

# Paradigms of Chinese Politics: kicking society back out

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*More than three decades of research since reforms were launched has significantly expanded our understanding of China's changing political landscape. In that period, new paradigmatic assumptions have been brought to bear on the study of China to challenge the traditional state-centered approach. Among these have been state–society, society-centered, historical, and globalized models. While such works have enriched our understanding of this dynamic polity, a close reading of them shows that the state-centered paradigm remains the most appropriate one for the study of China's politics. Brief consideration is given to the reasons for this and to how it might change.*

**Teresa Wright**, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State–Society Relations in China's Reform Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

**Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard**, *Hainan: State, Society, and Business in a Chinese Province* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

**Kate Xiao Zhou**, *China's Long March to Freedom: Grassroots Modernization Movements* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

**Scott Howard Wilson**, *Remade in China: Foreign Investors and Institutional Change in China* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

**Dieter Kuhn**, *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).  
And other works.

## Introduction

The study of China's politics has been immensely enriched and broadened over the past 30 years since the country embarked on its post-Mao transition. As the empirical landscape has changed, the depth and range of information available to scholars has increased exponentially. As a result, and as the books reviewed here show, the variety of paradigmatic theories used to explain contemporary Chinese politics

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has expanded. The long dominance of theories built within the state-centered paradigm has been challenged. New theories have been proposed within rival paradigms of analysis—including society-centered approaches, state–society approaches, globalized approaches, and historical approaches.

For much of the China-watching community, this pluralization of underlying assumptions about the subject they study has been a welcome development, for it has freed scholars from the Procrustean effort to fit micro and middle-level findings into singular frameworks of analysis. Shue, applauding the coming era of paradigmatic pluralism in 1988, criticized the ‘clean lines’, ‘simplisticism’, ‘stark and oversimple formulations’, and ‘narrow, unidimensional, or static assumptions’ of *all* paradigms.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Breslin has argued that ‘China is complex; and trying to impose simple analytical models to understand diverse complexity is at best unhelpful, and more likely counter-productive’.<sup>2</sup>

The proliferation of paradigmatic assumptions has not been without its costs however. Baum and Shevchenko wrote in 1999 of the ‘profound “paradigm gap”’<sup>3</sup> gripping the field, while Harding worried that ‘the field’s knowledge of the parts [has] outstripped its understanding of the whole’.<sup>4</sup> Since not all approaches can be simultaneously and equally valid, the proliferation of mutually-incompatible understandings of the same phenomena has raised the question, as Dittmer and Hurst put it in 2003, of ‘how to coordinate different approaches to the same problem’.<sup>5</sup>

From a scholarly perspective, getting paradigms right is essential to research. If one begins with the assumption of a state-centered polity, for instance, then research into a realm of politics where society appears to be in command can be justified as a potential outlier and can be guided by appropriate questions concerning why the normal mechanisms of state domination have failed. From a policy perspective, getting paradigms right is also important. Most early predictions about the Falun Gong movement, for instance, emphasized its serious threats to China’s political system, underpinned by paradigmatic assumptions about the rising importance of social forces.<sup>6</sup> Today, more than a decade since its irruption into China’s politics in 1999, the movement has been thoroughly defeated without so much as a wobble to the system. ‘The state seems, contrary to some expectations, to have won the conflict’, wrote Østergaard.<sup>7</sup> ‘The threat it represented now appears to reflect little

1. Vivienne Shue, ‘Theory and irony in the study of contemporary China’, in *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 11–29, at pp. 2, 4, 13, 29.

2. Shaun Breslin, ‘Do leaders matter? Chinese politics, leadership transition and the 17th Party Congress’, *Contemporary Politics* 14(2), (2008), pp. 215–231, at p. 215.

3. Richard Baum and Alexei Shevchenko, ‘The “state of the state”’, in Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, eds, *The Paradox of China’s Post-Mao Reforms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 333–360, at p. 333.

4. Harry Harding, ‘The evolution of American scholarship on contemporary China’, in David L. Shambaugh, ed., *American Studies of Contemporary China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), pp. 3–40, at p. 30.

5. Lowell Dittmer and William Hurst, ‘Analysis in limbo: contemporary Chinese politics amid the maturation of reform’, *Issues and Studies* 39(1), (2003), pp. 11–48, at p. 12.

6. Maria Hsia Chang, *Falun Gong: The End of Days* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Danny Schechter, *Falun Gong’s Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or ‘Evil Cult’?* (New York: Akashic Books, 2001).

7. Clemens Stubbe Østergaard, ‘Governance and the political challenge of the Falun Gong’, in Jude Howell, ed., *Governance in China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), pp. 207–225, at p. 221.

more than the hyperbole or wishful thinking of the humanist West', wrote Noakes.<sup>8</sup> The paradigmatic pluralism of the field led to a misunderstanding, and misprediction, of this most notable movement.

In this article, I consider competing paradigms of China's politics. The aim is to delve selectively but representatively into the post-reform literature and the macro-theoretical debates that surround it. What have we learned about the big picture of Chinese politics in 30 years of research? And what can we expect in future?

### Competing theories and paradigms

Theories are empirical propositions that seek to explain particular aspects of a given subject. In the case of politics, theories describe or explain the processes, outputs, or outcomes of collective decision-making on behalf of a political community. All theories of politics operate within a set of descriptive assumptions about the macro-structural factors that are most important. These are what we call 'general models', or where they have acquired a status of legitimating the research in which they are conducted, 'paradigms'. Unlike theories, paradigms are not intended to be tested. As Chilcote put it, 'they can facilitate understanding, but they do not explain'. Their aim, rather, is to 'bring order to the mass of information'.<sup>9</sup> They provide a broad intellectual framework within which facts can be arranged. A paradigm makes the formulation of certain theories more likely, however, and gains or loses favor based on the track record of those theories.

Paradigms can be classified in many ways. A common typology distinguishes between state-centered, society-centered, and state–society approaches. To this I will add historical and globalized approaches.

These five paradigms all claim social scientific status, in the sense that the theories generated within them are well-specified and can be tested through an appropriate research design that aims to establish the objective validity of certain claims, along with their scope conditions and uncertainty levels.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, one of the most important events of recent China politics scholarship has been a shift from consciously atheoretical area studies to methodologically conscious social science.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, theories of Chinese politics written using normative,<sup>12</sup> interpretive,<sup>13</sup> or postmodern<sup>14</sup> paradigms eschew the social scientific approach and thus will not be considered here.

Theories written within the state-centered paradigm are most familiar to the China field. Here, the state (defined as the institutions, ideologies, symbols, and norms that

8. Stephen Noakes, 'Falun Gong ten years on', *Pacific Affairs* 83(2), (2010), pp. 349–357, at p. 354.

9. Ronald H. Chilcote, *Theories of Comparative Politics: The Search for a Paradigm* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), p. 21.

10. John Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Criterial Framework* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. 5.

11. Maria Heimer and Stig Thøgersen, *Doing Fieldwork in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006); Allen Carlson, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

12. Chun Lin, *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

13. Chaohua Wang, *One China, Many Paths* (London and New York: Verso, 2003).

14. Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

hold sovereign power over collective decision-making within a territory) is taken to be the critical and dominant factor in a range of key outcomes. Often, the theories used to explain China's politics at a general level—such as the 'ideology and organization' theory or the 'fragmented authoritarianism' theory—fall implicitly within this paradigm. Zhang Jianjun's study of the relationship between economic marketization and democratizing forces is typical of the resilience of state-centered approaches in the post-Mao era.<sup>15</sup> His argument is that the state has effectively co-opted new economic groups and regulated the market to favor its continued control. Those places where the market has generated a genuine state–society dynamic are rare, he argues. Democratization forces are stunted as a result. Wright's neo-Marxist work, despite its subtitle, is also fully within the state-centered tradition, emphasizing the one-way dependence of society on the state as a result of state-led late industrialization. Guo<sup>16</sup> argued that the state has retained its totalitarian domination over Chinese society.

In many ways, the result of much research in the past 30 years has been to complement or complexify the state-centered paradigm by drawing attention to the influences of social, historical, and global forces and to the pluralization of state actors. The society-centered paradigm, for instance, shifts the focus to relatively autonomous markets, culture, ideas, class, social groups, or even individuals. In some ways, society-centered accounts have an even older provenance in Chinese politics research insofar as they represent a continuation of a long tradition of scholarship that sought explanation in the distinctive social, or civilizational, features of China. In its updated forms, it revives work on the Chinese revolution that conceived of politics in China as a genuine or 'authentic' social phenomenon. From politics, on such accounts, we can read backwards into society. Kate Zhou's work on 'grassroots modernization' directs attention to bottom-up processes of political change, extending her earlier work on the role of peasants in launching economic reforms.<sup>17</sup> For Zhou, the uncoordinated freedom-seeking of Chinese citizens has 'fundamentally altered key elements of the moral and material content of the party-state regime . . . [whose role] has been one of response and not of leadership . . . The Chinese people acted, and the state . . . reacted' (pp. xxii, xxviii). This notion of society leading the reform movement has been a key theme in society-centered accounts of the reform era. White's aptly-named *Unstately Power* on the causes of reforms is probably the single-most important work in this tradition.<sup>18</sup>

During the Cold War, the debate over state-centered versus society-centered paradigms of China's politics was often driven by ideological differences among scholars.<sup>19</sup> As a result, scholars in the reform era sought a more detached empiricism.

15. Jianjun Zhang, *Marketization and Democracy in China* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

16. Sujian Guo, *Post-Mao China: From Totalitarianism to Authoritarianism?* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000).

17. Kate Xiao Zhou, *How the Farmers Changed China: Power of the People* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

18. Lynn T. White, *Unstately Power* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998).

19. Howard Boorman, 'The study of contemporary Chinese politics: some remarks on retarded development', *World Politics* 12(4), (1960), pp. 585–599; A. M. Halpern, 'Contemporary China as a problem for political science', *World Politics* 15(3), (1963), pp. 361–376; Chalmers Johnson, 'The role of social science in China scholarship', *World Politics* 17(2), (1965), pp. 256–271; Richard Wilson, 'Chinese studies in crisis', *World Politics* 23(2), (1971), pp. 295–317; Edward Friedman and Mark Selden, *America's Asia: Dissenting Essays on Asian–American Relations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

There was a common striving after a ‘third way’ that would distinguish their work from the earlier divisions.<sup>20</sup> One result was the embrace of the state–society paradigm, echoing broader trends in the comparative politics of developing countries. This paradigm asserted the mutually constituting nature of state and society, and put an emphasis on process rather than structure. Baum and Shevchenko argued in 1994 that ‘such mutually transformative accommodation lies at the very heart of China’s post-reform political experience’.<sup>21</sup>

Most theorists operating within the state–society model have prudently avoided assuming the existence of an autonomous, self-organized ‘civil society’ in China. It has been plain since the onset of the reform era that no such thing exists, despite much anticipation of its arrival. Rather, the central paradigmatic assumption is that society exerts a critical impact on political outcomes through its unorganized actions and norms, often through a close ‘embedded’ relationship with the state.<sup>22</sup> Lily Tsai’s work, for instance, the result of extensive fieldwork in rural China, highlights the mutually-dependent relationship of ‘solidarity groups’ (temple associations and lineage groups) and local party leaders in transforming governance.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, O’Brien and Li provide an account of rural politics in which peasants both challenge and transform the state by embracing its ideological and policy claims.<sup>24</sup> Theories of ‘corporatism’<sup>25</sup> or of the ‘developmental’ or ‘entrepreneurial’ state<sup>26</sup> describe a close *and balanced* alliance between society and state in the interests of mutual development.

The other two paradigms locate critical causality outside of the contemporary PRC state and society. The globalized approach has a long ancestry in the study of China, in this case in the ‘impact-response’ historiography most closely associated with the late John King Fairbank<sup>27</sup> and earlier with the ‘inside–outside’ (*nei–wai*) approach

20. Harry Harding, ‘The study of Chinese politics: toward a third generation of scholarship’, *World Politics* 36(1), (1984), pp. 284–307; Elizabeth J. Perry, ‘Trends in the study of Chinese politics: state–society relations’, *China Quarterly* 139(3), (1994), pp. 704–713.

21. Baum and Shevchenko, ‘The “state of the state”’, p. 354.

22. Yongnian Zheng and Joseph Fewsmith, *China’s Opening Society: The Non-State Sector and Governance* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2008); Reza Hasmath and Jennifer Hsu, *China in an Era of Transition: Understanding Contemporary State and Society Actors* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Peter Ho and Richard L. Edmonds, *China’s Embedded Activism: Opportunities and Constraints of a Social Movement* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2007).

23. Lily L. Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy: Solidarity Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

24. Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

25. Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger, ‘China, corporatism, and the East Asian model’, *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, (January 1995); Jonathan Schwartz and Shawn Shieh, *State and Society Responses to Social Welfare Needs in China: Serving the People* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

26. Jane Duckett, *The Entrepreneurial State in China: Real Estate and Commerce Departments in Reform Era Tianjin* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Gordon White, *Riding the Tiger: The Politics of Economic Reform in Post-Mao China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); Jean Chun Oi, *Rural China Takes Off: Institutional Foundations of Economic Reform* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Jie Chen and Bruce J. Dickson, *Allies of the State: China’s Private Entrepreneurs and Democratic Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); but see also the book by Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard being reviewed here.

27. Ssu-yu Teng and John King Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West; a Documentary Survey, 1839–1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954).

of H. B. Morse.<sup>28</sup> It also coincides with the resurgence of globalized approaches to comparative politics as a whole, once previously confined to world systems' Marxist analysis. Wilson's book (under review here) stresses the ways in which foreign investors from the US and Japan in particular brought with them expectations and practices that critically shaped China's legal, labor, and regulatory reforms. Another key work in this tradition is by Zweig, who argues that 'international forces—external powers and markets—led elites, bureaucrats, and local actors to behave in ways that undermined the regulatory regime that controlled China's transnational exchanges'. Moreover, this outcome was of no small moment for it 'greatly affects ... the nature of the regime'.<sup>29</sup>

Lastly, theories within the historical paradigm attach critical importance to the influence of prior events and inherited structures and processes, often referred to as positive feedback effects. Bell's work is the most explicit attempt to conceptualize contemporary Chinese politics as operating within a Confucian ethic formed more than six centuries ago.<sup>30</sup> Kuhn argues that the Song dynasty's eleventh and twelfth century Confucian transformation of China 'laid the foundations of education, government, and civil society for every succeeding dynasty, and strengthened a sense of Chineseness among the descendants of the Han that would endure for centuries' (p. 9). Gates has explained China's reform era through the lens of class forces going back 'a thousand years'.<sup>31</sup> There is now a considerable body of work that emphasizes the critical role of prior (rather than contemporaneous) variables—Woodside's<sup>32</sup> work on the Song dynasty origins of technocratic rule or Wong's<sup>33</sup> work on the imperial origins of the dominant state.

Political scientists too have embraced historicist approaches, although the history they have in mind is more recent. Perry, for instance, argues that China's reform era 'can only be understood against the background of a revolutionary history that remains highly salient in many respects'.<sup>34</sup> Thornton says 'the revolutionary-era practice of controlled polarization under perpetual threat of looming crisis remains central to the arsenal of governing strategies'.<sup>35</sup> These statements reflect a long lineage of 'revolutionary' theories of China's politics that conceive of 1949 as a fundamental watershed in its political trajectory.

28. Hosea Ballou Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* (London and New York [etc.]: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910).

29. David Zweig, *Internationalizing China: Domestic Interests and Global Linkages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 261, 277.

30. Daniel Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

31. A class-based statement is Hill Gates, *China's Motor: A Thousand Years of Petty Capitalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

32. Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

33. Roy Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

34. Elizabeth Perry, 'Studying Chinese politics: farewell to revolution?', *China Journal* 57(1), (2007), pp. 1–22, at p. 5.

35. Patricia Thornton, 'Crisis and governance: Sars and the resilience of the Chinese body politic', *China Journal* 61(1), (2009), pp. 23–48, at p. 26.

### Evaluating the paradigms

In evaluating the many works, one usually need go no further than a close reading of the works themselves in order to consider their paradigmatic implications. Historical theories, like global ones, have enriched our understanding of Chinese politics immensely. Their main weakness is a lack of *breadth* across cases; they cannot tell us why those historical variables are determinative in some cases and not in others. Bell is wise to draw attention to the ways in which Confucian norms of propriety, paternalism, and collective rights shape contemporary PRC politics, for example; but his work actually reveals the *struggle* of those norms against rival ones. Likewise, Kuhn shows that the Song dynasty's Confucian transformation of China was important often as a target of *rejection* by later Ming and Qing dynasty reformers, not to mention PRC revolutionaries. Confucianism 'informed an understanding of Chineseness' (Kuhn, p. 277) only in this on-again/off-again sense. Those like Bell who espy an unbroken lineage of neo-Confucian underpinnings of contemporary Chinese politics—'those parts of the CCP's program that failed to take hold . . . did so because they conflicted with central Confucian values and habits'<sup>36</sup>—cannot explain the many instances where the program did conflict, and Confucianism lost. China's anti-family population control policies and the resilience of Marxist anti-traditionalism are only two obvious examples.

The revolutionary heritage, meanwhile, is being painted into an increasingly small corner of China's politics as bureaucratic-technocratic norms take over. Thornton and Perry's accounts of revolutionary norms in political process are important but suffer from selection bias: the selection of issues where such norms are present (the SARS crisis, the Falun Gong crackdown, etc.) and the neglect of those where they are absent (migration controls, industrial policy, etc.). To put it another way, in order to account for when historical factors are turned on and off, we need a further theory of policy choice. Indeed, Thornton's account of the SARS response reveals the *selective* use of revolutionary heritage by leaders after attempts to solve the problem through bureaucratic means failed. Revolutionary heritage, then, has little autonomy. Thornton's conclusion is that it can 'limit both the pace and degree of normalization'.<sup>37</sup> The historical origins of contemporary Chinese politics, in other words, are a matter of selective and voluntary choice by the contemporary Chinese political actors.

A parallel argument can be made about globalized theories. Haynes argues that globalization is likely to exert the *least* impact in a country like China, with a weak civil society and a strong state, unless state actors are *already* predisposed towards the goals of external actors.<sup>38</sup> As with historical factors, contemporary political actors are expected to remain the critical gatekeepers in switching external factors on and off. Zweig's argument that 'domestic and global market forces played *a much larger role* than [domestic] political factors'<sup>39</sup> in the politics of international education, foreign aid, urban development zones, and foreign investment in rural enterprises is

36. Bell, *China's New Confucianism*, p. 10.

37. Thornton, 'Crisis and governance', p. 24.

38. Jeffrey Haynes, *Comparative Politics in a Globalizing World* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), pp. 93–95.

39. Zweig, *Internationalizing China*, p. 48.

actually consistent with Haynes's theory. As Zweig himself shows, in the first two of these, political opportunity structures for opening had *already* been created within the state. In the latter two, central state leaders were *already* predisposed towards openness. The state, then, was the critical switch. In a more representative set of cases—including areas like human rights, for instance, or international environmental policy—the lack of state facilitation of external forces would explain why global forces are stymied. In his study of the welfare state, Saich finds that temporal variations have less to do with the impact of 'neo-liberal' globalization than with the *autonomous* decisions of the state to abandon egalitarian goals in favor of unequal growth.<sup>40</sup> Wilson too ends his carefully-researched work on foreign investment by reaffirming the centrality of the state. His 'state-led globalization' concept centers on the remarkable ability of the state to maintain autonomy through a judicious use of foreign capital (pp. 185, 206–208). As with historical theories, globalized theories often end up abandoning their premises in the face of the critical role of the state in policy choice.

The state–society paradigm has been popular in the reform era. Shue, for instance, has advocated a focus on 'the mutually conditioning interactions between elements of state and elements of society'<sup>41</sup> or on 'shifting arenas of state–society struggle and accommodation'.<sup>42</sup> More recently, she described a state–society approach 'as a compound, an admixture of unlike elements that can become a blend, an amalgam in which the original separate components have lost their distinctness'.<sup>43</sup> A key challenge for this paradigm has been to generate testable theories that are parsimonious and well-specified. Shue's paradigmatic admonitions stop short of offering *theories* that specify *which* elements and *which* arenas matter most. Thus we can never know *ex ante* what to predict from state–society interactions in terms of observable consequences—meaning we can never establish a hypothesis that can be disproven. State–society approaches can easily slide into story-telling.

The 'developmental state' theories in the state–society paradigm capture the close relationship between certain social and state actors in the interests of mutual enrichment that have descriptively characterized much of post-Mao politics. The challenge for such theories is to accurately portray the nature of that relationship. As Howell<sup>44</sup> and others have noted, the problem with applying a 'state–society' understanding to such relationships is that the reality is so one-sided. Even where formal structural links are extensive, the state remains largely autonomous of social actors, who are dependent in most respects upon the state. The social actors are rational and dependent rent-seekers, not partners. O'Brien,<sup>45</sup> for instance, introduced the concept of 'entwinement'—where social actors voluntarily seek embeddedness in

40. Tony Saich, *Providing Public Goods in Transitional China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

41. Shue, 'Theory and irony in the study of contemporary China', p. 27.

42. Vivienne Shue, 'State power and social organization in China', in Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue, eds, *State Power and Social Forces* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 65–88, at p. 85.

43. Vivienne Shue, 'Rule as repertory and the compound essence of authority', *Modern China* 34(1), (2008), pp. 141–151, at p. 148.

44. Jude Howell, 'Reflections on the Chinese state', *Development & Change* 37(2), (2006), pp. 273–297.

45. Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Chinese People's Congresses and legislative embeddedness: understanding early organizational development', *Comparative Political Studies* 27(1), (1994).

the state in order to attain legitimacy and value. Kang and Han<sup>46</sup> describe a model of ‘graduated controls’ by the state over social forces. Ho and Edmonds<sup>47</sup> use the term ‘embedded activism’ to describe environmental movements. All of these descriptive inferences imply that what matters most is the state, in particular the limited organizational freedoms it affords and its minimal tolerance for policy conflicts. If so, then it is these latter conditions—found inside the state—that are the critical factors in explaining the state–society relationship, which becomes a proximate or even process variable on the way to a range of political outcomes. Ownby, for example, finds that while ‘China has become a much more openly contentious society in the post-Mao era’, the crushing of the Falun Gong ‘represents a return by Chinese authorities to their habitual posture after a period [in the early reform era] when . . . they engaged in a dangerous flirtation with a mass movement’.<sup>48</sup> State dominance, then, not mutually-conditioning state–society interactions, explains the rise and the fall of a contentious movement.

Genuine state–society inter-conditioning is rare. Tsai’s state–society work is sufficiently extensive to fairly claim to represent a large part of rural China. However, the state–society dynamic she describes is largely *absent*, not present, in her cases. Only 21% of the 316 villages she surveys have structural links between local state actors and society that could be described as ‘binding’ on both. For the rest, such links are formalistic and rent-seeking—in other words entwinement. Attempts to develop more ‘solidarity groups’, including through Christian churches, are prevented by state repression, she shows.

Goodman notes that ‘the CCP remains central to politics at central and provincial levels’, but argues that at local levels a state–society bond with local entrepreneurs ‘provides the platform for the exercise of state power’. Yet in the same piece he notes that ‘the private sector’s dependency on the party–state’ implies that ‘the use of the term “private” in this context sometimes is called into question’.<sup>49</sup> Even in ‘small government, big society’ Hainan, Brødsgaard concludes that the state remains overwhelmingly dominant. Put simply, concepts such as ‘local state corporatism’ are not an accurate reflection of state–society relationships even in the limited context of local China. Already severely limited in its explanatory breadth to questions of political economy at the local level, concepts like corporatism or the entrepreneurial state lack depth *in these cases themselves*. In Dickson’s study of ‘state corporatism’, for instance, ‘instead of autonomy, corporate groups are embedded in the state, where they can be manipulated, their leaders replaced, and their finances controlled’.<sup>50</sup> Su finds in a recent study of agricultural policy-making that ‘the state defines the nature of public problems and takes responsibility for developing solutions to them’.<sup>51</sup>

46. Xiaoguang Kang and Heng Han, ‘Graduated controls: the state–society relationship in contemporary China’, *Modern China* 34(1), (2008), pp. 36–55.

47. Ho and Edmonds, *China’s Embedded Activism*.

48. Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, pp. 15, 15, 19.

49. David S. G. Goodman, ‘Sixty years of the People’s Republic: local perspectives on the evolution of the state in China’, *Pacific Review* 22(4), (2009), pp. 429–450, at pp. 443, 443, 439, 440.

50. Bruce J. Dickson, *Wealth into Power: The Communist Party’s Embrace of China’s Private Sector* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 107.

51. Minzi Su, *China’s Rural Development Policy: Exploring the ‘New Socialist Countryside’* (Boulder, CO: First Forum Press, 2009), p. 3.

As Hurst summarizes: 'It is questionable whether [corporatism] can be used effectively to characterize a revolutionary regime with a monist system'.<sup>52</sup>

That Chinese society has achieved developmental gains within this one-sided framework is a stunning and even heart-warming achievement, but it is not attributable to a state–society alliance that could be described as developmental or corporatist, much less 'mutually conditioning'. State power and social forces have come closer to be sure, but not so close that we should be ready to declare them as anything like rough equals, sharing power or shaping outcomes through ongoing interactions. As Friedman summarizes bluntly: 'Stressing a state–society dynamic misleads. From a political perspective, one is the master with a leash and the other is the dog on the leash. The master is not about to be jerked around by the dog'.<sup>53</sup>

If this is true of state–society theories then it is even more true of society-centered theories, at least at first glance. Again, one can find a few discrete spheres of politics where a society-centered dynamic *may* be at work—the remarkable organization, vocalness, and salience of professional soccer fans in shaping the politics of soccer in China for instance<sup>54</sup>—but as with attempts to apply pluralist theories to the Soviet Union,<sup>55</sup> pluralism in China founders on the monumental presence of the autonomous state. Kelliher's<sup>56</sup> argument about 'peasant power' in the creation of rural reforms was, on closer reading, an argument about how state socialism, by homogenizing the peasantry, made peasant interest-seeking more effective; yet criticality then reverted to the state itself—'the very structure of state socialism gives rise to an influential society', as Dittmer wrote.<sup>57</sup>

Zhou's work certainly highlights a more active society in contemporary China. She is careful to select issue areas—the economy, information and media, peasants, migration, sexuality, globalization—that are broad and important; yet her eye is constantly drawn to instances of social transgression of state boundaries rather than to those boundaries themselves. Some civil society groups are allowed to exist but ten times as many are banned, she notes; sometimes new media succeeds in revealing official malfeasance but usually 'the state's strong hand will interfere to smother freedom'; gays in some big cities can sometimes gather in clubs without being attacked, but most are still like the small-town gay who 'had to "date" in a very dirty public bathroom'; the Charter 08 movement for constitutional reform may have been 'the most widespread politically-motivated resistance against the national government' but it has been silenced inside China and its leaders jailed without a peep from society at large. Zhou may be right that there is a 'growing disenchantment with the officially-sanctioned "big state" tradition' but her book also shows the resilience of that tradition (pp. 306, 176, 189, 306, 296).

52. William Hurst, 'Conceptual tools and the study of Chinese politics: moral economy and corporatism', *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*, Boston, 2002.

53. Edward Friedman, 'State–society models', unpublished manuscript, (2008).

54. Wu Zhang, *Zhonghua Qiumi Fengyu Lu [The Story of Soccer Fans in China]* (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Press, 2007).

55. Susan Gross Solomon and H. Gordon Skilling, *Pluralism in the Soviet Union: Essays in Honour of H. Gordon Skilling* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

56. Daniel Roy Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China: The Era of Rural Reform, 1979–1989* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

57. Lowell Dittmer, 'Approaches to the study of Chinese politics', *Issues and Studies* 32(9), (1996), pp. 1–18, at p. 8.

There is, however, one way that the society-centered paradigm might be plausible: if the state is conceived of as a precipitate of society itself. In that case, the state's importance is reaffirmed, but only as a proximate variable in the causal chain whose critical origins lie one step removed, in society. White's weighty (two volumes, 1,280 pages) work on the local origins of reforms, *Unstately Power*, is grounded in such a model and despite its age it is worth pondering. It is valuable for its all-too-rare inclusiveness of the many dimensions of politics as a whole—not just central edicts but also local counter-edicts, social actors, processes, and outcomes. The proximate focus is the local state since many of the local power networks he studied 'include leaders with low bureaucratic ranks nominally inside the state', but White sees the local state as a product of local society—'nonstate institutions . . . are now extremely influential in structuring the state'. He notes that he might have subtitled the book *Kicking the State Back Out* since that 'happens to be exactly what de facto nonstate institutions have begun to do'. Yet these bold early claims in the work are eventually undermined (to its credit) by the careful and unbiased research that follows. By the end, local networks are a 'complement' to state-centered approaches since they have 'constrained what the Chinese state can do'.<sup>58</sup> White's work is a key one in understanding the internal pluralization of the state in the reform era. This evolving understanding of the internal differentiation of the modern Chinese state is perhaps the biggest contribution of the scholarship of the reform era; yet White's book describes only a constrained central state challenged by local state rivals and some social ones, a conclusion that modifies but does not undermine the state-centered paradigm.

Alternatively, Wang has argued that 'popular pressure', often expressed through the media or outside activists, is now 'frequently used' to drive policy-making. The result is 'an impressive congruence between the priorities of the public and the priorities of the Chinese government'. Oddly, he cites the *failed* attempts by civil society (represented by 61 local NGOs) to stop the series of Nu (Salween) river dams in Yunnan in 2004—the project was 'nearly aborted'—as evidence *in support of* the proposition.<sup>59</sup> Today, some of the dams are back on track, despite ongoing domestic and international pressures.<sup>60</sup> Mertha too cites the Nu river dams as an ambiguous outcome for social forces. The case he cites to show a positive outcome is the halting of the smaller of two dams near the ancient Dujiangyan irrigation system in Sichuan in 2003; yet as his own research shows, 'the core of the opposition' in this case came from local government agencies in heritage, tourism, environmental protection, seismology, and construction. Public opinion was mobilized by these local state opponents, and without them it would have been absent. It may be true that 'mass groups have played an increasing role in the process of dam politics in China' but overall they are still insignificant, as we see from this case.<sup>61</sup> More to the point: between 1973 and 2008, China built 3,547 dams of over 30 meters, more than triple

58. White, *Unstately Power*, vol. 2, pp. 611–617.

59. Shaoguang Wang, 'Changing models of China's policy agenda setting', *Modern China* 34(1), (2008), pp. 56–87, at pp. 81, 75.

60. Ben Blanchard, 'China province seeks dams despite environment fears', *Reuters News*, (6 March 2008).

61. Andrew Mertha, *China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 105, 117.

the number it had of that size at the onset of reforms.<sup>62</sup> Focusing on those rare cases where semi-autonomous social actors made brief, supporting appearances as part of local state challenges, is to engage in heroic case selection bias. As Mertha notes: ‘I cannot claim that I am testing hypotheses here’. Even if his cases *were* representative, they would in fact show that fragmented authoritarianism, and the state-centered paradigm that undergirds it, is alive and well. Mertha allows that he is ‘not suggesting that these changes have entirely supplanted the dominant paradigm’.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, they have not even left a scratch. Non-state ‘water warriors’ are basically unheard of in China and, when they appear, they are usually defeated.

It is true that the PRC state has reshaped itself more in the image of Chinese society in the reform era—its invocation of traditional Chinese cultural symbols and norms, for instance, or its embrace of the petty bourgeoisie capitalism that has been at the heart of southeastern Chinese culture since the Ming dynasty. There is certainly a degree of ‘neo-traditionalism’ in the PRC state today much like that which Jowitt believed ultimately destroyed the Soviet state,<sup>64</sup> but to say that the state acts in ways consonant with social preferences or norms is not the same as saying that they *cause* state policy.

To be more precise, the problems with socially-determined accounts of China’s politics are both substantive and methodological. Substantively, they fail to provide well-specified or parsimonious explanatory variables. It becomes impossible to disprove that what the state does is not always and everywhere a reflection of ‘culture’ or ‘society’. An autonomous state becomes *theoretically* impossible. Given plausible assumptions of cultural and social pluralism, however, we need to specify *which* norms or structures matter most. Hu, for instance, notes in his critique of Confucian theories that Confucianism is internally diverse and also competes with many other values and ideologies in today’s China.<sup>65</sup> The challenge of finding a suitably well-specified social or cultural theory of China’s politics is immense.

If instead, one specifies a non-parsimonious theory of social pluralism, then one must be prepared to predict the pluralization of state values that would result. In Migdal’s ‘state in society’ model, for instance, ‘states face a multitude of social organizations that maintain and vie for the power to set rules’ and in the process of competing for this social control the state is transformed into ‘a heap of loosely connected parts or fragments . . . often promoting conflicting sets of rules with one another and with “official” law’.<sup>66</sup> Yet nothing like this degree of value pluralization or structural fragmentation exists in the contemporary Chinese state, despite the pluralization of state actors. Frazier shows that the ‘multiple competing

62. Chinese National Committee on Large Dams, *2008 nian zhongguo yu shijie daba jianshe qingkuang [2008 Report on the Construction of Large Dams in China and the World]*, available at: [www.chinacold.org.cn/news/lin200911254534542.pdf](http://www.chinacold.org.cn/news/lin200911254534542.pdf) (accessed 15 February 2010).

63. Mertha, *China’s Water Warriors*, pp. xv, 152.

64. Kenneth Jowitt, ‘Soviet neo-traditionalism: the political corruption of a Leninist regime’, *Soviet Studies* 35(2), (1983), pp. 275–297.

65. Shaohua Hu, ‘Confucianism and contemporary Chinese politics’, *Politics & Policy* 35(1), (2007), pp. 136–153.

66. Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 49, 22.

interests' in Chinese economic policy are all state actors, while non-state actors 'stand little chance of organizing politically'.<sup>67</sup> The pluralization of voices in foreign policy-making<sup>68</sup> is likewise limited to relatively autonomous interests within the state itself.

Methodologically, as Pearson<sup>69</sup> as well as Rosen and Fewsmith<sup>70</sup> have noted in their studies of foreign policy, the lack of *observable* mechanisms linking social preferences to state actions makes the *testing* of pluralist theories nearly impossible. What goes on inside the state is still largely a black box. There are no established mechanisms for the open aggregation of social preferences that could be used to substantiate a society-based theory. A belief in the reception and aggregation of social preferences within the PRC state is therefore largely a leap of faith.

Indeed, a closer scrutiny of supposedly confirmatory cases leaves room for doubt. One oft-cited example is the visible public outcry over the murder of migrant worker Sun Zhigang by police in 2004 that coincided with an abrupt policy change; the abolition of the Gestapo-like 'Custody and Repatriation Law'. Yet legal and political elites had been calling for an end to the Custody and Repatriation Law since 2000.<sup>71</sup> Beijing may have used the Sun Zhigang incident as a popular pretext to end policies that were already on the ropes due to intra-state conflicts. If so, the 'impressive congruence' of the state with social demands was really just impressive state opportunism. We will never know. Broad, socially-structured policy preferences are a blunt instrument for understanding particular policy outcomes.

In summary, theories created within historical, global, state–society, and society-centered paradigms all provide important insights into post-Mao politics, but none of them achieves sufficient breadth and depth alongside reasonable specificity and parsimony to displace theories generated within the state-centered paradigm. In different ways they all reaffirm the centrality of a relatively autonomous state to China's politics. If we can identify a trend in the recent study of China's politics, it is the resurgence of state-centered approaches. Society, not the state, to paraphrase White's proposed subtitle, has been kicked back out. Perry<sup>72</sup> believed that a 'fourth wave' of theories of China's politics would move beyond implausible state–society models, yet what has become evident in recent years is that any such 'fourth wave' must be a return to the fundamental premise of the 'first wave', namely the critical and dominant role of the state in China's politics.

67. Mark Frazier, 'China's domestic policy fragmentation and grand strategy in global politics', *Asia Policy* 10, (2010), pp. 87–101 at pp. 89, 97.

68. Linda Jakobson, Dean Knox and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *New Foreign Policy Actors in China* (Solna, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2010); Hongyi Lai, *The Domestic Sources of China's Foreign Policy: Regimes, Leadership, Priorities and Process* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

69. Margaret Pearson, 'China in Geneva: lessons from China's early years in the World Trade Organization', in Alastair I. Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds, *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 242–275.

70. Joseph Fewsmith and Stanley Rosen, 'The domestic context of Chinese foreign policy: does "public opinion" matter?', in David Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978–2000* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

71. Nicolas Becquelin, *Enforcing the Rural–Urban Divide: Use of Custody and Repatriation Detention Triples in 10 Years* (New York: Human Rights in China, 2003).

72. Perry, 'Trends in the study of Chinese politics', p. 713.

## Conclusions

In the standard assumptions of comparative politics, liberalizing authoritarian regimes are those where non-state factors (both domestic and global) play a greater role. Once a highly centralized or even totalitarian state gives up control over social and economic spaces, it is more likely that the salience of non-state factors will rise. The post-totalitarian period of liberalizing authoritarianism in China has given rise to a vast literature that seeks evidence for such a shift. In many ways, this literature has succeeded in showing when and how state dominance in China has been compromised, but in doing so it has also underlined the resilience of state dominance itself.

While the historical and cultural foundations of state dominance in China have been widely noted, the East Asian region has many examples where similar historical and cultural traditions have given way to more socially-determined politics in post-authoritarian periods (Japan, Indonesia, Taiwan, or Malaysia for example). The obvious point to make is that what distinguishes China from these others is its adherence to a *Leninist* socialist conception of state dominance, a point that has come back into focus in several recent works.<sup>73</sup> While China shares with other East Asian states the impetus to deliver rapid economic growth, social advance, good governance, and global integration, it differs in having a simultaneous *and equal* normative commitment to a dominating and uncontested Leninist state with socialist legacies of economic control. It is not (yet) a post-Leninist state.<sup>74</sup> Only North Korea, Vietnam and Laos have similar commitments in the East Asian region. As Dickson puts it, ‘Although [China’s rulers] no longer pursue the Marxist utopia in the economy, they remain committed to Leninist party rule in the political realm’ and thus ‘China remains a distinctly communist country’;<sup>75</sup> or as White summarizes referring to Landry’s<sup>76</sup> seminal work on the cadre system: ‘Party control of appointments is still the main glue that holds the world’s largest authoritarian polity together’.<sup>77</sup> The rekindled interest in Mao Zedong,<sup>78</sup> from this perspective, is less a response to the enduring influence of social revolution than of statist Leninism in China’s politics.

Dickson’s phrase is worth repeating: *China remains a distinctly communist country*. Liberalizing East Asian authoritarianism is an ill-fitting template for the study of China because Leninism gets in the way of genuine state–society partnership in the interests of national development. In managing private

73. Minxin Pei, *China’s Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Xiaoqin Guo, *State and Society in China’s Democratic Transition: Confucianism, Leninism, and Economic Development* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

74. Cheng Chen, *The Prospects for Liberal Nationalism in Post-Leninist States* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

75. Dickson, *Wealth into Power*, pp. 253, 251.

76. Pierre F. Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China: The Communist Party’s Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

77. Lynn White, ‘Chinese political studies: overview of the state of the field’, *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 14(2), (2009), pp. 229–251, at p. 238.

78. Timothy Cheek, *A Critical Introduction to Mao* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Gregor Benton, *Mao Zedong and the Chinese Revolution* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

entrepreneurs, for example, the CCP has been torn between the need to incorporate them (consistent with the East Asian developmental model) and yet minimize their influence in the interests of CCP control. The result has been a lukewarm embrace, and of only those ‘possessing the political consciousness of the working class and willingness to fight for the party’s program’ rather than for national development.<sup>79</sup>

Leninist rule and East Asian developmentalism are not *always* in tension, of course. This may account for the unexpected annihilation of the Falun Gong, which threatened *both* Leninism with its counter-hegemonic appeals *and* developmentalism with its anti-material philosophy. A similar explanation might be offered for the unexpected policy success of closing the People’s Liberation Army’s business empire in 1998—the Leninist and developmental ideals pulled in the *same* direction in this case to overcome what appeared to be an insuperable challenge.<sup>80</sup>

Veterans of the China studies field will be reminded of Chalmers Johnson’s argument in a 1982 essay that the state-centered ‘Leninist government’ theory remained the most valid approach to China’s politics as a whole despite early irruptions of social forces. For Johnson, the reform era then dawning was about ‘restoring the Leninist system circa 1957 ... as an antidote to the demoralization caused by the “cultural revolution”’. Since Johnson wrote, China’s leaders have succeeded beyond anyone’s wildest expectations in recreating a confident Leninist polity with the party at the center and developmentalism as its adjunct.<sup>81</sup>

If so, then comparative communism—not comparative East Asian authoritarianism—remains the most apposite approach to the study of China, an approach widely used in early reform China but since abandoned.<sup>82</sup> Along with the marketizing communist states of Europe’s past, the closest analytic parallels in East Asia remain Vietnam (where modernization regained its equal status with communist rule with the *doi moi* or economic renovation reforms of 1986) and North Korea (where a post-Stalinist transformation, were it to occur, could launch the country along a modernizing East Asian path albeit under Leninist rule).

Interestingly, a similar paradigmatic debate currently grips the study of Vietnam’s politics: Luong, for instance, argues that rising evidence of social action against the state ‘do not reflect the policies of a dominating state or its mobilizational efforts’<sup>83</sup> and argues instead for a state–society perspective. In the same volume, Kerkvliet argues that despite wider space for social autonomy and occasional social inputs into politics, there is ‘considerable evidence to support the “dominating state”

79. Dickson, *Wealth into Power*, p. 81.

80. James C. Mulvenon, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise and Fall of the Chinese Military–Business Complex, 1978–1998* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).

81. Yongnian Zheng, *The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor: Culture, Reproduction and Transformation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

82. Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Victor Nee, David Stark and Mark Selden, *Remaking the Economic Institutions of Socialism: China and Eastern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989); Andrew G. Walder, *The Waning of the Communist State: Economic Origins of Political Decline in China and Hungary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

83. Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, ‘Authorities and the people: an analysis of state–society relations in Vietnam’, in Hy V. Luong, ed., *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society* (Singapore and Lanham, MD: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2003), pp. 27–53, at p. 23.

interpretation of Vietnam's political system'.<sup>84</sup> Some China and Vietnam scholars have begun to exploit the fruitful comparisons to be found between the two countries.<sup>85</sup>

The China case reminds us of the autonomy of politics, of the social construction of political power and its appropriate agents and boundaries. Chinese society has been kicked out because the Leninist socialist state and its historical antecedents makes this both desirable and possible. Provided that China's party-state continues to monopolize the production of norms in which authoritarian rule is not transitional and corporate but perpetual and dominating, its rule can persist. Wong argued that the dominating Chinese state has persisted since imperial times because of 'the absence of a strong state-society split', 'a general ideological acceptance of the state', and 'a lack of competing visions for organizing politics'.<sup>86</sup> Along with Walder,<sup>87</sup> however, he believed that the reform era had ushered in conditions that would end this tradition, whose foundations 'no longer exist'.<sup>88</sup> Yet the dominant Leninist state *has* persisted precisely by crowding out competing visions for organizing politics. As with society, history cannot explain the present reality of politics in China. It is the autonomous creation of contemporary (Leninist) political crafting. Johnson believed that a shift to a socially-driven politics in China would come if 'the politically mobilized and modernized people of the cities ... assert their interests against those of the entrenched Leninists'.<sup>89</sup> Watching for signs of such a change—as authors such as Zhou and Mertha do—is therefore important; but for now, the Leninists remain in control.

Why some Leninist leaders abandoned their self-identity is one of the great unanswered questions from the twentieth century. Studies of the Soviet Union have emphasized the underlying European dimension of Russian identity which doomed Leninism from the start; but China lacks such an identity. A great chasm in the field of China political studies at present is a biography of ousted party general secretary Hu Yaobang that would explain why he adopted measures that, in the later words of Zhao Ziyang, 'would have pushed China's political reform forward along the path of modernizing the political system and democratization'.<sup>90</sup> How, in other words, could a Leninist Chinese leader espouse a post-Leninist politics?

84. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

85. Anita Chan and Hong-zen Wang, 'The impact of the state on workers' conditions—comparing Taiwanese factories in China and Vietnam', *Pacific Affairs* 77(4), (2004), pp. 629–646; Thomas Heberer, *Private Entrepreneurs in China and Vietnam: Social and Political Functioning of Strategic Groups* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2003); Edmund Malesky, Regina M. Abrami and Yu Zheng, 'Institutions and inequality in single party regimes: a comparative analysis of Vietnam and China', *Comparative Politics* (forthcoming); John Gillespie and Pip Nicholson, *Asian Socialism & Legal Change: The Dynamics of Vietnamese and Chinese Reform* (Canberra, ACT: Australian National University E Press, Asia Pacific Press, 2005).

86. Wong, *China Transformed*, pp. 210, 199, 201.

87. Walder, *The Waning of the Communist State*.

88. Wong, *China Transformed*, p. 201.

89. Chalmers Johnson, 'What's wrong with Chinese political studies?', *Asian Survey* 22(10), (1982), pp. 919–933, at p. 931.

90. Ziyang Zhao, Pu Bao, Renee Chiang, Adi Ignatius and Roderick MacFarquhar, *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Zhao Ziyang* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), p. 255.

For now, the focus by scholars on grassroots organizations, rights defenders, and political dissidents is likely premature, aside from their value in measuring the resilience of state domination. Zhou may be right that there is a 'social revolution in the making' in China as the social forces grow, but this remains prospectival. Any strategy of political transformation will have to take aim at the Leninist state and its many actors, from where any transformation will begin.