Jennifer Altehenger has written a pioneering account of how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) endeavored to use legal propaganda to mold ideological consciousness and valorize the disparate phases of its revolution between 1949 and 1989. Her book, *Legal Lessons*, exemplifies a wave of scholarship that is casting light on the irregular and improvisational character of governance in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), as well as the diversity of popular responses to it. Beyond the contributions the book makes to the study of history and of law and society in China, it offers a welcome comparative dimension that takes stock of the PRC’s place in the larger socialist world.

Altehenger develops a three-part chronological narrative centered on Beijing and Shanghai. Part 1 introduces some of the theoretical and institutional innovations that the CCP brought to Chinese legal practice, including efforts to simplify legal language, control legal publishing, and galvanize popular participation in the dissemination and application of law through periodic, campaign-style mobilizations. She describes how urban residents encountered legal propaganda in a multitude of forms, from posters, traditional operas, and song collections, to literature, study sessions, and, finally, television programs. Law guided their collective march toward socialism, and learning it was an important way for them to demonstrate their loyalty to that project and the vanguard party that led it. Part 2 of the book elaborates on these themes through detailed case studies of the 1953 campaign to promote the Marriage Law, and the 1954 campaign to discuss the constitution. Part 3 then carries the analysis into the 1980s, and considers where PRC legal propaganda stood in relation to both its Maoist antecedents and its analogs elsewhere in the socialist world.

Among her notable findings, Altehenger recovers from the neglected legal history of the Cultural Revolution traces of a largely forgotten 1970 draft constitution. Similarly, she reveals budding legal exchanges between China and its socialist peers that were cut short by the collapse of communism in Europe, but cry out for further investigation. She concludes that, like many of its socialist contemporaries, the post-Mao PRC championed law less as a force for emancipation than as a guarantor of social and political stability. Legal propaganda in this era de-emphasized class struggle and instead facilitated the state’s ambition to cultivate law-abiding citizens with a 5 year plan that laid unprecedented stress on public safety and practical legal knowledge. Formerly an instrument for making revolution, legal propaganda now served to entrench the status quo.

Altehenger shines when she describes the persistent dilemmas and logistical challenges that the PRC party-state encountered. Determined to micromanage
legal propaganda, it was nevertheless hamstrung by its deep ideological ambivalence toward law, and its propensities for ambiguity and inconstancy as techniques of governance. In the 1950s, when state publishers failed to deliver compelling legal propaganda on schedule, private publishers, cadres, and cultural workers filled the gap with content that veered off message or was riddled with inaccuracies. The public also drew its own, sometimes heterodox, conclusions if it took an interest at all. Furthermore, legal propaganda favored binary language and categories that mapped poorly on to the complex social realities that many people actually experienced. In spite of its monopolies over coercive power, legal drafting, the media, and the rhythms of daily life, the party-state routinely met its match in the agency of the subjects it sought to reshape. The questions it left unanswered, the ideological inconsistencies it accumulated, and the self-serving inversions of the discourse it promoted engendered popular confusion, cognitive dissonance, and cynicism. At times, legal propaganda could even boomerang on the party-state, as exemplified by the claims citizens asserted against it during the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956, the Democracy Wall movement of 1979, and the Tiananmen protests of 1989.

A book as ambitious and pioneering as this inevitably raises more questions than it can answer. Altehenger’s narrative spans four decades, but the majority of that time receives comparatively light coverage, particularly the decades that experienced the greatest instability and political radicalization, roughly 1957–78. This imbalance no doubt reflects the limitations of her source base, but it also echoes the sleights of Party historiography. Are those years in fact less significant, or merely less legible? Why? What are the interpretive dangers of this weighting to our understanding of law and legal propaganda in this era, and their relationships to other forms of propaganda in the PRC? Similarly, Altehenger tantalizes us with reports of China’s legal exchanges with other socialist regimes and suggestions of a convergence among them, but the tangible outcomes of these developments seem unclear. Given how rapidly many of those countries diverged from China after 1989, what significance should we attach to these findings? Finally, there are some notable omissions in the book, such as the notorious “strike hard” campaigns against crime and the public execution rallies of the early post-Mao era, as well as the fierce legal propaganda campaign justifying the suppression of the Tiananmen protests in 1989. By leaving such examples out, and focusing instead on more benign cases such as the Marriage Law and constitutionalism, the book risks understating the brutality that Chinese legal propaganda often abetted.

These are minor points. Jennifer Altehenger has filled a key gap in the literature on the PRC legal system with an engaging, richly sourced study that bridges multiple fields of scholarship. Today, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping has breathed new life into the PRC’s legal propaganda apparatus
with a highly publicized corruption campaign and a parade of televised confessions. Altehenger has not only opened a timely window into the history from which those initiatives spring, but also shaped the research agenda for those who would explore it further. Her book will appeal to historians of modern China, culture, and law, as well as to observers of the contemporary PRC, and that is an exceptional feat.

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Taisu Zhang’s first book offers a new and insightful perspective on a topic that many scholars have debated in the last generation: the reasons for the Great Divergence of the economic trajectories of China and England. Zhang’s contribution brings together several long-standing theses to offer a novel proposal: China’s failure to develop an industrial economy in the eighteenth century was the result of its more *equitable* property distribution. He makes this argument even more provocative by adding that the most fundamental cause of the historical differences between the economies of England and China must ultimately be attributed not to any particular institution (the most common medium of comparative history today), but rather to culture. Zhang directly states that the existing “noncultural divergence theories…are simply logically incomplete” (6). If this ambitious claim gives some readers initial pause, they will be rewarded with a novel perspective if they forge ahead. For in pressing such a large thesis, the author has synthesized a wide range of arguments into a single framework to provide scholars of legal development, economic history, and Chinese history alike with a new perspective on the developmental trajectory of the late empire.

The bold dimensions of the argument are mirrored in the scope of the work itself. In order to find the cultural origins of the economic institutions under consideration, the author takes us back to 1041, the year that the emperor of the Song (960–1279) first decreed that officials of the state bureaucracy