For political scientists, China is an important country to study because of its global influence and the complexity of its political system. The book "China’s Political System" by Sebastian Heilmann and his colleagues presents a comprehensive overview of the Chinese political landscape. It covers various aspects of political leadership, including social unrest, environmental issues, and party influence, which often determine political outcomes.

An authoritative account

China’s Political System is notable for its clear and comprehensive organization, and key terms are provided in both Chinese and English. Given that the book is a product of several authors, its tone is remarkably consistent. The book is organized in terms of different areas of political science: political institutions, political leadership, political economy, state-society relations, policy making, and political development. Each chapter contains several specific subsections, ranging from food safety and disaster management (in terms of policy) to autonomous regions and public finance (in terms of institutions). Each discussion provides rich details, at many points aided by clear tables. Of course, a few topics are not discussed in detail—for instance, the book opts not to look at international relations or political history. However, given the enormity of the topic, there are remarkably few stones left unturned.

Readers will appreciate how the authors parse the formal and informal worlds of Chinese politics. Here, personal connections and party influence often determine political outcomes. The book also discusses several sensitive topics in a diplomatic manner, including social unrest, environmental degradation, and corruption. Throughout the book, the authors discuss several interesting themes, including relations between the central and subnational governments, regional inequality, and shifts between “normal” and “crisis” modes of political leadership. Another key theme is the growing power of President Xi Jinping. Unlike his predecessors, whose leadership involved consultation and delegation, Xi has demonstrated a more centralized, personalist approach. In Chapter Seven, Heilmann and his colleagues present a thought-provoking discussion of the implications that Xi’s consolidation of power may have for the sustainability of China’s political system, as it may be less able to adapt to changing circumstances.

Potential critiques

Despite our enthusiasm, we would like to raise some potential critiques. For one, in the book’s encyclopedic approach, it sometimes reads like a reference volume. There is limited engagement with major concepts or academic debates surrounding China, as the emphasis is more on painting a thorough, somewhat descriptive portrait. Another potential critique is that, in an effort to provide a neutral, diplomatic account of political leadership, the authors may have acquiesced too much. Regarding the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, the authors observe “a lack of journalistic distance” by the West (p. 97), noting that many Hong Kong residents felt the protestors’ criticisms of Beijing to be excessive. Regarding Tibet, the authors note that China justifies its claim “due to the fact that the region has been an inseparable part of China since … the thirteenth century” (p. 289). For some, this tone will be refreshing. For others, however, it may be seen as pro-government. Our major substantive concern relates to how the book frames the study of China. On several occasions, the authors emphasize China’s distinctiveness. The authors suggest that the “rhythm” of Chinese politics is completely different from that of most other political systems (p. 396). One potential danger here is that an excessive sense of Chinese exceptionalism may be used to sidestep accountability to international norms. Throughout the book, the authors suggest that Western models are unsuitable for understanding China. We are told that policy-making procedures in China are “markedly different from those in democratic constitutional states” (p. 300). While the authors do not help to understand developments in the PRC (p. 298), for one, it is unclear if Western experiences are not useful—for any particular case, we can expect varying levels of applicability. It is also unclear which models might work best. Heilmann labels China as a “learning authoritarian system” (p. 142); if China learns from international experiences, but not from the West, it would be useful to explain from which countries China is learning. The authors assert that we cannot represent our only comparative lenses, as we can also approach Chinese politics in regional context. The authors note that it seems impossible to have an educated society and globalized economy.

For students of Comparative Politics, Japan stands out as a fascinating case, as it is one of Asia’s few liberal democracies, although one with little turnover in government. Japanese politics have been known for overlapping business enterprises through long-term planning. Politically, China remains a single-party authoritarian state with few signs of democratization, although it is also relatively decentralized, responsive, and adaptable. Chinese politics are ever-changing, with our understanding limited by opaque party hierarchies. In light of these and other challenges, we applaud Sebastian Heilmann and his colleagues at the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin for their new book, China’s Political System. The authors provide a comprehensive, authoritative account of the contemporary political landscape of the Middle Kingdom.

Explaining political dominance in Japan

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