

The Gramscian Approach to the Chinese State

1 INTRODUCTION

As explained in Chap. 1, the approach of the authoritarian state, developmental state, and corporatist state have failed to offer a sufficiently sophisticated conceptualization of the Chinese party-state. Building largely upon the theoretical insights of Gramsci, complemented by those of Poulantzas, in this book I propose the Gramscian approach to investigate the Chinese state. I maintain that the Chinese party-state has been transforming from ruling principally with coercion to drive the country's passive revolution into governing with both persuasion and domination. That being said, I do not claim that the Chinese state has become fully hegemonic. Instead, it is undergoing a hegemonic transformation, moving slowly but significantly towards that direction. In other words, my approach underscores the broader trend of its socio-political and economic development, rather than merely analyzing a stationary moment within this trend.

In the next section, I first highlight the critical state theories developed by Gramsci and Poulantzas, which have inspired my conceptualizations of the Chinese state. In Sect. 3, I expound on the theoretical benefits of integrating Gramsci and Poulantzas' intellectual insights, Sect. 4 elaborates on how scholars in the field of China Studies have used the concept hegemony, and my hegemony approach to the Chinese state.

2 GRAMSCI AND POULANTZAS' CRITICAL STATE THEORIES

To understand Gramsci and Poulantzas' theories, we have to first grasp the development of state theories prior to their time as their aims were to advance the Marxist state theories prominent at that time that suffered from a few theoretical deficits. Due to his death, Marx did not have a chance to complete a systematic theory of the state (Miliband 1969). However, the state is not a missing focus from his work; it is discussed in his writings, such as *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx 1973) and *The Civil War in France* (Marx 1974). Commenting on the coup d'état of Bonaparte, Marx argues that the bourgeoisie's interest is 'most intimately imbricated precisely with the maintenance of that extensive and highly ramified state machine' (Marx 1973, 186). He and Engels contend in the *Communist Manifesto* that the modern state is the management committee for the bourgeoisie (Marx and Engels 1978). They see different modes of production as requiring different forms of state intervention and argue that 'the nature of the state power is determined by the changing needs of the economy and/or by the changing balance of class forces at the economic level' (Jessop 1982, 10). By underscoring the class character of the state, Marx and Engels lay down a significant foundation for critical state theories that refuse to regard the state as representing the entire society or serving the national interests.

Since Marx and Engels do not formulate a definitive theory of the state and politics, there is great room for interpretation of their ideas. As a result, state theories drawing upon their work but with diverse positions have come into existence, and there are no unitary or coherent Marxian state theories. Some interpretations of their ideas, especially dogmatic Marxism, are criticized for their instrumentalist tendency because they tend to view the state as a 'thing' or an 'entity' that can be taken over by any class (Jessop 1990). This criticism is one of the major premises for the subsequent debates about the state. Furthermore, dogmatic and orthodox Marxism are also disapproved for their economic reductionist orientation as they consider the state (the superstructure) to be a mere epiphenomenon of the economic structures. Hobsbawm has pointed out that they focus on 'the derivation of political, juridical and other ideological conceptions from the basic economic facts' (1977, 207).

Lenin regards the state as an instrument of class rule and as a machine for class oppression, holding that 'it [the state] is the creation of "order", which legalizes and perpetuates this oppression by moderating the conflict

between classes' (Lenin 1969). He believes that the state is a thing that any class can take over and that the proletarian revolution has the potential to smash the bourgeois state apparatus to bring about a socialist state (Wright 1979). This kind of Marxism-Leninism characterized by instrumentalism and epiphenomenalism was once quite influential, especially in the Second and Third International. However, it lost its predominance in the 1960s when many Marxians in Europe became disillusioned with Stalinism and the authoritarian socialism of the Soviet Union. Marxism-Leninism then came under attack by invigorated theoretical endeavors in different countries, including Althusserian structuralism in France which later spread to Britain and the USA, the Gramscian schools of thought in Italy and beyond, and the capital logic school (*Staatsableitung debatte*) in West Germany.

Gramsci's state theory represents a crucial break from Marxism-Leninism due to his rejection of instrumentalism and crude economic reductionism. He is considered the first Marxian to produce a 'full political theory' (Hobsbawm 1977, 208) that neither treats the political structures as mere reflections of the economic base, nor views the state as an instrument for class rule.¹ The political and socio-economic circumstances of the times drove Gramsci to create a state theory that surpasses Marxism-Leninism in a number of ways.² First, vulgar Marxism in Gramsci's time was marked by evolutionary determinism; it viewed the development of history and society as guided by objective laws and as 'beyond the scope of active human intervention' (Merrington 1968, 146). Many of its proponents believed that proletarian revolution and the demise of capitalism would come inevitably and automatically due to its inherent contradictions. Gramsci contests this mechanistic position, seeking to examine, with his own theories, why the working class in Western Europe, unlike their Russian counterparts, had not developed a class consciousness or risen up against capitalism automatically in times of economic and political crisis (Burawoy 2003; Salamini 1974). By introducing the dimension of worker subjectivities and consciousness into his social and political inquiries, as will be elucidated, Gramsci is able to convincingly explain why revolution did not take place in Europe.

Second, Gramsci circumvents the trap of reducing the superstructures into the economic base by paying legitimate attention to the former. He enriches Marxian state theories by proposing that civil society is part of the state. He regards the state not simply 'as the apparatus of government

operating within the “public” sphere (government, political parties, military) but also as part of the “private” sphere of civil society (for instance, church, media, and education) through which hegemony functions’ (Bieler and Morton 2003, 483). Building upon this broadened concept of the state, or what he calls the ‘integral state’, Gramsci further sheds light on how class power is organized by the state in political society and civil society with his ideas of ‘coercion’ and ‘hegemony’. Following the arguments of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, he holds that the coercive machinery of the state (political society) helps maintain the capitalist class’s domination (Gramsci 1971). At the same time, the dominant class seeks to acquire the active consent of the working class for its leadership by establishing ‘its own moral, political and cultural values as conventional norms of practical behavior’ in order to sustain its class superiority (Femia 1987, 3). This capitalist class’s ideological ascendancy over the subordinate class is what Gramsci calls hegemony. He maintains that a state is ethical if it helps organize capitalist hegemony:

[The] state is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes. (Gramsci 1971, 258)

The ethical state reproduces capitalist hegemony through civil society (and political society). Because of the intricate power mechanism of coercion and hegemony, Gramsci reveals that the working class’s consciousness and its rebellions against capitalism do not appear automatically as vulgar Marxism predicts.

As explained in Chap. 1, hegemony is a concept in contrast to passive revolution. In a hegemonic social formation, the subordinate class’s consent to capitalist development is elicited largely through persuasion. In some non-hegemonic Western societies, capitalism was introduced through state-engineered social and political reforms rather than through the initiative of the popular masses and capitalist class. The absence of a hegemonic class in these societies dictated that the state had to resort to domination and force to drive a top-down capitalist revolution.

Third, due to his renunciation of evolutionary and mechanistic Marxism, Gramsci endeavors to explore strategies for working class struggles in Western Europe. He observes that the state in Russia was

strong and its civil society was ‘primordial’ and ‘gelatinous’, whereas the state and civil society in the West has a more balanced relation and its civil society is comparatively ‘developed’ and ‘sturdy’ (Gramsci 1971, 238). Because of these substantial differences, Gramsci advocates that working class revolution, or what he calls the war of manoeuvre, that had taken place in Russia could not be copied in Italy or Western Europe. He argues that in the West, where hegemony, instead of coercion, is the prevalent form of class control, the exploited classes should deploy the strategy of war of position to accomplish ‘steady penetration and subversion of the complex and multiple mechanisms of ideological diffusion’ in order to stage counter-hegemony (Gramsci 1971, 232).

Because of restrictions in prison, Gramsci’s ideas could only be indirectly expressed in his work. This has created room for diverse or sometimes contradictory interpretations of his theories by different political forces in post-war Italy. For example, Togliatti’s interpretation of Gramsci’s insights is in line with the Marxist-Leninist political views held by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) while opponents of the PCI presented Gramsci as an unorthodox thinker who offers alternative theoretical resources to Leninism and Stalinism. Moreover, Gramsci is simultaneously criticized by some PCI supporters as a reformist and by some on the right and the left as a Stalinist (Mouffe and Sassoon 1977; Femia 1987). His major works were written during the 1920s and 1930s, but they were widely published in Italy only after the 1950s. Since the late 1960s, his intellectual contribution started to gain attention in countries beyond Italy, inspiring many subsequent theorists, such as Poulantzas, Laclau, Jessop, and Foucault.

Poulantzas was one of the most notable post-war critical state theorists. He adopts a structural approach in his counter-reductionist and counter-epiphenomenalist theorizations.³ In his first book published in English, *Political Power and Social Classes* (1973b), Poulantzas puts forward three propositions on the capitalist state: (1) the economy determines the political and the ideological only in the last instance; (2) the state enjoys relative autonomy from the dominant class; (3) the state performs a cohesive function in a capitalist formation. For Poulantzas, the capitalist social formation consists of three levels—the economic, the political, and the ideological. Following Althusser’s contention that the economic level is determinant in the last instance, Poulantzas argues that the political and the ideological cannot be reduced to the economic, though the economic level determines them in the last instance. Instead of focusing only on one’s position in relations of production, his theory concentrates on the

overdetermined effects of the ensemble of these three instances and the dynamics between them in social class formation (Poulantzas 1969, 1973a). This is what he first calls ‘overdetermination of class’ in *Political Power and Social Classes* (1973b, 54) and later calls ‘structural determination of class’ in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (1978, 29).

Within this conceptual framework, Poulantzas contends that the state is relatively autonomous from the dominant class due to the specificity of capitalism. In feudalism, elaborates Poulantzas, the serfs exercised some degree of control over the means of production and the object of labor because they still ‘had possession of his [their] parcel of land, which was protected by custom’ (Poulantzas 1978, 19). In other words, while the exploiting class had the economic ownership of the land, the exploited class was to a certain degree engaged in relations of economic possession. Under these circumstances, the feudal state had to exercise political force and legitimate violence over the serfs in order to secure the extraction of surplus labor from them. As a consequence, the state and the economy were intricately linked in feudal society. However, this kind of ‘overlapping’ or ‘mixedness’ (Poulantzas 2000, 18) between the economic and the political has been replaced by the relative separation between the two spheres in capitalism. Workers in capitalist societies, who are completely deprived of control over the means of production and the labor object, appear to be ‘free labourers’ in a double sense. First, unlike the serfs who were bounded to the land owned by their landlords, the working class is not legally or politically tied to the capitalist class. Second, workers are juridically free to sell their labor power in the market and to enter into labor contracts with capitalists. Direct political coercion of the state is unnecessary for the conversion of surplus labor into surplus value. Instead, the state’s intervention takes an indirect and legal-political form by creating the formal and abstract equality among exchangers of labor power (or other commodities) in the market (Poulantzas 1973a, 2000). Poulantzas sees the relative separation between the state and the economy as an inherent characteristic of capitalism. This relative autonomy of the state from the capitalist class has enabled the former to reproduce the latter’s long-term dominance by offering short-term benefits to the exploited class so that they will not revolt against the capitalist system.

The relative autonomy of the capitalist state does not mean that it is neutral or classless in nature. In contrast, Poulantzas argues in *Political Power and Social Classes* that the capitalist state is a cohesive factor in

maintaining the unity between the economic, political, and ideological instances in capitalist societies. As explained in Chap. 1, Poulantzas proposes that the state has three kinds of functions: economic, ideological, and political. Separate as these functions might seem, they together help prevent political conflicts from breaking out and the capitalist social formation from bursting apart, thereby maintaining the conditions for production. These functions of the capitalist state are interrelated in the sense that they all serve the purpose of upholding the unity of a capitalist formation.

After the release of his first book, Poulantzas's state theory changed over time in at least four respects. First, while his theorizations on the final determinant role of the economic and the relative autonomy of the state remain in his later writings, the idea that the state serves a cohesive function in capitalist societies has become less prominent, if not totally displaced. In his two other books, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (1978) and *State, Power, Socialism* (2000), Poulantzas proposes that the capitalist state is the materialization and condensation of class relations. No longer stressing the role of the state in organizing the capitalist class's interests and unity, he advances that class contradictions and social relations of production are inscribed, crystallized, and condensed in the state. He writes that

...the state crystallizes the relations of production and class relations. The modern political state does not translate the 'interest' of the dominant classes at the political level, but the relationship between those interests and the interests of the dominated classes—which means that it precisely constitutes the 'political' expression of the interests of the dominant classes. (2008, 80)

Many political scientists in Poulantzas's time interrogated the state from an institutional perspective (Hay and Lister 2006). Poulantzas's argument that the state is a condensation of class relations is therefore novel and insightful.

Second, in his later publication Poulantzas better portrays the dynamics between the state and class struggles. Building upon his thesis that the state is a condensation of class relations, in *State, Power, Socialism* he holds that even though class struggles take place beyond the state, they are not external to it; class struggles are inscribed in the institutional and material structures of the state (2000). Third, in his first book on the capitalist state, structures assumed primacy over class struggles, but in his later writings Poulantzas gradually shifted from structuralist formalism to asserting primacy of class struggles over the structures (Jessop 1982).

The fourth shift of focus in Poulantzas's writings concerns the weight he attributes to economic materiality. While the role of the economic instance is not explored so much in his early work *Political Power and Social Classes*, it is given greater attention in Poulantzas's two later books. This is probably due to the accusation of overpoliticizing the state in his early works (Poulantzas 2000). *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* has a more discernible 'economic framework' (Hall 1980); it delves into such questions regarding whether the role of the capitalist state changes during the transition from competitive capitalism to monopoly capitalism and whether the capitalist state still possesses relative autonomy vis-à-vis the dominant classes. In *State, Power, Socialism*, Poulantzas further restores the importance of the economic to his state theory with the concept of 'institutional materiality' (2000, 14). He stresses that the state manifests a material framework which is irreducible to political or ideological domination.

Despite his theoretical contribution, Poulantzas's state theory is not without criticism. To name a few examples, he has been accused of 'structural super-determinism' and 'structuralist abstractionism' by his opponent in the famous Poulantzas-Miliband debate (Laclau 1982). Ellen Meiksins Wood (1986) asserts that Poulantzas is the 'forerunner' in embarking on a retreat from class and leading to the complete autonomization of ideology and politics from economic materiality. Holloway and Picciotto (1977) disagree with Poulantzas's postulation that the separation between the state and the economy is an inherent characteristic of capitalism, arguing that such a separation is the product of continuous struggles by the ruling class to uphold its domination. Simon Clarke (1991) criticizes Poulantzas's structural determinism for underemphasizing the role of class struggle and assuming the predominance of structures.

These criticisms contain some truth. However, if we examine Poulantzas's theory within the historical and intellectual milieu of his time, his contributions to rebutting the instrumentalist and epiphenomenalist tendency of Marxism-Leninism should be rightfully acknowledged.⁴ Due to his premature death, Poulantzas's state theory was mainly developed during the 1960s and 1970s, and he was not able to respond to many criticisms against him. However, many contemporary theorists still find his theories relevant and stimulating. Within the British tradition, Jessop (1985) has dedicated a whole book to exploring Poulantzas's theories; and Poulantzas is a vital reference in much of his work (Jessop 1982, 1990, 2008). Within the US tradition, Aronowitz, and Bratsis (2003) have taken the Poulantzas-Miliband debate and Poulantzas's theories as points of

departure in reasserting the relevance of the state in the globalized era. Within the German tradition, Gallas et al. (2011) have offered an acute reading of Poulantzas's writings and explored how his theories should be applied and further developed in the contemporary context; Brand et al. (2011) have reformulated Poulantzas's theories to analyze the international political economy.

3 INTEGRATING GRAMSCI AND POULANTZAS' INSIGHTS

My theorization of the Chinese state is largely inspired by Gramsci's theory of hegemony (and passive revolution) with additional insights from Poulantzas. Gramsci and Poulantzas share some vigorous ideas, yet differ in other areas. As will be explicated, this has made their intellectual contributions complementary. Against the mainstream perception that Poulantzas inherits his ideas from Althusserian structuralism, Jessop maintains that Poulantzas actually adopts a neo-Gramscian approach in his work (1982). He writes:

But, if we ignore his earliest studies of law and the juridical system with their strongly Sartrean overtones...and his obvious flirtation with Althusserian structuralism in his first major work on the capitalist state (PPSC) and its residues in his subsequent analyses..., it is apparent that his principal sources of inspiration among twentieth-century Marxists are Gramsci and Lenin and that Gramsci is the more influential in many respects. (Jessop 1982, 154)

Gramsci's influence on Poulantzas is evident in the latter's emphasis on ideologies. As emphasized, Gramsci's concept of two modalities of class power (coercion and hegemony) is a breakthrough for Marxian state theory. With the ideas of hegemony, he convincingly illustrates how the capitalist class remains dominant by gaining cultural, political and moral leadership. Following in Gramsci's footsteps, Poulantzas elucidates that to sustain capitalist structures and the capitalist class's superiority, the state does not simply rule with its repressive apparatuses (such as police, army, judiciary and so forth) whose major functions are to maintain political order, it also rules with ideological apparatuses that elaborate and inculcate its ideologies (Poulantzas 1969, 1973a, b, 1978). Furthermore, Poulantzas extends Gramsci's concept of hegemony to analyze internal factions within the capitalist class (Poulantzas 1967, 1973b, 1978). The bourgeoisie is the dominant class in a capitalist formation and, according to Poulantzas,

within the dominant class there exist hegemonic classes that exercise dominance over the other dominant factions and unify them under its leadership.

In addition, both Gramsci and Poulantzas hold that capitalist hegemony and ideologies are rooted in economic materiality while scholars like Laclau and Mouffe have denied their relations to the economic. Gramsci believes that ‘if hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic’ (Femia 1987, 24). For him, in order to sustain the bourgeoisie’s dominance, the ruling class has to absorb the antagonism of the dominated class by addressing their concerns with short-term material measures. Similarly, Poulantzas (2000, 31) maintains that ‘...in working for class hegemony... the state...continually adopts material measures which are of positive significance for the popular masses...’ The fact that the capitalist state often forces concessions from the dominant class for the subordinate class has inspired Poulantzas to put forward the concept of the relative autonomy of the state.

Despite their common analysis on certain issues, Gramsci and Poulantzas’ thoughts have differences; these make their theories complementary to each other. Poulantzas puts flesh on the bones of some of Gramsci’s ideas. For instance, Gramsci does not clearly outline the mechanisms through which the state builds up and maintains capitalist hegemony (Poulantzas 2000),⁵ but Poulantzas fills the gap by highlighting the dual role of the state in organizing the power bloc and disorganizing the dominated class. On the one hand, it attempts to forestall working class struggles by producing effects of isolation at the ideological level, concealing the class nature of social relations of production from workers. On the other, the state seeks to unify the dominant class and help them overcome the isolation of their economic struggles by, for example, articulating their interests as the universal interests of society (Poulantzas 1973b). Furthermore, borrowing from Althusser, Poulantzas utilizes the concept of ideological apparatus to explain how the state elaborates upon and inculcates capitalist ideologies to maintain class hegemony. Examples of such apparatuses are churches, political parties, schools, mass media, and unions (Poulantzas 1969, 1978).

Moreover, influenced by Althusser, Poulantzas considers Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony subjectivist as he reduces ideology and consciousness to the subjectivity of class agents and does not analyze class subjects’ consciousness against economic and social structures.⁶ Criticizing Gramsci for conceptualizing the political and the economic as ‘moments’

(rather than structures) which is an expression of subjectivism (Poulantzas 2008, 163), Poulantzas argues that ideologies should be located within ‘an objective system of relations’ in a social formation (2008, 94). For him, the capitalist social formation consists of three instances: the economic, the political, and the ideological. Ideologies function within this ensemble of structures to shape social class formation, but the economic plays a determinant role in the last instance.

In addition, Gramsci has been criticized for insufficient attention to the economic and the economic role of the state (Hawley 1980; Anderson 1976). He surely does not deny the importance of economic materiality in class reproduction and social formation, but due to his central focus on hegemony, he does not explain the economic role of the state adequately. With his structuralist perspective, Poulantzas brings the economic structures, which Gramsci does not elaborate on much, back to the center of Marxian state theory.

However, there are two problems with Poulantzas’s structuralist approach to which Gramsci’s theories offer solutions. First, as mentioned in Chap. 1, Poulantzas’s political-ideological-economic structural concept lacks a social dimension. Influenced by Althusser (1971), Poulantzas tends to conceive of civil society as not enjoying any autonomy from the state. In his opinion, the actions of civil society institutions are determined by the repressive apparatuses of the state. Therefore, ‘the destruction of the ideological apparatus has its precondition in the destruction of the State repressive apparatus which maintains it’ (Poulantzas 1972, 252–253). Having conflated the state and civil society, Poulantzas does not pay adequate attention to the latter in his work.⁷ Gramsci’s emphasis on civil society and its relative autonomy from the state can compensate for the lack of a social dimension in Poulantzas’s state theory.

Second, Poulantzas has been criticized for overemphasizing structures at the expense of class agency. This perspective has a certain degree of validity, especially concerning his early writings, but it is not applicable to his later work which starts to emphasize the primacy of class struggles over structures (Jessop 1982, 156). Nevertheless, when compared to Gramsci’s theory, it is true that the strength of Poulantzas’s theory lies in its structural conceptualization, and that he has not shed much light on the role of social forces and class agents in transforming the structures. In contrast, Gramsci takes class actors, class organizations and class struggles more seriously. In his conceptualization, class agents play a crucial role in building hegemony

and working class revolution. For instance, the factory council was once conceived of as a platform through which workers can practise real democracy and self-autonomy; political parties are considered a modern ‘collective prince’ capable of revolutionizing the working class; organic intellectuals are regarded as vital in assisting the working class to overcome capitalist common sense. In brief, both theorists’ insights do not only share commonalities, but also help overcome each other’s weaknesses in different respects.

4 THE GRAMSCIAN APPROACH TO THE CHINESE PARTY-STATE

Although capitalist hegemony in China has received inadequate intellectual attention, scholars in the field of China Studies frequently refer to the term ‘hegemony’. It is, however, often used vaguely and ambiguously; and its meaning is always unspecified. According to my own analysis, hegemony is understood in at least four different undefined ways in the literature relating to the Chinese state, laws, and labor.

First, some scholars have equated hegemony with legitimacy. For instance, in his writing entitled *Contesting State Legitimacy in the 1990s*, Wright (2004) uses the term hegemony and legitimacy interchangeably when discussing to what extent the Chinese Democratic Party and China Labour Bulletin (a NGO led by overseas dissidents) can challenge the legitimacy of the Chinese state. Without defining what these two terms mean, the confusion between them manifests in his conclusion that ‘de-centralized CCP control provides openings that may be probed by groups challenging CCP *legitimacy*...the political atmosphere on the mainland remains extremely constricted, such that only groups that pose a limited threat to CCP *hegemony* (such as the CLB) may be allowed to persist’ (Wright 2004, 137–138).⁸ Legitimacy is a concept usually associated with political regimes, but without considering its relationship with the economic. For example, Max Weber’s understanding of legitimacy is ‘the belief that someone’s position and the system incorporating it are right and proper’ (Wallace and Wolf 2006, 74); for Habermas, it is ‘a political order’s worthiness to be recognised’ (Habermas 1979, 178); for Jessop, it is ‘the socially acknowledged character of its [the state’s] political functions’ (Jessop 2008, 10). However, from the Gramscian perspective the concept of hegemony concerns both political and economic relations. Due to their

conceptual difference, it is inappropriate to equate hegemony with legitimacy.

Second, hegemony is used by some scholars to indicate ideological influence or dominance. Gries argues that the Chinese state's 'hegemony over national discourse' (2004, 187) has been challenged by the popular notion of nationalism, which criticizes the state's nationalist discourse and foreign policies for failing to protect national interest. He suggests that '[s]truggling to keep up with popular nationalist demands, the Party appears to be losing its hegemony over Chinese nationalism' (Gries 2004, 183). Comparing it to the production regime characterized by localistic despotism in Shenzhen, Lee (1995) advances that the production regime in Hong Kong is based on 'familial hegemony', which refers to the managerial control of labor relying on discourses and ideologies related to the Chinese family and the domestic responsibilities of women. Although this kind of usage of hegemony concerns values and ideologies, it is different from the Gramscian notion of hegemony. These authors use hegemony to refer broadly to ideological domination rather than specifically to acceptance by the subaltern class of capitalist worldviews concerning the state and the economy.

Third, hegemony is treated as a synonym for domination, power or control. Solinger (1993, 93) emphasizes the Chinese state's 'socioeconomic domination' over floating migrant workers, arguing that they have been 'absorbed into the state's hegemony'. Potter examines how Chinese economic reform has strengthened the party-state's reliance on the legal system, which in turn has restrained state power and challenged 'party hegemony' (Potter 2004, 480). He highlights that '...once policies are publicly articulated in law, the regime loses important degrees of *control* over the content and interpretation of these new norms. Instead, *hegemony* is protected by preserving the party's authority over personnel...the regime has attempted to maintain *hegemony* over legal reform through *control* over personnel' (Potter 2004, 482).⁹ Like most of the scholars who have used the term hegemony, Potter does not define precisely what it means. The meaning of the above quotation does not change much if 'hegemony' is replaced by 'domination' or 'power'.

Fourth, some scholars in the field of China Studies have used hegemony in the Gramscian fashion and understood it as moral and political leadership of the capitalist class. As elaborated in Chap. 1, Blecher (2002), and Hui and Chan (2012) clearly spell out their Gramscian approach when studying the acceptance of market ideologies by urban workers,

and the party-state's hegemonic project of a harmonious society. Capitalist hegemony is a clear and principal theme of their research.

Some scholars do not make hegemony their subject of inquiry, but use the concept in a Gramscian sense or in connection to class relations. Friedman and Lee (2010, 528, 530) suggest that the response of the Chinese party-state to the 2008 economic crisis shows that it 'has accepted the interests of capital as hegemonic' and workers were 'forced to confront the hegemonic power of state and capital as individuals'. Pun and Chan (2008, 91) hold that the new working class in China has been undergoing a process of unmaking under 'the hegemonic project undertaken by a "quest for globality" driven by neoliberal political ideologies'. Pun suggests that in China, capitalism has to prevail over 'noncapitalist reasoning in order to assert its hegemony' (1999, 6), and she argues that the hegemonic bloc in China has tried to decry class politics with the neoliberal discourse of modernity (2005). These scholars, however, have employed the term hegemony too readily and casually, which has led to confusion and loss of precision. Without providing an unequivocal definition, some authors associate hegemony with differing ideas in the same piece of work. For instance, Pun, at one point in her book, refers to hegemony as the dominance of the capitalist system over non-capitalist reasoning (Pun 2005, 119–120, also see 22, 24, 28); but when discussing the politics of dialects at the workplace, she uses hegemony to indicate the cultural superiority of Cantonese, remarking that Mandarin has lost its 'hegemonic position' (Pun 2005, 128). Friedman and Lee basically employ hegemony in a Gramscian sense (2010, 531); but when they note that Chinese rule by law has become a 'hegemonic discourse' (2010, 519), they do not explain its relationship with capitalist ethico-political leadership. They simply use hegemony to express the general acceptance by workers of handling labor disputes through the legal system.

The lack of clarity and coherence in deploying the term hegemony has hindered constructive debates on the concept and created intellectual confusion. In order to avoid theoretical ambiguity and incoherence, in the following, I expound on my theoretical approach to the Chinese state by critically engaging with Gramsci and Poulantzas's theories, as well as a wider range of scholarship in regards to the concept 'hegemony'.

First, following Gramsci, I see the Chinese state undergoing hegemonic transformation as an integral state that does not merely include the government apparatus, but also civil society. Class power is organized by the

Chinese state in both political and civil society. Anderson (1976) disagrees with Gramsci's ideas of the state for entailing certain antinomies. On some occasions, Gramsci considers the state a combination of civil and political society, but on others he defines it either as equivalent only to political society or only to civil society (Hawley 1980). Defending Gramsci, Jessop argues that these antinomies are not significant as long as they are interpreted with reference to the exercise of state power, instead of to the definition of state apparatuses. I agree with Jessop that it is more crucial to pay attention to Gramsci's analysis of 'the modalities of state power and the periodisation of forms of state than to consider his various definitions of the state' (Jessop 1982, 147). Therefore, despite the 'antinomies', in this book I adhere to Gramsci's idea of integral state and conceptualize the Chinese state as a combination of political society and civil society.

Second, I maintain that the Chinese state rules with both coercion and persuasion (Gramsci 1971; Poulantzas 1969). The long-term ascendancy of the Chinese ruling class is not simply buttressed by the coercive capacity of the party-state, as the authoritarian thesis claims (see Chap. 1). It also relies on the state's hegemonic endeavour to promote and reproduce capitalist commonsensical worldviews among the Chinese working class.

Although I argue that hegemony is a rising modality of power exercised by the Chinese party-state, in no way do I imply that it now rules without coercion. Some scholars advocate that hegemony and coercion form two discrete modes of class power and counterpoise each other; if hegemony is predominant then coercion will decline proportionately in significance (for example, Gwyn 1960). Some of the writings of Gramsci, in fact, can lead to such an interpretation (Anderson 1976). However, his later elaboration on the relations between consent and force changes to one that does not view hegemony as "consent" in contrast to another of "coercion", but as itself a synthesis of consent and coercion' (Anderson 1976, 22). Poulantzas (2000) also maintains that the ruling class's power is rooted in both hegemony and violence and that hegemony is not a replacement of coercion. In this book, hegemony is not simply taken as ideological and cultural leadership of the capitalist class; I adopt the view that hegemony is always bulwarked by the application of state coercion (Burawoy 2003; Merrington 1968). Even the most hegemonic state cannot rule without the support of military and physical forces. This is what Gramsci calls 'hegemony protected by the armor of coercion' (Gramsci 1971, 263).

Considering the Chinese party-state's application of force to ensure worker compliance and its reliance on political control to forestall the formation of independent worker associations, some people may doubt the hegemonic capacity of the Chinese party-state. I contend that this type of opinion has polarized the modality of hegemony and domination, assuming that they are mutually exclusive. As explained, hegemony is, here, understood as the synthesis of consent and force. Under normal circumstances, the reign of the state–capital nexus in China is largely built upon the consent of the working class, with coercion receding into the background, but by no means eliminated. In a moment of crisis, the role of control and force in securing conformity of the subaltern will become more palpable and will prevail over consent.

Third, concerning the question about where the site of practice of hegemony is, the predominant opinion is that in addition to the points of production (Gramsci 1971; Burawoy 1979; Merrington 1968), it is mainly exercised through private organizations in civil society, such as churches, schools and trade unions (Femia 1987). However, Anderson (1976) reminds us that hegemony is exercised not only in civil society, but also in political society. He and other scholars, such as Hobsbawm (1977) and Jessop (2008), argue that the parliamentary democratic system performs a hegemonic function in convincing the subordinate class that they are in control of the government; it thus helps dampen their motivation to rebel against the socio–economic system. Supporting this argument, Buckel and Lescano (2009, 444) assert that '[i]n the political and legal apparatuses the leadership personnel act not only repressively but also hegemonically'. In fact, Gramsci (1971, 246) advances that the legislature, judiciary, and executive are 'organs of political hegemony'.

Unlike their Western counterparts, social organizations in China are not completely autonomous from the party-state in terms of their structures and operations. Some scholars hold that only state-led civil society (Frolic 1997) or semi-civil society (He 1997) exists in China. The strong government control over social organizations in China may weaken the conditions for exercising hegemony in the civil arena. Under these circumstances, I contend that the labor law system in China acts as a crucial organ of hegemony by endorsing, inculcating, and transmitting capitalist common sense. Moreover, as parliamentary democracy is absent in China, the rule of law through the legal system, which is increasingly emphasized by the party-state, is an even more critical site for the reproduction of hegemony.

Fourth, concerning the relationship between the economic structures, and the political and ideological superstructures, I propose that the socio-economic structures in China and the global economic setting have constituted the terrain within which the mode of governance and mode of regulation by the Chinese party-state develop. Yet the Chinese state is not unilaterally shaped by the economic structures; it still plays a vital role in reproducing the conditions that sustain capitalist social relations of production (Poulantzas 1973b, 1978).

There is no doubt that Gramsci places an emphasis on the superstructural elements, such as hegemony, values, ideas, and cultures, but different interpretations of his views on the relationship between ethico-political superstructures and economic structures exist. Scholars, such as Bobbio and Jean-Marc Piotte, argue that Gramsci puts primacy on the superstructures over the structures (Mouffe and Sassoon 1977). Contesting this super-structural reading of Gramsci, Texier contends that the superstructures and the base have a dialectical relation ‘in which each element can in turn assume the role of conditioner or conditioned’ (Mouffe and Sassoon 1977, 45), and that the economic structures are determinant in the last instance because they limit the possibilities of the development of superstructures. Portelli has a third opinion, holding that Gramsci attributes equal weight to both the economic base and ideological superstructures (Mouffe and Sassoon 1977, 46). Glucksmann considers Gramsci a theorist of superstructures, for he livens up historical materialism by delving into questions of the state and ideology/hegemony. However, she warns that we should avoid an ‘excessively super-structural’ reading of Gramsci, which regards the superstructures/state/ideology both as unrelated to specific relations of production and as ‘independent variables’ (Mouffe and Sassoon 1977, 48).

In this book, I discard the purely super-structural reading of Gramsci and align more with Texier and Glucksmann who adopt a non-economistic and non-reductionist interpretation of Gramsci’s ideas. Instead of seeing the Chinese state as mechanically determined by the base or manipulated by the bourgeoisie class, I maintain that the superstructural elements are highly relevant to the reproduction of social relations of production in China. Yet, the economic base is determinant in the last instance as it shapes the possible forms of superstructure development (Poulantzas 1973b, 1978). Social reproduction should be analyzed

...from the point of view of the articulation of the whole ensemble of the various levels of society. The economic aspect remains, in the last instance, as the final determinant but politics may now play the dominant role since it is through politics that a historical bloc is created or destroyed. (Mouffe and Sassoon 1977, 51)

Fifth, the capitalist class in China will become hegemonic only when it is able to create a national-popular appearance for its parochial interests (Gramsci 1971; Poulantzas 2008; Culter 2005). The formation of this trans-class interest is in no way equivalent to the imposition of false consciousness on the working class; it has to take account of and incorporate some of their interests and demands in order to gain universal appeal (Poulantzas 2008). In the country, only when the interests of the dominant Chinese class are successfully articulated and taken as national interest will the subordinate class render its consent to the leadership of the dominant class.

Moreover, the hegemonic class in China needs to grant economic concessions to the working class so as to maintain its support and allegiance (Femia 1987). These concessions are usually short-term in nature, related to secondary issues and do not endanger the long-term dominance of the capitalist class. Burawoy underscores that

To be an effective hegemonic force, a dominant or potentially dominant class must make economic concessions to elicit the consent of a subordinate or allied class. But these concessions must not touch the essential, and in the case of capitalists they must leave profit intact. (Burawoy 2003, 225)

These concessions, however, should not be seen as granted readily or willingly to the working class. In fact, they are often ‘imposed by the struggle of the subordinated classes’ (Poulantzas 2000, 31). In Western societies, minimum wages, standard working hours, rights to organize and collective bargaining, social welfare and universal suffrage are all hard-won concessions gained by the working class. Similarly, in China, concessions to the working class in the form of labor and social policies, and labor laws should be understood as the products of working class struggle.

Sixth, for the Chinese capitalist class to become hegemonic, it has to naturalize its moral, ethico-political, and intellectual worldviews; and they must turn these worldviews into a ‘common sense’ held by the Chinese popular masses so that they will endorse the capitalist logics and not

challenge the leadership of the dominant class. This common sense is usually mixed with scientific and philosophical ideas; they are ‘half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists’ (Gramsci 1971, 326).

This common sense is transmitted and reinforced by organic intellectuals that are allied with the capitalist class (Femia 1987; Adamson 1980), as well as by the state’s ideological apparatuses in civil society and political society (Poulantzas 1969, 1978). They are not stable, coherent, or comprehensive thoughts, but are ‘fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential’ in nature; they usually do not serve the interests of the exploited class who come to accept ‘common sense’ (Adamson 1980, 150). To overcome the hegemony of the ruling class, the working class, and its organic intellectuals must build up ‘good senses’ that meet their interests and needs (Gramsci 1971, 326).

Seventh, in this book, hegemony is not seen as a *thing*. Instead, it is conceptualized as a *historical process of class struggles* through which the ruling class continuously reinforces and reproduces their ideological ascendancy, and through which the working class resists capitalist hegemony (Benney 1983; Mouffe 1979; Culter 2005). *Hegemony is ‘historical’* because class agents are born into societies that are shaped by class struggles of the past. As a result of these past struggles, some class agents take up hegemonic and dominant positions in social relations of production, and they will need to strive to sustain their control and hegemony (Adamson 1980, 149). *Hegemony is a ‘process’* because it does not only concern ‘the fact of consent’, but, more importantly, it is related to the process of creating and mobilizing that consent (Hunt 1993, 20).

Hegemony is ‘class struggles’ between the capitalist and the working class because the former needs to maintain its ideological, intellectual, and moral leadership continuously so as to pre-empt revolt by the working class, while the working class and its class organizations strive to develop stronger class consciousness among workers in order to transgress capitalist hegemony. In other words, hegemony is not equal to complete submission of the working class or total domination of the capitalist class; instead, it is only an ‘unstable equilibrium of compromises between capital and labor’ (Poulantzas 2000, 31). How hegemonic a social class is, how much consent is given by labor to the capitalist class, and how much concession is wrung from capital is not definite or stable; rather, they result from class struggles in the economic, political, and ideological terrain at various particular historical moments of a social formation.

Understanding hegemony as a historical process of class struggles, rather than merely as a mode of power exercised by the ruling class, offers two theoretical benefits. First, it does not only focus on how the dominant class reproduces and stabilizes the current socio-economic system, but also opens up the possibility of conceptualizing how this system can be transformed. By inserting class agency and struggle into the analysis, capitalist hegemony is no longer perceived as stationary or insuperable. Instead, the unstable and fragile nature of hegemonic labor–capital relations can be sophisticatedly conceptualized, and the possibility of carrying out subaltern projects of counter-hegemony is not conceptually denied.

Moreover, viewing hegemony as a historical process of class struggles allows us to do away with a zero-sum understanding of hegemony when studying state–capital–labor relations in China. Capitalism has been introduced into China through the passive revolution since 1978 and has a short history in the country. Therefore, in comparison with its Anglo-Saxon and European counterparts, the process of building hegemony in China is still in the infant stage. Seen from a wider historical-temporal perspective, the Chinese capitalist class is in the initial *process of building up* their moral and intellectual leadership, and the Chinese state is in the early process of transforming the basis of its governance from one that relies principally on coercion to one that combines persuasion and force. As elucidated in Chap. 1, if we adopt the authoritarian perspective to analyze the Chinese state, we would overlook the sprouting of an important mode of power exercised by the Chinese ruling class. Conceptualizing hegemony as a historical process allows us to capture the critical transformation of the Chinese state ‘within capitalism from political dictatorship to political hegemony’ (Burawoy 2003, 220).

Eighth, hegemony has a praxis dimension. As Buckel and Lescano point out, ‘...hegemony is not some metaphysical subject, but a permanent practice, a world-view fought out in struggles for recognition, through which moral, political, and intellectual leadership is established’ (2009, 442). Since hegemony is a historical process of class struggles, the construction of hegemony in China involves ‘permanent practice’ carried out by the hegemonic class in the socio-economic and political domain to continually reacquire the consent of the Chinese working class to capitalist leadership. The commonsensical worldviews of the Chinese dominant class need to be continuously promulgated and reproduced through their class practices. In addition, hegemony also has an institutional dimension. The ideological apparatuses of the Chinese state, such as the legal system, trade

unions, and schools, help transmit, inculcate, and reproduce capitalist hegemony.

Finally, although Gramsci has shed light on how the state helps organize class power, he does not discuss much about what the state is. On this issue, it is useful to apply Poulantzas's insight about the state as a condensation and materialization of social relations to analyze the Chinese party-state. The Chinese state does not translate the interests of the capitalist class onto the political level, but 'the relationship between those interests and the interests of the dominated classes' (Poulantzas 2008, 80). Therefore, class contradictions and social relations of production are inscribed, crystallized, and condensed in the Chinese party-state. The mode of governance, the social and labor policies, and the labor law system are a condensation and crystallization of class relations, an unstable equilibrium of class forces, and products of class struggle.

5 CONCLUSION

My theorization of the Chinese state is substantially different from the authoritarian, corporatist, and developmental state perspectives outlined in Chap. 1. I conceptualize the Chinese party-state as undergoing a hegemonic transformation, changing from engineering the country's passive revolution through force to facilitating capital accumulation through establishing hegemony. Within this conceptual framework, I argue that the Chinese party-state rules not only with coercion as the authoritarian thesis argues, but also through the construction of hegemony to uphold predominance of the capitalist class. The Chinese party-state has utilized different state apparatuses of ideological, economic, legal, and political nature to build up, transmit, inculcate, and reproduce capitalist hegemony. The labor law system, a key subject of inquiry in this book, is an example of such apparatuses. Unlike the developmental state perspective that stresses only the economic role of the Chinese state, my theorization also considers socio-economic and juridico-political dimensions of the Chinese state. The coercive and hegemonic mechanisms that the Chinese state uses to mediate capital-labor relations in order to facilitate economic accumulation are of primary concern. Different from the corporatist approach that focuses largely on the corporatist actors, the hegemony approach to the Chinese state analyzes social forces and class struggles that are beyond the corporatist structures in China. I also examine how state-capital-labor relations

are reinforced, consolidated, and reproduced through the daily hegemonic practices of class agents, the state, and non-state institutions.

In summary, I advance that, after having steered the passive revolution for almost four decades, the Chinese party-state, as a condensation and materialization of social relations, simultaneously plays a coercive and hegemonic role in mediating labor–capital relations. The Chinese ruling class’s long-term ascendancy is not simply grounded on the coercive capacity of the party-state; it is also rooted in the state’s hegemonic attempt to promote capitalist common sense among the subordinate class in the country. Moreover, hegemony is not a thing, but a historical process of class struggles. It is related to both the economic structures (which lead to economic domination of the capitalist class) and the ethico-political superstructures (which secure the subaltern class’s consent to capitalist ideological ascendancy), both persuasion (through the formation of national-popular interest and granting economic concessions) and domination (through the use of coercive apparatuses), both ideology (such as capitalist common sense and worldviews) and practice/institutions, and both civil society and political society.

NOTES

1. There is no doubt that Gramsci is a Marxian; however, his early works were heavily influenced by Croce, a leading Italian philosopher, and thus show traits of idealism. From 1919 onward, his writings manifest an orthodox Marxist orientation, and he starts to criticize the Crocean ideas in his prison writings. In the latter stages of his life, he illustrates a sophisticated materialist “de-mystification of Hegel” (Femia 1987, 101).
2. This development includes the success of the Russian revolution in 1917, the failure of the factory council movement in Italy in 1920, the economic crisis from 1929 to 1932, the emergency of fascism in Italy during the interwar period and so forth.
3. His early writings were subject to the influence of Sartrean existentialism, but later he was inspired by Gramsci and Althusser in different ways (Poulantzas 2008).
4. His theory also seeks to rebut the pluralist political system approach, which was the focus of inquiries in mainstream sociology and political science during the 1950s and 1960s (Barrow 2003). The political system approach assumes a pluralist society, asserting that the state is not the only actor making political decisions; politicians, businessmen, trade unions, voters and so forth are also involved (Barrow 2003). Poulantzas has

- revolted against this trend of undervaluing the state, seeking to revive Marxian critical state theories.
5. Litowitz (2000, 523) writes that "...nor did Gramsci provide an analysis of the various mechanisms by which the existing regime in Italy had become hegemonic" and Stuart Hall states that Poulantzas clearly attempted to give Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" a more theoreticized and systemic "formulation" (Poulantzas 2000, ix).
 6. Althusser criticizes Gramsci (and Korsch and Lukacs) for his subjectivist and historicist approach which has reduced knowledge "to its own conditions of existence, thus abandoning altogether Marxism's claim to genuine scientific status" and which has reduced history into "the expression of a subject" (Martin 2008, 7).
 7. Poulantzas's state theory is insightful, but it neglects the social dimension of the state. With the exception of *Preliminaries to the Study of Hegemony in the State* (Poulantzas 2008, Chap. 3), which was written during his early academic career, concepts such as civil society and social organizations were largely missed out from his theory.
 8. My own emphasis.
 9. My own emphasis.

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Hegemonic Transformation

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