

# THE STATE

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**T**HE state is one of the lively areas of contention in the study of Chinese politics. In this memorandum, I review the literature on the Chinese state, with a focus on the state's role in coercion and development. I identify three remaining questions and suggest possible approaches to address them in future research. Looking forward, I argue that a historical, comparative, and macro-level analysis of the Chinese case may contribute to the general theories of the state.

## The Basics

An argument that can be traced back to [Marx \(1973\)](#) and [Wittfogel \(1957\)](#) believes that the Chinese state arose through the need for flood control and irrigation, which required central coordination and a specialized bureaucracy. This “hydraulic origin” theory has been criticized on the ground that most of the water control and irrigation projects were coordinated at the local level. But a recent archaeological discovery points to the connection between Yellow River flood and the rise of the Xia Dynasty (2070–1600 BCE) ([Wu et al. 2016](#)).

[Hui \(2005\)](#) relates early political centralization in China in the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE) to warfare during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). Thereafter, a single political authority has ruled China for most years until today, with political fragmentation as an exception.

Yet scholars have challenged the myth of a powerful and centralized Chinese state. [Shue \(1988\)](#)

argues that the imperial Chinese state's "reach" was limited, constrained by the rural "honeycomb" structure that consisted of gentry families. In urban China, [Perry \(1993\)](#) shows that both the Nationalist and the Communist states "were constrained by the nature of their working-class support." Within the state, [Lieberthal \(1992\)](#) demonstrates that the bureaucracy is fragmented, with conflicting government organizations at different levels and in various vertical hierarchies. [Mertha \(2009\)](#) further develops the framework, arguing that the bureaucratic process in the reform era has become increasingly pluralized, leaving much room for "policy entrepreneurs" to influence policies. [Montinola, Qian and Weingast \(1995\)](#) claim that China is not as unitary as it is believed to be, with strong *de facto* power controlled by provinces, probably because of Deng Xiaoping's need to "play to the provinces" ([Shirk 1993](#)). [Wang and Hu \(2015 \(2001\)\)](#) share a similar concern, arguing that too much decentralization has endangered central control. On the other hand, [Yang \(2006\)](#) reminds us that Beijing still has the *nomenklatura* power to appoint, rotate, and remove provincial-level officials (also see [Manion \(1985\)](#), [Huang \(1995\)](#), [Whiting \(2004\)](#), [Edin \(2003\)](#), and [Landry \(2008\)](#)).

In addition to the origin and structure of the state, most scholarly work has focused on the role of the Chinese state in maintaining political order and promoting socio-economic development, which I will discuss in the next two sections.

## The State and Political Order

Similar to any states, the Chinese state has a "comparative advantage in violence" ([North 1981](#)). After 1949, the CCP has employed state coercive apparatus to crush mass uprisings and regime challenges during the Cultural Revolution ([Walder 2014](#)), the 1989 Student Movement ([Zhang et al. 2008](#)), and the 1999 Falungong movement ([Tong 2009](#)). These episodes of contentious politics, in turn, have strengthened the Chinese security state.

A recent line of research starts to examine the tactics coercive organizations use to manage collective action. [Deng and O'Brien \(2013\)](#) discover that local officials frequently employ "rela-

tional repression,” through mobilizing activists’ social ties, to control protesters. Ong (2018) and Chen (2017), separately, show that local police often rely on thugs or gangsters to repress “mass incidents” to protect the legitimacy of the state. Yan (2014) examines how universities control students—a key target group for authoritarian political control. Studying rural coercion, Wang (2015) shows that township governments, with short time horizons, have strived to contain, rather than resolve, social discontent. King, Pan and Roberts (2013), through studying Internet censorship, demonstrate that the state cares most about collective action but not criticisms.

## The State and Development

While scholars agree that the Chinese state, especially the local state, has played an indispensable role in social and economic development, they debate what that role is. Baum and Shevchenko (1999) group the many disparate observations and models into four main sorts: in their relationships to economic activity, local states have been found to be *entrepreneurial*, *clientelist*, *predatory*, or *developmental*.

In *entrepreneurial states*, as described by Duckett (2006), state agents and bureaucrats, even whole government bureaus, may go into business independently or enter into partnerships for profit. In *clientelist states*, officials promote and participate in the benefits of profit-making activity through personalized and particularistic ties to entrepreneurs in their localities. Pearson (1997) and Wank (1999), separately, provide two urban examples. In *predatory states*, officials do not engage in business either directly or indirectly but utilize their positions instead to extract unproductive rents from producers and entrepreneurs through exorbitant fees, levies and fines, as reported in Bernstein and Lü (2003). Last, in *developmental states*, officials intervene indirectly in the economy, “helping to plan, finance, and co-ordinate local projects, investing in local infrastructure, and promoting co-operative economic relations with external agencies.” This is best captured in Oi (1992) and termed “state corporatism.” Other examples of developmental state forms continue to be found, as reported in Unger and Chan (1999) and Blecher and Shue (1996).

While most of the work on the local states focuses on the 1980s and early 1990s, the fiscal centralization in the mid-1990s invites many scholars to reconsider the role of the local states. Ong (2012), for example, argues that, with declining local autonomy and fiscal revenue, local states have changed from developmental to clientelist. Dickson (2008) uses the term “crony communism” to describe the characteristics of cronyism that are decentralized at the local level. Tsai (2006) shows that private entrepreneurs, in discreet collaboration with local officials, have created a range of adaptive informal institutions, which in turn, have fundamentally altered China’s political and regulatory landscape. In the same vein, Pei (2009) also observes decentralization of corruption and the rise of vested interests capturing the local states.

One interesting question is what explains the variation in different sorts of local states. Yang (1998) and Whiting (2000), separately, trace reform outcomes to the Maoist era. Manion (1996) emphasizes the competitiveness of local elections. Tsai (2007) focuses on local solidarity groups, such as temples and lineages, and how they hold local officials accountable. Xu and Yao (2015) argue that clans help village leaders overcome the collective action problem of financing public goods. Huang (2008) examines the *Sunan*, *Zhebei*, and Shanghai models. Ang (2016) shows the importance of initial conditions for the “coevolution” of the state and the economy. Mattingly (2016) investigates how village committees are “captured” by lineage groups. And Koss (2018) contends that the density of CCP organizations determines how local states function.

## Remaining Questions

As the above discussion indicates, generations of scholars have provided a rich body of research on the Chinese state. But most work has focused on the state in one particular locality at one particular time, which prevents us from aggregating existing knowledge to form a general framework to understand state building, state power, and state development. This is unfortunate particularly because the long span of Chinese history has presented scholars with an unusual opportunity to examine the long-term development of the Chinese state. Future research can benefit from a his-

torical, comparative, and macro-level analysis to answer three remaining questions.

First, what is the best framework to understand China's state building process? An established literature, based on the European experience, focuses on external conflict and crown-elite bargaining in building the modern state (Tilly 1992; North and Weingast 1989). We still lack a systematic understanding of how the Chinese state "came out" and what kind of state "came out." A promising point of departure is to examine the role played by Chinese traditional elites and their relationship with the ruler in various historical periods. Weber's (1978) seminal idea that building a modern state with a "rational-legal" bureaucracy requires shattering the fetter of the families is still useful in thinking about the "tug of war" between the Chinese state and the traditional authorities represented by the gentry and their lineage organizations.

Second, what is the fundamental source of China's state power? While whether the Chinese state is strong is debatable, no one denies that the Chinese state is very effective in achieving some of its goals, such as population control, mass mobilization, and coercion. But we still do not know where this power comes from. Here, a "state-in-society" approach (Migdal, Kohli and Shue 1994) might help us examine how the state employs its social ties to achieve domination. This insight has a deep intellectual root, reflected in historians' work on the gentry and their roles in assisting the imperial state in providing order and development.

Third, what is the role of the central state in China's socio-economic development? While the focus on Chinese local state in economic development has generated useful insights, the under-theorized central state has rendered the China field miss the opportunity to connect with the broad literature on the "developmental state" (Johnson 1982; Amsden 1989; Wade 1990). A promising research agenda is to investigate the role of the national elites in China's economic development. News reports by *Bloomberg* and the *New York Times* reveal that some of the biggest Chinese companies are controlled by a few "ruling families." A systematic empirical study of these ruling families and their role might unlock many mysteries of the Chinese economy.

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