

POWER, LEGITIMACY, AND WORLD ORDER

Changing Contours of
Preconditions and Perspectives

*Edited by Sanjay Pulipaka, Krishnan
Srinivasan, and James Mayall*

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POWER AND LEGITIMACY IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Michael Puett

8.1 Introduction

At first glance, the People's Republic of China might appear to be a jumble of contradictory forms of legitimation. A self-proclaimed communist state overseeing one of the most powerful capitalist economies in the world; a self-proclaimed Maoist ruler overseeing a meritocratic bureaucracy explicitly modelled on the imperial past; a communist party that is as likely to quote Confucius as Marx. But, when seen in terms of the development of Chinese political theory and in terms of the deeper history of Chinese political practice, the forms of political legitimacy in operation in China become more understandable. The goal of this chapter will be to explicate these forms of political legitimacy in China and discuss their larger implications.

8.2 History

Let us begin with notions of political legitimacy in earlier Chinese history, with a focus on those ideas and practices that have contemporary resonance and that are being appropriated by contemporary actors.

One of the most important notions in political theory in Chinese history is that of the Mandate of Heaven. This notion, which appears in documents from the Western Zhou dynasty (founded ca 11th century BCE), held that Heaven was a moral deity that ensured the legitimacy of the monarchy. Heaven would grant the mandate to rule to a virtuous figure. That figure would become the king as well as the founder of a dynasty, meaning that the kingship would be passed down from father to son within the same lineage. But, when a ruler from that lineage proved unworthy of the kingship, Heaven would withdraw the mandate

and thus bring the dynasty to an end. Heaven would then grant the mandate to another figure, who would found the next dynasty.

The Zhou claimed that they ruled because they had received the Mandate of Heaven and that their overthrow of the previous dynasty, the Shang, had been given divine sanction. The vision of history entailed by the Mandate of Heaven theory was thus one of a dynastic cycle, in which one lineage would control the kingship as long as it maintained Heaven's favour.

Forged during the Bronze Age, the Mandate of Heaven very much assumed a world of hereditary power, in which all land and resources were controlled by aristocratic lineages. The mandate simply served as a check, ensuring that if the ruling lineage lost the support of Heaven (as manifested by a lack of support from the other aristocratic lineages), the kingship would move to another lineage.

Although based in a world of hereditary power and focused exclusively on the monarch, the concept would be expanded and altered over the next millennium. In particular, the concept played a crucial role in the bodies of political theory associated with Confucius. In the 4th century BCE, the political theorist Mencius – a follower of Confucius – argued that the people were the ones who, with their natures given to them by Heaven, would inherently be repulsed by a bad ruler and inherently drawn to a good figure. It was thus the people who should enforce the Mandate of Heaven by overthrowing a bad ruler and supporting a virtuous figure as the new ruler. Indeed, it was the duty of the population to do so.

But the concept fell into abeyance over the next several centuries. Over the course of the 4th through 2nd centuries BCE, during a period when China was divided into a series of competing states, a series of new institutions of statecraft were forged. The states started developing bureaucracies that would function on meritocratic principles – promoting officials based upon merit rather than high birth. Moreover, the goal of the bureaucracies was to undercut aristocratic control over land and resources. When successful, it would mean that the state, rather than the aristocracy, would be able to control these resources and utilise them for its own purposes. The state would also gain the power to create laws that would apply to all equally – aristocrats and commoners alike – and to build infrastructural projects that would cut across aristocratic lands.¹

A key part of this governance involved the collection of data on resources – both human and material. The state would try to gain a census of the population of each area, the amount of grain produced in each area, the amount of the population that could be taken off the land to serve in the military, the amount of excess grain that would be needed to supply the army, types of infrastructure that needed to be built to allow the movement of supplies and population, etc.

The state that developed these forms of administrative statecraft most effectively was the Qin, which used the institutions to organise an extraordinary war machine that ultimately overwhelmed the other states. In 221 BCE, the Qin declared the beginning of the first empire in Chinese history. The ruler at the time – the self-proclaimed First Emperor of China – presented himself as

rejecting the traditions of the past and creating an entirely new era. Among the traditions rejected was the Mandate of Heaven. Indeed, the claim was that the Qin would rule for 10,000 generations; there would never be another dynasty. Both the Mandate of Heaven and the resulting dynastic cycle were thus things of the past.

The Qin, however, fell shortly after the death of the First Emperor, and it was indeed replaced by another dynasty – the Han. After a tumultuous several decades, a ruler emerged named Han Wudi (Emperor Wu of the Han). Like all Han rulers, Emperor Wu kept the imperial title forged by the First Emperor and actively rebuilt the state institutions of the Qin. He also utilised these institutions to launch an enormous war with the Xiongnu empire in the northwest steppe region. In many ways, in other words, Han Wudi was modelling himself directly on the First Emperor.

But, to build legitimacy for the imperial state – something the Qin had failed to do, Han Wudi also claimed to have received the Mandate of Heaven, established academies for the study of the classics associated with Confucius, and claimed to support virtuous governance. This marked the beginning of what would become an odd, but historically extremely successful, amalgam of ideas and institutions.

At the top was a hereditary monarch, whose lineage would rule until the dynasty was overthrown. The monarch would oversee an imperial bureaucracy that ran the legal system, built infrastructure, and oversaw the military. The entire state – the monarch and bureaucracy alike – claimed to be governing with the support of the Mandate of Heaven, and, by implication, the entire state would collapse were the dynasty to be overthrown. Chinese political history would come to be defined by the resulting dynastic cycle, even though actual governance was predominantly undertaken by the imperial bureaucracy.

By the time one reaches the 14th century, the bureaucracy had come to be defined almost entirely as a meritocracy. With the significant exception of the hereditary monarch, almost all positions of power could only be obtained by passing a civil service examination aimed at testing one's commitment to learning and one's understanding of Confucian political thought. Even the children of aristocrats or wealthy merchants would have to be educated in order to pass the examination, and the hope was that they would thus be socialised into thinking more broadly about the political world rather acting in support of the interests of their background. Those who passed the examination would also be moved around constantly in order to prevent the officials from getting too connected to local networks of power. The goal of these institutional mechanisms was to divorce political power from wealth – regardless of whether that wealth had been obtained through heredity or merchant activity.²

The criteria by which the state would be held accountable were based to a significant degree on this autonomy from wealthy interests. Officials were expected to be non-corrupt, responsive to the population, and acting on behalf of the entire population, as opposed to narrow, wealthy interests. The state was also

expected to be effective in building infrastructure, running the legal system, and responding to natural disasters.³ These two sets of issues were often seen as inter-related: a failure to be effective was usually ascribed to the officials being corrupt and non-responsive. Strong critiques along these lines often presaged the fall of a dynasty.

8.3 Twentieth Century

The fall of the imperial system in the 20th century appeared at the time to bring an end to all of what we have been discussing so far. Certainly the most extreme moment in this rejection of the past occurred with the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Mao explicitly associated pre-20th-century China with a traditional, feudal world that needed to be completely overcome. Indeed, Mao would compare himself with the First Emperor, saying that the biggest difference between the two was that Mao would succeed in fully rejecting the past, whereas the First Emperor had ultimately failed to do so.

Such a rejection became a key part of Mao's regime. The Cultural Revolution, for example, involved a claim that the Communist Party was becoming like the old imperial bureaucracy, and Mao called upon the people to rise up and tear down the party. Mao's vision, in other words, was of a permanent revolution by the people – a revolution that would never be followed by the creation of a new dynasty.

This vision would become a lasting legacy of Mao. Over the course of the 1980s, China embarked on rebuilding the state apparatus and promoting the market. In the student protests of 1989, one of the key criticisms was that the party was becoming corrupt and non-responsive to the people. Many of the students wore Mao buttons during the protests – a clear reference to Mao's calls on the people to stand up to corrupt officials.

It may well have been those same associations of the student demonstrations with the echoes of the Cultural Revolution that led Deng Xiaoping to suppress the protests brutally. The party continued with its efforts to rebuild the administrative state and embarked as well on a strong policy of state capitalism – supporting economic growth through major state investments in infrastructure and industrial policy. The result was a period of tremendous economic growth that transformed China into a dominant economic power.

But, by the beginning of the 21st century, this very success had become an object of concern. Wealth inequality in China had started growing to alarming levels, officials were increasingly seen as corrupt, and the state was seen as increasingly controlled by corporate interests.

8.4 The Rise of Xi Jinping

In response to these concerns, a new left began emerging in the party making explicit reference to Mao. Early on, the most successful figure to take on the Mao

mantle was Bo Xilai, the official in charge of the city of Chongqing. Bo Xilai presented himself as standing against corruption and standing up to powerful corporate interests on behalf of the people. He also began developing a cult of personality clearly modelled on that of Mao.

Another figure started taking up the Maoist mantle as well: Xi Jinping. Although less charismatic than Bo Xilai, Xi had clearly mastered the politics of the party. After Bo Xilai was charged with corruption, Xi Jinping became the most important figure in the party claiming the Maoist legacy.

But, unlike Mao (and unlike Bo Xilai), Xi Jinping's approach has involved a dramatic increase in the power of the state bureaucracy, precisely out of the argument that a strong, effective state is required to stand up to corruption and corporate interests and to break down income inequality. Xi Jinping's move, in other words, has been to re-create the assertion of a strong divorce between political power and economic wealth that had been a goal of pre-20th-century Chinese forms of governance.

Accordingly, one of the first emphases of Xi Jinping was a much-publicised anti-corruption campaign. The goal was to address directly the growing sense that the party had once again become corrupt. But Xi undertook this anti-corruption campaign not by calling on the people to overthrow party officials but rather through a strengthening of the state apparatus itself.

Moreover, Xi Jinping has also strongly emphasised the recreation of the meritocratic underpinnings of the party. Although Xi has not re-introduced the civil service examination, he has built upon the existing college examination system to do something very similar. Admission into colleges in China is based upon an intense entrance examination. Those who test highest are moved to the best universities – such as Tsinghua University. Those students who then do extremely well at Tsinghua are invited to join the party. The result, as the party strongly emphasises, is a party composed of an educated, meritocratic elite, rather than a wealthy elite.⁴

Xi Jinping is thus very much presenting himself as a Maoist response to the perceptions of a China overly controlled by the market during the 1990s. But Xi is doing so not through a permanent revolution by the population but rather by re-creating many of the political ideas and institutions of the pre-20th-century period. The very bureaucratic institutions that Mao saw as holding back the population are being presented by Xi as that which can stand up to the growing power of corporate interests.

If Mao compared himself to the First Emperor, Xi Jinping is in a sense playing Han Wudi to Mao's First Emperor. Han Wudi built on the First Emperor's creations, but also consolidated his innovations by synthesising them with past practices. Xi Jinping is doing much the same. Xi is thus a Maoist figure overseeing an administrative state directly modelled upon the very pre-imperial meritocratic bureaucracy Mao sought to destroy.

I mentioned above that the China of Xi Jinping might seem to the outside like a series of contradictions. But, by looking at the historical background to

these ideas and practices and by seeing their current resonance and associations it becomes clear how Xi Jinping's synthesis makes sense.

8.5 Xi Jinping's China

The resulting order is a surprising re-creation of many of the earlier forms of governance from imperial China. Instead of a single lineage, the dynasty is now defined by the party. And instead of a civil service examination determining entrance into the bureaucracy, entrance to the bureaucracy is determined by a combination of the college entrance examination and grades in college. But the claims of a bureaucracy composed of an educated elite and divorced from moneyed interests very much play upon earlier ideas and practices.

The resulting bureaucracy is focused upon major infrastructure projects and major state investments in specific areas of strategic and economic interest – most significantly technology. China is positioning itself as the next leader in engineering infrastructure and technology. It is also becoming the leader in utilising technology for governance as well. We noted above how focused the imperial bureaucracy had been on utilising data to organise human and material resources. This is very much the case in the current regime as well, only now that data organisation is being worked through the use of algorithms. Increasingly, algorithms are being used to determine everything from surveillance to the workings of public infrastructure. China is also quickly becoming the leader in green technology, geoengineering, and genetic engineering.

To explain the significance of these technological developments for China's legitimation, it will be helpful to turn to the question of how China is positioning itself in the international arena.

8.6 The International Order

Thus far, we have been discussing China's mode of political legitimation within the domestic sphere. But Xi Jinping is also very concerned with the international arena as well. China is explicitly presenting itself in opposition to the political economy of the United States and in opposition to the international system run by the United States.

A commonly made argument in China is that the system of governance in the United States is one in which a neoliberal economic order has been allowed to run fully for several decades. The result has been the growth of massive income inequality with minimal social mobility, despite US claims to being a meritocracy. Moreover, because of the tremendous income inequality, wealthy figures and corporations have de facto been allowed to play an outsize role in determining government policy.

The result is a form of governance that works for and is to a significant degree controlled by major corporate interests. A further result is that governance is

highly ineffective, since it is in practice designed to work for such a narrow set of interests and is therefore incapable of confronting the major issues of the day. It is a system of governance that by definition cannot seriously address income inequality, since the governing institutions are largely controlled by wealthy interests. And it cannot address climate change, since the corporate interests that led to environmental destruction by definition would not support policies that would undercut their own profits.

The further argument is that the current US form of political economy has largely been exported to the world as the normative model. Indeed, the implicit claim of Xi Jinping's government is that the Communist Party in China overly embraced the neoliberal policies of the United States during the 1990s. Xi Jinping's response to the problems in China of economic inequality and corruption is thus also a response to the political economy that the United States embodies and has been exporting to the world.⁵

But the critique of the current international order goes further than just this. A recurrent claim in China is also that the existing world order – including most international law and most institutions of global governance – is a product of the imperial system of Great Britain and its successor, the United States. Under the guise of “free markets,” the argument goes, a system is being run that effectively enriches American corporate interests at the expense of the rest of the world. The kind of income inequality that the US political economy creates domestically is thus also being replicated in the international order as well, with the rest of humanity being impoverished at the expense of American corporations.

Along with the impoverishment of the rest of the world, the reigning ideology of economics and statecraft embodied in the United States and held as normative for the world is presented in China as one that has created global climate change. Here again, the US political economy has created the problem and is incapable of solving it.

The model that China is presenting domestically to solve its own problems is thus one that it is also presenting as an alternate model for the world in opposition to the neoliberal system of the United States. China is presenting itself not simply as the next world power – a significant claim in itself – but as the world power that will bring an end to the entire Anglo-American imperial system that has dominated the international order for the past two centuries.

8.7 Potentials and Challenges

How likely is it that China will accomplish these goals? To begin to answer this, let us note the places where China may have a chance of succeeding, then turn to where it will be facing very significant challenges, and finally turn to the implications these potentials and challenges might have for the international order.

Certainly the clearest opening that exists for China's attempted international positioning as the world's next superpower is being created by recent

failures on the part of the United States. Many of the critiques being made by China have a potential to resonate globally for the simple reason that there is a great deal of truth to them. The United States has been unable to provide any credible leadership on climate change and seems unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future. Income inequality in the United States is extremely high, and no significant government policies have been enacted to address it. The perception that US governmental institutions are controlled by corporate interests has led to significant populist protests in America that even threaten the democratic system itself. The United States is hardly at its strongest position as a world leader.

Many of these same points can be made when moving from the domestic situation in the United States to the international order more broadly. Certainly the post-World War II liberal international order created by and largely run by the United States has rarely seemed weaker.

All of this makes a possible challenge to the current world order a realistic possibility. And certainly many of the specific responses that China is offering are clearly relevant to the current problems. The emphasis in Chinese political theory on creating a divorce between political power and economic interests, as well as the centuries of political experimentation in how to implement such a vision, fully deserve to be taken deeply seriously in global discussions.

But the success of the current model being offered by China – both domestically and internationally – will depend to a significant degree on its effectiveness in addressing the problems it emphasises so strongly.

To begin with the domestic space. Much of the domestic support in China for the government over the past two decades has emerged from the tremendous economic growth overseen by the state and in part forged through its infrastructure and investment projects. But economic growth at that level is clearly unsustainable. What will happen as economic growth slows, perhaps punctuated with significant financial crises from over-investments in specific industries (particularly construction)?

Income inequality and pollution in China are indeed alarmingly high, and the government is promising to alleviate these. But will China be able to address these effectively? Especially if doing so may lead in the short term to an even further slowing of the economy?

Even if it can prove an ability to address these problems, will China be able to gain the trust of other nations? Given the intense nationalism that exists in China, an effective state governance system that leads to a continued growth in standard of living and a growing prominence on the world stage would be likely to continue to generate strong domestic support. But that may not be enough to gain support internationally as a power that other states would be willing to rally behind in opposition to the United States. In East Asia itself, China is viewed with great suspicion by many states other than North Korea. Outside of East Asia, China has some support, but primarily as the most effective current rival to the United States, rather than as a long-term ally.

But even if the extreme position – of China as the next world power reorienting the international order – seems unlikely in the immediate future, the implications of China's current political positioning are nonetheless significant.

8.8 Challenges to the Current International Order

One of the hallmarks of liberal thinking as promoted by the United States since World War II has been that democracy and capitalism are inherently related. The argument has been that the United States, by promoting a global economic system, would help create the emergence of a middle class in each society, and that middle class would in turn push for the creation of a democracy. Indeed, this is precisely the way China has been approached by the United States since the 1980s: the assumption was that, by promoting economic liberalisation, China would inevitably become more and more like the United States.

It is not simply that this has not happened in China. If China can succeed in maintaining a strong economic system while also maintaining a strong managerial state – building, in other words, a successful form of authoritarian state capitalism – it could indeed present a model that would be tempting in many areas of the world. Most obviously, it provides a model for authoritarian states, now with levels of technology for effective surveillance and human engineering that would have been impossible even a few years ago.

But it also provides a vision for how states can use meritocratic mechanisms to divorce political power from corporate interests and thus open at least the possibility of dealing with issues like income inequality. Moreover, it provides a possible approach as well as a growing body of technology for dealing with climate change. China's approach to this issue will probably continue to be through geoengineering and new technologies for green infrastructure. For all the very serious concerns that geoengineering may raise, it is easy to imagine a scenario where it would become an increasingly common approach for attempting to deal with climate change, if only for a lack of other viable options. In all of these areas, China is likely to play a very significant role in the world to come.

8.9 Conclusions

Until quite recently, the dominant way of reading China occurred within a common Euro-American modernity framework. China was seen as having been controlled by a "traditional" state that inhibited economic growth – a traditional state that China had never completely thrown off. The assumption was that economic growth in China would inevitably lead to the emergence of a middle class and that such a rising middle class would in turn call for an American-style system of democratic governance and the gradual withering away of the "traditional" authoritarian state. China would thus become "modern" – understood as American-style democracy and capitalism.

But this is a misreading of China's past, a misreading of China's present, and very likely a misreading of things to come. Understanding ideas and practices from China's past allows us to see the development of a distinctive political culture that is actively being built upon and appropriated today. Such an understanding can allow us to see how political legitimization is operating in China today and what implications these forms of political legitimization might have, both domestically and in the international order. Given the significant role that China is likely to be playing in the decades to come, such an attempt will well repay the effort.

Notes

- 1 The theory for this approach is laid out clearly in the 3rd-century work, *The Book of Lord Shang*. For an outstanding translation, see Yuri Pines, *The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
- 2 Benjamin A. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- 3 For an excellent discussion of the late imperial Chinese administrative state, see R. Bin Wong, 'Coping with Poverty and Famine: Material Welfare, Public Goods, and Chinese Approaches to Governance,' in Masayuki Tanimoto and R. Bin Wong (Eds), *Public Goods Provision in the Early Modern Economy: Comparative Perspectives from Japan, China, and Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).
- 4 Chenyang Li and Hong Xiao, 'China's Meritocratic Examinations and the Ideal of Virtuous Talents', in Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li (Eds), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 340–362.
- 5 For a helpful compendium of the speeches and official pronouncements of Xi Jinping, see *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*, three volumes (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2020). For an excellent study of Xi Jinping in relation to previous rulers of the Party, see David Shambaugh, *China's Leaders: From Mao to Now* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

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