

## CSCC Podcast Ep. 16: “Local Governance and Accountability in China – Dan Mattingly”

### Introduction:

Welcome to the podcast of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Contemporary China. I’m your host, Neysun Mahboubi, and in today’s episode, you’ll hear my conversation with Dan Mattingly, assistant professor of political science at Yale University, and the author of a provocative new book, soon to be published by Cambridge University Press, on “The Art of Political Control in China.”

In his book, Professor Mattingly grapples with the question of how autocratic regimes secure political obedience, and implement unpopular policies—like the Chinese family planning policies and land takings that we discussed in earlier episodes of this podcast—without always resorting to outright coercive tactics, that would be too costly to maintain all the time. His argument, based on extensive fieldwork he conducted between 2012 and 2018, is that the Chinese state, exercising power through local governments, relies on local civil society groups—like temple organizations or lineage associations—to quietly infiltrate, observe, and thereby control Chinese rural society. It’s a subtle and carefully developed theory, about a “soft” form of repression, which challenges, or at least supplements, more conventional understandings of how civil society can work to hold governments to account—as claimed, for example and most famously, in the work of Robert Putnam.

Dan visited the University of Pennsylvania last April, to present his forthcoming book, and that gave us the chance to record this podcast for you as well. In our discussion, Dan and I spoke about his book’s argument, and how it relates to other research—including Robert Putnam’s and also that of MIT Professor Lily Tsai, who has written about local civic associations in China as “informal institutions of accountability”. Setting up the book’s argument prompted us to speak more broadly as well—about local governance in China, and various forms of real or potential accountability—in a way that I think helpfully builds on many of the themes addressed in this podcast recently. So, among other things, you’ll hear us talk about the structure and responsibilities of local governments ... the nature of village leadership ... the role of the Party at this level ... formal and informal channels for citizens to express their grievances ... and, how local civil society groups fit into this overall picture.

What you won’t hear Dan and I discuss in this episode are the *harsh* forms of repression that the Chinese state, like other autocratic regimes, certainly does resort to, as it deems necessary for its objectives. As the episode goes live, in March 2019, there seem to be a growing number of prominent examples of such outright coercion by the Chinese government that are, of course, very troubling—and perhaps none more so, at this moment, than the detention camps for Uighur populations in Xinjiang province that are now rightly attracting worldwide condemnation. Dan and I don’t discuss harsh repression in China, or the case of Xinjiang for that matter, not because of a lack of recognition or concern, which we both share, but just because that is not the focus of his book—which, again, seeks to understand the less obvious, more “soft” repression which the Chinese state relies upon as well, and perhaps to greater effect.

Now, at a time when organized social protest seems to be on the rise throughout China, the government may be well advised to reconsider all of its strategies of repression, whether hard or soft. But, in the meantime, to better understand the “softer” half of that equation—including its institutional roots, the reasons for its effectiveness, as well as its potential costs—let’s turn now to my conversation with Professor Dan Mattingly.