

Book Review: China's Political Economy in Modern Times: Changes and Economic Consequences, 1800-2000

by blog admin

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*This book aims to make an important contribution to the study of changes in China's institutions and their impact on the national economy as well as ordinary people's daily material life from 1800 to 2000. **China's Political Economy in Modern Times** serves as a useful reference for readers who are interested in Chinese modern history and how China became the country it is today, writes Yan Yun.*



China's Political Economy in Modern Times: Changes and Economic Consequences, 1800-2000. Kent Deng. Routledge. October 2012.

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Chinese modern history, starting from the mid-19th century on the mainland, was messy in the sense that it experienced a long series of uprisings, foreign invasions, warlord warfare, political purges, and famines, either simultaneously or in quick succession. To navigate through it, [Kent Deng](#) in his book *China's Political Economy in Modern Times*, attaches an underlying motivation to the tiny minority of the movers and shakers present in this time of Chinese history: the pursuit of state power. This lust for state power is deceptively simple and has often been overlooked by historians. Deng goes on to argue that the Taiping rebellion, Sun Yat-sen's revolution, and Mao's rising, are all attributed to this underlying drive for power and they succeeded due to the weakness of the Qing state.



The traditional view regarding Qing China (1644-1911) i.e., the official and prevalently accepted view in mainland China, was that it was a strong state and had a firm control over society. Contrary to this, Deng writes that Qing China was a "simple, small and cheap state", of low-budget, and low-density in nature. According to the survey in Chapter 3, the population-to-officials ratio was 2,300:1 in 1700, and this widened to 15,136:1 in 1833. In comparison, Deng states that "on the eve of the Cultural Revolution Mao's China had 12 million 'civil cadres' which would put the civilians-to-cadres ratio at 5:1. This is over 50 times the Qing level" (p. 26). In another comparison, the notorious Qing 'literary inquisition' – a period of censorship which saw the persecution of individuals for writings which were perceived as offensive to the ruling state – only involved a small number of people: 65 cases and 70 death penalties. This was only 0.25% of all officials or 0.005% of the gentry and was trivial compared to the victims under Mao's dictatorship in the 20th century (p. 28). Thus, as Deng concludes, the Qing state control and sanction could only be occasional and random.



In chapter 4, an impressive narrative on the Taiping rebellion is presented. The Rebellion was the most damaging uprising in the Empire, and the ensuing social unrest lasted more than ten years (1850 to 1864), sweeping nearly half of China. According to the narrative, the Taiping state was run by a group of illiterates, ignorant radicals, and professional looters. There was no system of codified law, and the economy was ill-functioning. Readers are left to wonder, however, why such a poorly managed state could last as long as it did but Deng leaves this burning question unanswered. However, the fact it took the Qings over ten years to squash the incompetent Taipings, simply proves Deng's argument surrounding the "withering state of Qing".

Deng's most novel and ingenious hypothesis is his reassessment of Maoism, generally taken as an indigenous philosophy of China, but which Deng views as a Eurocentric system. This is fully expounded in Chapter 9 and part of Chapter 10, where Maoism is investigated politically, economically, and culturally. Here the author generalises three models for the economic planning under Maoism: waste in the name of planning; exploitation of the peasantry; and politics overruling the economy. Mao's pursuit of economic growth was motivated by the ambition to match Stalin's 'achievements' and thus to become a real contender for the top leadership in the international communist movement (p. 128). The economic consequences of this ambitious plan were disastrous and resulted in man-made famine and mass poverty. Despite what has been officially claimed, Maoism aimed to treat China as another Europe with an ultimate wish to transform China into a sort of Europe. Marxism too, is shown to be a Eurocentric model that ultimately failed.

In contrast, [Deng Xiaoping's](#) growth model was the model of the Asian Tigers. What distinguishes it from Eurocentric models is that it appreciates public education, private property rights and the market economy, something Confucianism openly promoted and also something which helped Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The model Deng puts forth is thus Asiacentric or Sinocentric, and compatible with China's tradition.

It is worth mentioning the author is ethnic Chinese who grew up 'under the red flag' and also was one of the privileged few to enter Zhongzhi Yuying Xuexiao ("The Elite-Nurturing School for the Central Apparatus"), a school whose admission was based on parents' social standing as well as one's IQ, and whose alumni include a long list of offspring of top officials in Mao's China. This has clearly given him first-hand insights into the Maoist system and has helped him to provide a convincing trajectory for the development of modern China, though one cannot expect a short book which deals with such a large country with a complicated past to be accurate in every detail. However, *China's Political Economy in Modern Times* offers an alternative way of thinking about social phenomenon, especially in the case of China. This book therefore serves as a new reference for readers who are interested in Chinese modern history and how China became the country it is today.

Yan Yun is research fellow at Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, working on Chinese economic history from the sixteenth century down to the early twentieth century. Her recent research interests include business history of a Sino-British enterprise Kailuan colliery in modern China and household wealth of the official-elite families in eighteenth century China. [Read more reviews by Yan.](#)