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The Social Sources of Chinese Power

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The social sources of Chinese power

At the 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing in October 2017, President Xi Jinping announced a “new era” of Chinese power. China, Xi declared, was ready to transform itself into a “mighty force” that could lead the world on issues ranging from climate change to financial cooperation. Xi spoke of a “call to action” in which the CCP would engage in a “tenacious struggle” that would secure “sweeping victory”. His speech made clear the indivisible nature of the Chinese state – Xi’s leadership, allied to CCP primacy, led organically to Chinese prosperity and power. Although seen by some as marking a shift in Chinese grand strategy, Xi’s pronouncements are better seen as reflections of dynamics that are already well underway. A list of China’s power assets is striking: the world’s second largest economy, including four of the world’s ten biggest banks by market capitalisation; the world’s second largest military budget; the world’s biggest exporter; the world’s highest foreign exchange reserves; the world’s second largest recipient of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI); the world’s leading producer; and the world’s second largest aid donor, providing development assistance to over 100 states in the global south, including many that are off limits to Western donors (Chin and Quadir 2012, 494; Shambaugh 2013, 7-8, 157).

We are already living, therefore, in a world in which China is a ‘great power’, defined as a state that has considerable influence in more than one region of the world. But how should we understand the *sources* of China’s power? *The Confucian-Legalist State* gives us a novel answer to this question. For two millennia, Zhao (2015) argues, from the unification of China under the Qin to the collapse of the Qing dynasty in the early part of the 20th century, China’s political system can be captured by a single macro-formulation: Confucian-Legalism. This resilient blend of hierarchy and state centralization provided China with formidable advantages: a strong state, a meritocratic bureaucracy, and an ideological unity. But the sources of Chinese stability were also its greatest weaknesses – they arrested economic development. Unlike early modern Europe, Chinese merchants did not translate their economic wealth into political power. For many centuries, this did not particularly matter. Most parts of the world were a long

way off, and neither any wealthier nor any more productive than China. Things changed during the 19th century. Once a handful of Western states harnessed industrial power, China fell behind quickly and decisively. “It was in the nature of the Confucian-Legalist state”, Zhao (2015, 348) writes, “to turn its back on industrial capitalism”.

Industrialization, along with related strands of modernity, hastened the collapse of China’s Confucian-Legalist order, ushering in a tumultuous century of revolution, wardlordism and, more recently, intense economic development. ‘Modernization’ is now the only game in town. Xi Jinping’s call for action is the latest in a century long struggle to reestablish Chinese power without the unity – and shackles – provided by its Confucian-Legalist past.

It should be said at the outset that I am not a China specialist. Rather, I am a historical sociologist whose disciplinary home is International Relations (IR). As such, I will leave discussion of the fine details of Zhao’s historical argument to other, more qualified, reviewers. All I will say on this subject is that the book is the product of extensive, original, meticulous research, combining primary and secondary sources with travel, interviews, and other novel techniques. It is a work of exemplary scholarship. Zhao joins attempts to draw out long-term continuities in Chinese history (e.g. Pines 2012). And his historical reinterpretations are, for me as a non-specialist, fascinating insights into places, peoples, and times I do not know well. Rather than concentrate on Zhao’s contributions to Chinese historiography, my contribution highlights four reservations about the theoretical components of Zhao’s argument, as well as two possible extensions of interest to IR audiences.

Reservations

Zhao (2015, 10, 29) sees people as “competitive” and “conflict-prone animals”, who are “strongly inclined to compete for domination”. From these basic impulses, Zhao (2015, 33) constructs a theory, based around Michael Mann’s (1986) fourfold sources of social power, in which competition for domination takes center stage. For Zhao, military competition generates state centralization, while economic competition decentralizes societal power. The latter is concerned with “private” rationality; the latter with “public” rationality. Political power contains a “performance-based legitimacy” based on regulating competition (Zhao 2015, 40). Ideological power represents the ways in which prominent social actors disseminate “legitimizing values”, “institutionalize their

gains”, and “indoctrinate” publics (Zhao 2015, 10-11). Whereas China’s blend of Confucian-Legalism developed as an ideology of state power through military competition, early modern Europe blended military and economic competition. Here, states were hemmed in by a merchant class that developed into an urban bourgeoisie, political checks and balances (such as that between monarchs and parliaments), and alternative sources of ideological power, particularly churches (Zhao 2015, 220, 242-3). This meant that merchants were able to imbue states not just with a “well-stocked treasury” (Zhao 2015, 359), but also with novel strategies and ideologies. An alliance between states and merchants produced a form of cumulative development that Confucian-Legalism was unable to emulate.

There are several things to say about this argument. First, Zhao’s argument rests on a view of human nature as necessarily power-seeking and oriented towards competition. As he puts it, competition is the “ultimate engine of historical change” (Zhao 2015: 29). This quasi-functionalist, quasi-evolutionary theory is, to me, unpersuasive. Clearly humans have a capacity, perhaps even a tendency, towards competition and conflict. But they have at least as strong a capacity towards reciprocity and cooperation. Human beings are, in comparison to other animals, not well suited to violence – children are defenceless for many years, while adults do not possess the teeth, claws, jaws, horns, venom, speed, smell, or eyesight of many other animals (Malešević 2017, 310). Indeed, it may be that the relative weakness of human’s capacity for violent competition has prompted their development in other spheres, particularly cognition. As with other micro-dynamics, psychogenetic factors leave an indeterminate legacy at higher levels of social aggregation. Primal urges are an insecure way on which to base a macro-sociological argument.

Second, although the ambition of Zhao’s book – to explain the principal patterns of Chinese historical development over more than two thousand years – is admirable, it is questionable whether it can be captured by the use of terms drawn from the modern world. Zhao spends some time discussing this point, especially in the book’s Introduction, but not for me convincingly. To take one example that is fundamental to his argument – the split between private (economic) rationalities and public (political) rationalities: this is a quintessentially modern construction. Public and private meant different things three or four centuries ago, let alone two thousand years ago, as they do today. To take one obvious example – the trade carried out by the British East India

Company, which was fundamental to how modern notions of public and private developed (Erikson 2017). This trade was *public* in that it was a monopoly trade sanctioned by acts (charters) of parliament. *Private* trade was conducted by individuals working outside these monopolies. Patrimonial regimes in Europe sold offices and granted prerogatives for services rendered to the crown. In mid-17th century England, for example, favoured nobles held *public* monopolies: Sir Edmund Verney for tobacco, the Earl of Salisbury for silk, etc. Contemporary distinctions between public and private (and their reification as distinct spheres of politics and economics) belong to the modern world, in particular the shift from a single realm of political economy to the bracketing of a private sphere of market exchange from a public sphere of political regulation. In order to understand these relationships, we need to think not in terms of public/private, but in terms of monopoly vs. free trade, spiritual vs. temporal sovereignty, universal vs. bounded monarchy, patrimonial vs. legal/bureaucratic authority, etc. Different contexts require different concepts. The same is surely true of ancient China.

Third, and relatedly, much of Zhao's explanation hangs on the role of economic competition. "The most crucial feature of modernity", Zhao (2015, 44, 361) writes, is "the valuation and domination of privately oriented instrumental rationalism". Whereas, as noted above, European merchants were able to peddle their entrepreneurship into political influence, Confucian-Legalism acted as a brake on Chinese economic development. This begs a range of questions. One is how Japan's relatively early industrialization can be accommodated within this schema. It may not have been fully Confucian-Legalist in character, but its form of authoritarian-hierarchical modernization certainly shared a family resemblance to it. Japan was one of many states that modernized not through the translation of private into public rationality, but through the reverse, i.e. hierarchical, often authoritarian, state-led development (Buzan and Lawson 2015, Ch. 5). Late 19th century Germany provides one example of this tendency, the post-war 'Asian Tigers' a second, contemporary China a third. Today, the fusion of conservative, often authoritarian, statehood with capitalism can be found from Singapore to Qatar. This apparently stable fusion would not have been a major surprise to 19th century analysts of industrial capitalism. For both its detractors and advocates alike, capitalism prompted tendencies towards oligopoly. Because capitalism turbo-charges change, it is always attended by trade-offs in terms of

growth, inequality, efficiency, and stability. Capitalism is legitimized by generating wealth in the form of growth and profits. But this wealth is unevenly distributed, something accentuated by the tendency of the rate of return on capital (particularly inherited wealth) to exceed growth in either income or output over the long-term (Piketty 2014). Contemporary debates about the oligarchic nature of capitalism and rising levels of inequality speak to a more complex relationship between private/public, capital/state, and economic/political power than Zhao suggests.

Fourth, Zhao (2015, 4, fn. 4) sees the industrial revolution as a European phenomenon, but it was much more than this – industrialization was a global affair. Industrialization in some places (such as Britain) was deeply interwoven with the forceful de-industrialization of others (such as India). For example, Indian textiles were either banned from Britain or levied with high tariffs – the British government tripled duties on Indian goods during the 1790s and raised them by a factor of nine in the first two decades of the 19th century. In contrast, British manufacturing products were forcibly imported into India without duty (Wolf 1997, 151). Between 1814 and 1828, British cloth exports to India rose from 800,000 yards to over 40 million yards; while during the same period, Indian cloth exports to Britain halved (Goody 1996, 131). For many centuries before the onset of modernity, India’s merchant class produced the garments that “clothed the world” (Parthasarathi 2011, 22). By 1850, Lancashire was the new center of a global textiles industry. Within a generation or two, centuries-old skills in industries such as cloth dyeing, shipbuilding, metallurgy and gun making had been lost to South Asia (Arnold 2000, 100-1; Parthasarathi 2011, 259). Transnational networks, allied to power asymmetries, were fundamental to the emergence of industrialization – Indian textile workers were as implicated in modernity as British engineers (Burbank and Cooper 2010, 238).

In contrast, Zhao’s explanation is ‘internalist’ in nature – he explains patterns of Chinese history through reference to dynamics *internal* to China. There are strikingly few references in his book to geopolitics outside China, the emulation of administrative and commercial practices, the spread of ideas and technologies across borders, etc. The reader is left to wonder about the influence of conflict with Central Asian nomads, the role of long-distance trade, China’s retreat from voyages of exploration under General Zheng He, and similar events (Zhao 2015, Ch. 11 is a brief exception; also see 363-4). In other words, Zhao largely omits the *inter-societal* features of Chinese historical

development – its embedding in transboundary circuits of peoples, places, and ideas (Go and Lawson 2017). These features did not arrive unannounced in the 19th century. Two thousand years ago, imperial Rome and Han China knew of each other, and had a significant trade in luxury goods and specie. During the early modern period, China was embedded in global circuits of silver, silk, porcelain and, later, opium. Yet Zhao’s account stays almost entirely within the contours of the Chinese polity, uprooted from vectors that exceeded the boundaries of the Chinese state.

Openings

In this final section, I want to consider two possible extensions of Zhao’s argument, which will be of interest to IR audiences. Zhao (2015, 184-93, 260-1) engages IR directly during his discussion of legalism and in his analysis of how the Qin were able to unify China without generating a united opposition. Zhao (2015, 193, 221, 248) sees legalism as an “ideology of rule” and its statecraft as an ethos of militarization – the result was a “war machine”. Whereas China’s inter-state order was one of “Hobbesian anarchy” (Zhao 2015, 260), European inter-state competition was mediated by norms, law, and institutions (Zhao 2015, 251-2). Most importantly, none of the Qin’s adversaries could establish the trust required for building an enduring alliance. Unlike European states, Chinese polities did not have an imperial exit visa – their theater was smaller than that available to European states. This made it easier for a single power to become dominant. This discussion contains a range of insights. Realist IR theory would expect a balance against an aspirant hegemon to emerge, even if it was simply an alliance of convenience, and even if it was contained within a relatively bounded region. After all, this is what happened in Europe following attempts at unification by Charlemagne, Napoleon, and Hitler. However, none of these alliances were formed or held together by trust. Much more important was the imperative that ‘universal empire’ should be halted in its tracks. In this sense, Zhao’s argument and the mechanisms he cites in explanation of Qin unification could be fruitfully deployed to further refine balance of power theory, particularly work that has extended the theory beyond the experience of the modern West (e.g. Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth eds. 2007).

The second opening lies in the relationship Zhao draws between war making, state centralization, and international order. For Zhao, military competition is a core component of both state centralization and international order making. This claim

needs further specification. To take one example: between 1650 and 1780, France was at war in two out of every three years. However, the product of French bellicosity was factionalism rather than state centralization – indeed, a factionalism that was fatal to the *ancien régime*. War, therefore, does not have a single, determinate effect on state power – it causes state breakdown as well as state strengthening. To put this another way – war may make the state, but it may also break the state. Take, as an obvious example, World War Two. The war devastated European states, both winners and losers alike: by its end, German GDP had returned to its 1890 level, while living standards in Britain had fallen by a third (Frieden 2006, 261); the United States, by contrast, had seen its economy grow substantially. These examples provide little support for Zhao's claim that war is *necessarily* generative of state power. Sometimes it is, at other times it is not. This is one reason why Realist IR cautions against war. Contrary to the ethos of bellicosity with which it is often associated, including in Zhao's book, Realism favors a cautious, prudential foreign policy based on concern for the excessive character of politics. For many Realists, war is the great destroyer of states. In this sense, the comparison Zhao draws between Realism and Legalism, as well as the constitutive relationship he constructs between war, state formation and international order, would benefit from further elaboration.

Making these points is not meant to detract from the many insights contained in Zhao's magisterial study. I learned a huge amount from reading the book, much more than this brief engagement can detail. My aim is to tease out the wider implications of *The Confucian-Legalist State* in order to further encourage the stimulating discussions that I am sure will follow.

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