

Review — The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor: culture, reproduction, and transformation by Zheng Yongnian

James O'Duibh

School of Philosophy & Sociology UCC and the Irish Institute of Chinese Studies

International Relations traditionally takes the nation-state as its unit of analysis. These are the players in the arena of world politics. Or at least this was the case. Increasingly, there is the realisation that this identification of nation-states in International Relations is no longer sustainable. New players are making themselves heard, whether they are terrorist cells working transnationally for radical goals, NGO's lobbying to change national policies, or multinational conglomerates with greater spending power than most countries. It is worthwhile re-examining — with these new players in the field — some of the assumptions regarding the *nation-state* as being a self-evident player. There is, currently, a cultural turn taking place in many disciplines and this is particularly evident in political analysis of East Asia. Scholars are investigating cultural reasons for the failure of democracy to take root in many nations. Some scholars are explaining existing nations in their own historical terms rather than applying the nation-state concept, which is a European historical development in the first place. These are the thoughts and questions that Zheng poses in consideration of China not as a nation-state, or party-state, but as a continuation and transformation of the traditional emperorship of Chinese civilisation. Taking direction from Emile Durkheim, Zheng seeks to explain *social facts as things*. What kind of players are the Communist Party of China and the People's Republic of China? What is the relation between the two and, in turn, their relation to the rest of the world? Is what came to be understood as the nation-state — and in China's case the party-state — truly applicable despite how widely such a description is used? Who and what is the Chinese state?

The identity of the state in Europe, in modern times, rests on the territorial integrity of a sovereign people with the right to self-determination. With the French Revolution and subsequent fall of monarchies and rise of parliamentary systems, the political party established itself as an active representation of the interests of a particular segment of society that attempts to garner a proportional amount of power in the control of the state. This description of the state and the political party works well in Europe and is a product of European historical forces. But, as Zheng argues, this description is not at all viable when one looks to China. In China, territorial integrity was not recognised by either the Emperor

or his subjects. Since the foundation of the Chinese state as we know it today, we can see that the 'political party' in the guise of the Communist Party of China [CCP] pre-existed the state and subsequently believes itself to have the right to guide the 'product' of its labours through the appointments it makes into the governmental system. The importance of the CCP is recognisable not least because its party membership now exceeds the population of France and is rising.

Many of the awkward terms we hear about Chinese society and state are often a result of the prescriptive identities we place on China — 'post-communist', 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics', 'post-socialist', 'China in transition' — Zheng argues that we need a new paradigm that can understand China on its own terms so as not to enforce Western schemas that simply do not apply and result in increasing debate with little applicable content. The paradigms he dismisses are embedded in both European and American traditions where in Northern America New Institutionalism dominates and post-Marxism in Europe (generally speaking). When Western academics look to China, they often do so according to behavioural norms that attempt to typify how China *should* be acting rather than attempting to identify China in terms of how it *is* acting. Zheng's analysis draws on the strengths of both traditions but with a firm anthropological basis interpreting Chinese political actors as products of a Chinese historical context.

This title expertly delineates different lines and realms of power with the political apparatus of the People's Republic of China. The introduction and first chapter are particularly nuanced in drawing out the current state of China Studies identifying leading authors and their strengths and weaknesses. The book can be read straight through from beginning to end but the structure of themed chapters allows readers to pick and choose according to interest or need. This will particularly suit undergraduate students as long as they remain aware of Zheng's primary aim of arguing for the CCP as an Organisation Emperorship. Divided thematically, these chapters serve as both introductions to themed concerns and also as steps in his larger argument based in chapter eight. As a whole this structure is well wrought out allowing the content to be used whether one agrees or not with Zheng's primary argument. It is in the final chapter that Zheng concentrates on his proposal with the other prior seven chapters serving to elucidate the nature of the political and bureaucratic system inside China.

Zheng's book is dense in terms of both style and content and is symptomatic of the wealth of information that is attainable in his title. Yet beyond its application of understanding China as a new transfiguration of emperorship, the manner in which it details and explains the inner workings of the political system in China makes it a worthy purchase for any undergraduate student of China Studies. It is a much-needed and welcome title that offers an alternative method of understanding the Chinese system and the Chinese state apart and beyond the limitations of Western political discourse.