

The Authoritarian Society

Abstract

Drawing on data collected in China through interviews and participant-observation from 2005 through 2017, and borrowing insights from Tocqueville and Gramsci, Dr Spires explores how civil society under authoritarianism reproduces and reinforces the hierarchical, autocratic organizational culture of the state itself. In China, this culture permeates businesses and government agencies, where 'those above' issue orders 'down' to 'those below'. Yet government-organized NGOs, professionalized (if still 'grassroots') NGOs, and even university student clubs are also steeped in this culture of authoritarianism, often with domineering leaders who stifle dissent amongst staff and volunteers. Developing a distinctly sociological concept of 'hegemonic authoritarianism', Dr Spires suggests that these dynamics comprise the mainstream organizational culture in China, regardless of setting or sphere of activity, and should be understood as the constitutive backbone of an 'authoritarian society'. In this lecture, Dr Spires concludes with an analysis of the nascent counter-hegemonic critiques and yearnings for a more democratic, participatory space expressed by some civil society participants.