

Modern China

<http://mcx.sagepub.com>

Introduction to "The Nature of the Chinese State: Dialogues among Western and Chinese Scholars, I"

Philip C. C. Huang

Modern China 2008; 34; 3

DOI: 10.1177/0097700407308131

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mcx.sagepub.com>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Modern China* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://mcx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://mcx.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://mcx.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/34/1/3>

Introduction to “The Nature of the Chinese State: Dialogues among Western and Chinese Scholars, I”

Philip C. C. Huang
People's University of China
University of California, Los Angeles

This special issue challenges, first of all, a range of theoretical concepts about the nature of the Chinese state. Four of the articles—by Philip Huang, Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng, Wang Shaoguang, and Sun Liping—may be read as emphasizing past and present Chinese “practices” (as opposed to theories, representations, and/or institutional structures) to dispute some of the theories that have been applied to the Chinese state. The fifth article, by Wang Hui, on the other hand, critiques the application of the modern Western binary of “empire versus nation-state” to the Song–Qing by placing each side into its own “internal” traditions and circumstances, to lend critical perspectives on both. Our commentators—Prasenjit Duara, Vivienne Shue, and Ivan Szelenyi—seem to agree with most of these challenges but go on to raise powerful questions, which are dealt with only in part in the five main articles. I begin below with a summary of the more obvious themes of this volume.

My own article challenges the either–or binary of state–society in Max Weber and others, and its derivative concept of “bureaucratization,” employed in Western China scholarship. On the basis of recently accumulated archival evidence, I attempt to demonstrate the wide resort in past and present Chinese administrative practice to “semiformal governance” by reliance on unsalaried personnel (nominated by the communities and then confirmed by the state) and dispute resolution (with the state intervening only in the event of a dispute or change of personnel). Such administrative practice, I suggest, might better be characterized as “centralized minimalism,” part of a long-standing tradition of a “third realm” of Chinese governance in which state and society worked together, rather than in presumed opposition.

Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng’s, in turn, disputes the employment of the category of “civil society,” juxtaposed against the formal state, to understand

the multitude of nongovernmental organizations that have emerged in China in recent years. Despite the ostensibly “civil” nature of such organizations, Kang and Han show that the present Chinese state in fact employs a graduated set of controls, depending on the nature of the organization and the degree of its perceived threat to the state—ranging from informal societies and enterprises to business and commercial associations, which enjoy considerable latitude and autonomy, to religious organizations and government-sponsored trade unions, which are tightly controlled, to organizations perceived as antagonistic to the state, which are ruthlessly suppressed.

Wang Shaoguang’s article, on the other hand, demonstrates how marketization of the mass media and the coming of the Internet have greatly broadened the scope for popular influence on agenda setting for policy decisions. Policy making is no longer strictly “closed,” limited to the ruler and top officials and their advisors, or merely something for which the state mobilizes or solicits public opinion, but often a consequence of popular pressures from outside—evidenced in recent measures addressing the widening gaps between the east coast and the western interior, the cities and the countryside, and different income groups and in responses to environmental deterioration and to specific instances of governmental abuse. The coming of information technology and the Internet has been an empowering development for public influence on governmental decision making. A simple model of “authoritarianism” cannot take account of these subtle but profound changes in the nature of the Chinese state and its relations with society.

Sun Liping’s article, in turn, points out how very different the Chinese path of post-communist “(societal) transitions” (*zhuanxing*) has been from the paths of Russia and Central Europe as interpreted in mainstream theory, given the fact that the ruling Chinese Communist Party, instead of being dismantled, has retained its power and control, and even much of its rhetoric. Many current changes have as a result come by setting ideological issues aside, by informal actions and expedient adaptations (*biantong*), and even saying one thing and doing another, so much so that operational realities can really only be seen through “practice” understood as process rather than in terms of official rhetoric or institutional structure. It is on this basis that Sun calls for a “sociology of practice,” which he situates within the new sociology of transitions. The earlier classical Weberian sociology had dealt above all with the logic of capitalism, of the transition from pre-capitalist societies to capitalist societies; the new sociology of transitions deals instead with post-communist, rather than pre-capitalist, transitions, but Sun objects to the tendency in existing transition theories to view the changes as simply capitalist.

Wang Hui’s contribution, finally, demonstrates (more thoroughly in his larger work, which is only briefly summarized here) how centrally important

the modernist binary of (the premodern) “empire” versus (the modern) “nation-state” has been to Western (as well as the Naitō hypothesis of the Japanese Kyoto school’s) scholarship on China, accompanied by a host of presuppositions about both. That binary obscures, as Wang Hui points out, some very big and exceptional continuities—as, for example, in the Qing–Republic–PRC’s self-legitimizing multiethnic ideology and also in their spatial extent. Along similar lines, Wang Hui argues that Song arguments over “feudalism” (*fengjian*) and “rational bureaucracy” (*junxian*) need to be understood in the “internal” context of a newly emergent worldview centering on the concept of the “heavenly principle” (*tianli*). Application of Western modernist categories to Song thought (whether of philosophical ones such as ontology, realism, and epistemology or social science ones such as empire vs. nation-state) are therefore very misleading.

Our dialogue begins with Vivienne Shue, whose careful summaries of each of the above-mentioned articles almost makes this introduction unnecessary. She suggests that the multiple realities they analyze might be unified under a single metaphor of the Chinese state as a repertory company employing many flexible roles and dissimilar techniques, though always under the consistent idea of a state authority that is singular and unitary. The exercise of that state’s authority involves the blending of the formal and informal (and state and society) and might in turn be likened to a calligrapher using an amalgam of dry ink and water in his art. What is constant, however, is the conception of authority as “deriving ultimately from a single, exceedingly centralized source on high.” For that reason, she concludes her comment with the challenge: what about (democracy conceived as) checks and balances?

Prasenjit Duara too reviews all five articles and evidently agrees with much of their content. Indeed, he himself has done extensive work to show how the (nationalist) ideological apparatuses of modern nation-states have shaped profoundly historical scholarship. In his contribution here, however, he goes on to ask: all of the above points notwithstanding, has not the global order under “the hegemony of the capitalistic system of nation-states” reshaped just about everything in its path? It is important to note that for Duara that global order is no mere “globalization” as conceptualized by laissez-faire market fundamentalists; rather, his conception proceeds from the acknowledgement of the close partnership between world capitalism and the nation-state. It is with such a conception that he asks: did not even the anti-imperialist and socialist Chinese Revolution take for granted from its inception “encasement in the nation form”? And, in the end, has it not been fundamentally transformed and “absorbed by this very order”?

Ivan Szelenyi lends Duara’s question considerable empirical and theoretical support. He reviews first the three divergent paths in the early period of the

transitions out of socialism of the former socialist states: the “capitalism from below” path of China, driven by rural enterprises; the “neo-patrimonial capitalism” path of Russia, driven by officials turned capitalists; and the “capitalism from without” path of (former) Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary (“Central Europe”), driven by foreign investment. He then turns to the increasing convergence of the three in the later transition period after the mid-1990s, with privatization of state-owned enterprises and the massive influx of foreign capital in China, the fuller development of market institutions in Russia, and the rise of a domestic bourgeoisie in Central Europe. In such a review, China indeed looks to be more and more fully “absorbed” into the world capitalist order.

The authors of the five articles in this volume have to some degree addressed elsewhere the questions of Shue, Duara, and Szelenyi. Our PRC contributors are all “public intellectuals” of renown in China in addition to being professional university scholars. They seek not merely to deconstruct modernist categories or demonstrate Chinese distinctiveness but to question “whither China?” often couched in the present-day Chinese discursive world in terms of the nature of “modernity.” If there is a common thread among them, it would be that China’s present cannot be, and China’s future should not be, equated simply with the modern Western path of capitalism, liberal democracy, and the nation-state.

Kang Xiaoguang is known for advocating a new “Confucian religion” (*rujiao*) attuned to the needs of a modernized and globalized world, to form the core of a Chinese ideology and cultural revival, to compete in a (Samuel) Huntington-ian world of clash of civilizations (Kang, 2004; cf. Kang, 2002). In Shue’s reading, of course, Kang also takes for granted a unitary, unchecked central authority. Wang Shaoguang, on the other hand, has delineated a vision for a democracy of sustained, broad participation (not merely one-time elections) and a liberty predicated on equality of means and access (not the inequalities of capitalist society), and he would combine those with a state strong enough to ensure both (Wang, 2007a). As someone who has had considerable influence over China’s tax reforms, he has most recently also called for China’s moving from a premodern “tax state” to a modern “budget state” for the purpose of establishing legislative oversight of the state budget (Wang 2007b).

The points made by the other three authors, however, are perhaps as much methodological as visionary and have to do with attempts to search out tendencies within China’s past and present that might provide alternative approaches to “modernity.” Sociologist Sun Liping spotlights in his present article the emergent logics of (popular) practice that inhere in the way the common people are coping with the new realities of the mixed

planned-market economy and its rules of the game (*boyi*), neither simply capitalist nor socialist. (Against this, Szelenyi counters: that may be well and good, but the fact remains that the common people and their practices have at least thus far not mattered very much in shaping China's transitional path.) Of course, although Sun devotes himself mainly to criticisms of the present, for its deepening social chasms (*duanlie*) and loss of equilibrium (*shiheng*) (the titles of the first two volumes of his trilogy, the third being *boyi*), revealed through popular practices rather than government representations, he implicitly advocates a socially just and more cohesive China in which the weak have a greater voice.

I myself have argued here and elsewhere for an approach based on study of the "history of practice." "Modernity" in the West's own history of "practice," I maintain, contains multiple tendencies not reducible to any single theoretical tradition such as the currently powerful (neo)classical economics, (neo)classical sociology, or (American) legal "classical orthodoxy" (i.e., legal formalism) in their state-ideologized form under U.S. Neoconservative rule. I argue for a method that would build concepts on the basis of empirical evidence drawn from the history of practice. My own delineation of administrative practice in a "third realm" between the formal state and informal society may be seen as one such attempt to outline a different kind of governance, and perhaps also of economic organization, that might be relevant for the present and future. (Vivienne Shue says she would employ instead her amalgam metaphor, so as to leave behind entirely the state-society binary; my intention though is not to deny the realities of a "state" [e.g., its official apparatus] and of "society" [e.g., natural villages], but rather only to object to the either-or—if not one, then must be the other—dichotomous formulation.) I have attempted elsewhere also to highlight a persistent "practical moralism" (as opposed to modern formalism), which underlies among other things past and to a considerable extent also contemporary law making—a mode of thinking that might prove useful for China's current challenges (Huang, 2006, 2007). To judge by that history, the practice of "checks and balances" (presumably through a division of the powers of the executive, the legislative, and the judicial), highlighted by Vivienne Shue, has to some extent and will likely continue to come before its official espousal in theory.

Wang Hui, in turn, calls for an "anti-modernity modernity"—that is, a Chinese modernity based on critical understandings of Western Enlightenment modernism. He applies the same contextualizing searchlight to modern thought as he does to Song or Qing thought or governance and goes back and forth between the two to bring out truly historical and critical perspectives on both. His *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* may be read

as an effort to use such an approach to search out in Chinese tradition potential resources for coping with the problems of the present. More recently, he has been engaged in the equally monumental task of reevaluating the Chinese Revolution, also in terms of an understanding derived from its own internal tradition and circumstances and from the viewpoint of a continuing search for alternative paths to Chinese modernity. To the extent that China in these last few years is turning toward a greater concern for social equity and public services, aspects of the legacy of the revolution might yet prove relevant for China's present and future.

All of us in the symposium are, of course, still left with Shue's question: what about checks and balances as opposed to a unitary supreme authority? And the question of Duara and Szelenyi: can any possible alternatives really challenge the overwhelmingly powerful world capitalist cum nation-states order? Duara speaks of his own sympathies for social justice and his wish for an alternative to that world order—an order that, we might add, carries with it a rapacious history of imperialism, the world wars and the cold war, and now singular hegemony. But, Duara says in effect, the "realist" in him cannot but recognize the overwhelming transformative impact (triumph?) of that global order. Szelenyi, we have seen, has lent that point strong empirical-theoretical support. Still, some of us might turn the question back on Duara: Is the issue already closed for China? And are we as critical scholars to do no more than point to that triumph as conclusive? Or do we continue our search for alternative paths? For all of us, perhaps the true import of the question of Duara and Szelenyi is that such a search must be not only about a different Chinese modernity but also about a more pluralistic world order.

References

- HUANG, PHILIP C. C. (2006) "Civil adjudication in China." *Modern China* 32, 2 (April): 135–80.
- (2007) "Whither Chinese law?" *Modern China* 33, 2 (April): 163–94.
- KANG XIAOGUANG (2002) "Weilai san wu nian Zhongguo dalu zhengzhi wending xing fenxi" (An analysis of the political stability of the Chinese mainland in the next three to five years). *Zhanlüe yu guanli* 3. <<http://www.tecn.cn>>.
- (2004) "Wenhua minzuzhuyi suixiang" (Random thoughts on cultural nationalism), at <<http://www.confucius2000.com>>.
- WANG SHAO GUANG (2007a) "Tansuo anbang zhi dao" (In search of the way of good governance), at <<http://www.tecn.cn>>.
- (2007b) "Cong shuishou guojia dao yusuan guojia" (From the "tax state" to the "budget state"), *Dushu* 9.