

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Philip A. Kuhn. *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. ii + 162 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4283-2.

Reviewed by Norton Wheeler (American Studies Program, University of Kansas)
Published on H-Diplo (January, 2003)



Some Origins of Contemporary Chinese Authoritarianism

Some Origins of Contemporary Chinese Authoritarianism

In this compact, elegantly written, and tightly argued book, eminent China historian Philip Kuhn brings new evidence and interpretations to themes that have long interested him—the weaknesses in governance that beset late-Qing China and their relationship to contemporary Chinese statecraft.[1]

In the 1980s, Paul Cohen took American historians of China to task for viewing modern Chinese history, in important respects, as primarily a “response” to forces and ideas from the West.[2] Kuhn has consistently resisted this temptation (refer to note 1) and does so again in this work. At the outset, he acknowledges influences from abroad: “[T]he main point of making a modern state was to resist foreign domination by using some of the foreigners’ own technologies, both material and societal.... Yet, the character of China’s modern state has been shaped decisively by the flow of its internal history” (p. 1). This latter insight serves as Kuhn’s guide in his current book.

The book includes a new introduction, followed by four chapters that Kuhn originally presented as lectures at the College de France in 1994 and that were published in French in 1999. In each of the first three chapters, Kuhn presents and interprets primary Chinese-language sources that have been little or never studied in English. The fourth, and least satisfying, chapter is partly a recapitulation of the first three, partly a new reading of much-studied late-nineteenth-century nationalists Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao.

Throughout, Kuhn explores three challenges that vexed China’s leadership in the waning decades of its empire. “How was broadened political participation to be reconciled with enhancing the power and legitimacy of the state? How could political competition be reconciled with the concept of a public interest? And how could the fiscal demands of the state be reconciled with the needs of the local society” (p. 2)?

Chapter 1 profiles the political career of nineteenth-century literatus Wei Yuan. Drawing on secondary literature (mostly in Chinese) about Wei and on his own reading of Wei’s commentary on a collection of classical Chinese poetry, Kuhn teases out answers to his questions. In analyzing a poem about deer, for example, Wei confounded the conventional reading of the poem as a call for obedience to the wise emperor. Instead, he emphasized communication among the foraging deer. The implication, writes Kuhn, is that “correct policies are to emerge through discussion, not flow downward from a single source” (pp. 39-40). Kuhn cautions against seeing Wei as a liberal democrat, though. He sought to extend the sphere of policy deliberation only to the upper-level literati. Further, “Wei repeatedly associated broader participation not with limiting state power, but with enhancing it” (p. 48).

In chapter 2, Kuhn turns to Wei’s younger contemporary Feng Guifen. Building upon Wei’s abstract ideas, Feng made specific policy proposals for reforming the taxation system and, thus, relations between Beijing and its rural subjects. Kuhn gained access to “a recent

archival discovery” (p. 58) that facilitates his innovative approach to a series of reformist essays that Feng wrote in the 1860s. Published under the title *Essays of Protest*, Feng’s proposals were studied by leaders of the Reform Movement of 1898. Government officials made written comments on Feng’s essays which were preserved in the imperial archives and examined by Kuhn. He found that Feng’s proposals for democratic reform at the state and local level bore a strong imprint of Western influence, and that the reaction of 1898 reformers was “almost uniformly hostile” (pp. 61-62). They worried that creating an American-style political system would give free reign to faction, elevating private over public interest.

In the third chapter, Kuhn studies government-archived documents on the revolt of Leiyang farmers in the 1840s. The revolt reflected the inability of the Beijing government to collect adequate taxes without fostering corruption and extortion by the middlemen who did the actual collecting. Kuhn goes on to argue that not only was communist collectivization of agriculture in the 1950s a way to jump start industrialization, it was an attempt to solve this centuries-old problem of center-periphery relations. “The Old Regime’s concern with forging an unmediated link to the rural producers had certainly provided the historical foundations of the collectivist experiment” (p. 110).

Like all well-constructed books, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* tends to leave engrossed readers, such as this reviewer, with a sense of the inevitability of its conclusions. Thus, one is ready to agree when Kuhn writes, “Considering China’s present-day hybrid of authoritarian politics and entrepreneurial economics (‘market socialism’), it is worth our notice that Wei Yuan considered strong government perfectly compatible with a dynamic private economy” (p. 51). And one nods in agreement to his assessment of the 1898 reformers’ reaction to Feng Guifen’s proposals, “[w]e are verging here ... upon the inner core of Chinese authoritarianism, a system of beliefs about human behavior that did not necessarily dis-

solve with the emergence of the modern state” (p. 70).

Yet, Kuhn’s narrative of contemporary Chinese authoritarianism as a near-inevitable outgrowth of the country’s history is almost too tight. Perhaps this is because his analysis does not extend to twentieth-century reform movements that he has certainly assessed but does not include within the scope of *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*. While democratic intellectuals such as Hu Shi did not prevail politically in the short term, for example, one could argue that their liberal ideas and programs are testimony against any inevitable Chinese tendency toward authoritarianism.[3] Kuhn nevertheless provides another cogent and thoughtful analysis of some historical sources for a contemporary state that, whatever else one may think of it, retains a strong authoritarian streak.

Notes

[1]. See, for example: Kwang-Ching Liu, “Nineteenth Century China: The Disintegration of the Old Order and the Impact of the West” in *China’s Heritage and the Communist Political System*, Vol. 1, Book 1, eds. Ping-ti Ho and Tang Tsou (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 93-178; Philip Kuhn, “Modes of Change in Nineteenth-Century China” [comments on Liu], *ibid.*, pp. 194-199.

[2]. Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

[3]. See, for example, Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960); Barry Keenan, *The Dewey Experiment in China: Educational Reform and Political Power in the Early Republic* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1977); and Charles R. Lilley, “A Mid-Level Bureaucrat’s Dream to Save China,” *SHAFR Newsletter*, June 2002, 41-49. [Available online at <[\\$">http://shafr.history.ohio-state.edu/Newsletter/2002/JUN/CHINA.HTM](http://shafr.history.ohio-state.edu/Newsletter/2002/JUN/CHINA.HTM).\$> \$]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Norton Wheeler. Review of Kuhn, Philip A., *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. January, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7105>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.