

Book Review

Lejano, R. P., Guo, J., Lian, H., & Yin, B. A. 2019. *Phenomenology of Institutions: Relationality and Governance in China and Beyond*. Routledge Press. 162 pages.

**A Phenomenology of Institutions:
Relationality and Governance in China and Beyond**

The book, *A Phenomenology of Institutions: Relationality and Governance in China and Beyond*, is an offshoot of *Frameworks for Policy Analysis*, a book first published by the Tsinghua University Press in 2006. *A Phenomenology of Institutions* initially describes some concepts in institution studies. But, reading on, one realizes that the book does not follow the style and thinking of Douglass North and Elinor Ostrom, who examined institutions as a set of rules, nor is it simply about lines of authority typical of the Weberian tradition.

At a deeper level, the work of Lejano et al. highlights the relational dimension of institutions. This relationality refers to patterns of action that evolve as responses to the daily interchange among policy actors. Further rationalizing the relationality concept, the book distills and muses on grand decisions or actions that take new routes due to or under emerging unique institutional conditions by actors. When policymakers encounter challenging points on the ground, one finds and examines the rationality of decisions and policies relative to the realities. In other words, institutions operate as a response to the prevailing need and conditions on the ground. The institutional life discussed in the book breathes and kicks.

To elucidate the phenomenological character of institutions, the book picks up some cases in China that illustrate the realities and challenge the concept and workings of institutions. Case method is one approach adopted by the authors as a way to argue its relationality concept. Cases are the best evidence to argue for the relational institutions' performance and action. One case elucidates how institutions operate and cope with realities in an area under Chinese rural land reform in Chengdu. Another case discusses work among environment-oriented non-government organizations in Yunnan and Jiangsu. Both cases point out what environmental changes are emerging and how institutions take shape to respond and adapt to these changes.

The usual notion is that institutions entail repeatable patterns of action with regard to an organization's or agency's legal structures, documentation habits, and practices. The cases in the book draw out the larger landscape of

the institutions, such as modernization in general, the so-called “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” modernization of government system, social market economy, challenges of democratic politics, harmonious society, and ecological progress and challenges, among others. In other words, the shape and conduct of institutions as set rules were examined in light of change, as shown in the cases presented in the book.

Beyond merely emphasizing the normative principles of institutions as most Western authors do, the book offers an interesting angle to illustrate how institutions respond and adapt to the changing conditions external to them. The cases cited by the authors offer an evidence-based perspective on institutions.

The hermeneutics of the institution stand out—the culture, the material and whatever else that falls under the so-called *locale*, which defines specific time and space. These elements are vital influences that shape the institutions. Hermeneutics—the culture, the warm and living elements of institutions—is often neglected by many institutional studies. However, they ultimately prove to be crucial and decisive in determining the success or failure of institutional performance. This is especially true in the Oriental and non-Western contexts. In fact, some thoughtful scholars say “institutions can only be as good as the people and the culture that pervade the institution.”

The book does not highlight or affirm the normative principles and definition of institutions, but neither does it absolutely defy the norms of institutions as defined by the West. It articulates the Chinese notion of phenomenological, evolving institutions and the search for a new path to the concept of institutional life. The descriptive approach unravels the complexity of the interface between the institution and the locale, and allows the free flow of the adaptation and course of action taken by institutions influenced by external factors. The institutional adaptation and dynamism relative to the external factors, and the consequential emergent decision, is itself the institutional life.

The book offers another way of looking at institutions and another approach to institutional studies. The framework highlights a concept and discourse that is textured and cognizant of specific characteristics of institutions, offbeat from the usual Western normative perspective on institutional studies.

The comparability between the Confucian and the Western notions of institution is an added value. The comparison is an interesting contribution of the authors to institutional studies.

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