

This is a provocative and creative contribution to the broader comparative literature on authoritarian parties that nonetheless draws from a rich empirical analysis of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. The creativity of the project resides both in the author's drawing together of seemingly disparate case studies in order to test subnational variation in state-building outcomes first in contemporary China (enforcement of the one-child policy, fiscal extraction), before moving back in reverse chronological order to consider the origins of this variation, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), the Great Leap Forward (GLF) famine (1958-61), and the initial period of the Communist Party's victory (1949), all of which the author relates back to CCP membership patterns during the period of the Japanese occupation—which is ultimately where the author's causal chain originates. It is a truly novel argument, and presented in a counterintuitive manner. Whereas the bulk of the existing scholarly literature on authoritarian regime parties has centered on the party either as a means of patronage distribution, or of facilitating political bargains between a core elite and an adjacent group of supporters, this author's explanation is far more parsimonious: the key to the stability of a regime party resides in patterns of geographic membership density. Contrasting what the author dubs as “crimson provinces”—provinces with high party membership density—with “pink provinces” where party membership is less dense, Koss finds that local governments in the former have been far more effective at implementing the contentious one child policy, at extracting tax revenue in more recent times; and historically were able to not only contain factional violence during the Cultural Revolution, but also to mitigate the effects of the GLF policies. The author finds that the crucial factor in determining these subnational variations is traceable to the period of the Japanese occupation of China (1937-45), with areas formerly occupied by Japanese troops evolving into the “crimson provinces” of the post-49 era.

This is, in terms of explanatory narrative, a compelling and original design, written in clear and incisive prose, and draws on a truly impressive set of original materials for each of the periods under consideration. The author begins with two more or less contemporary tests of party strength in order to establish a baseline distinction between “red” and “pink” provinces in terms of policy implementation, and then extends the findings backwards in time to include not only a correlation between areas under Japanese occupation during World War 2, but also to demonstrate that the density of party membership can, under certain conditions, produce the opposite effect: weak implementation of central state policies in times of crisis, during the Cultural Revolution (when the author argues that the presence of high numbers of party members worked to mitigate mass violence, even as the formal chain of command within the party structure collapsed), and during the Great Leap Forward (when the author argues that local party leaders managed to resist implementing some of the most devastating central policies, thereby dampening the effects of the catastrophic famine that was sweeping the Chinese countryside). Yet this crucial turn in the argument is precisely where the analysis requires a bit more development: if one the author's key measures of the party's regional strength is its ability to implement unpopular central policies during the reform era—like the one-child policy—then the argument that the party's ability to resist the implementation of unpopular policies during the Mao era—like the disastrous schemes that accompanied communization during the Great Leap Forward—raises more questions that ultimately go unanswered in the current draft. Which policies do local party officials choose to oppose and why? Under what circumstances does the party's regional strength get deployed against the party's center, and to what ultimate end? Regime resilience or regime collapse? This dichotomous relationship—both contributing to as well undermining the strength of the state—is alluded to by the author in the conclusion of the second chapter when he remarks:

“The [personally, I would change that to “this book”] book unlocks the potential of the China case for studying authoritarian parties. In some regards, the analysis of the CCP refines, but essentially confirms, existing theories about the historical origins of authoritarian party strength. In other regards, the case of the CCP is unsettling.”

And, indeed, the case of the CCP as Koss presents it is unsettling: the nuances of the contemporary cases selected for closer examination (one-child policy, fiscal extraction), while fascinating, do not conform clearly to the argument as presented in the introduction. For example, in the conclusion of the third chapter (on the one-child policy), the reader learns:

“The government focuses on preventing surplus births and its agents are rewarded for performance on that routine task, which is relatively straightforward to observe. On the other hand, an unintended side-effect of the one-child policy is the unbalanced gender ratio at birth. This problem has taken on great

urgency and proves much harder to solve. The party is put in charge of solving this problem, including through ‘thought work’. The smaller risk aversion of CCP members, compared to bureaucrats, has consequences, both positive ones and negative ones, beyond the realm of one-child policy implementation. On the downside, the less risk averse party members may be more tempted by corruption than the more risk averse government officials. On the bright side, the less risk averse party cadres might be more enterprising, thereby fueling economic dynamism.” (105).

Koss concludes that, whereas “the unevenness of governance at first sight appeared as a weakness, but at closer look turned out **to reflect the state’s capacity to prioritize tasks**. Similarly, **the fact that party members and bureaucrats are working somewhat against each other reflects the fact that they have been assigned different tasks in a rational way**.” (105) This again underscores the highly problematic argument presented throughout: that the strength of the state and effectiveness of state-building outcomes correlates closely with both party membership and party strength, yet much of the analysis demonstrates that both (party membership and strength) are double-edged swords, thwarting central policies as easily as advancing them. The author has presented an incredibly sophisticated analysis here, and has a ready explanation for this dichotomous result (and discusses it most lucidly, in my view, in the conclusion), but I would urge him to make that explanation much more clearly and forcefully in the introduction, and to return to it throughout at appropriate intervals, lest the nuances of his argument be overridden or misunderstood by less attentive readers.

Suggestions regarding specific issues in the manuscript for the author’s consideration appear below:

The literature review in Chapter 2 on authoritarian regime parties is truly excellent and wonderfully written, and would be incredibly valuable to assign to both advanced undergraduate and graduate students in Chinese and comparative politics.

On the section in Chapter 3 on “missing girls,” the author would be wise to engage with an article by Yaojiang Shi and John James Kennedy, “Delayed Registration and Identifying the ‘Missing Girls’ in China (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001132>) in which the authors present three main explanations for the skewed sex ratio at birth statistics in China (sex-selective abortion, infanticide and delayed or late registration). Using descriptive statistics derived from the 1990, 2000 and 2010 census data to identify the “missing girls,” Shi and Kennedy argue that the combination of late registration and unreported births may point to a larger proportion of “missing girls” than previously reported. The article has already been picked up on by some major news media outlets because of its controversial findings. Koss’s own explanation regarding the *seasonal* variation, which is in and of itself an interesting finding, is a bit problematic: if “female party members are indeed undermining the one-child policy, rather than promoting it” (102), then, obviously, the opening argument regarding the party’s contribution to regime strength is also called into question, and the case of the one-child policy begins to look not like a case of local/regional party strength contributing to local/regional/central state or overall regime strength, but another case in which the party’s regional strength undermines state/regime outcomes.

In Chapter 8, the discussion of the relationship between CCP growth and popularity and the Japanese Occupation is nuanced and sophisticated. The casual reader might assume that the party quickly became strong in Japanese occupied areas because (as Chalmers Johnson argued famously in his 1962 *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power*) the CCP mobilized patriotic resistance against the Imperial Army. Popular assumptions have tended to echo the countless CCP claims that it was the Nationalists’ corruption, inability to repel the Japanese and suppression of patriotic revolutionary forces that lost them the war, and China. Koss would do well to engage more directly and deeply with some of the more recent scholarship (meaning, more recent than Johnson’s seminal contribution) on WW2 in China, which shows that the resistance to the Japanese, which saved China from outright colonisation, was primarily a Nationalist Party endeavour, despite CCP claims to its own leadership of such efforts. Some of the key Anglophone contributions include Lloyd Eastman’s *Seeds of Destruction* (1984), Hans van de Ven’s *War and Nationalism in China* (2003), Diana Lary’s *The Chinese People at War* (2010), and Rana Mitter’s *China’s War with Japan, 1937-1945: The Struggle for Survival* (2013). A brief discussion of the debates regarding the CCP’s role in engaging the Japanese militarily—and the relationship between those CCP claims and the author’s broader argument concerning patriotic mobilisation would be welcome.

In conclusion, I’d like to congratulate Koss for this truly impressive, important and fascinating piece of

work and look forward to seeing it in print.