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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Governance of Life in Chinese Moral Experience: The Quest for an Adequate Life by Zhang, Kleinman and Weiming

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*Governance of Life in Chinese Moral Experience: The Quest for an Adequate Life*, edited by Everett Zhang, Arthur Kleinman and Tu Weiming. London: Routledge, 2011. xvi + 278 pp. £95.00/US\$155.00 (hardcover), £28.99/US\$54.95 (paperback, eBook).

This is a complex book with complex papers, looking at many interesting domains of life and power in modern China. All the authors analyze political and ethical aspects of social phenomena in modern China in terms of the “Chinese moral experience”. It is impossible to engage with every argument in this book, but most chapters are particularly concerned with the subtle and unsubtle abuses of state power. “Moral experience”, then, is not so much defined here as it is displaced to broad political and historical questions of assessing the moral value of Chinese government. To consider the general tenor of this book, I concentrate on three terms that appear throughout it: governance, governmentality and the state.

The title, in fact, goes a long way toward summarizing the nature of the project as conceived by the editors and many of the authors. It reflects the perception of a changing ethos of governance of life in China, looked at—the Introduction tells us—from the perspective of “governmentality”, a term which is understood as “both a mode of power and a rationale for the use of power under modernity” (p. 1). The editors tend to equate “governmentality” with “governance of life”, but it is sometimes difficult to tell how they conceive of either term. Both terms are in frequent use in the social sciences, and it is often difficult to tell the difference between them, but I think that there are important advantages in maintaining a distinction. First, as Nikolas Rose points out in *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, “the term ‘governance’ is used as a kind of catch-all to refer to any strategy, tactic, process, procedure or program for controlling, regulating, shaping, mastering or exercising authority *over others* in a nation, organization or locality” (p. 15, italics added). In a sense, governance concerns how one agency exerts a governing power over others. This approach would focus on the exercise of power from above, instead of attending to the generative power of the governed—the people—as this might be achieved through participation in governmentality, or through a dispersed disciplinarity. Many authors in this book take issues with modern forms of Chinese governance, bypassing the rather different problems of critique that have been raised by the concept of governmentality. This evaluative stance can be seen from certain key terms employed, such as “coercive commensality” (James Watson), the “body politic of the sovereign” (Everett Zhang) and “status politics” (Liang Zhiping), to mention just a few. In his discussion of the Great Leap Famine, for example, Zhang starts by introducing the concepts of governmentality, sovereignty and Communist revolution as “three modes of power”. However, his main focus turns out to be on a China-specific “combination of the sovereign will and the communist ideology”, which produced “the system of uninformation and the culture of deception” among Communist officials and led directly to large-scale famine in Sichuan in the early

1960s. Morality should certainly count in this depiction of a deliberately deceptive power that causes widespread suffering, but the structures of government in question are based on conventional assumptions about the nature of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1960s. The historical narrative may be right but, if so, the dispersed capillary powers of governmentality either are beside the point or remain undiscoverable using this historical method.

Many authors use the notion of “governance” instead of the more intimate term “governmentality”, providing analyses that reflect as a matter of course their concern with state power; however, even governance is not best understood solely in terms of a centralized, controlling and regulating state. Rather, governance refers to “the pattern or structure that emerges as the resultant of the interactions of a range of political actors—of which the state is only one” (pp. 16–17). A few authors in this collection do, in fact, attend to the “interactions of a range of political actors”. For example, Stephan Feuchtwang takes this approach explicitly, in an essay that also attempts to decipher the Great Leap Forward campaigns, by relying on different ethnographic accounts throughout. Weaving together different voices, from Party documents to village cadres, from city public security officials to female investors, from students to intellectuals, and reminding us of China’s generation gap, Feuchtwang seeks to recover the (in)visible deep impact of the Great Leap Famine. He finds this impact reflected in both an “aggravated indifference to the subject of leadership” and “the widespread phenomenon of irony applied to almost any aspect of public life in China, as well as to the recalling of the famine” (p. 58).

Even so, it is difficult to find a clear demonstration of the usefulness of the concept of governmentality among these papers. The term is important because it has functioned in recent decades to overcome the state–society divide that underpins much social science analysis. This opposition of state and society has never been unproblematic, but it has proven especially unhelpful in modern China. The difficulty is made explicit in Yang Nianqun’s discussion of barefoot doctors during the Cultural Revolution and in Wu Fei’s analysis of the success of Rural Women, an NGO that was effectively intervening to prevent suicide in rural China. As Wu puts it directly, “society and government are not well separated from each other in China” and “the concept of civil society as understood in the West does not quite fit into Chinese society” (p. 194). Tracing Rural Women’s ups and downs, Wu goes further to argue that “the separation of state and society is the very reason for the cessation of the suicide intervention program”. In this regard, it is hard to say whether he is calling for a “deepening of governmentality”, as stated by Zhang in the Introduction, or whether he seeks a positive development in which “suicide prevention and other health and social welfare concerns [would] become more central to the political process” (p. 195).

Susan Greenhalgh’s discussion of biopolitical governance, on the other hand, sees governing power rather negatively, in that “the state’s firm control over population size has made power over life significantly more state-centric than in the

more familiar West European cases”. Moreover, “in China the state remains the number one agent, and the transition from uni-centric to multi-centric power over life remains closely managed by the state” (p. 158). As with most of the other chapters, then, Greenhalgh chooses to put a great deal of weight on the powers of the state. Her explicitness is wise, but it reminds us that, where the focus is so strongly on state governance, all manner of everyday powers, motives and petty dominations—the politics of life in practice—can be hidden from sight.

As Gary Sigley points out in an excellent discussion of the usefulness of the concept of governmentality for the analysis of power in China (“Governing Chinese Bodies: The Significance of Studies in the Concept of Governmentality for the Analysis of Government in China,” *Economy and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 4 [1996], pp. 477–78), governmentality also refers to “techniques of ‘action at a distance’ . . . through the intensification of techniques of self-government aimed at transforming the programmatic desires of government into those of its subjects”. Thus “governmentality” not only concerns discipline and domination but also, and centrally, involves an “art of living”. The title of *Governance of Life in Chinese Moral Experience* invokes a modern Chinese “quest for adequate life”, but what adequate life is in the eyes of contemporary Chinese subjects remains a question. Of course this term calls to mind the Dengist Communist Party’s continuing promise of “moderate well-being for all”. Many of these essays, however, pay little attention to the creative role of the state in instilling middle-class desires in citizens (preferring to focus on coercive and oppressive power), neither do they heed the strivings of ordinary Chinese seeking to improve their lives in a power-infused field. Reviewing these rich and complex essays in search of the play of power through life in China, one wishes for more description of ordinary dilemmas and “quests” and less resort to explanation of the social by way of the immoral power of the strong state.

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*Chinese Characters: Profiles of Fast-Changing Lives in a Fast-Changing Land*, edited by Angilee Shah and Jeffrey Wasserstrom. Foreword by Pahkaj Mishra. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. xiv + 229 pp. US\$60.00/£41.95 (hardcover), AU\$39.95/US\$24.95/£16.95 (paperback),

*Eating Bitterness: Stories from the Frontline of China’s Great Urban Migration*, by Michelle Dammon Loyalka. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. [viii] + 264 pp. US\$29.95/£19.95 (hardcover).

Outwardly, *Chinese Characters* and *Eating Bitterness* seem so similar that one initially wonders why the University of California Press chose to publish them both