BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth Brunner. *Environmental Activism, Social Media, and Protest in China: Becoming Activists Over Wild Public Networks*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019, 200 pp., ISBN No. 978-1-7936-0612-9 (hardcover).

Little scholarly attention has been paid to the intersection of social media and environmental activism in China. Elizabeth Brunner contributes to this under-explored area in *Environmental Activism, Social Media, and Protest in China: Becoming Activists Over Wild Public Networks*. Building upon her field research and prior scholarship in communication, sociology, and China studies, Brunner examines environmental movements in China, including three case studies of anti-paraxylene (PX) protests in Xiamen, Dalian, and Maoming, tracing how environmental protests have changed in China as social media surge and impact wild public networks. Chapters 1, 2 cover the environmental history in China, including communication’s role in environmental activism, and the following three chapters analyze anti-PX protests in Xiamen, Dalian, and Maoming.

The book opens by discussing the impacts of China’s history on the environment, from dynastic times through the Mao years to Deng Xiaoping’s period of reformation. The ebb and flow of environmentalists (or quasi-environmentalists in earlier days) and their relationship with the government, policy, and media (when applicable) are also traced as crucial background information. Chapter 2 points out the key role of communication in social movements, which may erupt, maintain, and extend collective networks. Brunner proposes a framework of *wild public networks*, incorporating the dispersed efforts in protests that are not organized formally into the traditional networks within formal organizations and hierarchies. With this networked perspective, factors and actors that seem insignificant can become an assemblage of forces, labeled a *force majeure*. *Force majeure*, therefore, is not a legal term in this book, but a theoretical lens to conceptualize protest as the culmination of “intertwined rational and affective forces, reason and violence, information and rumors” (p. 156).

In chapters 3, 4, and 5, the anti-PX protests in Xiamen, Dalian, and Maoming are investigated using the theory of *wild public networks* and the concept of *force majeure*. Although these cities are all located in the east of China, and the protests target the same environmental problem, distinctions among the three cases gradually emerge in Brunner’s analysis. The most notable distinction is that social media functioned differently for environmental activism in each city. Since the protests in Xiamen, Dalian, and Maoming occurred in 2007, 2011, and 2014 respectively, the extent to which people rely on the Internet and social media for protest-related information differed greatly. While most Chinese Internet users joined the Xiamen protest through bulletin board systems or blogs on computers, the spread of smartphones and social media made it possible for more people to support or participate in the Dalian and Maoming protests. However, Brunner not
only focuses on communication technology itself, but emphasizes the traces of interconnected relationships shown in social media use, or “the invisible in-between spaces full of force” (p. 46).

Through the lens of wild public networks and force majeure, Brunner identifies the prerequisites of three cases, among which social media is a pivotal one. Social media became increasingly more important over time. As to the cases in Xiamen (2007) and Dalian (2011), well-known people and their actions played a significant role (e.g., Dr. Zhao Yufen, a professor at Xiamen University and Bo Xilai, a preceding mayor of Dalian). Yet there were no such people during the 2014 Maoming protest. Instead, the social media-saturated environment stood out as a key prerequisite. In Maoming, citizens united to fight against PX when they received and sent fragmented pieces of information over social media platforms, and they exchanged their mistrust and anger toward the government on social media. Thousands of social media posts around Maoming citizens’ appeal and emotions coalesced into a force majeure. Additionally, Brunner argues that the impacts of previous protests were also integral to later activism as part of force majeure. In a digital age, social media helps sustain and disseminate these impacts. Although several protests prior to 2014 were not instrumentally successful, they shed light on the Maoming protest in terms of civic engagement and environmental awareness.

Overall, Brunner tells great stories of the protests in Xiamen, Dalian, and Maoming with sufficient evidence she collected in China and even with Chinese ancient philosophy (e.g., Maodun, or contradiction). She successfully connects the three cases with her framework of wild public networks and force majeure, as well as presenting the distinctions among them. If there is a shortcoming of this book, it is that Brunner does not explicitly state why she chooses these three cities, whereas environmental protests happen in many cities in China.

One significant contribution is the creative networked approach to explore the role of social media in environmental activism outside the Western world. Researchers who study social media from the network perspective are the perfect audiences of this book. All three cases also explore how traditional news outlets and media censorship influence social movements, of benefit to scholars interested in China’s evolving media landscape. Moreover, Brunner demonstrates how to develop a successful framework for qualitative inquiry. University instructors may find this useful in qualitative research methods classes. Graduate-level students can learn about conducting qualitative studies, including how to conduct field research abroad and how to develop a theoretical framework for their research.

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