

Review Essay for PS (Perspectives on Politics): Forthcoming

New and Renewed Approaches to Understanding Chinese Politics

Rethinking Chinese Politics. By Joseph Fewsmith. London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 230p. \$70.49 cloth, \$25.10 paper.

Fractured China: How State Transformation Is Shaping China's Rise. By Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri. London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 318p. \$72.66 cloth, \$34.99 paper.

China in the World: Culture, Politics, and World Vision. By Ban Wang. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. 232p. \$73.43 cloth, \$25.95 paper.

A consensus has emerged among America's policy circles and China specialists that the US policy of engagement to promote the democratization of China has not been successful. Debates abound as to why and what went wrong, as can be seen in the pages of leading foreign policy journals and a plethora of books on a rising China's challenge to American primacy. Typical is the assessment that western democracies have underestimated "the resilience, resourcefulness, and ruthlessness of the Chinese Communist Party" (Aaron Friedberg, *Getting China Wrong*, 2022).

What then is the nature of the Chinese polity and its import globally? This is an important question not only because of the scale and speed of China's rise, but also because of its increasingly repressive domestic policy and assertive foreign policy, especially under Xi Jinping's leadership during the past decade. The three books under review here address the question from different angles: from elite politics in *Rethinking Chinese Politics* by Joseph Fewsmith, a leading Pekingologist; from the realities of China's foreign policy making and implementation in *Fractured China: How State Transformation Is Shaping China's Rise* by Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, scholars of international politics; and from Chinese political and literary works in *China in the World: Culture, Politics and World Vision* by Ban Wang, a scholar of Chinese Studies.

The relative political stability that China has experienced since Tiananmen has led to a widespread understanding in the fields of political science and China studies that the Chinese political system has become institutionalized. That is, the development of rules that define

leadership succession and decision making, and an administrative system that more or less resembles a Weberian-style rational–legal bureaucracy. Such institutionalization, by implication, should entail a degree of predictability and transparency about China’s intentions and behaviors both at home and abroad. In *Rethinking Chinese politics*, however, Fewsmith challenges this prevailing explanation of the Chinese system. Instead of institutionalization, he argues, its absence provides the better explanation. Fewsmith resurrects the concept of Leninism to characterize the Chinese system, defined as a hierarchal, mobilizational, task-oriented party that rules by relying on cadres and penetrating deeply into society. His empirical chapters trace four decades of elite politics from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, showing that each leader has built his power base relying not so much on institutional rules but raw power, personal factions, manipulation of rules and processes, ideology, and political mobilization. Xi’s recentralization of power is seen as efforts to address the inevitable pathologies of the Leninist party, including organizational corrosion and dysfunction, yet only to strengthen Leninism and further weaken institutionalization. Fewsmith’s deep knowledge of Chinese elite politics, adept use of Chinese language sources, and rich documentation of leadership roles and transitions help build solid support for his argument.

Identifying the nature of the Chinese political system is also key to the central argument of *Fractured China*. Co-authors Jones and Hameiri set out to refute the prevailing analytical framework among western policy makers and scholars that views China as a revisionist power whose rise poses a threat to the global order. They trace this misconception to the generic statism of many IR theories, which assume that states are unitary actors. In China’s case, this view is reinforced by its one-party authoritarian system, which appears to outsiders as a top-down monolith that ensures coherent, strategic policymaking. Jones and Hameri develop an alternative framework, “state transformation,” to explain the reality of disjointed policymaking and implementation in China’s case: the fragmentation, decentralization and internationalization of party-state apparatuses, thanks to four decades of reform and opening. Multiple state actors at different levels - from central, provincial and local governments to functional agencies and state owned enterprises (SOEs) – now operate internationally with divergent interests and agendas, considerable autonomy, and limited coordination and oversight. The central government provides broad policy guidelines, but leave details and execution to individual agencies and SOEs. The result is often inconsistent and even contradictory behavior in China’s international

engagements. The book's empirical chapters offer three well documented case studies that challenge conventional understanding of China's international behavior: Chinese engagements in the South China Seas (SCS), where the economic interests of local fishermen in Hainan province and those of state oil companies are shown to dominate; Chinese management of "non-traditional" security issues in the Greater Mekong Subregion, where the local governments and SOEs of Yunnan province diverge from or even undermine Beijing's goals; and finally, China's developmental financing (DF) in the same subregion, where China's fragmented governance regime permits widespread malpractice on the part of its SOEs and recipient governments. Interviews of sources on both sides of the parties in the three cases, i.e. Chinese and Southeast Asian, help generate balanced and mutually corroborating evidence for the study.

China's in the World examines how China's own thinkers and writers envision the nature of the Chinese polity and its relation to or place in the world. Selected from the late Qing to the Mao eras, they represent modern Chinese thinking that draws on the classical vision of *tianxia*, or Confucian universalism, and addresses the intertwinement of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. The dominant discourse that emerges is one of socialist fraternity at home and abroad: asserting national equality and liberation in the face of imperial powers during the late Qing and Republican periods, and asserting interethnic unity, socialist internationalism and third worldism during the Mao period. This Chinese discourse is presented as a yearning quest for a desirable alternative to the capitalist world system. The tone of the book is nostalgic, lamenting contemporary China's embrace of global capitalism and western treatment of China with depoliticized, capitalist cosmopolitanism.

Rethinking Chinese Politics and *Fractured China* bring refreshing and compelling analytical frameworks to the fields of China studies and international relations. The efficacy of Fewsmith's Leninist framework is three-fold. First, it pinpoints the toolkits on which the party relies to maintain the stability of its rule: centralization, ideology, and penetration of society. Secondly, it explains the way the party works at the highest and down to the lowest levels of its organizational hierarchy. With centralization personified in the party secretary at each level, the result is a political system where individuals shape power structures rather than institutions constrain individual power. Thirdly, Leninism also helps to explain the ways institutional decay sets in for the party. As post-Mao China undergoes diversification of society and the "state transformation" characterized in *Fractured China*, the party's control over local organization and

cadre inevitably atrophies or becomes impossible, leading to weakened discipline, abuse of power, factionalism, and corruption. Leninism is then called upon to remedy its own pathologies. The Leninist framework provides a parsimonious and cogent explanation of the Chinese political system, convincingly rebuking alternative explanations.

If Fewsmith focuses on elite politics and has just one chapter on the pathologies of the Chinese system, Jones and Hameiri put those pathologies on full display. Their “state transformation” framework, highlighting fragmentation, decentralization and internationalization of bureaucratic powers and functions over China’s four decades of reform and opening, adds a much needed analytical lens to the studies of Chinese foreign policy and international politics in general. The realist view of a rational and interest-maximizing unitary actor may be analytically convenient. But it runs up against China’s complex realities of myriad central agencies with different priorities jockeying for influence over policymaking, while implementation is fragmented even further and dominated by SOEs, which compete fiercely for tied aid contracts and whose interests are not always aligned with Beijing’s wider diplomatic or geopolitical goals. The two case studies involving the Greater Mekong Subregion, one about counter-narcotics operation (substitution farming) in Myanmar and Laos and the other about DF programs (dam construction) in Myanmar and Cambodia, are especially telling. Due to horrible political environments in the recipient countries (other than Laos) and virtually absent Chinese governance regime on the ground, the projects often result in rapacious exploitation of natural resources, violent and illegal land-grabbing backed by recipient states, forced displacements of poor rural communities, and militarization by the local army to protect project sites. All this generates deep resentment among local communities long grieved by the military. Fighting over profits from these investments create elite-level tensions and corruption. Far from pacifying and developing the borderlands, Chinese involvements have entrenched conflict.

The two Mekong cases, suggest Jones and Hameiri, exemplify a rather common scenario. Such abuse by low-level state actors is also a familiar story in China’s own urban development. That is, land-grabbing and displacement of local residents, contributing to a major source of social contention in the reform era. Furthermore, Jones and Hameiri’s empirical finding is consistent with Fewsmith’s argument about the Leninist party’s weakening control over local levels in a diversifying society. Their books also agree that Xi’s recentralization efforts have not made things fundamentally better.

That said, there may be even more diversity to China's state fragmentation than Jones and Hameiri recognize. That is, not all SOEs may be eager or willing partners in Beijing's overseas involvements or DF projects. Some are simply commanded to undertake them because they are SOEs. Participation in such projects is not necessarily a factor in their executives' career advancement, although refusal to participate can be. Likewise, not all SOE involvement is motivated by profit making but may be obligated as political tasks. As political tasks, projects may not be profitable and the undertakers may be more concerned with getting the job done than with their socioeconomic or environmental impact. This pattern is again a familiar one in China's aid projects at home in its key minority regions. Contrary to Jones and Hameiri's account, a well-informed Chinese source told this author that drillings in the SCS are not profitable for SOEs but they do it as a political task to project China's presence and that Yunnan province does not need the electricity generated by the dams built by Chinese SOEs in Cambodia, but has to purchase it as a political task from Beijing or as a deal to corrupt elites across the border. In these scenarios, Jones and Hameiri's thesis about a haphazard Chinese state still holds.

The analytical insights and complex realities from Fewsmith and Jones and Hameiri render hollow the socialist discourse from Ban Wang's *China in the World*. Given the transformative forces examined in the first two books, Wang's use of past Chinese thinking to understand the present appears idealistic and anachronistic. It would be more relevant to look at contemporary Chinese thinking in the context of current political dynamics. Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, prominent thinkers from the late Qing period in Wang's empirical cases, were writing when China was confronting stronger imperial powers. But China is now a strong power, itself sometimes cast as an imperial power abroad and a colonial power at home in some of its own ethnic regions. How do prominent Chinese thinkers approach issues of national equality and liberation now? Likewise, films from the Mao era about Chinese participation in the Korean War are analyzed by Wang to exemplify socialist internationalism. But why not include more recent "wolf warrior" themed movies that reflects more realistically China's jingoistic mood today? Wang's use of a minority film to illustrate interethnic unity also seems misplaced, because the minority groups featured in the film have long been acculturated to the mainstream society, in contrast to the less assimilated groups that continue to besiege the party-state today. The same line of criticism applies to the rest of Wang's empirical cases.

Most of all, the utopian discourse presented by Wang fails to consider the systemic flaws highlighted by Fewsmith and Jones and Hameiri. Those flaws show the costs of the Chinese system based in official socialist ideology, including hegemony, victimization and injustice that so concern the Chinese thinking analyzed by Wang.

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