THE MEANING OF CITIZENSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SOCIETY, SICONG CHEN (2018)

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Citizenship and citizenship education in China seem to have emerged as a focus of a growing body of research by Chinese scholars in recent years (e.g. Li 2015; Xu 2016; Ye 2016). Sicong Chen's recent work *The Meaning of Citizenship in Contemporary Chinese Society* adds to this vibrant field. Subtitled 'an empirical study through Western lens', the book – in a nutshell – develops a conceptual framework of citizenship based on western scholarship on the topic, and applies this framework to examine empirically how the Chinese equivalent term for citizenship – *gongmin* – is understood in contemporary Chinese society.

The book's introduction chapter sets out the overall justification of the study by identifying two research gaps that the book claims to fill:

> the lack of research on a systematic comparison of the meaning of the Chinese term *gongmin* with Western citizenship conception; and the lack of empirical research on the meaning of *gongmin* in contemporary society in comparison with that in historical and official perspectives.
>
> (12)

The author demonstrates awareness of the potential pitfalls of framing the study through a 'east–west' dichotomy, and is at pains to stress that the use of such dichotomous rhetoric is not intended to perpetuate essentialism or value judgement of superiority/inferiority of any kind. Instead, it is argued that a conceptual framework derived from western (which perhaps could have been more accurately described as anglophone) scholarship can serve as a useful 'lens' or 'mirror' for examining citizenship in the Chinese context, in turn establishing a 'common ground' for further dialogue.

Chapter 2 of the book is essentially devoted to constructing this 'lens'/'mirror', where the author offers an ambitious discussion of citizenship that covers the term's pre-modern roots in Greco-Roman traditions, its modern meanings under the framework of the nation state and its further mutations under conditions of postmodernity and globalization. There seems to be some tension between the ambitiousness of this discussion and the amount of space allowed for it, resulting in a somewhat abridged account. Nevertheless, for those unfamiliar with the scholarship on citizenship, this discussion provides a relatively easy entry point into what is a complex genealogy of ideas. From this discussion, a three-dimensional framework of citizenship – encompassing identity, rights and responsibility, and participation – is also outlined, which subsequently serves as the organizing structure for much of the remaining parts of the book.

Shifting from west to east, Chapter 3 delves into citizenship in the Chinese context. After a brief but captivating discussion of the etymology of the Chinese term *gongmin*, the chapter then uses the three-dimensional framework outlined previously to examine the CCP party-state's stance on citizenship,

based on a mixture of official document analysis and literature review. What follows then is an overview of citizenship-related education in China, which argues essentially that official citizenship education has followed closely the CCP party-state's perspectives on citizenship. Thus, the official versions of citizenship and citizenship education in China are laid out, setting the stage for an empirical investigation of how citizenship is understood 'on the ground'. The chapter ends by explaining and justifying the sources of the empirical data of the study: contents of a major Guangdong-based 'non-official' newspaper *Southern Metropolis Daily* (*Nanfang Duishibao*), and samples of university students and migrant workers in Guangdong province.

Chapter 4 and onwards are devoted to the empirical findings, discussions and recommendations. Following the three-dimensional western citizenship lens, Chapters 4, 5 and 6, respectively, deal with author's findings on citizenship as identity, as rights and responsibilities, and as participation. While these chapters are supposedly the substantive part of the book, they are perhaps also the part most likely to be skipped by most readers, since a quick one-page summary of the key findings can easily be found on page 14 in the Introduction (also on p. 133). As one flips through an impressive array of tables and charts containing statistical analyses of significance, among other things, about the differences between survey answers obtained from university students and migrant workers, one wonders if this really is the most critical and intellectually stimulating way to approach the thick and convoluted narratives of citizenship. While the statistical findings are qualitatively supplemented by some interview data, these insertions remain relatively scarce, overall lacking the narrative clout to sufficiently penetrate in a nuanced way the *experiences* of citizenship.

In the context of today's China, with mounting social problems (social inequality, housing, environment, etc.), citizenship is in fact a highly sensitive and contentious topic, connoting issues of rights, equity, inclusivity and dignity. It is no wonder that some recent studies on citizenship and citizenship education in China have chosen to use marginalized groups such as migrant students/youth as empirical vantage points (Li 2015; Ye 2016). Chen's study also includes a sample of migrant workers; however, because of the study's focus on the *semantics* of citizenship – based on a list of abstract ideas (such as identity, rights, responsibility and participation) – as opposed to the real-life *practice* and/or *experience* of citizenship, the study's findings somehow become anaemic, even sanitized. This is not to invalidate the author's findings; indeed, the findings about the different ways in which migrant workers and university students understand citizenship on a relatively large quantitative scale seem quite reasonable, as are the various recommendations the author makes for citizenship education in China (141–45).

However, *talking* about citizenship is one thing, *practicing* citizenship or *living as a citizen* is quite another. Arguably, instead of actually investigating in detail what citizenship is for its practitioners, the meaning of citizenship is deferred in Chen's study by referring to another set of equally empty sounding terms such as 'identity', 'rights', 'responsibility', 'morality' and 'participation'. The study's findings, accordingly, merely reveal different social groups' differing preferences for these terms. It seems the author has anticipated this potential criticism – he thus cites Norman Fairclough about language/discourse being also a form of social practice in the concluding chapter (147). However, while Fairclough's argument is well accepted, the book per se largely fails to show how the semantics/discursivity of citizenship relate to the social

practice and experience of citizenship in the empirical context of China. As a result, readers seeking a *sociological* answer to the question 'What citizenship means in contemporary Chinese society?' will likely be disappointed by this book and might have to look elsewhere.

All in all, Chen's book offers a fairly well-researched conceptual discussion of citizenship as found in western/English-language literature, providing a good entry-point reference for scholars interested in this topic. It also offers valuable pointers on how *gongmin* is situated in the sociocultural–political contexts specific to China. However, insofar as empirical insights are concerned, the book's contributions and relevance are ultimately limited by, among other things, the author's choice to deal with citizenship only at the discursive/sematic level of 'meaning' instead of engaging with more pertinent aspects of citizenship in the Chinese context. Therefore, sociologically, the significance of the book's empirical findings somehow pale in light of the importance of the book's subject matter and its purported scope.

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