Review of Zhang, Kleinman, and Tu: Governance in Life in Chinese Moral Experience

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The goal of the volume under review is to articulate the ways in which the governance of life in China has transformed over the last three decades. Under Mao, power was deployed toward the twin goals of maintaining “sovereignty” (i.e., Mao as ruler) and achieving utopian revolution; in the subsequent reform era, power has been increasingly exercised as “governmentality,” whereby the regime seeks to control and enhance the state’s population. The volume’s authors tend to agree that under the new configuration of power, citizens’ achievements of “adequate lives” has come to be valued as it was not under Mao. The narrative that emerges from the authors’ multiple perspectives is not univocally positive and there is certainly no unanimity on where China is—or should be—headed, but in general the authors agree that the new normative and political reality is importantly different and importantly better.

The bulk of Governance in China is composed of twelve detailed studies, most of which are based in extensive fieldwork. Chronologically, they range from the late 1950s through 2009; in terms of subject matter, they cover the Great Leap Forward, the ensuing famine, barefoot doctors, the hukou system, smoking, AIDS, suicide, family planning, healthcare, women’s rights, and political satisfaction. These twelve case studies are bookended by Arthur Kleinman’s Foreword, Everett Zhang’s substantial Introduction, and Tu Weiming’s Epilogue. The three editors each bring distinctive perspectives to the project, but they have enough in common, and there is enough engagement with the volume’s broad theoretical goals in many of the individual essays, that disparate contents and methodologies in the essays do not undermine the overall
coherence of the volume. To the contrary: the individual studies admirably illustrate—even while they complexify—the thesis that the rise of governmentality has led to a new endorsement of citizens’ quest for adequate lives.

“Governmentality,” “sovereignty,” and the general focus on modalities of power derive from the work of Michael Foucault, based on his understanding of European developments, and it is natural to wonder how well they fit Chinese realities. Foucault’s basic model is of a transformation in eighteenth-century Europe from ruling to governing, from sovereignty (the goal of which is simply continued rule by the sovereign) to governmentality (the goal of which is improving the condition of the population). Contributors to the volume suggest three kinds of qualifications to Foucault’s framework. First, some authors note ways in which the details of Foucault’s categories are Eurocentric, but in general they still endorse the concepts’ explanatory value. Second, Everett Zhang argues that a third mode of power, “communist revolution,” must be added in order to make sense of the Chinese case. Under Mao power was frequently exercised in the pursuit of utopian, revolutionary objectives that were quite distinct from the idea of sovereign rulership. All three dimensions can readily be seen at work in the detailed studies that make up the book. A third challenge to Foucault’s categories arises when one compares changing ideas of political legitimacy in China and Europe. Zhang briefly notes that ancient Confucian ideas of minben (people as root) resonate rather strongly with governmentality’s commitment to promoting the well-being of the population. However, he adds that in the absence of liberal checks on sovereignty, “the idea of minben and the rule of benevolence [were little more than] a pretension of the sovereign…. It also tended to render the notion of min (the people) a collection of subjects of the sovereign, instead of a population whose desire the governing power must respect” (21).
The similarities between *minben* ideas and governmentality are not pursued elsewhere in the volume, except in Tu Weiming’s brief account of a new mode of governance that might be emerging in China. Tu looks to a synthesis of the idea of governmentality with traditional practices concerning “public discussion” and the responsibility of the elite. We might worry that in the absence of the kinds of liberal institutions referred to by Zhang—rule of law, robust protection for civil and at least some political rights—there is very little in Tu’s account to give us confidence that it would serve as the “functional equivalent of a liberal democracy” (268) and exercise governmentality. Still, there is the fact that to a notable degree, governmentality has emerged in contemporary China. Some of the reasons for this can be understood within Zhang’s modified Foucauldian framework: the post-Cultural Revolution bankruptcy of the “communist revolution” mode of power made space for alternatives, and the Party came to see governmentality as conducive to its own maintained sovereignty. It may be that the resilience of Confucian attitudes concerning the role of government and the responsibilities of leaders also helps to explain the shift. The lessons of many of the volume’s case studies, though, is that governmentality in contemporary China is fragile and contested. If the quest for adequate lives is to be cemented in Chinese governance and moral experience, further political developments are surely necessary.

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