1

Studying China in an Era of Globalisation

Studying China’s political economy in the pre reform era was not an easy task. With the plethora of information that is now available from China, it is worth remembering how difficult it was to get data and reliable information out of China for many years after 1949. The sort of information that is available on one visit to the web page of the Institute of World Economics and Politics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (www.iwep.org.cn) would have taken most scholars years to collect. Access to the Tsinghua collection of Chinese academic journals through Eastview (www.eastview.com) – both used in preparing this manuscript – gives more articles on any given subject than you can cope with. Conducting the sort of interviews that are now relatively common with Chinese officials, scholars and business people was impossible. And if Chinese officials or scholars visited the West, it was unlikely that they would engage in free and frank discussion, engage with western ideas and methods, or provide candid observations on the domestic situation in China. As Morgan (2004: 77) notes:

Twenty-five years ago the China specialist was of necessity a generalist. Since then, mastering the slow dribble of information that can be gleaned from a closed society, has been replaced by the management of a deluge of policies, facts, and figures. Simply keeping pace in one’s own small area of expertise has become an onerous task.

We should not fool ourselves that nowadays we know everything that is going on and really understand China – but our chances of making educated guesses that get somewhere close to reality have been vastly improved.
In some ways, however, studying the dynamics of change in the Chinese political economy was more simplistic in that it was all but possible to think entirely in domestic terms. To be sure, China was never a purely totalitarian state where central leaders spoke and everybody else just fell in line, and considerable time and effort was spent trying to find the real locus of power, with particular emphasis on elite factionalism, the role of the military, and the power of provincial leaders. And of course, China’s leaders always had relations with the superpowers in mind when defining domestic development strategies. But you could all but ignore the global and focus purely on the dynamics of domestic politics.

With China’s re-engagement with the global economy in the post-Mao era, and particularly after Deng Xiaoping’s southern inspection tour – the nanxun – in 1992, such a domestic focus can no longer be efficacious. This is not to say that the domestic context is unimportant – far from it. Domestic considerations must remain crucial for any understanding of the contemporary political economy. It is just that on their own, domestic issues do not let us truly understand the many dynamics at play. Trying to get to grips with the domestic context of reform is hard enough in itself, but the rather daunting reality for students of contemporary China is that it is now essential to also get to grips with the dynamics and workings of the global political economy as well.

Building on Payne’s (1998) analysis of the political economy of area studies, the objective of this book is both quite straightforward and rather grand at the same time. It is an attempt to enrich the study of Chinese politics and international relations by deploying the analytical tools of International Political Economy (IPE), to consider the dynamics and implications of China’s re-engagement with the global economy. It is also an attempt to enrich the study of IPE by providing a detailed case study to provide a resource for the development of a more comparative basis of theory.

In terms of enriching the study of Chinese IR, in attempting to categorise dominant approaches to considering China’s IR in an era of globalisation, we face the risk of caricaturing a vast canon of literature. Nevertheless, and accepting this risk, much of what is written about Chinese IR – particularly from inside China – is methodologically overly-statist and realist. In particular, I suggest that it fails to address the analytical problems of separating the domestic from the international, and separating economics from politics. There are of course exceptions, but by and large, the IR discipline has not widely embraced basic tenets of IPE as a methodological starting point.