



Shih-Diing Liu. *The Politics of People: Protest Cultures in China.* SUNY Series in Global Modernity. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019. Illustrations. 248 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-7621-6.

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The Politics of People offers an analysis of protest cultures in China from the perspective of what the author names as “performative politics.” Beginning with an epigraph from Michel Foucault, the book announces an intention to explore how protests not only manifest particular places but also constitute self-knowing subjects with the capacity to act. Leavening its theoretical apparatus with abundant quotes from the usual suspects of post-1989 Euro-American social democratic and socialist theory, including Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler, and Jacques Ranciere, and informed by a broad reading of social scientific and historical studies of Chinese protest, Shih-Diing Liu’s book explores how bodily and expressive practices construct conditions of possibility for political action in China.

Asserting that previous scholarship has hitherto not taken the performative politics of Chinese protest seriously enough, the introduction presents the book’s three disciplinary pillars as postcolonial studies, Occupy (Wall Street) studies, and Chinese protest studies. All three of these streams are hailed and then criticized for, respectively, not addressing a purportedly global condition of intensified neoliberalism; ignoring China or implicitly misapplying prescriptions toward a mainland Chinese territory where street occupations, marches, and other direct action tactics are

relatively infeasible; and failing to take cultures of protest performance seriously enough. Although staking the shortcomings of earlier scholarship is a common habit of scholarly legitimation, some of these critiques feel a bit overstated in this work, especially as the book’s theoretical apparatus and individual studies largely stand on their own merits. Furthermore, some of the assumptions underlying these critiques raise important questions that the book does not address. For example, whether neoliberalism is an appropriate frame for understanding post-2010s China is arguable at best, but the invisibility of the term within Chinese protest spaces belies the claim that the book “investigates how people create political codes, discourses and logics that need to be understood on their own terms” (p. 10). These quibbles notwithstanding, there is much of value in the sophisticated theoretical discussion and in the following chapters.

Chapter 1 pieces together a cultural glossary of protest practices to help contextualize the interpretations of the studies that follow. The expressive value of nudity, suicide, public mourning, participation by youth and the elderly, and so on as components of protest repertoires that are part and parcel of a “Chinese society” are given concise and colorful treatments, however much this approach risks a culturalism that elides spatial and temporal difference and the many radical trans-

formations of political expression in post-1949 China. Although these simplifications are partially rectified by the empirical detail in the case studies that follow, more explicit historical context would have helped clarify the applicability and limits of the effort to code specific practices as culturally Chinese, rather than as contingent products of shifting regime priorities and transnational encounters, especially in Hong Kong and Macau.

This broad culturalist scaffolding is followed by several chapters of case studies and more focused arguments. Chapter 2 examines a migrant worker factory occupation at a clothing factory in Shenzhen in 2015. Chapter 3 looks at two significant and widely publicized workers' strikes in Guangdong Province. Chapter 4 compares the 2011 Hong Kong Occupy movement and its much-better known and longer-lasting successor, the 2014 Umbrella movement. Chapter 5 examines the aesthetics of social activism in both mainland China and Hong Kong. Finally, chapter 6 turns to Macau, where the author teaches communication, to discuss online satirical political representations of government officials as a form of "cyberpolitics." The overwhelming majority of the data is cited from other studies and media reports, although there are several well-chosen photos taken by the author that help to illustrate the arguments. Although the author claims to have conducted observational fieldwork and interviews at several of these sites, voices of individual protestors are not heard here, raising a methodological question of how exactly the author understands protestors in their own terms. Still, these chapters offer interesting passages that demonstrate the range and the utility of the author's framing of "performative politics," drawing further insights from sociological theories of contentious politics.

The book's relevance has no doubt been heightened by the explosive recurrence, multiplication, and repression of protest in Hong Kong shortly after its publication in 2019. However, although the book's insistent focus on neoliberalism

and precarity facilitates its use of widely cited Euro-American theory, the elision of the intensification of state repression and centralization of party-state industry under Xi Jinping (who is mentioned only once in the book) limits its value for making sense of post-2010 China. Another possible avenue of analysis untaken is that, despite the introduction's invocation of postcolonial studies, the book does not consider what postcolonial theory may have to offer toward an analysis of how the indefinite deferral of Hong Kong's and Macau's promised autonomy may perhaps constitute an ongoing (if transferred and transformed) colonialism that itself animates protest.

Despite these unanswered (and increasingly unspeakable, given widespread political crack-downs and sweeping legal interventions, such as Hong Kong's 2020 National Security Law) questions, Liu's emphasis on performative politics marks a welcome addition to a growing literature on the protest cultures of China and its peripheries. The book's theoretical eclecticism complements other recent works on protest in Hong Kong, such as Ho Ming-Sho's *Challenging Beijing's Mandate of Heaven: Taiwan's Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement* (2019), which is rooted in the sociology of contentious politics, and Pang Laikwan's *The Appearing Demos: Hong Kong during and after the Umbrella Movement* (2020), which is animated by an imaginative reading of Hannah Arendt. It should be of interest to area and social movement scholars and of use in related post-graduate classes.

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