

The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China¹

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This article develops an interactive and relational conception of infrastructural state power for studying the capacity of authoritarian regimes to absorb popular protests. Based on an ethnography of the grassroots state in moments of unrest in China, the authors identify three microfoundations of Chinese authoritarianism: protest bargaining, legal-bureaucratic absorption, and patron-clientelism. Adopting, respectively, the logics of market exchange, rule-bound games, and interpersonal bonds, these mechanisms have the effect of depoliticizing social unrest and constitute a lived experience of authoritarian domination as a non-zero-sum situation, totalizing and transparent yet permissive of room for maneuvering and bargaining. This heuristic framework calls for bringing the subjective experience of subordination back into the theorizing of state domination.