

Preface

Since the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which presented to a global audience the face of contemporary China, the legatee of centuries of civilization, the beneficiary of recent decades of disciplined hard work and now orderly, prosperous and optimistic about the future, there has been a burgeoning literature of commentary on China. Many writers have contributed to this body of work and whilst the questions at issue shift and change with passing events, all revolve one way or another around the matter of the trajectory of development in China; its character, direction and possible wider consequences. In all this debate there are two familiar strands of more narrowly politically oriented work. On the one hand, Washington boosters, those who take the historical example of the USA for granted, a standard against which others, in this case China, can be judged; and on the other hand, China boosters, those who respond to foreign criticism by celebrating the long history, culture and present achievements of contemporary China, again in contrast to other countries, those with shorter, and implicitly less distinguished, histories. Yet both these approaches are foolish and unpersuasive as passing political judgments are allowed to confuse scholarly analysis. In contrast, in this short book we turn our attention to the internal dynamics of politics in China. Offering neither partisan-boosting nor criticism, we root our discussion in those traditions of scholarship with which we are familiar – the text is thus interpretive/critical and we deploy ideas dialogically offering our best efforts to reflexively grasp local logics. In particular we use the resources of historical institutionalism and related notions of culture criticism, as overall our aim is to report simply and directly how the political system works.

Formally, that is, in terms of theoretical approaches, we reject those which are informed by modernization/globalization theory as neither their evolutionism nor America-centredness are helpful. A familiar strand of work cast in these terms looks at China through the ‘comparative lens of Leninist systems’ but such approaches are doomed to fail as the

party-state system is read in terms of the loaded concepts of authoritarianism and political transitions – in its crude and familiar forms such analyses read the world from the perspective of the Washington policy community, and this may be fine, if you are a member, but non-members should not confuse such work with scholarship. And in a similar vein we reject the analogous arguments which claim to be rooted in a distinctive East Asian reality and which offer counter-assertions invoking Confucianism or family types in order to speak about fundamentally hierarchical, paternalistic and moral polities. Here, one particular variant sees Chinese scholars invoking the example of Singapore, taking the self-aggrandizing claims of that country's government at face value and neglecting the wealth of available scholarship which tells a more critical tale of the enduring success of a trading port lodged deeply in the structures of the modern world. In brief, China-boosting is just as foolish as Washington-boosting. Then, third, more prosaically, we reject popular journalistic talk about the failure of the People's Republic of China for it is not collapsing, neither is it threatening, nor, contrariwise, is it without its own spread of problems.

And, finally, in contrast to these approaches and their various anxieties, we embrace those theorists who look to the country's history in the long unfolding shift to the modern world – we look to its institutional structures, to the agents animating the various components and to the sets of ideas running through the machineries of politics and administration and thereafter the wider society. In short, a mix of historical institutionalism and culture criticism. Such approaches allow scholarship a better access to the logic of Chinese politics. Another way of putting this is to look to the history of scholarly commentary on the European Union: at first, dominated by international relations theorists, conversations were concerned with the question of the nature of the European Union but attempts at classificatory analysis were not fruitful and later political scientists and others became involved and turned instead to the question of how the system worked – its logic. And so, here, in this text, we follow that line; we deploy the machineries of historical institutionalism and culture criticism in order to uncover the logic of Chinese politics.

So, in brief, in this short book we endeavour to grasp the underlying logic of the political system of the People's Republic of China. The book also covers a range of hot topics in China, including Internet sovereignty, the 'One Belt, One Road' initiatives and the South China Sea issue along with the problems of the elderly empty nesters and left-behind children.

We hope the book will provide the most relevant and up-to-date information to a broad audience of students, researchers, scholars, professionals, irrespective of discipline, and people with an interest in knowing about China or Chinese politics. We have deployed a mixture of historical institutionalist and culture critical analysis in order to grasp the way in which the system works. We are concerned to spell out the record of the polity; to take note of its beginnings, the historical context within which it was formed, to note the players, the agents whose efforts animate the story, to note the institutional structures which have been created, both ordering and facilitating the work of active agents, to note the policy lines that have been developed and put to work, sketching consequences, intended and unintended, calling attention thereby to the mundane realms of ordinary life, and to note thereafter the overall trajectory of the country and indicate possible future lines of direction.