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INTRODUCTION

QUESTIONING THE TELEOLOGY OF THE CENTRAL STATE IN REPUBLICAN CHINA

XAVIER PAULÈS AND DAVID SERFASS

No doubt the expansion of the reach of the state can be considered one of the prominent features of the twentieth century.¹ Many studies have described this process in Western Europe and beyond.² In the case of China, however, there is a marked tendency in the historiography to assume that, except for the Qing dynasty's last-ditch efforts to modernize from 1901–1911 with the New Policies (新政 *xinzheng*) reforms and a short-lived attempt during the Nanjing Decade (1928–1937), the first half of the twentieth century represented, for the most part, a discontinuation in the process of state building.

It was in order to question this assumption that we organized a conference on “State-Building through Political Disunity in Republican China,” held in Paris at EHESS (École des hautes études en sciences sociales) in September 2018. The idea was to target the Republican period (1912–1949) as one of critical importance in the process of state building in modern China.

A key aspect of the Republican period, in fact, is political fragmentation. None of the central governments asserting themselves and (mostly) recognized as such—the Beiyang governments (1912–1928) and the subsequent Nationalist government (1928–1949)—was in a position to control China Proper, let alone the whole territory formerly dominated by the Qing dynasty. Moreover, these central governments faced many formidable challengers, including regional warlord and Communist regimes as well as pro-Japanese governments. Contemporaries lamented the lack of effective centralization because they saw political disunity as a decisive obstacle on the road toward a modern and powerful China capable of (among other things) renegotiating the “unequal treaties” as Meiji Japan had done.

This Republican concern for disunity and its negative effect on state building tends to persist among today's specialists on Republican China (regardless of nationality). Admittedly, scholars have demonstrated that the Beiyang governments, despite their

1 C. A. Bayly, *Remaking the Modern World 1900–2015: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 325.

2 For example, James E. Cronin, *The Politics of State Expansion: War, State and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1991); Tracy L. Steffes, *School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

political weakness, were nonetheless able to record very significant diplomatic successes (the Washington Conference from November 1921 to February 1922 being a case in point).³ But in terms of domestic policy, the consensus prevails that political disunity was a decisive hindrance in the quest for modernization and state building.

The papers presented at the September 2018 conference, however, demonstrated that the lack of a strong central authority does not mean the complete absence of the state. By the same token, the fragmented nature of political authority does not mean that politics within the various regional regimes across China did not follow parallel trajectories to some extent. The broad idea that surfaced clearly at the conference was that the issue of state building during the Republican period should no longer be conceived in terms of “state building *despite* political disunity” but rather in terms of “state building *through* political disunity.”

Following this line of thought, this roundtable special issue proposes a new understanding of how state building occurred in Republican China.

FROM ONE TELEOLOGY TO ANOTHER: PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP ON STATE BUILDING

During the three decades following 1949, it is no exaggeration to state that historians deemed the Republic an interregnum between the collapse of the Qing state and the reconstruction of China under the Communist state. In Chinese official historiography, the term *jianguo* (建國 literally, “to build/found the country”) gained currency to characterize post-1949 China, conveying the idea that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to start state building from a tabula rasa.⁴ Of course, this vision served the political aim of glorifying Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule by contrasting it with its predecessors, in particular with the allegedly inefficient and corrupt Guomindang (GMD) government.⁵ But it is remarkable that in Western as well as Japanese scholarship the perspective was similar.⁶ Even the great effort to achieve centralization and modernization undertaken by the GMD during the Nanjing Decade was painted in a negative light by such scholars as Lloyd Eastman.⁷

3 Tang Qihua, “Beiyang waijiao yu ‘Fan’ersai-Huashengdun tixi” [Beiyang diplomacy and the Versailles-Washington system], in Jin Guangyao and Wang Jianlang, eds., *Beiyang shiqi de Zhongguo waijiao* [China’s diplomacy during the Beiyang era] (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2006), 47–80.

4 Indeed, historical research on the Republican period was almost nonexistent in the People’s Republic of China until the 1980s, except for CCP-related studies. Zeng Jingzhong, ed., *Zhonghuaminguo shi yanjiu shulie* [A concise study of historiography on Republican China] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1992), 497.

5 It is ironic that the GMD itself had systematically used the notion of *jianguo* to characterize its own actions.

6 See Lucien Bianco’s lucid “Postface” to his seminal opus, first published in 1967. Lucien Bianco, *Les origines de la révolution chinoise, 1915–1949* [Origins of the Chinese revolution, 1915–1949], 4th ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 305–20. For a critical discussion of postwar Japanese studies on Chinese state building, see Tsukamoto Gen, “Chūgoku kingendai seijishi ni kan suru issuron: ‘kokka kensetsu’ o chūshin ni” [On the political history of modern and contemporary China: focusing on “state building”], *Hōgaku Shirin* 90, no. 2 (October 1992): 77–95.

7 Lloyd E. Eastman, *The Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule, 1927–1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the surge of a new generation of research in the West regarding state building in China. This evolution was a side effect of a shift in the grand narrative of modern Chinese history: the previously prevalent narrative of revolution was fading away, while China's struggle to modernize became the dominant narrative.⁸ In that new light, Deng Xiaoping's market-oriented reforms were seen as part of a long quest for modernization that had its roots in the Qing New Policies (*xinzheng*) launched in 1901. From that perspective, the GMD's efforts, especially during the Nanjing Decade, came to be deemed worthy of praise.⁹ In the meantime, historians in the People's Republic of China also opted for a more nuanced vision of the GMD's achievements; in particular, they began to acknowledge its role in the process leading to a strong and centralized party-state.¹⁰

Such a reappraisal of state building during the Republican period was extremely selective, however, and its main focus was the Nanjing Decade: clearly, it was out of the question to identify the whole Republican period as an era of decisive state expansion in China, especially in comparison with the New Policies era and even more in comparison with the post-1949 era. Moreover, in their attempts to evaluate state-building achievement in the long run, both generations of researchers paid attention only to the central governments: Qing, Beiyang, GMD, and CCP. One of the side effects of this approach was a disregard for the actions of "centrifugal" forces (warlords and pro-Japanese regimes),¹¹ which were dismissed as mere obstacles hindering the successive central governments' efforts toward modernization.

As a consequence, in order to build on previous attempts to reconsider the position of the Republic in the overall trajectory of twentieth-century China, the next step, to invoke Prasenjit Duara, should be to rescue the history of state building from the narrative of the central state.¹²

A DIVERSITY OF ACTORS AT PLAY

To be sure, previous scholarship has addressed "centrifugal" forces during the Republican era in terms of state building. In the case of warlords, a substantial body of

8 Li Huaiyin, *Reinventing Modern China: Imagination and Authenticity in Chinese Historical Writing* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 204–35.

9 Robert E. Bedeski, *State Building in Modern China: The Kuomintang in the Prewar Period* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1981); "Reappraising Republican China," special issue, *China Quarterly* 150 (June 1997); Julia C. Strauss, *Strong Institutions in Weak Politics: State Building in Republican China, 1927–1940* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

10 Zhang Xianwen, ed., *Zhonghua minguo shi* [History of the Republic of China], vol. 2, *Nanjing guominzhengfu de jianli: Zhongguo xiandaihua jianshe de quzhe fazhan, 1927–1937 nian* [The founding of the Nanjing Nationalist government: China's tortuous modernization, 1927–1937] (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2005).

11 We place "centrifugal" within quotation marks because of the tricky nature of the expression. These forces were "centrifugal" only from the very perspective of the teleological narrative of the Chinese modern state that we aim to challenge. Warlords like Zhang Zuolin or Wu Peifu, for example, spearheaded coalitions (the Fengtian and the Zhili cliques) whose positions on the chessboard of Chinese politics were much stronger than that of the Beiyang government, and they might have gained recognition as the central government on more than one occasion.

12 Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

literature has indeed demonstrated that some of them had a deep sense of statehood and acted in a resolute way to extend the scope of the state in the regions they controlled. To put it differently, fierce hostility against the recentralization attempts of the Beijing or Nanjing governments does not necessarily imply sticking to a reactionary political agenda. Certainly the clichéd vision of warlords as mere predatory bullies is no longer accepted. However, due to the fact that previous research on warlords often adopted a biographical approach, such work usually centered on the figure of a given warlord and tended to adopt too monographic a perspective.¹³

By the same token, the period of the Second Sino-Japanese War has also been studied, although selectively, as an era of state expansion. Historians have shown how the war deepened bureaucratic intervention in areas administered by the Nationalist government.¹⁴ The occupied zone, in contrast, remains a blind spot in this history. Labeled as “puppet,” pro-Japanese governments have yet to be investigated by historians in the same way “normal” governments are, so that we can fully understand how they contributed to shaping China on the verge of the Communist takeover.

As this roundtable special issue works to capture a large-scale picture of the topography of regional regimes in the first half of the twentieth century, other previously downplayed dimensions of state building emerge, in particular the dynamics of cooperation and emulation among the various local power-holders and central governments.

RECONSIDERING THE NOTION OF A “CHINESE STATE”

This special issue reveals a need to reconsider the actors involved in state building and the very notion of a “Chinese state” in two main ways.

Following up on the point about the diversity of actors at play, it is necessary to abandon an approach to state building from the perspective of “*the* Chinese state.” Such an approach entails reification of “the Chinese state” as the actor of its own construction and reduces it to the successive governments recognized internationally and domestically as “central” or—to use a Chinese concept—to those that held the *fatong* (法統 legally constituted authority). In so doing, historians lose sight of a critical point: an essential part of the state-building endeavor of these successive governments has been, precisely, to build their legitimacy as holders of the *fatong*. Historians also tend to categorize as “centrifugal” any policy adopted outside the (often contested) capital, thus perpetuating a teleological narrative of the modern Chinese state. More broadly, this approach relies on a simplistic definition of state building as a linear process and a concerted endeavor.

Instead, we contend that the best way to grasp the diffuse and elusive nature of this multicentered process is to define our object of study as “the state *in* China.” As such, this special issue aims less to write a history of roads not taken than to show that the trajectory of state modernization in China is made up of multiple roads rather than the sole path

13 See Edward A. McCord, “The Warlords,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, July 2018, doi: 10.1093/obo/9780199920082-0154.

14 For example, see Morris L. Bian, *The Making of the State Enterprise System in Modern China: The Dynamics of Institutional Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Kevin P. Landdeck, “Under the Gun: Nationalist Military Service and Society in Wartime Sichuan, 1938–1945” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011).

chosen by the central government. In this respect, we propose to go a step further than Elizabeth J. Remick did by not only disaggregating the state in order to give back agency to local state builders “within the framework of the larger state,” as she rightly did, but also by taking into account local state building *outside* this framework.¹⁵

In addition, we draw on Philip Abrams’s distinction between the state as “a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centered in government” (the state-system) and the state as an idea (the state-idea) “projected, purveyed and variously believed in.”¹⁶ Arguably, the “state-idea” had never been more pervasive in China than during the Republic. True, there were many debates and controversies among intellectual and political elites over the shape the state should take and the strategy of state building.¹⁷ But these controversies should not deter us from seeing a crucial fact: the wide consensus about the necessity—the desire, so to speak—for a strong and far-reaching state as a prerequisite in the quest for modernization and national power.¹⁸ Even if it was not achieved through a concerted, planned, and centrally driven process but rather by a multiplicity of geographically scattered and often fiercely opposed actors, this consensus was nonetheless highly influential in producing an expansion of the state-system.¹⁹

Unraveling the complex trajectory of state modernization and expansion also requires us to move beyond the state/society dichotomy. Questioning the limits of classical conceptions of the state, scholars have long pointed out that the state is not built outside the society it governs.²⁰ Yet, the tendency to approach state building only as a top-down process is less easy to avoid in the Chinese context, where the vast majority of the population was—and still is—largely excluded from participation in that process. By stressing the role played by professional associations, intellectuals, settlers, or medical personnel in shaping governmental policies, authors in this volume suggest that a comprehensive picture of Chinese state building requires a broad definition of political agency.

The seven papers in this special issue deal with different dimensions and agents of state building in the Republican period. We acknowledge that the CCP took part in this process, especially during the Second Sino-Japanese War, as Chen Yung-fa has convincingly argued.²¹ Even though some of the papers hint at this aspect, we have decided to

15 Elizabeth J. Remick, *Building Local States: China during the Republican and Post-Mao Eras* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 15.

16 Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977),” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (1988): 82.

17 Margherita Zanasi, *Saving the Nation: Economic Modernity in Republican China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 125–31; Lane J. Harris, “The Post Office and State Formation in Modern China” (PhD diss., University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2012), 15–16.

18 This consensus has roots that largely predate the twentieth century, as they can be traced back to the eighteenth century. Margherita Zanasi, *Economic Thought in Modern China, c.1500–1937* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

19 Although this special issue does not address nation building per se, deconstructing the teleology of the central state helps to escape the broader teleology of the Chinese nation-state. Indeed, nationalism did much to consolidate the “strong state” consensus, which, in turn, fostered the retrospective idea of an uninterrupted unitary “China.”

20 Pierre Rosanvallon, *L’État en France de 1789 à nos jours* [The state in France from 1789 to the present day] (Paris: Points Seuil, 1990), 14–15.

21 Chen Yung-fa, *Making Revolution: The Communist Movement in Eastern and Central China, 1937–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

focus on reappraising the role of actors whose contribution in Republican China's state building is commonly considered as either ancillary (Beiyang regimes) or obstructive (warlords, pro-Japanese governments).

In order to explore as many facets of the state in Republican China as possible in a single issue, we asked the authors to share their research in a format half the length of a regular article. As a result, each contribution briefly frames one aspect of state building in conceptual and historiographical terms, with sufficient empirical detail to flesh out the point historically. Hence, rather than offering in-depth studies, this volume is meant to establish key concepts related to state building in fragmented polities, stimulate reflection, and foster future research.

State building during the Republican period encompasses strong continuities with the era of the New Policies. These continuities are especially evident at the level of municipal government, explored in the article by Kristin Stapleton. She argues that, in the aftermath of the dissolution of the imperial system, municipal government served as a crucial scale for state-building policies, especially for infrastructure and economic development. It was also instrumental in providing an entrée into public service for cohorts of young experts who had studied abroad and facilitated investment from overseas Chinese.

Tackling issues of continuity at the other end of the period, Emily Hill questions the now dominant consensus that the post-1949 Communist state inherited many of its institutions and approaches to governance from its Nationalist predecessor. In this transition, warfare appears as the main impetus for state building. While not without merit, especially as compared with previous paradigms, this consensus influenced by Charles Tilly's work on state formation in Europe tends, Hill argues, to exaggerate continuities over discontinuities. Instead, she characterizes the pre-1949 period as an era of competing and overlapping political realms during which war unmade Republican China before the triumph of Communist China.

Pierre Fuller's paper reconsiders the role of Beiyang governments (1916–1928) in the process of state building in twentieth-century China. Challenging existing scholarship, Fuller argues that the Beiyang period was pivotal in China's successful efforts to win the race with Japan and Russia for dominance over Manchuria. Fuller highlights the roles of Zhang Zuolin, *de facto* ruler of Manchuria from 1916 to 1928, and the central Beiyang government in a refugee colonization program in 1921. Only by close cooperation could these actors complete the complex work of converting the more than 100,000 refugees from the zone of drought and famine along the Yellow River Plain into colonists in service of China's northward expansion.

Xavier Paulès's article demonstrates the centrality in state building of warlords' activities during both the Beiyang era and the Nanjing Decade. In an attempt to fully acknowledge their role, Paulès adopts a China-wide scale to outline four realms in which warlords' contributions were especially remarkable: transport infrastructure, education, economic planning, and statistics. He also underlines that, despite political fragmentation, a set of commonly shared values among power-holders explains the remarkable convergence of their state-building politics.

Taxation is perhaps the most crucial realm of state building, as Xiaoqun Xu explains in his contribution addressing tax reform and rationalization under the Nationalist government from the 1920s to the 1940s. Xu contends that foreign encroachment and political

disunity stimulated the GMD's strenuous efforts to increase state income through better taxation methods, especially after Japan's full-scale invasion in 1937. These reforms, Xu shows, were not imposed from above on reticent and passive taxpayers but resulted from state-society interactions that saw the Nationalist government negotiating compromises with professional associations.

Xu's work takes us into the post-1937 period, and it joins articles by Nicole Elizabeth Barnes and David Serfass to make the case for reappraising the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) as an essential stage of state expansion in twentieth-century China.

Barnes discusses this expansion through the case of health services. Beyond the battlefield, total war against Japan provoked an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. As the traditional pattern of emergency measures based on limited state intervention and local solidarities did not suffice, state-sponsored health services grew tremendously. Barnes's definition of the state as a diffuse entity embodied in health workers, among many others, enables her to reconsider state building across the political boundary between Nationalist- and Communist-controlled areas and the social boundary between formal state agents and health workers as drivers of state expansion. Since many health workers were female, such a definition also allows Barnes to reassess the role of women in this key aspect of the overall process of state making, which accelerated after 1949.

Serfass's article proposes to dismantle one last historical barrier: the one that puts "puppet" governments established by the Japanese occupiers into opposition with "normal" governments that ended up on the right side of the modern Chinese state's narrative. Understandable on an ideological level, since Japanese expansionism was the most effective fuel for Chinese nationalism, this opposition has long prevented historians from recognizing the contribution of these "empty shells" at the level of state building. Reframing pro-Japanese regimes as embedded in a larger occupation state that also included Japanese civil and military agencies, Serfass posits that state making under occupation was an integral part of the whole formation of the modern state in China.

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