

Book Review

State Formation in China and Taiwan: Bureaucracy, Campaign and Performance

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Building upwards and outwards from the groundwork laid by her seminal 1998 *Strong Institutions in Weak Politics: State Building in Republican China, 1927–1940* (Oxford University Press), Julia Strauss revisits the literature on state formation and brings to it a new, dynamic and comparative historical focus. Strauss finds that although there is much to commend in the historical-institutional turn with respect to issues of temporal sequencing and critical junctures, and state interactions with core elites and forms of either delegated or deployed rule, relatively little has been said “about process, implementation, and the intelligibility of the state’s projects at the time they were undertaken” (p. 3). In this volume, she seeks to balance classical Weberian institutionalism with Gramscian cultural approaches, and move, as she puts it, “one level down” from the analysis of outcomes and structures to reprise the substantive and crucial details of precisely how two ideologically diametrically opposed regimes were formed on either side of the Taiwan Strait after 1949. The result is a provocative and often challenging comparative analysis of the making of two successful but widely divergent party-states by the Chinese Communist Party in post-liberation Sunan, and the Kuomintang in post-1949 Taiwan.

The core of the comparative analysis is broken into extended discussions of not only the bureaucratic modalities of state building in terms of constructing formal state institutions, but also the attempts of authorities to render those projects legible to wider public audiences. This involved, in both cases, the practice of carrying out mobilizational campaigns designed to focus and concentrate administrative and popular effort around targeted policy implementation. Strauss hones in on three paired case studies to illuminate how the performative, bureaucratic and campaign modalities she identifies were interwoven in the process of PRC and ROC state formation: the creation and training of a cadre of state administrative agents to staff the bureaucracies of their respective party-states, the project of weeding out presumptive internal enemies, and the implementation of ambitious land reform programmes. Her first chapter details how the ROC and PRC each faced the challenge of building a cadre of loyal and competent agents after 1949, by drawing upon similar repertoires that conflated expert knowledge, political loyalty and individuality in their recruitment and training practices. She finds that, critically, whereas the PRC leadership focussed their recruitment efforts on those who had demonstrated their loyalty to the Party and the revolutionary cause before 1949, the Kuomintang aimed to develop

45 “scientific” systems of modern management that recruited through open competi-
 46 tive examinations and a meritocratic system of career progression and rewards.

47 In chapters two and three, Strauss turns to how these agents waged campaigns
 48 of terror against perceived internal enemies as the two new party-states in Sunan
 49 and Taiwan began the relentless process of consolidating their power. She finds
 50 that, whereas the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries was launched
 51 in the PRC in part to overcome the laborious bureaucratic procedures involved
 52 in reviewing and investigating accusations against presumed enemies of the
 53 state, the ROC’s implementation of White Terror bore the hallmarks of “a
 54 legal bureaucratic modality that claimed to expand and regularize impartially
 55 applied rules and laws” even as it succumbed in practice to waves of moral
 56 panic about political subversion and was driven by an intensifying competition
 57 between rival security agencies within the state (p. 143).

58 The institutional and performative aspects of land reform in Sunan and
 59 Taiwan, which the author points out “stand as perhaps our most important
 60 and accessible test case for comparing ‘successful’ versions of revolutionary
 61 and reformist approaches to land reform” (p. 178), are covered in rich detail in
 62 chapters four and five. Strauss finds that land reform was not only crucial to
 63 establishing the legitimacy of the regimes on either side of the Taiwan Strait,
 64 but also spurred the PRC and ROC states to build up their presence in the
 65 countryside, granting both the ability to penetrate rural communities down to
 66 the social grassroots. This newfound institutional capacity allowed each the
 67 ability to fundamentally restructure the countryside, creating new organizations
 68 in rural areas that linked back to burgeoning party-state structures at superordinate
 69 levels. Yet equally important was the normative dramaturgy of land reform in each
 70 case, communicating the very different moral underpinnings between the PRC and
 71 ROCs to one another and to their respective populations. Both the revolutionary
 72 state-supported violence of the public accusation and class struggle sessions staged
 73 in Sunan, and the peaceful technocratic transfer of “excess land” in Taiwan gener-
 74 ated powerful heuristics modelling how new state-enlightened subjects ought to
 75 behave in each regime. Despite the obvious differences, however, Strauss reminds
 76 us that the ways that these two very different land reform campaigns were used
 77 instrumentally by their respective regimes were identical: “to clear the countryside
 78 of all meaningful social organizations, institutions, and individuals who could act
 79 as a brake on the expansion of state power; to penetrate to the grass roots of rural
 80 society; and to fundamentally re-cast rural political and economic institutions in
 81 the dominant party-state’s preferred image” (p. 240).

82 The result is a robust and gripping analysis of the bureaucratic and narrative
 83 aspects of state formation. Some may question the viability of a research design
 84 that compares state building at a national level, which clearly takes place within
 85 the context of a broader set of international dynamics, to the same process of a
 86 sub-national/provincial unit. Anticipating this critique, Strauss points out that the
 87 fractal nature of state formation in the PRC meant that sub-national government
 88 units implemented the broad directives from above, but they did so in light of

89 their local conditions, affording Sunan an unusual level of autonomy more
90 roughly equivalent to the more independent Taiwan. She further notes that
91 both regimes arrived as “external occupiers” with “weak and shallow social
92 roots in the territories over which they exercised coercive control” (p. 12), creat-
93 ing an overall dynamic that was more similar than not. Both points are debat-
94 able, particularly in the context of the literature on state formation; but,
95 regardless, Strauss has produced a richly detailed, provocative and compelling
96 framework that breaks new ground by interweaving a more traditional institu-
97 tional analysis with careful attention to the culturalist and performative aspects
98 of state power.

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