

The Chinese Historical Review

ISSN: 1547-402X (Print) 2048-7827 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ytcr20

Markets with Bureaucratic Characteristics: How Economic Bureaucrats Make Policies and Remake the Chinese State

Yingyao Wang, New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. 304 pp., Paper, $35, ISBN: 9780231214797

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To cite this article: Wen Xie (2025) Markets with Bureaucratic Characteristics: How Economic Bureaucrats Make Policies and Remake the Chinese State, The Chinese Historical Review, 32:2, 283-286, DOI: 10.1080/1547402X.2025.2600866

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1547402X.2025.2600866

Published online: 18 Feb 2026.

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merchant surnamed Liu, exploring business opportunities in Rason, North Korea's Special Economic Zone. Liu remarks, "North Koreans are so easily satisfied … must be because of their Military First policy taking all the money" (67). Yet his venture stalls due to unpredictable regulations and bureaucratic inability. Pulford illustrates how Liu's entrepreneurial ambition clashes with the decelerated temporality of the North Korean state.

Past Progress proposes an archaeological model of time in which the present is layered with the residues of past regimes—each continuing to shape perception, movement, and possibility. The notion of "time sovereignty" (Chapter 4) describes how local actors actively reconfigure the rhythms of time at the margins of state power. In this framework, time is not unilaterally imposed by history or ideology but is shaped by situated practices and negotiations. Yet this conceptualization raises further questions: How does the vision of socialist progress—with its utopian, emancipatory horizon—contrast with that of capitalist progress, which is oriented around productivity, accumulation, and innovation? What impact has the global ascendancy of capitalist progress had on the trajectory of socialist progress? How do these two distinct yet interrelated visions of progress speak to—and push back against—one another? While *Past Progress* gestures toward ideological distinctions and conversions, it does not fully explain how different systems interact with divergent temporalities and affective orientations. Regardless of ideological framework, individuals encounter moments of hope, inevitability, and crisis. These affective and material experiences, cutting across ideological boundaries, remain central to the pursuit of modern life.

Pulford's multilingual and multisite fieldwork, archival engagement, and narrative nuance come together to provide an innovative contribution to the anthropology of time, border studies, and post/socialism. This is a book not only about borders or states, but about how people live amid the afterlives of ideology—how they experience, endure, and challenge uncertain futures under the specter of socialism. *Past Progress* is essential reading for scholars interested in the temporal politics of everyday life, the materiality of ideology, and the historical sedimentations that shape the present in borderlands where grand narratives collide and fracture.

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YINGYAO WANG, *Markets with Bureaucratic Characteristics: How Economic Bureaucrats Make Policies and Remake the Chinese State*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. 304 pp., Paper, $35, ISBN: 9780231214797

The relationship between the market and the state has long captivated sociologists, political economists, and historians alike. As classical thinkers like Karl Polanyi have argued, the twin expansions of markets and state power are not opposing

forces but deeply intertwined processes: Markets are created through state intervention, and their growth often reinforces sovereign authority. Yingyao Wang's *Markets with Bureaucratic Characteristics* builds on this foundational insight and advances the discussion in the Chinese context, offering a timely and significant contribution to the study of China's market reforms.

Wang's study highlights the crucial role of ideas and economic bureaucrats in shaping China's remarkable market transformation. In the Chinese context, idea-based legitimacy plays a central role in influencing policy outcomes and driving institutional change. Amid transitional uncertainty, economic ideas function as blueprints that help reduce ambiguity and enable the formation of coalitions around shared visions (15). Furthermore, the compressed nature of China's late development has made economic policymaking especially complex and challenging. Policymakers must navigate a landscape characterized by diverse—and often conflicting—developmental demands. This complexity compels central policymakers to draw on a broad array of economic ideas and to employ arguments, justifications, and strategic self-presentation to assert authority and shape policy directions. As Wang argues, China's economic policies and ideas resemble a "living world-historical museum," where multiple modes of economic management can be observed simultaneously (16). The coexistence of these managerial modes makes the study of economic policy in China particularly intriguing. Wang's work broadens our understanding of the role of economic ideas in the policymaking process within a dynamic and historically layered context.

Moreover, Wang emphasizes the importance of real bureaucrats. She creatively reinterprets Max Weber's classical portrayal of bureaucracy as a rational, impersonal machine prone to alienation, rigidity, and a lack of creativity. Wang "humanizes" this model by stressing that bureaucratic institutions are, in fact, inhabited by human agents. Rather than presenting the state as a monolithic entity, she highlights the internal composition of the bureaucracy—what she describes as evolving "small societies"—formed through career trajectories, generational shifts, and social networks, which often extend beyond formal organizational boundaries (5). More specifically, Wang focuses on "elite economic bureaucrats," defined as "those with an administrative ranking of vice minister or above in an economic policy-making agency" (97). While recent scholarship has turned to decision-making at the local level, Wang opens the black box of central government policymaking, offering a rare and much-needed look into its inner workings.

While the scope of the book is ambitious, Wang effectively employs the concept of "policy paradigm" to connect ideas, bureaucratic actors, and the evolution of implemented policies. Challenging the dominant narrative that China's economic reforms were guided primarily by "crossing the river by feeling for the stones"—as a process characterized by incrementalism and ad hoc experimentation—she persuasively argues that many reforms were, in fact, guided by identifiable policy paradigms formulated within the bureaucracy (22). The core of Wang's analysis lies in tracing the intellectual origins of bureaucrats' economic thinking, the formation of bureaucratic collectives, their strategic use of organizational platforms to advance key initiatives, and the ongoing expansion of specific policy paradigms. The book identifies several paradigms that have shaped China's reform trajectory over time, including decentralization (1978–1989), recentralization (1993–present),

interenterprise restructuring (1993–2002), financialization (2001–present), and industrial competitiveness (2005–present) (22).

While the concept of the policy paradigm is Wang's most distinctive analytical contribution—serving as a key tool for unpacking the complex history of reform—Wang occasionally oscillates between broader and narrower definitions. At times, policy paradigms are broad, overarching frameworks, principles, and ideas that shape how problems are understood and guide the search for appropriate policy solutions (21). Elsewhere, the concept is defined more narrowly as "integrated approaches to the economy and markets: worldviews on what the goals of economic development should be, how economic problems should be defined, and how state–economy relations should be formatted" (4). This narrow definition suggests that a policy paradigm must, at minimum, represent a coherent and integrated approach. While this definitional flexibility does not undermine the strength of Wang's overall argument, a more consistent articulation would sharpen the book's analytical clarity.

Without resolving this issue, one may question to what extent the identified paradigms *decentralization* and *recentralization* qualify as fully developed policy paradigms. Both are relatively broad and, at times, lack the conceptual specificity required to serve as coherent frameworks for policy guidance. In particular, the designation of recentralization as a paradigm spanning from 1993 to the present raises concerns whether such a long and internally varied temporal span dilutes its analytical precision.

By the end of the book, small variations in vocabulary have started to introduce further ambiguity into the discussion. The concluding Table C.1 introduces the slightly different term "policy movements," which is also linked to "paradigmatic views on the economy" (217). While there is clear overlap between these movements and previously identified policy paradigms—particularly interenterprise restructuring, financialization, and industrial competitiveness—the conceptual relationship between policy paradigms and policy movements remains somewhat unclear. Why, for instance, do decentralization and recentralization appear as paradigms but not as policy movements? A more explicit discussion of the distinctions and connections between these two terms would help enhance the overall coherence of the argument.

After reading the book, one may find that the discussions of financial and industrial policies are particularly rich and insightful, and Wang has devoted substantial effort to analyzing these two domains. However, an important question remains: Was the focus on finance and industrial policy domains driven by theoretical priorities, empirical accessibility, or methodological considerations? What about other key policy areas, such as foreign investment and global trade? Have there been efforts to formulate overarching "pan-paradigms" in these domains as well? Are certain policy arenas more conducive to paradigm formation due to their institutional configurations, the strategic interests of bureaucratic actors, or external pressures? Engaging with these questions would not only help clarify the scope and limitations of the policy paradigm framework but also deepen our understanding of the broader mechanisms that shape policy innovation and inertia during China's reform era.

Despite these points of discussion, *Markets with Bureaucratic Characteristics* is a valuable and pioneering contribution that greatly enhances our understanding of

China's policy-making processes, the evolution of its economic reforms, and the role of bureaucracy in shaping state-market dynamics. It encourages readers to reconsider long-standing assumptions in political economy and opens new avenues for exploring the complexities of governance and market formation in China. Yingyao Wang's ability to integrate empirical insights with theoretical rigor makes this book an important resource for sociologists, political scientists, historians, and anyone interested in China's ongoing transformation.

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PENG XU, *The Courtesan's Memory, Voice, and Late Ming Drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2025. 244 pp. Paper. $29.95. ISBN: 9780472057221; Cloth. $85.00. ISBN: 9780472077229

Peng Xu's *The Courtesan's Memory, Voice, and Late Ming Drama* addresses a critical lacuna in Chinese theater history by recovering the contributions of courtesans to late Ming dramatic culture. Employing a diverse body of materials—musical treatises and formularies, contemporary poems, biographical accounts, illustrations, paintings, and textual variants across different editions of playscripts—Xu challenges the conventional narrative that the development of late Ming Chinese theater should be attributed to male connoisseurs and performers. Through meticulous analysis, Xu tells a convincing story of how female performers of the pleasure quarters actively shaped theatrical practice, musical transmission, and dramatic composition during this pivotal period of Chinese cultural and literary history.

The book is structured chronologically in four substantive chapters plus a coda, following the evolution of musical practices and their concomitant cultural transformation from the medieval to the early modern periods. Central to Peng Xu's argument is the concept of embodied knowledge—the skills, techniques, and cultural memory transmitted through oral tradition and performance practice rather than written texts. The book reveals how courtesans served as embodied repositories of musical knowledge from earlier dramatic forms, particularly the *xiansuo* (弦索) musical style of northern drama, which they then adapted and incorporated into the increasingly popular practice of *kunqu* (崑曲).

Chapter 1 tells the story of courtesan Fu Shou 傅壽 (Nimble Beauty) and her collaboration with the Cantonese poet Han Shanggui 韓上桂 in producing the northern drama *Soaring the Sky* (*Lingyun ji* 凌雲記). Nimble Beauty's mastery of the *xiansuo* style influenced Han's composition; the play's musical irregularities, Xu argues, in fact represent innovations designed to accommodate courtesan performance practices. By comparing the work with contemporary song anthologies, Xu persuasively argues that segments dismissed by previous scholarship as technical flaws were deliberate adaptations that prioritized performer agency over conventional prosodic rules.