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Spires, A. J., *Global Civil Society and China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, pp. 86

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How has Global Civil Society (GCS) influenced China, and vice versa? Political sociologist Anthony Spires, Associate Professor at the University of Melbourne, combines an overview of current academic debates on these questions with original analysis in an accessible short book format emblematic of the *Cambridge Elements* series. On merely 67 pages of text, Spires explores the inevitable tensions between international NGOs promoting universal values and human rights norms and an autocratic party-state balancing regime security with socio-economic development and international legitimacy objectives. Spires draws on his remarkable record of publications examining the influence of foreign funders on Chinese NGO development during the 2000s and 2010s, as well as long-standing relationships with international and local NGOs. The empirical material presented here primarily stems from the author's field research into "survival strategies of INGOs in China" between 2014 and early 2017 (p. 2). This period was characterised by the large shadow cast over the sector by the draft Overseas NGO Law, which eventually came into effect in January 2017 and has further complicated the situation for INGOs operating in China ever since.

Apart from a succinct conceptual introduction presenting "Global Civil Society as a Normative and Political Project" and an outlook that raises many relevant questions for further research, the book is structured in (only) two substantive chapters dealing with the two sides of the GCS-China relationship. Chapter 2 ("The Impacts of GCS on

China") excels in illustrating the CCP's calculated engagement with GCS since the 1990s, revealing the state's dual strategies of leveraging GCS for socio-economic benefits while restricting its democratising potential. It actually dedicates very limited space to explaining INGOs' actual impacts in China. Instead, Spires focuses on the CCP's increasingly paranoid concerns about "foreign influence" (p. 17) and the discursive convolution of INGOs with "anti-China" foreign policy interests. It also delves into the forced adjustment strategies of INGOs such as Ford Foundation, which have bowed to political pressure by omitting references to grassroots NGOs and working more directly with state actors (p. 33). Only one short section is concerned with how "cosmopolitan values" have impacted Chinese discourse. It provides a few examples (mostly dating back to the 2000s and early 2010s) of how Chinese activists have adopted GCS language on law-based justice (p. 36) or gender mainstreaming (p. 38) and promoted commitments to "participation, to dignity, to equality, and to freedom of thought and expression" (p. 37). Explicitly avoiding the question of "whether the actual operations or achievements of the specific organisations discussed here match their rhetorical commitments" (p. 38) leaves one major gap in the present analysis.

Chapter 3 turns the table and deals with China's own influence on GCS in the course of the "state-led internationalisation of (GO)NGOs". The extensive overview of policy statements endorsing overseas activities by non-profit organisations, which presents the "going out" of Chinese NGOs as "largely a political project" (p. 40) from the top, doesn't do full justice to the universalist-minded Chinese civil society leaders who have long advocated for a more favourable political and regulatory environment for overseas humanitarian activities or environmental conservation in the context of Chinese overseas investments. This

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nuanced bottom-up perspective is better reflected in several concrete examples of Chinese NGOs such as Peaceland Foundation that seek to balance domestic adherence to “patriotic” (p. 50) party-state discourse with progressive concerns for “vulnerable groups” and “local sustainable development” (p. 51). The chapter also touches upon the increasingly important political battleground of Chinese diaspora activism across the globe: Spires recounts anti-CCP protests in the A-4 Movement or minority rights movements, as well as the perspective of social rights activists who used to work from within China and seek to pursue their causes through transnational activism after emigrating. He also crucially addresses the growing “threat and reality of transnational repression” (p. 60) exacerbated by the Hong Kong National Security Law and harassment of Uyghur activists by CCP agents even in democratic countries.

Thus, the book excels at integrating many aspects of a multifaceted topic into a concise discussion. With the sobering conclusion that “the window may be almost fully shut for GCS activities inside China” due to Xi Jinping’s domestic social control agenda (p. 67), the book appears to close a chapter of research on international civil society while opening another one on the future engagement of GCS actors with authoritarian regimes that inevitably shape the future of sustainable development or humanitarian assistance. Regarding China’s future impact on GCS, it mostly presents open questions and calls upon third

sector researchers to “explore the ideas, values, and practices that [Chinese NGOs] take with them when they leave China” (p. 64). Most of all, however, readers unfamiliar with the Chinese context will benefit from a skilful introduction to many current issues that will define the future of GCS engagement with Chinese actors across the globe.

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