



École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales

Labex Tepsis

State-Building through Political Disunity in Republican China

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Narratives of State-building in China throughout the twentieth-century follow the line of succession of the so-called “central governments”: Qing-Beiyang-Guomindang-CCP. Against such a backdrop, debates about State-building during the Republican period (1912-1949) have been almost exclusively concerned with the issue of ruptures and continuities between the Guomindang state and the PRC. This is quite paradoxical, as the Republican period was first and foremost characterized by political fragmentation. Indeed, neither the Beiyang nor the Guomindang governments were in a position to control the whole country, and they both had to deal with many formidable challengers: warlords, communist soviets, and later pro-Japanese governments. The traditional historiographical interpretation of such a political context by Chinese and Western scholars has been univocally negative: disunity has invariably been regarded as a blessing for imperialist forces, as a source of weakness for China as well as a serious hindrance to its modernization and to State-building.

Yet, some scholars have recently pointed to the fact that State-building ambitions were certainly not the exclusive preserve of the central governments: so-called “centrifugal political forces” harbored (and put into practice) similar ambitions too. Against such a backdrop and given the very strength of centrifugal forces during the Republic, it is exceedingly restrictive a vision to consider that the process of modernization and State-building was engineered only through central governments. Our main argument is that competing political realms should be considered less as a hindrance to the overall dynamics of Chinese State-building, than as an integral part of them.

Reconsidering the political division of China in such a new light bring forwards a new range of issues. Drawing on past researches, it now becomes necessary to explore the various achievements of the local power holders in realms such as infrastructures, taxation, police, education and welfare, while also paying attention to the array of tools (statistics, law, economic planning, etc.) that usually come together with the development of a modern administrative apparatus. But it is equally important to compare rival State-building endeavors and the dynamics of emulation and competition between them. Moreover, the issue of actual cooperation, and sometimes even coordination, between competing power holders remains underexplored.

We will single out two distinct periods which correlate with two different patterns of political disunity: the warlords period (1916-36) and the Sino-Japanese war (1937-45).