

A demanding reader might like to see more in-depth discussions in Lam's book of the fundamental comparisons of Xi with Mao, since Lam sees many similarities between the two leaders, even if today's China is obviously very different from that under Mao. For example, as the author talks about Xi's revival of Maoist "transformation" of the educated classes (p. 76), a question arises: can Xi achieve the same levels of brainwashing as Mao once successfully did? More importantly, does the presence of market mechanisms in today's China have a fundamental impact on politics, or, as the author highlights, can political repression continue notwithstanding any economic changes?

Generally speaking, both books are well researched in as much as they cite a huge number of sources, but they differ in size: Chan attempts to be comprehensive, while Lam tries to be concise. They cite each other, at least Chan cites Lam's earlier works many times. They even share some similarities in both personal (if I am allowed to mention these) and academic life: the two authors are political scientists, they have a Hong Kong background but now live in Canada, and both are prolific and well-respected writers on contemporary Chinese politics. Their different conclusions on what Xi means for China, therefore, raise an intriguing question: what factors determine scholars' divergent interpretations of the same political figure and his/her policies?

This is obviously not a proper place to explore the question, but reading the two books with the question in mind can be enlightening. For scholars as readers of both books, it might stimulate reflections on some fundamental issues in discipline building and methodology, as well as those regarding interconnections in research between social-science theories and real-life reality. Both books are also suitable for university undergraduate classes on contemporary China and for anyone in the wider public who is interested in China's politics, economy and foreign relations. It would be misplaced to read these books to find a role model – as many like to do so in reading famous leaders' biographies – in moving up the power ladder, as Xi Jinping successfully did. But reading them is certainly helpful to understand today's China.

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Factional-Ideological Conflicts in Chinese Politics: To the Left or to the Right?

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Less than two decades ago, when China's economic growth seemed all but unstoppable, many pointed to the country's experimentalist policy style as the cornerstone of the country's uniquely adaptive authoritarianism. Policy experimentation – delegated to local officials but carefully monitored by the central government – played a key role in China's pivot to marketization, with local experiments supported, encouraged and even sponsored by more senior patrons in the central party-state.

Olivia Cheung's terrific and informative study revisits the literature on policy experimentalism, but introduces a new perspective: instead of a process driven solely by pragmatic concerns and



developmental goals, she finds that the promotion of particular policy experiments and models was frequently driven by factions within the Party seeking to promote competing visions of governance and, often, to pursue unorthodox political reforms masquerading as particular developmental agendas.

Cheung dates the origins of this process to the national campaign to “Learn from Dazhai” (1964–1978), launched at a time when the Mao-era Party’s norms of collective leadership were weak. The lack of clear central directives over the 14 years that Dazhai was promoted as a national model generated enduring policy confusion as “radicals and conservatives competed to issue different interpretations of the policy lessons that villages should learn from Dazhai in order to claim control of the party line” (p. 27). In the wake of Mao’s death, the factional-ideological divide between radical and conservative party elites morphed into a new competitive struggle waged between die-hard Mao loyalists and rehabilitated survivors, with both attempting to seize discursive control over the so-called “Sixty articles on agriculture,” re-promulgated in 1978. Rising political star and young survivor Wan Li, then the Party secretary of Anhui Province, advocated a market-oriented reform plan for rural China rooted in the household responsibility system (*baochan daohu*, HRS) as a critical step in shifting the countryside away from collective agriculture. Wan’s persistent petitioning for the return of the HRS eventually won over Deng Xiaoping and the reformers in Beijing, and briefly turned Anhui into a “rightful resistance” model for the decollectivization of agriculture (p. 80).

Yet, the Anhui HRS “model” was by no means universally well received: by contrast, decollectivization plunged Nanjie Village in Henan’s Linying into utter misery as farmers left their fields to seek work in the cities. Even worse, two of the local township-village enterprises (TVEs) were subcontracted out to groups that defaulted on wage payments to those left working in the village (p. 92). The charismatic local Party secretary of Nanjie managed to seize back control over the TVEs and persuaded Nanjie residents to return their land usage rights to the collective in the mid-1980s, which were then turned over to new enterprises that proved surprisingly profitable. By 2010, the success of the village’s enterprises allowed the local Party committee to start providing generous welfare benefits to all Nanjie residents, including medical insurance, monthly coupons sufficient to cover family food consumption, and even tuition fees and stipends for students. Every village family enjoyed a furnished apartment, with the utility costs heavily subsidised by the village collective, and Nanjie quickly vaulted to national prominence as a Maoist nostalgia model among Left-leaning factions within the party-state, including several prominent “princelings,” as a model that proved that the “future of communism is prosperous” – or at least that it could potentially be so (pp. 95, 99).

Cheung’s fascinating fifth chapter covers the respective rises of Shenzhen and Shekou as Special Economic Zones (SEZs) that tested the boundaries between political and economic reforms from 1979 and 1989. Shenzhen, of course, has remained a key economic hub (now the home of Tencent), but in the late 1970s, Yuan Geng, head of the China Merchants Group, petitioned Beijing to grant special economic status to Shekou. After the status was awarded in 1979, Yuan became the *de facto* governor of the Shekou Industrial Zone, and immediately implemented an electoral system making Shekou the only geographic constituency in China in which residents could directly elect their leaders without interference (pp. 113–114).

The political experiments of Shekou and Shenzhen came to a crashing halt following the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, but the competitive practice of fostering local experiments continued. Xi’s elevation to General Secretary was famously preceded by a factional-ideological rift that played out not only in domestic media but was closely followed outside of China as well. The rivalry between Chongqing’s Bo Xilai and Wang Yang in Guangdong first came to the fore in July 2011 when Bo bragged that Chongqing’s development model was following a path opposite to that of other regions. “We endeavour to slice the pie well before baking more pies,” Bo proudly told reporters. A few days later, speaking from Guangzhou, Wang Yang commented that regional

governments in China would do well to “focus on baking the pie” first, since the matter of slicing was clearly “secondary” (p. 126).

The rise of Xi has unsurprisingly put an end to factional model-making, at least for the time being, but the enduring value and relevance of Cheung’s important and empirically rich monograph lies in her description of “the factional-ideational nexus” within the Chinese Communist Party. At the core of her model are four key propositions, including that self-interest and political beliefs must be taken as equivalent explanations for policy outcomes; that elites can hold widely different political views while still remaining committed to the primacy of the Party; that the policy process itself can serve as a field of competitive struggle among elites; and that faction members are drawn together not only by patron–client ties, but equally by the power of their shared political ideas. These are important axioms frequently glossed over in contemporary analyses of contemporary Chinese politics; but Xi’s period of power, for however long it may last, will no doubt be remembered for its emphasis on political ideas. Alongside her impressive co-authored *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* (Oxford University Press, 2024) with Steve Tsang, this volume reminds us yet again that ideology has long driven the Party’s internal dynamics in both overt and covert ways and will surely continue to do so into the foreseeable future.

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Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China

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China has experienced rapid urbanization over the past four decades. In the early 1980s, less than 20 per cent of the Chinese population lived in cities. By 2022, China’s urbanization rate had reached 65 per cent. A challenging task for the Chinese government is to re-distribute the land among different stakeholders for urban development, such as building houses, roads, bridges and industrial zones. As a developmental state, local governments have strong incentives to promote various urban development projects. However, strong resistance from landowners may arise due to unsatisfactory compensation, corruption and the violence involved in the demolition and land-grabbing process. How does the Chinese party-state deal with this resistance? In her book *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China*, Lynette Ong addresses this important question.

Using data collected from field observation, interviews, content analysis of government documents and media reports, Ong identified three important strategies adopted by local governments to deal with resistance: stick (violent coercion), carrot (economic incentive) and persuasion (psychological coercion). Although one particular strategy may take predominance, the other two were used as complementary measures to get the work done. The three strategies are nothing new. However, the selective use of these strategies may vary in different periods. Ong convincingly demonstrates that, over the past three decades, the Chinese party-state has increasingly relied on