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China’s political system

Jaroslav Zapletal and Shane J. Barter

For political scientists, China is an important as it is elusive. It has developed into one of the world’s leading economies, with officials guiding market forces and state 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.

An authoritative account

China’s Political System is notable for its overall clarity, with clear writing and organization, and key terms provided in both Chinese and English. Given that the book is a product of several authors, its tone is 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 in painting a thorough, somewhat descriptive portrait. Another potential critique is that, in an effort to provide a neutral, diplomatic account of Chinese politics, 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 protesters’ 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 use 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). 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 better. 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. In other words, the book does not represent our only comparative lenses, as we can also approach Chinese politics in regional context. The authors do so to some extent in terms of political economy, framing China as an Asian developmental state. At several points, the authors note that it seems less like Western countries, whereas Asia provides several rich examples. Singapore, which is hardly mentioned in this lengthy study, could serve as a useful comparison. In future editions, the book might wrestle with how China’s politics are novel in Western terms, and instead acknowledge its similarities with its Asian peers.

Such quibbles should not detract too much from what is an authoritative overview of politics in China. Due to its thorough account of the many aspects of Chinese politics, Heilmann and his colleagues effectively moderate the discourse on the topic, dismissing many misconceptions. China’s Political System promises to stand as a key text for various audiences, including advanced undergraduates, graduate students, policymakers, and even professors who hope to refresh or enrich their knowledge of the People’s Republic.

Reviewed title

China’s Political System

Sebastian Heilmann (ed.) 2017

Lonham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield

ISBN 9781442277399

Explaining political dominance in Japan

Shunji Fueki and Shane J. Barter

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 interests, powerful internal party factions, limited women’s participation, and recent controversial turn. At the core of this distinctive political landscape has been the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), whose dominance and ability to recapture power have been extraordinary.

Kōji Nakakita’s The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan: The Realities of ‘Power’ provides readers with an authoritative guide to the LDP’s inner workings and evolution. Nakakita is a renowned expert of Japanese politics, authoring many books and articles. Already a highly popular book in Japan, the English translation was provided by Stephen Johnson, who is to be commended for such a readable translation of a complex text. The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan features six chapters. Chapter One dives directly into the decline of factional politics in Japan, a product of electoral and finance reforms. Chapter Two looks within the LDP, examining the party elections and the distribution of offices. In Chapter Three, Nakakita focuses on policymaking, which is increasingly dominated by the executive due...
Vietnam's gender system


One of the book's great strengths is that Tran lays out official gender systems, but always within the context of the women’s rights movement. Each chapter notes different experiences over time, by ethnicity and geography (with the time, by ethnicity and geography). The book promotes its gender system in its quest for stability, as stable families and the continuation of a patriarchal order. The book places a strong emphasis on women, making them the key figures in Vietnamese culture and nationalism.

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Other themes

By examining the application of neo-Confucianism under the Lê Dynasty and how they affected gender systems in Vietnam, Tran finds that women were able to amass resources and maintain influence within a Confucian legal system and veneration in the afterlife. The book’s final chapter examines the contemporary relevance of historical gender systems in Vietnam. Tran notes that French colonizers framed Vietnamese women as oppressed by Chinese laws to help legitimize colonial power. At Independence, Vietnamese leaders promoted similar tropes, noting that the French practice of mixing communist and nationalist rhetoric about women’s equality, often aimed at denigrating Chinese society. The book concludes, ‘there is potential for the current Vietnamese government to work to restore Vietnamese traditions. Tran makes a case for greater attention to gender norms and locating patriarchy early in Vietnamese history. As Vietnam continues to develop and tensions with China continue to mount, there is a need to question state claims of traditional equality, as patriarchy lacks roots in Vietnam.

Possible critiques

Familial Properties features impressive research, clear writing, and speaks to a range of important issues. Although Tran successfully shows that official laws often played out differently in practice, she could be clearer regarding the limitations of her methods and sources. For the most part, state power correlates with records. Even if we move beyond official records to village states, it is likely that we are still overlooking the rural majority. The book essentially tackles the hardest cases, showing that even in historically patriarchal areas of state strength, women maintained autonomy and resisted official norms. It should be remembered, though, that women's equality under the Nguyen dynasty was not complete. Women likely had even greater autonomy. A related point is that, by focusing on the state, we have little sense of how gender norms were enforced socially. Cases of adultery and perceived sexual indiscretions were more likely to have involved social disapproval and condemnation from state actors, with judicial records providing only an echo of social enforcement. Tran provides several examples of women being married off to men who had already married. Only a few of these marriages were recognized by the court, and those were often coerced. The book appears to show that social enforcement reflects their will, clouding our understanding of how the reach of state rules.

Conclusions

Table 1.3.8: The Realities of 'Power' provides a masterful study. The book could do with more details on subnational electoral networks. Readers may want to consult the book for a more comprehensive resource on the topics discussed.

Familial properties

Reviewed title: Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463-1778


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