

BOOK REVIEW
Christian P. Sorace,
*Shaken Authority:
China's Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake*
(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017)

Chris Courtney, *University of Durham*

In 2008, a devastating earthquake struck Sichuan Province. Killing over eighty-five thousand people and leaving millions homeless, this was the mostly deadly disaster that China had experienced in decades. In his ground-breaking monograph, Christian Sorace offers a forensic analysis of how the Communist Party responded to this crisis. His methodology is based upon a premise that may seem simple, yet to a certain breed of China-watcher would be considered the height of sacrilege. Sorace argues that in order to understand how the Communist Party operates in such situations, it is necessary to listen to what they actually say. Rather than dismissing official discourse as empty propaganda, which is the stock reaction of many political theorists, we should instead integrate the concepts and categories espoused by the Communist Party into our analysis of Chinese politics. For official ideology not only has demonstrable effects in terms of policy decisions, but also helps to shape “everyday habits of speech and dispositions” (p.10) of ordinary people. So powerful is the influence of ideology, in fact, that it even colonises the rhetoric of those cynics and critics who seek to subvert it.

Disasters tend to reveal underlying governance failures. The Sichuan Earthquake was no exception. The most infamous of the many failures that it revealed, was that a large number of children had died because corrupt officials had allowed their schoolhouses to be built with substandard materials. While Sorace does touch upon such issues, like most academic studies of the earthquake, his monograph deals primarily with the recovery process. This is presumably—and justifiably—because this was the phase of the disaster that he witnessed personally.¹ He bases his analysis upon a range of theoretical insights, most prominently Louis Althusser’s work on ideology, and also an impressive knowledge of local politics developed during eighteen months of multi-sighted fieldwork. The result is a monograph which offers a series of illustrative case studies of communities in recovery. These facilitate a more general reflection upon how the Communist Party deploys ideology in its governance. Readers should be aware that this book is not designed to be a conventional history of the Sichuan Earthquake. Instead, it is a study of contemporary Chinese governance and discourse, which is rich in theoretical and empirical details gathered through reading Party documents and interviewing a wide range of informants, including both officials and disaster survivors. It will, therefore, appeal more to scholars and students of contemporary Chinese politics than

to those in the field of disaster studies. It is structured in two distinct halves. In the first three chapters Sorace expands upon his theoretical approach in order to equip his readers with the requisite “conceptual lenses” to understand the operation of ideology. In the latter three, he encourages readers to use these lenses to examine conditions in three post-disaster communities.

In Chapter 1 Sorace examines the “miracle” (*qiji*) of reconstruction that the Communist Party promised the people of Sichuan in the aftermath of the earthquake. He traces the quasi-religious discourse encapsulated within such promises back to the Maoist era, finding its roots in seminal texts written by the Great Helmsman himself. The miracles promised in the wake of the earthquake were strictly secular, based on the capacity of the officials to mobilise resources and unify the people. Yet many earthquake victims saw through these promises. They came to believe that reconstruction efforts were not designed to increase their living standards, but rather to improve the image of the Party. They believed that those promising miracles were guilty of “formalism” (*xingshizhuyi*), a concept popularised in the Maoist era, which signifies hollow rhetoric – speech designed to inflate the status of speaker yet having little actual substance. Charges of formalism fell on deaf ears. Rather than facing up to the emptiness of its own rhetoric, the Party instead launched a “gratitude education” (*gan'en jiaoyu*) campaign, designed to teach the people to appreciate the miracles that it was performing.

In Chapter 2 Sorace turns his attention to the figure of the Communist Party cadre (*ganbu*). Unlike the emotionally detached professional bureaucrats described by Max Weber, the ideal cadre fosters a close relationship with the people. They are supposed to embody “Party spirit” (*dangxing*), a quality that allows them to overcome the frailties of their own “human nature” (*renxing*) to perform acts of extreme self-sacrifice. Sorace traces this ideal back to the revolutionary period, seeing the inspiration for ideal cadres in the works of Liu Shaoqi. There is, in fact, a much older tradition of local officials sacrificing themselves for their communities during periods of disaster. Indeed, one can see in the propagandist image of tireless cadres working in earthquake-stricken communities, echoes of those Qing magistrates who sat out in the sun to move Heaven to end the droughts.² Just as these magistrates were known to perish from heat exhaustion, so too cadres in post-

earthquake Sichuan struggled to cope with the expectations of both Party and people, especially when they were themselves disaster victims. Before long, physical and psychological exhaustion had driven a number of cadres to commit suicide. The fabled Party spirit, it would seem, offered scant protection against personal and collective trauma.

The conventional narrative states that in the 1980s the Communist Party put aside its fixation with ideological goals such as class struggle and instead decided to concentrate on economic development. In Chapter 3, Sorace offers a highly convincing argument against this narrative, questioning the very logic of separating ideology and economics. With this in mind, he sets out to embed the Party's economic response to the earthquake within its broader ideological project. The economics of recovery was predicated upon wealthier provinces providing a "blood transfusion" (*shu xue*) of financial assistance to the disaster zone. This policy went beyond direct relief and involved transfusions of capital to help with longer-term development efforts. Unfortunately, these transfusions often ran into difficulties as the requirements of the donors and recipients conflicted. Such was the case, for example, when the government of Shandong sent flat roofed houses, which suited their own arid landscape, to those living in a particularly rainy area of Sichuan, where they were prone to leak. Such difficulties were exacerbated by time pressures, dictated by largely political considerations, and the tendency for officials to use funds to indulge in vanity projects. Far from being a realm of dispassionate technocrats, it would seem that the economic aspects of reconstruction were highly ideological.

In Chapter 4, the emphasis shifts from the theoretical to the empirical, as Sorace embarks upon the first of three case studies. He begins by looking at attempts to reconstruct Dujiangyan Municipality using policies aimed at rural-urban integration. His deconstruction of this process is one of the finest moments of this monograph, and one that transcends the context of post-disaster Sichuan, to give a valuable insight into the dynamics of urbanisation across the People's Republic over recent decades. For in as much as the earthquake served as a stimulus to this process locally, it was, as Sorace notes, merely a "convenient alibi" (p.103) for the government to enact an all too familiar suite of policies. These resulted in the rural population being deprived of their agricultural land while being offered no credible source of alternative urban employment. With this case study, Sorace highlights the fundamental problem with policies designed to improve "low-quality" rural populations by turning them into urban consumers, namely that "even if people do change their subjective desires, there is no guarantee that the economic conditions will be such to support their new desires to buy, decorate, and individualize" (p.100). As a result, the novice urbanites of Dujiangyan have been left chronically underemployed, while empty residential complexes mushroom up from the fields that once fed them.

In Chapter 5 Sorace turns his attention to another ill-conceived project, in which officials attempted to use tourism to revive the economy of Yingxiu, a township at the very epicentre of the earthquake. It is not hard to determine why a development project built solely upon disaster tourism might not be an

overwhelming success. Visitor numbers were bound to dwindle as the earthquake faded from public memory, and even while the disaster was still at the forefront of national consciousness, relatively few visitors wished to linger amidst the ghosts of seven thousand people when better hotels and restaurants were just a short drive away in Chengdu. Why did officials fail to detect the obvious flaws in this project? The answer, Sorace suggests, is that they were using a wholly different set of criteria to assess success than the locals on the receiving end of development. While the latter wished for a sustainable solution to economic stagnation caused both by short-term disaster destruction and longer-term structural problems, officials were concerned largely with creating a cosmetic illusion of growth. The underlying problem was, once again, formalism. The vanity of Party officials has condemned residents of Yingxiu to live in a ghost town of empty hotels and noodle restaurants.

Chapter 6 uses the experience of Qingchuan County to explore how the Communist Party has attempted to reconcile the contradiction between the desire for economic growth and the reality of environmental limits. This dilemma is particularly pressing in a region that was chronically underdeveloped even before it was devastated by the earthquake. Whereas once the Party would have thought little of sacrificing the local environment in order to pursue growth, it has now committed itself to the creation of an "ecological civilisation" (*shengtai wenming*). In some respects, this policy sounds progressive, and it has inspired the Party to commit itself to what it describes, in its own idiosyncratic officialese, as the "ecologization" (p.135) of industrial production. Elsewhere, the Party has fallen back upon familiar biopolitical refrains, emphasising the need to improve the "quality" (*suzhi*) of the population in order to modify attitudes and behaviour towards the environment. Having analysed the government development schemes in depth, Sorace then describes his experience accompanying an official to a village, where he found himself surrounded by an angry crowd of rabbit farmers, who were still awaiting promised development funds. This scene, in which the fantasies of governance are punctured by the reality of governing, would be vaguely comic, were it not for the desperation motivating the protesting villagers. Rather than addressing their concerns, officials in Qingchuan were content to create an aesthetically pleasing image of development, building a series of new public parks to make the county look green. Locals dismissed this vision of ecological civilisation as a "face project."

Sorace concludes his book by stating that any scholar engaging with the Sinophone world should develop at least a degree of familiarity with the "conceptual and linguistic world of the Chinese Communist Party" (p.149). His monograph has done more than prove this point. With his detailed knowledge of the politics of Sichuan, and his ability to integrate specific policies into broader ideological formations, he has demonstrated the vital insights that can be gained through analysing the Communist Party on its own terms. One of the most fascinating of these insights is the fact that ideology can easily be transformed into a burden for the Party. What Sorace describes as "discursive path dependency" compels officials to promise more than they can deliver, whilst it also arms detractors with the rhetorical weapons they need expose the "gap between Party

promises and reality” (p.155). Far from being something foisted onto the people by the Party, then, ideology serves as a realm in which Party and people negotiate regime legitimacy. This delicate process, as Sorace notes, can lead people to have higher expectations of their local leaders than their counterparts in electoral democracies, such as the United States. Here, then, there is a powerful argument against the assumption that citizens of the People’s Republic who use the discourse of the Party are blindly accepting the legitimacy of its governance.

As with any study of such breadth and complexity, readers are bound to be left with quite a few questions. Firstly, given his tendency to trace contemporary ideology back to the Maoist period, I wondered how Sorace would account for the inconsistencies and revisions to Communist Party discourses and practices in the decades since the revolutionary era? How, for example, does he assess the specific ideological contributions of Hu Jintao, and his attempts to use Neo-Confucian rhetoric, such as “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*), to specifically disavow certain aspects of the Maoist ideological project? The question of continuity leads to a more general enquiry about how to apply an Althusserian reading of ideology to a society that has undergone such seismic ideological change in its recent history. Following Althusser, Sorace argues that “people do not *stand outside* of discourse even when they manipulate it” (p.11). Hence even those who use Party discourse to ridicule or challenge the Party, have not stepped beyond Party ideology, as “regime dissidents are cut from the same ideological cloth as the Party they are challenging” (p.12.) This begs the question of exactly how we delineate the temporal and institutional borders of Communist Party ideology? After all, Communist Party ideology was forged by figures who were, in their own time, regime dissidents. They articulated a new ideology in a self-conscious attempt to revolutionise and step outside the pre-existing “discursive environment” (p.152), which had been, under the

Qing Empire, dominated by a certain reading of Confucianism. Despite their disavowal of the past, their discourse continued to be peppered with pre-existing political concepts. The distinction between “natural disasters” (*tianzai*) and “manmade disasters” (*renhuo*), for example, was the product of a form of cosmological thinking about causality that the Communist Party rejected as superstitious, yet, as Sorace notes, this rhetoric was still used within the Party’s analysis of the failures of the Great Leap Forward. Meanwhile Liu Shaoqi’s famous injunctions on the behaviour of Communists, which Sorace invokes in his analysis of the expectations placed on cadres, included a Neo-Confucian adaptation of the notion of self-cultivation. Given the extent to which Communist discourse remains haunted by pre-existing political concepts, can we say that the Party has managed to escape its own Althusserian trap of ideology? More generally, how do we account for heterogeneity of elements that co-mingle to form the contemporary discursive environment, which include not only remnants of multiple indigenous political traditions, but also ideological influences of global institutions and markets?

One final question, which is perhaps inevitable in the current climate, is the extent to which Sorace believes his analysis of 2008 might help us to understand subsequent crises, particularly the current coronavirus outbreak. Does he think that Xi Jinping has significantly transformed the ideological landscape in the decade since the earthquake, or does his study offer any insights into the official response? Given the epidemic of speculation that has accompanied this disease outbreak - which has included a great deal of hyperbolic prognostication about regime collapse - it would seem that there could hardly be a more apt time to read a rigorously researched and imaginatively composed study of how the Communist Party actually copes with crises.

¹ Other studies of post-earthquake Sichuan include Bin Xu, *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Katiana Le Mentec, K. and Zhang Qiaoyun, (2017). “Heritagization of disaster ruins and ethnic culture in

China: Recovery plans after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake,” *China Information*, 31(3): 349–370.

² See Jeffrey Snyder-Reinke. *Dry Spells: State Rainmaking and Local Governance in Late Imperial China*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009.

Response

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“Just as the country tackled the 2002-2003 SARS outbreak and the 8.0 magnitude Wenchuan earthquake, the institutional strength will continue playing a key role in enabling China to secure a decisive victory against COVID-19. While China protects the health of its 1.4 billion people, it contributes greatly to the global fight as well. Those who have used the virus to make racist remarks or smear China’s system and tremendous efforts are immoral and despicable.”

Xinhua News, March 10, 2020

At the end of his exceptionally generous review, Chris Courtney asks if my study of Sichuan can “offer any insights” into the Chinese Party-state’s handling of the novel coronavirus epidemic? My response to his review will be a provisional answer to that question.

People’s War Against the Virus

In *Shaken Authority*, I argue that the Communist Party’s political legitimacy depends on its ability to manage ideology in times of crisis. For me, ideology is a capacious concept that gives form to discursive environments, appeals to emotion, and normative pressures that ordinary people navigate on a daily basis. In China, the Communist Party is the architect, builder, inspector, and demolisher of the *forms of ideology* in which people make their lives. Although ideological form can be filled in with disparate content, such as Maoist class-struggle or Xi Jinping’s China Dream, there are key features of it which remain remarkably consistent. *The Communist Party must govern on behalf of and represent the interests of the people*, even if those interests, and the definition of the people, are modified over time. *The Communist Party is able to mobilize both state and society to engineer miracles of development that improve people’s lives*, even if the definitions and measures from previous eras are unrecognizable to the present one. In exchange, *Chinese citizen-subjects must acknowledge the legitimacy of the Party in their hearts, words, and actions*. But as Chris Courtney notes, this framework of “ideology can easily be transformed into a burden for the Party.” The underlying structural contradiction of China’s political system is that the Communist Party’s survival depends on “performing a repertoire of legitimating narratives that it can neither abandon nor fulfil.”² It is constantly stabilizing the vibrations that shake its authority.³

Before the novel coronavirus epidemic, the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake caused perhaps the largest tremor shaking the Communist Party’s authority since 1989. The Communist Party responded by controlling the ideological environment and narrative of the earthquake, rescue, and reconstruction. “The official account of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake declared that it was a ‘natural disaster’ (*tianzai*), not a ‘manmade catastrophe’ (*renhuo*). That is to say, the damage

and loss of life that occurred were unavoidable. The Party was not culpable; in fact, it was the agent of salvation.”⁴ The Party was responsible for the *new life* it provided *earthquake survivors* and not for the *deaths of victims*, which were attributed to the earthquake alone.

The Communist Party’s response to the novel coronavirus thus far has followed the pattern of how it handled the Sichuan earthquake. The virus is a natural disaster. The Party has mobilized the entire political system and society in a “people’s war” (*renmin zhanzheng*) against it.⁵ To be clear, I am not evaluating the effectiveness of efforts to contain the spread of the virus, but only their *political representation*. One of the strengths of China’s political system is its *mobilizational capacity* forged during the political campaigns of the Mao period.⁶ In the way the Party was able to accomplish “miracles” (*qiji*) in the aftermath of the earthquake, it has also been able to erect a hospital in under 10 days in a feat of “miracle engineering” (*qiji gongcheng*) to contain patients infected with the virus.⁷

The Communist Party’s ability to engineer “miracles” is due to the “Party spirit” (*dangxing*) of its cadres. As Chris Courtney notes, “[cadres] are supposed to embody “Party spirit” (*dangxing*), a quality that allows them to overcome the frailties of their own “human nature” (*renxing*) to perform acts of extreme self-sacrifice.” *Party spirit* is not some quirky throwback to the Maoist days of Lei Feng but a structural feature of China’s political system, and one that generates pressure on grassroots cadres. In Chapter 2, I write: “In China, political legitimacy is not concentrated in fixed-term electoral cycles but is dispersed throughout the body politic in the relationship between the Party and the people.”⁸ As a result, a cadre’s “work-style” (*gongzuo zuofeng*) including speech, attitude, behaviour, interaction with the masses, and image are subject to Party governance and discipline. Unlike the Weberian bureaucrat whose person is distinct from the office, “cadres are Party legitimacy made flesh. As flesh, they can be called on to suffer.”⁹ This also explains why in times of crisis, the Party will blame “subalterns within the bureaucracy”¹⁰ and make them perform public confessions to mitigate and immunize itself from public outrage.¹¹

After the earthquake, the abstract idea of Communist Party legitimacy was embodied in the figure of the cadre rushing to the scene of the disaster, working endless hours, and sacrificing herself for the well-being of the people. The same language describes Party efforts in response to the novel coronavirus. In the words of the *Guangming Daily*, the role of cadres and Party members “is to make the Party’s flag flutter high at the front lines in the struggle for prevention and control against the epidemic” (*rang dangqi zai yiqing fangkong douzheng diyixian*

gao piaoyang).¹² The same article describes inspired medical professionals who join the Party, and scenes of cadres and medical staff working side by side regardless of the risk of contagion. Again, to prevent any misunderstanding, I am not denying the courage and altruism of countless people in China but articulating how the Party claims monopoly over all heroic actions and selfless feelings. As indicated by Chairman Xi Jinping’s recent visit to Wuhan, the impending “victory” (*shengli*) over the virus will be mobilized in the service of the Communist Party’s legitimacy.

Mourning Dr. Li Wenliang

Sacrifice and death are the sublime material of Communist Party legitimacy and nationalist sentiment. During crises, the Communist Party enacts its sovereignty over the meaning of life and death by managing how the public mourns and expresses its grief. After the Sichuan earthquake, mourning and grief were mobilized to shore up the national attachments and fortify the Party leadership.¹³ Those who die fighting in the “people’s war” against the novel coronavirus are to be revered as “martyrs” (*lieshi*).¹⁴

However, corpses are unstable objects and funerals can become occasions to challenge political legitimacy, as historically has been the case during the mourning rituals for Zhou Enlai in 1976 and Hu Yaobang in 1989. After the Sichuan earthquake, reports emerged of grieving parents demanding answers for why their children were killed by shoddily constructed school, referred to as “tou-fu dreg schoolhouses” (*doufu zha xiaoshe*) especially in the case that adjacent buildings remained standing. The protests cast a shadow not only over the Party’s response to the earthquake but also the upcoming 2008 Beijing Olympics. One of the most iconic scenes from that time is of Mianzhu Party Secretary kneeling down before and pleading with angry parents who were marching to the provincial capital of Chengdu. Internationally acclaimed artist Ai Weiwei’s most emotionally powerful and politically significant artworks, in my opinion, were those that transformed private grief into a public act of mourning, such as the mural of nine thousand children’s backpacks composing the sentence “she lived happily in this world for seven years” (*ta zai zhe ge shijie kaixin di shenghuo guo qinian*) uttered by a grieving Sichuan mother.¹⁵

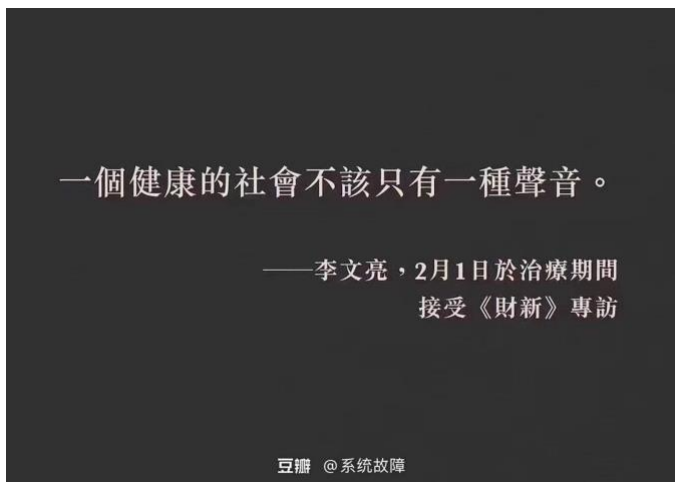
For these reasons, Dr. Li Wenliang’s death from the novel coronavirus could be seen as having posed a temporary *crisis of legitimation* for the Party (to be clear: crisis of legitimation does not mean prognosticating the collapse of the Communist Party; as I write in the book’s conclusion, despite the banal predictions that each crisis will be the ‘one’ to bring the system down, the Communist Party has been able to absorb the exogenous, and internal, shocks that shake its authority. I would even say that my book is precisely about explaining its absorptive capacity). On December 30, 2019 Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist, noticed symptoms in one of his patients that resembled those triggered by the SARS virus. In response, he warned a WeChat group composed of friends and colleagues to take extra caution when treating patients. For this message, on January 3, 2020, he was detained and censured for “spreading rumours to mislead the masses” (*zaoyao huozhong*) by the local police department. The notice of reprimand (*xunjie shu*) he was forced to sign and

thumb print warned him to “calm down” and cooperate with the police, punctuated with the chilling questions: “Are you able to do this?” (*ni neng zuo dao ma*) and “do you understand?” (*ni ting mingbai ma?*). A few weeks later, Dr. Li was diagnosed with the novel coronavirus and died on February 7, 2020 leaving behind a pregnant widow and child.

His death sparked a public outcry. With few exceptions, my WeChat newsfeed that day went black in mourning. Then the deluge of memes ranging from public demands for the freedom of speech (*#women yaoqiu yanlun ziyou*); a depiction of Dr. Li wearing a face-mask latticed with barbed-wire; ordinary citizens wearing face masks emblazoned with the characters “I can’t” and “I don’t understand” (*bu neng, bu mingbai*) reprising the official reprimand into a *refusal of silence* (see image below); word plays contrasting Li Wenliang’s name containing the character for “light” (*liang*) with “darkness”; and millions of digital candles flickering in protest grief. Similar to how the corpses of Sichuan school children embodied structural problems of corruption and indifference to human life, Dr. Li’s death catalysed simmering anger over the delayed response and bureaucratic mismanagement in the initial month of the viral epidemic. In one since deleted WeChat post, the author states in words eerily similar to popular outrage over the Sichuan earthquake, “History continuously repeats itself. Ignoring, prohibiting, and cracking down on rational voices will ultimately lead to grave consequences. A voice of warning was treated as a rumour. *This is not a natural disaster, it is a manmade catastrophe.*”



Mourning over the death of Dr. Li Wenliang contests the Communist Party’s hegemony over public discourse.¹⁶ In the official account, Dr. Li was a martyr who gave his life on the front-lines of the “people’s war” against the virus. But for many others, Dr. Li was a whistle-blower who sacrificed his life to expose the truth. This tension becomes clear in the contrast between the following slogan from the quarantine zone stating: “the coronavirus is nothing to be afraid of if everyone listens to the Party” (*guan Zhuang bingdu bu keda, zhiyao dajia ting dahua*) (see image below) with the widely circulated sentence from Dr. Li Wenliang’s interview with *Caixin* magazine days before he died: “A healthy society should not only have one voice” (see image below).



Provoked by my sense of *déjà vu* while writing this piece, I keep wondering: will any change result from these ripples across social media? On the one hand, a key difference may be that the virus is a national, as well as global epidemic, whereas the Sichuan earthquake was a localized disaster. Then, the Party was able to cauterize the damage. Most Chinese people *outside* Sichuan believe that the Party did an excellent job. This time, however, it is too early to tell whether or not the Party can successfully tourniquet the narrative haemorrhaging. More people are directly and indirectly affected by the virus, which is ongoing and whose final consequences remain to be seen. Even acquaintances who are usually indifferent to politics have mourned openly and angrily for Dr. Li. On the other hand, the Communist Party's legitimating claim that it is all that stands between life and death, prosperity and crisis, stability and chaos, perhaps rings true now more than ever. As the contagion of panic spreads throughout the world, without sparing developed liberal democracies, authoritarianism might not only be reassuring but for some, desirable. I think especially English-speaking scholars underestimate the ideological appeal and emotional resonance of the Communist Party's promise/warning that there is no alternative. *One can complain about the Party endlessly, but also depend on its being there.*

Gratitude Education

The Communist Party cannot tolerate dissatisfaction, like an abusive lover, *it simply cares too much*. For everything it does

for the Chinese people, the Communist Party demands gratitude in return. Capturing this structure of sovereignty, Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov conceptualizes “*modernity as circulating in gift form*” which “imposes reciprocity on the receivers before the gift is actually made.”¹⁷ The script is written in advance of the results. When reciprocity is broken, it requires repair and maintenance at the *formal, symbolic level*.

In response to the dissatisfaction with the reconstruction process among earthquake survivors, the Communist Party launched a “gratitude education” (*gan'en jiaoyu*) campaign. Several years later, the 10th anniversary of the earthquake was officially celebrated as a “day of gratitude” (*gan'en ri*).¹⁸ This time, the Party's instrumentalization of mourning elicited an outcry from the public. In a censored post on Weibo titled: “Day of disaster becomes a day of gratitude—who is dishonouring the survivors who walked out of the ruins?” the author prophetically writes: “Being grateful for disaster is scarier than the disaster itself, in fact, it is even more intolerable . . .” According to this logic, people “should be grateful to war for devastation and trampling ... [and to] flooding, earthquakes, tsunamis, and viral devastation!”

It is not at all surprising that Wuhan's new Communist Party Secretary, Wang Zhonglin is reported to have encouraged people to “carry out gratitude education among the citizens of the whole city, so that they thank the General Secretary [Xi Jinping], thank the Chinese Communist Party, heed the Party, walk with the Party, and create strong positive energy.”¹⁹ The “online fury” was almost immediate.²⁰ Journalist Chu Zhaoxin's posted: “Have a Bit of Conscience: It's Not Time to Ask the People of Wuhan for their Thanks.” Reversing the structure of sovereignty, the writer Fang Fang scolded: “Government, please take away your arrogance, and humbly be grateful to your masters – the millions of people of Wuhan.” Not mincing words, some netizens have substituted the first character in “gratitude” (*gan'en*)—which literally means to feel (*gan*) kindness and grace (*en*)—with the character for *fuck* (also pronounced *gan*).²¹

Overwhelmed by negative emotions, the Party has ordered a healthy elixir of “positive energy.” To convey more uplifting stories, local Hubei officials convened “positive energy training” (*zhengnengliang peixun*) for members of Hubei Province's Writer's Association (*Hubei sheng zuojia xiehui huiyuan*), digital media companies, and others hailed into serving in Hubei's “literary army troops” (*wenxue e'jun duiwu*).²² Without irony, the report suggests that writing positive stories is an effective method of “disease prevention” (*fangyi*). All that is needed to contain the political impact of the coronavirus is the skill of “telling China's stories well,”²³ which entails redacting the voices of ordinary citizens.²⁴

It's All Fake

But isn't it a little too early for “gratitude education” while people are still dying and under quarantine? At least during the Sichuan earthquake, the first campaign took place a few years into the *reconstruction phrase* rather than during the *rescue effort*. To put it bluntly: what was Wang Zhonglin thinking? One plausible answer is that “Wang Zhonglin's words were a

direct response to yesterday’s heckling of the inspection group”²⁵ led by vice-premier Sun Chunlan. During Sun’s inspection of Wuhan’s Qingshan district local neighbourhood committees tasked with looking after the needs of residents under quarantine since February 12, local residents began shouting from their apartment windows: “Fake! Fake! Everything is Fake” as well as “we protest . . . some could be heard yelling, ‘formalism.’”²⁶ The circuits of reciprocity appear to already be severed.

In Chapter 5 of *Shaken Authority*, I examine the reconstruction of Yingxiu Township, the epicentre of the earthquake and the concept of “political tourism” defined as compulsory “leadership inspection visits” (*lingdao shicha*). It is important to note, as I argue in Chapter 1, the original purpose of leadership visits is to “investigate,” gather information on the local situation and adjust policy direction. Mao’s famous dictum, “Unless you have investigated the situation, you have no right to talk about it” (*meiyou diaocha, meiyou fayan*) is a prohibition against governing from above. The problem is that China’s political system rewards “formalism” (*xingshizhuyi*) over “facts” (*shishi*). Inspection teams mostly encounter curated tableaux of their own expectations.

One of the questions my book addresses is: how was it that the Party-state devoted exorbitant amounts of money, time and resources to the post-earthquake reconstruction only for the people to be dissatisfied with the results? The Communist Party’s answer is that the *people are ungrateful* and need to be taught how to recognize what is in their best interests. My work provides a different answer that *the Communist Party’s main audience and constituency is itself*. The performance of gratitude is ultimately for the sovereign in Beijing. As Chris Courtney eloquently summarizes, “The underlying problem was, once again, formalism.” If it is between serving ordinary people (*laobaixing*) or propping up the representation of the people (*renmin*), individual lives will be sacrificed without the glory of martyrdom.²⁷

Conclusion

I am not suggesting that the Communist Party is entirely unresponsive to people’s needs. At least they aspired to ensure that over 5 million people rendered homeless by the earthquake moved into new homes in under two years, unlike the United States’ government’s dismal response to Hurricane Katrina, which was to abandon people to the vagaries of the market.²⁸ What I am arguing is that a crucial element in the Communist Party’s strategies for survival is maintaining its control over ideology.

Party ideology can absorb a “heterogeneity of elements . . . which include not only remnants of multiple indigenous

political traditions, but also ideological influences of global institutions and markets.” In response to Chris Courtney’s question of how do I “account for the inconsistencies and revisions to Communist Party discourses and practices in the decades since the revolutionary era?” I do not think that *ideology is a problem of consistency*. Even during the Mao period, Communist Party ideology was expansive, fluid, and adaptive to changing circumstances and crises, while retaining a set of core features. Deng era Party luminaries, such as Hu Qiaomu, refashioned ideology to elastically accommodate China’s state socialist apparatus’s embrace of market reform. The Communist Party’s ideological machinery runs on its dialectical ability to devour, digest, and expel its opposition.²⁹ As Boris Groys writes of life in the Soviet Union, “Those who studied dialectical materialism in the Soviet Union were simply astonished by Western critiques of this theory” that pointed to logical contradiction or inconsistency as flaws because “for dialectical materialism, to be living means simply to be contradictory and paradoxical.”³⁰ The Chinese Communist Party has mastered the art of paradoxical living.

The problem appears only if one is searching for consistency. To look at the question from another angle, the ideology of American life is not coherent, homogenous, and non-contradictory. But we can still feel and know it through emotional appeals, normative claims, and sentimental fantasies. As Lisa Wedeen puts it, we are “not so much colonized by ideology as drawn affectively and cognitively into [it].”³¹

This brings me to Chris Courtney’s other daunting question: how does one get out of Althusserian ideological quicksand? In the 1960s, Althusser argued that the only way out of ideology was following Marx’s footsteps through scientific rupture.³² For most contemporary readers of Althusser, myself included, the overture to scientific rupture is not convincing. The way out depends on re-conceptualizing ideology. Even if we cannot escape ideology, *ideology’s incompleteness* provides opportunities and space to critique and transform it. In our present time of crisis, we might have no other choice than to invent new ideological forms of living.

I would like to thank Chris Courtney for generously engaging my book, and for his observation that it is not limited to the purview of “conventional history of the Sichuan earthquake” but offers “a more general reflection upon how the Communist Party deploys ideology in its governance.” I would also like to thank Yidi Wu and *The PRC History Review* for the platform and opportunity to reflect on the current moment.

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² Christian Sorace, *Shaken Authority: China’s Communist Party and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017): 152.

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