

BOOK REVIEW

The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century. By Stein Ringen. Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, Distributed by Columbia University Press, 2016. 208 pages. USD 70.00. ISBN 978-988-8208-93-7.

Book review by Maximilian Ernst

In his latest book “The Perfect Dictatorship; China in the 21st Century,” Stein Ringen uses the discipline of state analysis to establish and substantiate the hypothesis that China is a dictatorship. The entire book is as much to the point as the title. The book is presented in a “just the facts, Ma’am” manner, analyzing in-depth modern China’s political sphere and its strategies to govern the (still) most populous country in the world. One important reference for the book is a previous work by Stein Ringen, “The Korean State and Social Policy,”¹ which Ringen repeatedly draws on to compare the Asian tiger state of South Korea and its economic miracle with the alleged economic miracle of China. According to Ringen, China’s economic growth is, given its size, not all that miraculous. Furthermore, Ringen uses Korea as the example of an authoritarian state to show that China, being considerably more autocratic and using violence against its citizens more often, cannot also be authoritarian, but instead must be a dictatorship.

Another repeatedly quoted work is the recent book by Daniel A. Bell, “The China model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy,”² to which Stein proposes in this book a sort of counter-argument. Based on the thorough analysis provided in this book, complete with a number of scenarios how the future of the Chinese state will play out, Ringen argues it is rather unlikely “that the Chinese state is on its way to becoming a

1 Stein Ringen, Huck-ju Kwon, and Ilcheong Yi, *The Korean state and social policy: How South Korea lifted itself from poverty and dictatorship to affluence and democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

2 Daniel A. Bell, *The China model: Political meritocracy and the limits of democracy* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2016).

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good regime of its own kind,”³ as among others Bell proposed, and that China’s leaders, able or not, have not governed China well. Instead, Ringen concludes that the Chinese state has been run highly inefficiently in economical terms and that the nation could be many times more productive if the ruling elite would be less preoccupied with ensuring its own survival and more with serving its people.

The book’s structure is rather straight-forward. In the beginning, the hypothesis that China is a dictatorship is introduced and the rest of the book investigates whether China is in fact a dictatorship and if so, what kind of dictatorship it is. The book is organized into five chapters, in which Ringen analyses China’s *Leaders* (1), *What They Say* (2), *What They Do* (3), *What They Produce* (4), and *Who They Are* (5). If there is one possible criticism for this book, it is the seemingly ambiguous name-giving of the chapters and the fact that all chapters will inform the reader to some degree about who China’s leaders are, what they say, and what they do.

Chapter One (Leaders) sets out with an inventory on the state of the Chinese Nation and examines national identity, leaders’ self-image towards the outside and to the inside, as well as their priorities. China, as a party-state, “is a system with two overpowering bureaucracies, side by side and intertwined. The state controls society, and the party controls the state.”⁴ Control indeed is one of the best-describing features of the Chinese state, which is why Ringen, before coming to the conclusion that China is a dictatorship, asserts that China is a “controlocracy.” Chapter One also explains important variables in Chinese leaders’ foreign policy behavior. A first such variable is insecurity, which makes it “near paranoid about being treated with the respect the leaders believe it is due,” which went as far as China having “lead down the threat of war to neighbours such as India (invaded in 1962) and Vietnam (invaded in 1979).”⁵

Chinese leaders, Ringen asserts, are most likely telling the truth when they insist “that China does not represent a threat to anyone in the world who does not oppose its self-defined ‘core interests’ and who is otherwise cooperative, in particular in economic matters and treats it with that all-important respect.”⁶ The central ‘core interest’, of the Chinese leadership is self perpetuation, which it derives through ‘legitimacy of rule’. Since up until now economic growth has guaranteed this legitimacy, other nations were right in their assessment that China would not threaten international peace and stability so as to guarantee continued economic growth. However, since economic growth and prosperity of the Chinese people are not an end, but a mean to gain this all-important legitimacy, “[i]t is conceivable that [the Chinese leadership] might accept great economic sacrifice in a mission of protecting its own definition of territorial integrity, and even for

3 Stein Ringen, *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), xi.

4 Ibid., 1.

5 Ibid., 9.

6 Ibid., 10.

the promotion of national glory.”⁷

Chapter Two (What They Say) represents a central building block in the establishment of the hypothesis that China is a dictatorship. In this first step, Ringen inquires what the ‘purpose’ of this one-party state of China is by proposing three possibilities, namely ‘the triviality hypothesis’, ‘the welfare hypothesis’, and ‘the power hypothesis’. The triviality hypothesis maintains that the Chinese state may be strong “but does not possess any purpose beyond itself for the use of its strength.”⁸ What a trivial state lacks, however, is ideology.

The triviality hypothesis has important implications both domestically and internationally. Domestically, “[a] trivial dictatorship is likely to strike a deal with the people that they can get on with life much as they want, as long as they do not make serious trouble.” Internationally, however “[strength] without a purpose can be a threatening constellation. [...] Perhaps it has no capacity because it has no other vision of itself than being bigger than others”⁹ Either way, a trivial state is much harder to predict by foreign policy analysts. This instant is contrasted with the example of the United States, which stands for the protection and promotion of values such as freedom and democracy. This something that the United States stand for may be liked or disliked by others, but everyone knows that these American values are there and that they are promoted through American foreign policy. In the end, such triviality seems highly unlikely in the case of a party-state such as China, which needs legitimacy and needs justification so as to “make it credible that there are reasons why it should be in control and why its rule should continue.”¹⁰

The welfare- and the power hypothesis can be understood as opposites, the disambiguation of which goes back to the book *Citizen and Churchman* by William Temple.¹¹ The welfare hypothesis maintains that “the purpose of rule is to advance and protect the well-being of citizens. In power states, the purpose is to perpetuate the might and glory of the nation and its destiny, while citizens are subordinate in a duty to serve the state.”¹² In other words, the two hypotheses are two opposite ways of state-society relations, i.e. whether the state serves society, or society serves the state. The welfare state represents a strong narrative, as therein the Chinese state has a purpose and a destiny, namely to increase the welfare of its people. Power states have an ideology too, and have a purpose. Most importantly, power states are in most cases also dictatorial states. In international relations, power states tend to be more aggressive than trivial- and welfare states. In order to decide which of the three hypotheses is the most accurate, the social security structure and ideology of the Chinese Regime needs further analysis, which

7 Ibid., 11.

8 Ibid., 47.

9 Ibid., 49.

10 Ibid., 50.

11 William Temple, *Citizen and Churchman* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1941).

12 Stein Ringen, *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 51.

Ringen does in the following chapters.

Chapter Three (What They Do) represents a very thorough, almost encyclopedic, elucidation of the Chinese state, which institutions it is made up of, and how they work. Special attention was paid to the involvement and the degree of influence and control capacity the party vis-à-vis the government has on the different institutions. This chapter does not contribute to the theoretic part of the book, but goes into detail to describe the culture of centralism the CCP conducts in virtually every aspect of Chinese political, social, and individual life. The conclusion of this ‘rich in raw data’ chapter is that the Chinese government is an effective government in the sense that it controls everything and is capable to conducting every policy it wishes, but that it is not an efficient government, meaning the resources (time and working hours of Chinese citizens) to be put into any such policies are far from being used “cost-efficiently.”

Chapter Four (What They Produce) is similar to Chapter Three in the sense that it provides detailed information on the Chinese public sector and the social security system. While there are considerable local differences, mostly between rural areas and the cities, overall it can be said that China has a social welfare system comparable to developing countries, while the tax burden to sustain it resembles that of developed countries. Ringen hence asserts that China is after all not a welfare state. This conclusion is based on the finding that the system is unequal and that the poor pay more into it than the rich. Furthermore, social assistance is limited, the threat of falling into poverty is real for Chinese citizens and the quality of the services is below ‘best practices’, meaning those who can afford it get better treatment. Overall, “we see a state that takes a great deal in taxes and that takes proportionately more from the poor than from the rich, and that gives back a [marginal package] that would normally be associated with a low-tax regime—and a package that is without redistributive force in poverty protection or otherwise.”¹³

Chapter Five (Who They Are) concludes the analysis of the book. The question at the core of this chapter is, what kind of regime China is; authoritarian, totalitarian, or something else? Ringen asserts that China cannot be authoritarian as this term is too accommodating. Yet while the Chinese regime’s demand of obedience from its people and readiness to use violence against them meet the dictatorship threshold, it is still too unsophisticated a label for a Chinese “dictatorship in which dictate is restrained and in which, except in the last resort, indirect control is substituted for direct command. This mode of control, hard in effect but soft in execution, is being developed to perfection and makes the Chinese state a kind of dictatorship never seen before.”¹⁴ For the remainder of the chapter, Ringen calculates, drawing on the previous chapter, what the state gives (economic growth, public services, a degree of life quality) and what it takes (between 55 and 67 percent of Chinese people’s income) and concludes that the Chinese government

¹³ Ibid., 132.

¹⁴ Ibid., 138.

takes considerably more from its people than it gives back. In the end, this appears to be the strongest argument for China being a dictatorship and not some sort of benevolent autocracy that struck a deal with its people; “It needs to be dictatorial because it is the kind of state it is, because of its greediness in what it takes and how it takes it, and because of its stinginess in what it gives and how it gives it. A regime of this kind would not be possible if it were to depend on the consent of the people.”¹⁵

The postscript (A Better Regime) presents five scenarios and their likelihood of how the Chinese state will develop. In the scenario *Steady On*, which is a highly probable one, the economy continues to grow and the state continues to remain in control to some degree, while it also continues to reform step-by-step, under continued collective leadership. However, accounting for Xi Jinping’s recent concentration of power in his own hands in a degree unprecedented since Mao, the scenario got a little less likely.

The second scenario, *Demise*, asserts that a number of things could go wrong in areas such as finance, socio-economic developments, national security etc. leading to social unrest and even war with neighboring countries. However this scenarios is, due to the Chinese Government’s formidable capacity to stay in control, to reform and to adapt, an unlikely one.

The third scenario, *Utopia*, entails that the socialist paradise as written in the party’s constitution becomes a reality. While this scenario is a possibility, and first steps towards a relaxation of the hukou system and the embryonic system of social protection could be seen as steps in the right direction, it is however also the case that all previous movements towards balanced social relations and democracy “have been seen as a threat, and have been crushed,” and the new regime in China appears to be determined to maintain and fortify the current “controlocracy”.

The fourth scenario, *Democracy*, explores the possibility that China continues to develop the “grassroots” democracy it has on the village level. The model Ringen presents here is that of indirect elections, where officials would answer downwards (not as now upwards), all the way down to the lowest level of directly elected officials. However, this scenario again is deemed unlikely due to the apparent common understanding at the top of the Chinese leadership “that anything that resembles real democracy is a danger to that all-important stability and not permissible given the regime’s determination to self-preserve.”¹⁶

The last scenario, *The perfect fascist state*, addresses much of the analysis provided in the book, especially chapter two and the establishment of the power state hypothesis. However while China is a perfect dictatorship and a near-totalitarian state, it remains unclear whether the regime has an ideology or is trivial. China can check the other boxes of fascism; aggressiveness, nationalism, and militarism, but China’s nationalism is not

15 Ibid., 164.

16 Ibid., 173.

grounded in a fascist ideology. The following years will show whether China develops the “China Dream” into the “ultra dangerous” nationalist ideology it has the capacity to be.¹⁷ This scenario is asserted to have a high probability.

With this warning in disguise the book concludes. The main points to take away from Stein Ringen’s analysis are that China is a perfect dictatorship; perfect, because it is inconspicuous as most of the times commanding is not necessary and citizens self-sensor. This dictatorship is furthermore based on an effective yet inefficient system of control which serves the main purpose to maintain stability and to preserve the current regime. This finding is based on the thorough investigation this book undertakes of the relationship between the Chinese government and the Chinese people. This relationship, however, is unequal, as the state takes more than it gives back.

17 What we are seeing in the China Dream is the embryo of an ideology that is ultra-dangerous. is is that because it sits on a rhetoric of power and national greatness and because, ultimately, it is an ideology in which the person ceases to exist as an autonomous being and is subsumed in the nation [...]. If repression, aggression, and ultimately war are in the national interest, then these policies are by ideological fiat also of the good of ‘each person’s future and destiny’. *Ibid.*, 176.