns the three cases might be. Certainly some of the conditions present in Yunnan reflect larger cross-provincial trends. As Matsuzawa explains, the Yunnan case was selected specially because “although Yunnan is resource-rich, it is too poor to address provincial goals on its own, which led an increase in financial assistance from foreign NGOs” (p. 17). Yunnan is hardly the only province fitting this bill. In any event, the details Matsuzawa provides on the Yunnan context are a welcome and necessary addition to our growing sense of how and why foreign NGOs gain political currency in China where and when they do. A logical future step for the field at large might be to integrate these data into a bigger regional or national picture in order to identify key trends or highlight important aspects of regional difference.

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