

Daniel Koss: Where the Party Rules – The Rank and File of China's Communist State

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Review by Carolin Kautz

With his recently published monograph, Daniel Koss offers an important contribution to the study of authoritarianism. By using China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a case study, Koss analyses “the party’s role in the information architecture of the authoritarian state, with implications for state capacity and ultimately for regime durability as well” (p. 6). Koss wants to go beyond existing approaches in the literature that focus on the role of authoritarian parties as institutions of patronage, for mediating leadership conflicts and as democratic concessions in an authoritarian context (p. 6). Instead, he suggests the use of an authoritarian lens for the study of authoritarian regime parties in order to understand how they function and how they serve to empower the state. In order to do this, Koss uses his case study of the CCP to move beyond analyses either of the top-level leadership or of making comparisons on a cross-national scale and instead, with the help of a sub-national comparative approach, analyses the distribution of the CCP’s rank and file and their contributions to empowering the state. Koss argues that rank-and-file party members of the CCP help to empower the state by fulfilling the function of providing information crucial for political tasks.

In order to analyse the influence of the presence of rank-and-file party members on the implementation of important state policies, Koss conducts mostly quantitative analyses of two exemplary policy areas, i.e. the implementation of the one-child policy and the collection of taxes throughout the country. With the help of existent as well as newly available statistical data, he first tests the hypothesis of whether a higher presence of party members in a given locality has a positive effect on the implementation of the one-child policy, namely the prevention of a high-ratio of gender-imbalanced birth. Because he argues that this is the more difficult task to implement compared to the task of simply lowering birth rates, Koss concludes that this is a task for the party to implement with the help of its extensive grassroots networks. He finds that a higher number of party members in a given locality indeed correlates with a less significant gender-imbalance at birth and concludes that a higher party presence allows for better implementation of difficult policies. Similarly, with regard to tax collection Koss argues that the presence of rank-and-file party members in a given locality allows for improved revenue collection so that party members do not only extract rents from the state, but also help with the collection of state income, thereby empowering the state.

Since Koss argues that rank-and-file party members support policy implementation and thereby empower the state and concludes that a higher number of party members present in a given locality leads to better results in policy implementation and revenue raising, he attempts to trace the reasons for the divergence in the density of party members across localities. Looking at the divergence in the density of party representation in different areas of the People's Republic of China, Koss proposes that this divergence can be traced back to the Japanese occupation during the Sino-Japanese War. He suggests that due to Japanese occupation, the CCP was able to build a strong Party organisation because it provided a shield from Guomindang attacks and helped with the mobilisation of peasants on xenophobic and nationalist grounds. Additionally, the CCP was able to rapidly move into the power vacuum left by the retreating Japanese troops after the end of World War II. Koss shows that patterns of current-day party membership can be linked to these effects of occupation and during the past 70 years have been waning only slowly. According to him, early party membership patterns still have a visible effect on how party membership is distributed geographically now and he identifies an, albeit weakening, effect of path-dependency between historical and current patterns of party membership.

Following his argument of state empowerment by rank-and-file Party members at the grassroots level whose spatially diverse presence he traces back to patterns of Japanese occupation during World War II, Koss still analyses the question of whether the Party can also function as a self-corrective device in times of crisis. He takes into consideration the two cases of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and based on mostly qualitative document analysis, concludes that an, albeit weak, self-corrective effect can be observed in both cases. Areas that were strongly contested during the anti-Japanese war and therefore had party members more strongly committed to the Communist cause tended to have lower death tolls during the famine following the Great Leap Forward and areas with a better developed party network did undergo less turmoil during the Cultural Revolution or returned to order more easily.

Summing up, based on his case study of the CCP Koss argues that authoritarian regime parties help to empower the state and thereby make authoritarian regimes more resilient by supporting policy implementation, revenue collection and by serving as a self-corrective device in times of crisis. He traces back the patterns of party membership in China helping with these tasks to patterns of Japanese occupation during World War II and identifies a path dependency of these patterns that is still influential today. Koss makes an important contribution to the study of the functioning of the CCP and of authoritarian parties more generally, not only because he makes use of newly available resources and innovative methodology. Even more importantly, he analyses an authoritarian party from an authoritarian standpoint, trying to understand how it works and how it helps to empower an authoritarian state instead of looking for democratic or reform potential. As such,

Koss's book is not only interesting for students of Chinese politics and the CCP, but for studying authoritarian regime parties more broadly.

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