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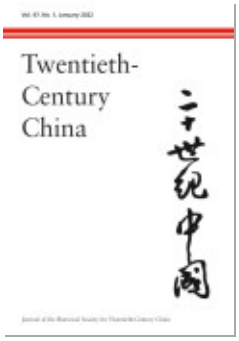

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WAR, DISUNITY, AND STATE BUILDING IN CHINA, 1912–1949

Emily M. Hill

Xavier Paulès and David Serfass—in their introduction to this special issue—call for greater recognition of the many agents involved in multicentered state-building processes during China's Republican era (1912–1949). This article addresses their intriguing idea by linking it to the theoretical paradigm associated with Charles Tilly (1929–2008), in which states are formed and strengthened through war. The article briefly reviews how Tilly's paradigm has figured in research on China's early twentieth-century era of conflict among regional strongmen and struggle against Japanese invasions. Recounting trends construed as unifying processes, it then reconsiders the idea that the unity of the People's Republic of China (PRC) grew out of regional and central state-building efforts of the Republican period. With an eye to the potential for further analytical exploration of conflicts born of political disunity in China, the article concludes by proposing greater precision in the conceptualization of centralization and continuity in Chinese state-building processes.

Keywords: disunity, Republican China, state building, Charles Tilly, war, warlords

Assessing the state of the field of "warlord studies" in 1980, Diana Lary declared that efforts "to impose Western analytic models on the fabric of Chinese society" were unlikely to be fruitful. While acknowledging the value of analytic models, she cautioned that "those derived from a study of Western societies may be massively irrelevant."[1] Existing historiography on warlordism and war in relation to political change in early twentieth-century China reflects broad agreement with her view.[2] By 1980, only two books had applied analytic models to Chinese warlordism. Lucien Pye and Hsi-sheng Ch'i, both political scientists, identified patterns of interaction among warlords and their regimes by following the multiple story lines, shifting

1 Diana Lary, "Warlord Studies" (review essay), *Modern China* 6, no. 4 (1980): 447.

2 Arthur Waldron analyzed the pejorative and satirical connotations of "warlord" and "warlordism" and their equivalents in other languages. As established labels, the terms are useful if handled with care. Arthur Waldron, "The Warlord: Twentieth-Century Chinese Understandings of Violence, Militarism, and Imperialism," *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (October 1991): 1073–1100.

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alliances, and varied behavior of major players.[3] Until very recently, their works were the only monographs on China's warlord era in which social theory was explicitly applied. After these books appeared, China's early twentieth century faded from the view of social scientists, leaving the field to historians, who appeared to share Diana Lary's pessimism about theoretical models relating to warfare and political change. The works by Pye and Ch'i were accompanied by a remarkable cluster of empirical studies of individual warlords and autonomous regions of the warlord era.[4] Only a few, however, sought to generalize about warlordism either in China or in comparative global history.[5] For the most part, the historiography of the 1960s through the 1990s remained free of explicit theoretical analysis or sustained empirical comparison.

Since the 1990s, social theory has returned to historical analysis of China's Republican era. Reverberations of the widely influential war-centered analysis of which Charles Tilly was the most prominent and prolific representative have affected the China field. Historians have now created a substantial body of empirical research on military matters and state building in modern China and ventured into comparative analysis of their findings.

Charles Tilly was his generation's most influential analyst of what he called "state formation" through conflict over many centuries of European history.[6] He argued that the material foundations of state power tended to expand rapidly through wartime exigencies and expedients. As rulers imposed extraordinary taxes and levies on their subjects, called for special contributions from property-holders, and drew bankers and accountants into their service, they built bureaucratic scaffolding for their states and the capacity to extract resources from their realms through consistent and regularized systems. Warfare thus promoted the centralization of administrative functions, strengthening states against their rivals.[7]

3 Lucian Pye, *Warlord Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Modernization of Republican China* (New York: Praeger, 1971); Ch'i Hsi-sheng, *Warlord Politics in China, 1916–1928* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976).

4 Including James E. Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966); Donald G. Gillin, *Warlord: Yen Hsi-shan in Shansi Province, 1911–1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967); Diana Lary, *Region and Nation: The Kwangsi Clique in Chinese Politics, 1925–1937* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Gavan McCormack, *Chang Tso-lin in Northeast China, 1911–1928* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1977).

5 On the general features of Chinese warlordism, see James E. Sheridan, *China in Disintegration: The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912–1949* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 57–65, 182–206.

6 Tilly developed his hypotheses centered on war in three major works: "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 3–83; Charles Tilly, "War-Making and State-Making as Organized Crime," in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 170–91; Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992).

7 Tilly and other historical sociologists extended the argument of Max Weber (1864–1920) that a state, by definition, holds a monopoly on violence within its territory. Tilly's bellicist arguments have been qualified and extended by many scholars, notably sociologist–political scientist Thomas Ertman. See Thomas Ertman, *The Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Tilly did not consider his state-formation framework to be applicable outside Europe.[8] Nonetheless, it has been adopted by many scholars outside European studies. In the China field, for instance, the paradigm has been applied in an ambitious comparison of Warring States China to early modern Europe.[9] In recent years, research on Republican China has likewise begun to feature explicit engagement with Tilly's hypothesis that "war made the state, and the state made war."[10]

In response to Paulès and Serfass's conception of state building through political disunity in China from 1912 to 1949,[11] this article takes stock of the emergence of conceptual approaches to the phenomena of war and political disunity in scholarship on Republican China since the 1990s. It then presents a pair of contrasting historical narratives, discussed in sections on "unification" and "disunity." According to the first narrative, China's political unity increased over the course of the Republican period. The second tells an alternative story of continuing disunity. Juxtaposition of these contrasting narratives suggests that political disunity and centralization are overlapping and dynamic tendencies rather than separate conditions. Finally, the article concludes by questioning the idea that after 1949 China's new authorities carried out state building on foundations established during the Republican era.

Approaches to War, Society, and the State in Republican China

Diana Lary expressed skepticism regarding the use of theoretical frameworks at a time when her colleagues were breaking away from the "challenge-response" paradigm in which Westerners figured as the main agents of change in China and elsewhere outside Europe.[12] Historians writing in English sought to move away from foreign influences on the edges of China's vast territory and to explore internal dynamics of change without imposing Western conceptual categories in their interpretation of historical sources.[13] Furthermore, with regard to the study of warfare in particular, outsiders' callous attitudes toward Chinese experiences of devastating conflict called for scholarly intervention. In her prolific work, Lary has reiterated humane reminders

8 For Tilly's exclusions, see Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," 81; Tilly, "War-Making and State-Making as Organized Crime," 186.

9 Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

10 Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," 73. For an introduction to Tilly's bellecist thought together with a valuable set of critiques and extensions of his ideas, see Lars Bo Kaspersen and Jeppe Strandsbjerg, eds., *Does War Make States? Investigations of Charles Tilly's Historical Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

11 Xavier Paulès, "Questioning the Teleology of the Central State in Republican China," in Xavier Paulès and David Serfass, eds., "State Building through Political Disunity in Republican China," special issue, *Twentieth-Century China* 47, no. 1 (January 2022): 3–10.

12 For a critique of this approach to China, see Tani E. Barlow, "Colonialism's Career in Postwar China Studies," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 1, no. 1 (1993): 224–67.

13 The trend was described and applauded by Paul Cohen. Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

that the Chinese people suffered deeply throughout the back-to-back conflicts that raged across their country from 1912 to 1949.[14]

In parallel to a continuing stream of social history recounting personal experiences of war, historiography on China since the 1990s has also been shaped by a starkly contrasting view of warfare. To mention two leading contributors, Arthur Waldron and Hans van de Ven have written extensively on China's political transformation through war.[15] Their pathbreaking work bears the imprint of a European-based historical trend to see war as a transformative force at the macrohistorical level.[16] A generational conversion in scholars' attitudes toward war first focused on European history.[17] Implicitly, the new approach to war in China drew inspiration from scholars such as Charles Tilly, whose analytical models and hypotheses—developed in research mainly on Europe—elevated warfare to the level of a primary cause of political restructuring.[18]

Applying Tilly's model of state building through war explicitly to Qing and Republican China, recent work by Huaiyin Li represents a conceptual breakthrough among historians. On the basis of rich empirical research examining how the mobilization of revenue to support war and political consolidation enabled the Guomindang (GMD) state to reach a position of dominance in 1928, Li based a conclusion about China's "bottom-up" state formation on comparison of early Republican China and early modern Europe.[19] Li's revealing analysis of the financial bases of disunity and unity in the warlord years demonstrated that Tilly's ideas are indeed broadly applicable to twentieth-century China. With reference to China after 1949, Li declared that the centralization and unification he

14 Lary's works include: Diana Lary, "Violence, Fear, and Insecurity: The Mood of Republican China," *Republican China* 10, nos. 2/3 (1985): 57–58; *Warlord Soldiers: Chinese Common Soldiers, 1911–1937* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Diana Lary and Stephen MacKinnon, eds., *The Scars of War: The Impact of Warfare on Modern China* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2001); Diana Lary, *The Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation, 1937–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Diana Lary, *China's Civil War: A Social History, 1937–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

15 Arthur Waldron, *From War to Nationalism: China's Turning Point, 1924–25* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Hans J. van de Ven, "Public Finance and the Rise of Warlordism," *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 4 (1996): 829–36; Hans J. van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China, 1925–1945* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

16 Introducing a special issue on war in modern China, Hans van de Ven acknowledged a debt to "the new military history," an approach developed in studies of Europe. See Hans J. van de Ven, "War in the Making of Modern China," *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 4 (1996): 738.

17 Historical work on the impact of technological advances on military weaponry helped launch the trend. Notable for their world-historical perspective, two such works were written by Donald Headrick and William McNeill. Donald Headrick, *Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power*: *Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

18 Hans van de Ven stated, for instance, that "the military . . . drove state-building." Hans J. van de Ven, "The Military in the Republic," in Frederic Wakeman Jr. and Richard Louis Edmonds, eds., *Reappraising Republican China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99.

19 Huaiyin Li, "Centralized Regionalism: The Rise of Regional Fiscal-Military States in China, 1916–28," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 1 (January 2021): 1–39; Huaiyin Li, *The Making of the Modern Chinese State: 1600–1950* (London: Routledge, 2020), 163–91.

traced were continued after 1928 by GMD leaders and later by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).[20]

In illuminating earlier contributions, political scientist Ja Ian Chong engaged Tilly's bellicist ideas in theoretically informed and empirically grounded analysis of internal politics and foreign intervention in the late Qing and Republican periods. Supporting his propositions by comparing China to two other Asian nations, Chong considered an array of both unifying and divisive forces during the period from 1893 to 1952. He argued that although internal fractures were exacerbated by foreign intervention in China's political, financial, and military affairs, such intervention at the same time ensured China's survival as a unified political entity.[21] Not cited by Li, Chong's interpretation of concurrent processes of fragmentation and state strengthening offers valuable conceptual refinement to historians.

By linking Nationalist China's emergence from warlordism to China's reunification under the CCP, Huaiyin Li and Ja Ian Chong have strengthened a consensus that has gradually coalesced in support of Robert Bedeski's hypothesis, advanced in 1992, that "the Nationalist regime was the transition to, or even the beginning of, a new and sovereign Chinese state system."[22] Thanks to a generation of scholars' painstaking archival research and analysis since 1992, it is now possible to substantiate Bedeski's claim.

Unification

Since the 1990s, scholars have collectively presented a plausible narrative of China's gradual unification during the period from 1912 to 1949. The story begins with fragmentation and proceeds through episodes of strengthened state authority from the 1920s onward. The GMD-led government emerged as a strong state compared to its predecessor in Beijing and also increased its authority over regional rivals. Thanks to international and widespread domestic recognition of the Nanjing government (1927–1937) as the legitimate representation of the nation of China, moreover, the power of this entity began to reach further than its armies and appointed officials.

Within a few years of its founding in 1912, the Beijing-based apparatus of the Republic of China had lost credibility as a national state, barely exerting authority in the vast territories beyond its capital district. The political pattern known as Chinese warlordism emerged, featuring rivalry among military leaders and their shifting coalitions.[23] Although the Nanjing-based GMD leadership has conventionally been charged with failing to fully reunify Qing territory, an emergence of administrative unity may certainly be discerned.

20 Li, "Centralized Regionalism," 39; Li, *Making of the Modern Chinese State*, 190.

21 Ja Ian Chong, "Breaking Up is Hard to Do: Foreign Intervention and the Limiting of Fragmentation in the Late Qing and Early Republic 1893–1922," *Twentieth-Century China* 35, no. 1 (November 2009): 75–98; Ja Ian Chong, *External Intervention and the Politics of State Formation: China, Indonesia, and Thailand, 1893–1952* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

22 Robert E. Bedeski, "China's Wartime State," in James C. Hsiung and Steven I. Levine, eds., *China's Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937–1945* (Boulder, CO: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 48.

23 Edward A. McCord, *The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); David Bonavia, *China's Warlords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Details of the process of unification support the hypothesis that political disunity was a basis for state building. Chiang Kai-shek brought several additional provinces under central control during the years before the beginning of full-scale war against Japan in July 1937.[24] Regional military leaders also deserve credit for reunifying a fractured nation under the pressure of competition and conflict. As Edward McCord pointed out in a case study of He Jian (何鍵) in the province of Hunan, the autonomy of many regional militarists gradually decreased during the 1930s. By consolidating military control and extending provincial administration more completely throughout Hunan, particularly in tax collection, General He represented and intentionally strengthened central authority in the province.[25]

Despite losses of territory to Japanese control, the pressures of war spurred centralization of economic management by officials in Nanjing and Chongqing. Morris Bian's study of the wartime reorganization of China's industrial system convincingly argued that efforts triggered by national crisis established important foundations for the state enterprise system of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Providing evidence of war-related centralization and continuity in state building during the 1930s and 1940s, Bian's analysis also supports Bedeski's hypothesis of continuity in state building across the 1949 divide.[26]

The province of Guangdong provides a contrasting regional case of unifying and decentralized processes. The era of General Chen Jitang (陳濟棠 1928–1936) featured provincially led industrial development and trade monopolies fostered by an autonomous military regime.[27] Chen's toppling in 1936 was Chiang Kai-shek's most decisive success against the "residual warlordism" of the Nanjing era.[28] Moreover, it allowed the Nanjing regime to benefit from the earlier building of provincial state capacity in Guangdong. Central players such as his brother-in-law T.V. Soong (宋子文 Song Ziwen) followed Chiang to tap the revenue streams that had supported provincial autonomy. Thus the capacity of the GMD state expanded through predation, first as the provincial regime took over private systems and next as the center appropriated revenue streams that provincial rulers had channeled in their own interests. As well as benefiting Chiang's unification effort, however, Guangdong's region-building efforts contributed to a degree of autonomy for the province after 1949, when provincial management of Chen Jitang's many ventures resumed. The legacy of military separatism and control of revenue in Guangdong and other provinces helps to explain the distinctive features of China's decentralized economic

24 Lloyd E. Eastman, "Nationalist China during the Nanking Decade, 1927–1937," in Lloyd E. Eastman, Jerome Ch'en, Suzanne Pepper, and Lyman P. Van Slyke, *The Nationalist Era in China, 1927–1949* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 35.

25 Edward A. McCord, *Military Force and Elite Power in the Formation of Modern China* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 125–35.

26 Morris L. Bian, *The Making of the State Enterprise System in Modern China: The Dynamics of Institutional Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

27 Emily M. Hill, *Smokeless Sugar: The Death of a Provincial Official and the Construction of China's National Economy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

28 The term was introduced in Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord*, 14–16.

planning after 1949.[29] This example suggests that the legacy of the Republican era was a tangled mix of unification and disunity.

Disunity: A System of Political Realms

As specialists know well, the history of Republican China features multiple story lines. These narratives follow a variety of temporal arcs in a variety of spatial settings. "Competing political realms," an evocative phrase used by Xavier Paulès and David Serfass, aptly describes the forms of political authority that flourished in China between 1912 and 1949.[30] After a brief survey of the era's competing and overlapping realms, this section continues by questioning the narrative convention in which events before 1949 are related to China's subsequent reconstitution by CCP leaders.

In addition to territories controlled by warlords and by central governments, a number of other political realms existed during the Republican era, exercising authority over nonterritorially as well as territorially bounded spaces. The multiplicity of these zones presents a challenge to generalizations about how violent conflict was linked to disunity and state building. Displaying similarities to the realms ruled by autonomous Chinese strongmen, Japanese-sponsored political entities controlled territories in the northeastern lands of the former Qing Empire from 1905 to 1945 and operated "puppet" administrations in northern and central China from 1935 to 1945.[31] To the north, Soviet sponsors helped to create the Republic of Mongolia in 1922, and the CCP carved out base areas in numerous interprovincial borderlands, beginning in the south, from 1927 onward.[32] At the same time, all three of the powers just named exerted nonterritorial forms of authority. Throughout the era, Japan's strength and its status as a treaty power enabled it to impose demands, such as the right to station troops near Beijing, that impeded China's actions as a sovereign state. Meanwhile, the Soviet-sponsored Communist International (Comintern) created a nonterritorial political realm in China after its founding in 1919. In the early 1920s, Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) accepted the Comintern's patronage so thoroughly that the Nationalist government of the Republic of China, founded by Sun's reorganized GMD in Guangzhou in 1925, was at first the Comintern's Chinese client state. Within two years of Sun's death, however, his strongest successors repudiated client status through political

29 Soviet-inspired central planning in China was a distinctively decentralized institution. See Thomas P. Lyons, *Economic Integration and Planning in Maoist China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); David Granick, *Chinese State Enterprises: A Property Rights Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

30 Announcing conference plans, they stated: "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." Xavier Paulès and David Serfass, "State-Building through Political Disunity in Republican China," École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2018, accessed on August 16, 2021, https://www.ehess.fr/fr/colloque/state-building-through-political-disunity-republican-china.

31 On Manchukuo and earlier zones of Japanese political control in the Northeast, see Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire*: *Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

32 On Mongolia, see Stephen Kotkin and Bruce Elleman, *Mongolia in the Twentieth Century: Landlocked Cosmopolitan* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999). On the "interstitial tactics" of the CCP's border-area base building, see Brantly Womack, *The Foundations of Mao Zedong's Political Thought, 1917–1935* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1982), 95–100.

struggle and military action. Thereafter, the CCP survived a series of spatial displacements by building an autonomous political realm extending beyond its scattered territorial bases.

A full list of competing political entities in Republican China includes other foreign-supported realms. For most of the era, a number of Western states and Japan separately and collectively maintained sturdy political realms that existed beyond their coastal microcolonies. As reflected in the treaty term "extraterritoriality," meaning the rights of nationals from states that had imposed settlements on Qing officials from 1842 to 1901 to be subject only to the juridical authority of their home governments, these political powers were not fully defined in physical space. The authority of the Vatican was one such realm, exerting competing and contested authority over members of the Roman Catholic community in China. Overlapping with and often challenged by other realms, the Chinese Customs Service was a foreign-dominated and armed political entity that channeled flows of revenue from Chinese commercial activity into the coffers of Western banks. While building a centralized and bureaucratized fiscal system, the Customs Service upheld the onerous financial obligations that earlier Chinese governments had been compelled to accept, protecting the interests of creditors and internationally recognized Republican governments from rival realms' hunger for revenue.[33]

The China of competing political realms described above, where Western administrators, Japanese armies, Christian organizations, and the Comintern all exerted political authority concurrently with an array of autonomous regional military strongmen, was not only a very different China from the realm governed by the CCP but was also simply not the same nation-state under a different set of rulers. Because political authority cannot be precisely measured, a trend of unification cannot be proven. Acknowledging that increased unity is difficult to discern, we should thereby reduce our emphasis on continuity in state building. The next step would be to recognize that the Republic of China and its rival realms existed in temporally bounded and distinct forms. In this perspective, the Republic of China was a state that was in the end destroyed rather than built by war. Together with most of its coeval realms, that former China was swept away during wars against Japan and the CCP. Arguably, the CCP then began a new process of state building as it inaugurated another period of ever-shifting balance between unifying processes and the ever-present forces of political disunity. Thanks to research on China after 1949, it is clear that forces of unity and disunity are characteristic of that era as well as of earlier periods.[34] Definitive conclusions about which processes were dominant at any particular time are perhaps not possible.

As noted by Paulès and Serfass, the Republican era has been viewed as an "interregnum," lying between the imperial era and the PRC.[35] Earlier history, the source of

33 Hans J. van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origins of Modernity in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

34 Political scientist Jae Ho Chung has analyzed the Chinese state's uneasy balance between centralization and decentralization from 1949 to the present. See Jae Ho Chung, *Centrifugal Empire: Central-Local Relations in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Jae Ho Chung, *Central Control and Local Discretion in China: Leadership and Implementation during Post-Mao Decollectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

35 Paulès and Serfass, "Questioning the Teleology of the Central State," 4. Bruce Elleman, for instance, called a long section "Imperial Interregnum." Bruce Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795–1989* (New Yorklong: Routledge, 2001), 147–232.

the interregnum idea, offers an alternative. Preceding the longer-lasting Han and Tang dynasties, the Qin and Sui imperial states are remembered as powers in their own right. Before its transfer to Taiwan, the Republic of China existed for exactly as long as the Sui (581–618): 37 years. Instead of being dismissed as an interdynastic interregnum, the Republic of China deserves to be viewed as a peer of the Qing government and the PRC. Respect for an internationally recognized government may be accorded, however, without imposing a story of unification that might not fit well.

To view China's Republican era as a time of disunity in which fragmentation was gradually overcome through competitive state building underestimates the discontinuity of history by linking events of the early twentieth century to a mid-century endpoint. It might be helpful to scholars who find Tilly's bellicist paradigm valuable to note that an emphasis on continuity from the Republican period through the second half of the twentieth century fits Tilly's framework poorly. Tilly sought to avoid explaining a particular process of state formation by its outcome, cautioning against retrospectively tracing paths to centralized statehood.[36] Furthermore, it would be helpful to recognize a limitation of Tilly's analytic framework: he may be criticized for inattention to the tendency of military conflict to advance the building of some states while demolishing others.[37]

Conclusion

The study of Chinese history seems at times to be a continent-sized island, a vast world of its own. Despite an earlier reluctance to apply imported frameworks, however, scholars are now adapting comparative approaches such as those inspired by historical sociologists' war-centered analytic frameworks. Given the abundance of source material available for comparative purposes, such engagement might become an analytic frontier in the China field. Theoretically informed attention to disunity and conflict in early twentieth-century China in further application of Tilly's compelling and much-debated theory of state formation would promote analysis of China's era of competing territorial regimes, political factions, and highly destructive engagements involving hundreds of thousands of soldiers at a time. Such work has the potential to further the informed integration of research on China into comparative studies of world history and politics and to advance the development of social theory.

While welcoming the emergence of the bellicist approach, this discussion has identified weaknesses in recent applications of a framework linking war, disunity, and state building to the study of twentieth-century China. Pointing out the imprecision of viewing disunity and unity as mutually exclusive states or processes, it also questions a related tendency to overemphasize continuity in a way that links events of the Republican era too loosely to China's reconstitution under CCP leadership.

36 Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, 32–33; Charles Tilly, "Western State-Making and Theories of Political Transformation," in Tilly, *Formation of National States in Europe*, 615.

37 A critic of Tilly's model has argued that warfare weakens states in certain circumstances. See Hendrik Spruyt, "War and State Formation: Amending the Bellicist Theory of State Making," in Kaspersen and Strandsbjerg, *Do Wars Make States?*, 73–97.

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