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The National Interest • 1615 L Street, N.W. • Suite 1230 • Washington, D.C. 20036

Phone (202) 467-4884 • Fax (202) 467-0006 • editor@nationalinterest.org

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The Truth About China

By Andrew J. Nathan

Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 576 pp., \$29.95.

Will China “rule the world”? Despite his breathless title, Martin Jacques is not so sure. On the one hand, “China . . . is destined to become . . . ultimately *the* major global power.” On the other hand, “the challenge posed by the rise of China is far more likely to be cultural in nature” than political or military. But on further consideration, “As China becomes a global power, and ultimately a superpower, probably in time the dominant superpower, then it, like every other previous major power, will view the world through the prism of its own history and will seek, subject to the prevailing constraints, to reshape that world in its own image.” But then again, “For perhaps the next half-century, it seems unlikely that China will be particularly aggressive”; “for the next twenty years or so . . . it will remain an essentially status-quo power.” But after all, yes: “China’s mass will oblige the

Andrew J. Nathan is Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science at Columbia University and, most recently, coeditor of *How East Asians View Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 2008).

rest of the world largely to acquiesce in China’s way of doing things.”

Such zigzag logic characterizes many of Jacques’s arguments. Will China democratize? Very likely: “it seems reasonable to expect serious moves towards democratization within [a twenty-year] timescale, possibly less.” But not necessarily: “the weight of what might be described as Confucian orthodoxy is likely to make it more difficult.” But probably so: “In the long run it seems rather unlikely . . . that China will be able to resist the process of democratization.” But still maybe not: “it is pointless to think that China is going to change and adopt Western cultural norms: the practices and ways of thinking are simply too old and too deeply rooted for that to happen.” Yet once again, yes: “It is . . . likely that within any of the longer time-frames [being considered] there will be profound political changes in China, perhaps involving either the end of Communist rule or a major metamorphosis in its character.” And finally, no: “it is inconceivable that Chinese politics will come to resemble those of the West.”

Where does this leave us then as we attempt to peer into the China hegemony ball? Will China rise or founder? Will it see regime change or hold fast to its values?

It is as if Jacques were trying to convey something for which precise words do not exist. That something is the quintessential Chineseness of China, an essence so deeply rooted that he believes it has persisted through nine major dynasties over two thousand years, has survived both modernization and communism, and will not change in our

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lifetimes. To be sure, “China has changed beyond recognition. But at another level the lines of continuity are stubborn and visible.” “Many of the fundamental truths of Chinese politics apply as much to the Communist period as to the earlier dynasties.”

These fundamentals are China’s sense of itself as a civilization; belief in its superiority to other civilizations; belief in racial hierarchy; preference for order; and acceptance of unbounded government. This cultural essence is homogenous, unitary, unchallengeable and unchanging. It is “Confucian.” And because China is getting so strong, it is about to overwhelm the West. “Whatever the fortunes of the Communist regime . . . the main political impact of China on the world will be its Confucian tradition, its lack of a Western-style democracy or tradition, the centrality of the state and the relative weakness of any civil society that is likely to develop.”

Certainly, China is discernibly different from everywhere else. If you parachuted into Chengdu, you would not think you were in Milan or Calcutta. Jacques is perceptive on the differences among nations in cosmetics, clothing, furniture and musical tastes. But the question is: just how is China different? At the level of abstraction to which Jacques rises when discussing politics and foreign affairs, it would be hard to distinguish Chinese culture from that of Russia, France or America. All these nations are proud of their histories, value their family systems, like social order and seek national security. At that level of abstraction, China in fact is no different from any other state.

Nor, contra Jacques, is China different in being more unified than other cultures. The same forces of contention and change are at play here as in any vibrant society. Political scientist Tianjian Shi of Duke University found in a random-sample survey conducted in China in 2008 that 48 percent of respondents agreed that “The government should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society” and 25 percent disagreed (the remainder couldn’t choose or didn’t understand); 31.1 percent agreed that “If we have political leaders who are morally upright we can let them decide everything,” while 45.3 percent disagreed. If these questions were asked in a Western society, the responses would likely be different, but you would find a similar diversity in viewpoints. And there is a wide range of views in China itself, depending on age and life experience. In this survey, younger Chinese were more liberal than older Chinese, urban Chinese more liberal than rural Chinese. No huge surprise. Chinese disagree among themselves on fundamental values just like people in any society.

Nor is the Chinese tradition a monolith. It offers room not only for collectivism, state domination and social order, but also for individualism, civil society and rebellion. Besides Confucianism, the Chinese tradition includes Legalism, Taoism, Buddhism, and other philosophies and religions. Within Confucianism there were tensions between the educated man’s duty to the ruler and his obligation to honor his own ethical precepts (“What is called a great minister is one who serves his prince

according to what is right, and when he finds he cannot do so, retires”), and between the power of the ruler and the primacy of the people (“The requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the confidence of the people in their ruler”). Such tensions have opened the way for culturally Chinese people to advocate liberalism and democracy—and in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan, to bring such values into practice. The monolith is a myth.

foreign influences at a rapid pace. Chinese urban society is intoxicated with foreign food, sports, clothing and music. Chinese kids love foreign toys, cartoons and TV shows. This process is only beginning. If the culture of the Japanese samurai was no bar to industrialization and democracy—and as Jacques points out it was not—then why should the teachings of Confucius, who lived two thousand five hundred years ago, have created an iron cage that limits China’s possible future relationships with itself and the world?



Moreover, cultures are no longer pure, if they ever were. They are hybrid—increasingly so under conditions of globalization. China reopened to the outside world only thirty years ago and has been absorbing

What does make China different, with respect to the features of domestic politics and foreign policy that concern Jacques most, can be best understood in terms of its institutions and geostrategic circum-

stances, not its culture. The reason China is undemocratic is not because it is culturally fated to endure authoritarianism, but because—among a series of reasons, for there can be no simple answer to a puzzle like this—its existing institutions are well entrenched and adaptive, the ruling party hangs together, the system is able to recruit and empower technocrats, the bureaucratic promotion system motivates local officials to work toward state goals, and the government knows how to make effective use of its propaganda and police systems. If these institutions decay, the system will change. The reason China exercises so much influence on its neighbors is not because of “the return of the tributary system”—after all, China exerted little real influence on its neighbors under this millennia-old arrangement—but because of its size and wealth. Its power would simply decline if its economy shrank. And, the reason China does not seek to acquire the territory of its neighbors is not a tradition of ruling through indirect influence, but because it is surrounded by settled areas and robust states that offer no space into which to expand—a feature that is unlikely to change.

But Jacques is dead set on the idea of an epochal change in the structure of world power, and he uses overheated and oftentimes downright scary language to describe a coming reversal of dominance between China and the West. He speaks of “the rise of the civilization-state,” “the Chinese racial order,” “a Chinese commonwealth,” “a new political pole” and “the decline and fall of the West.” The fact

is, however, that though Jacques wants to “ponder what the world might be like in twenty, or even fifty, years’ time” most of his predictions are of things that are already happening, and none of which is cause for histrionic alarm. Jacques says that Chinese history will become familiar to people around the world; Beijing will emerge as a global capital; China’s cultural influence will spread; less powerful countries will tilt toward China; China will influence global taste through the power of its market; Chinese will think of themselves as racially superior; overseas Chinese will identify with their homeland; China will invest beyond its borders and influence the world financial system; China will refrain from invading its neighbors; China’s authoritarian-capitalist system will be seen as an alternative political-economic model; China will promote its idea of moral values; more students around the world will learn Chinese; Chinese universities will rise in global rankings; Chinese art and film will reach global audiences; and, Chinese food and medicine will be appreciated worldwide. So what’s new?

Jacques is much impressed with the oft-cited Goldman Sachs projection that China’s economy will become the largest in the world around the year 2027. If this happens, then he is right to think that the trends he has identified will intensify: more young Westerners will learn Chinese and flock to Shanghai and Beijing to start their careers; Chinese ways of doing business will become more acceptable around the world; packaging will be designed to appeal to Chinese consumers; Chinese music

and films will gain wider appeal; the Chinese renminbi will become a reserve currency; and, Chinese financial officials will enjoy seignorage privileges and influence world rates of inflation and growth.

Of course, any adjustment in power relations is disturbing, and China is indeed an independent force with its own interests that are not identical to ours. However, Jacques's alarmism is unwarranted. China is, for now, as Jacques notes, a status quo power. It contributes more to the general welfare than it detracts. It has acquired a long list of overlapping interests with the West. Engagement worked.

Whether in this same period the United States has declined as badly and irreversibly as Jacques contends is more debatable. The rise of China and the decline of America are like yin and yang in his argument: one is entailed in the other. But is this zero-sum view of power correct? Or has the rise of China in many ways also helped America stay strong—both economically and as a strategic actor in world affairs—by supporting our prosperity and cooperating (however balkily or incompletely) in our primary security goals? Was it not always an illusion to think that the United States would play the role of the sole superpower that could “dissuade po-

tential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equalling, the power of the United States,”



in the words of the Bush White House's 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States*? If the United States has to deal with China and other large powers with the acknowledgment that their interests are not identical to ours, and that this means we cannot simply compel them to do what we want, is this surrender—or just a return to realism?

Alarm is all the less necessary because China at the top of the international

economic pecking order will be different from any of its predecessors.¹ First, Beijing's lead will not be built on technological supremacy but on demographic preeminence. Although the Chinese economy will continue to advance technologically, unless the other high-tech nations stop competing, in a wide range of fields China will not surge ahead of them in the way that nineteenth-century England or twentieth-century America did. It will be the biggest economy because it has the largest popula-

with Portugal in the sixteenth century, the Dutch Republic competing with Portugal and Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or Britain competing with France in the nineteenth century, Beijing will not get ahead if its rivals do not. Nor will China be able to prosper like nineteenth-century colonial powers by exploiting and impoverishing other societies. Other countries' decline or destruction will not help Beijing.

Finally, China will not be able to gain energy or commodity security through conquest in the way of past empires, or by creating spheres of influence uncontested by other powers, in the manner of nineteenth-century neo-colonialists. Barring the collapse of other strong powers, there will be no vacuum into



tion. On a per capita basis it will still be relatively poor.

As well, China's prosperity will remain interdependent with the prosperity of its global rivals such as the United States and Japan. Unlike Spain competing

which to expand. Neither conquest nor

¹ For more on my views see Andrew J. Nathan, "When China is no. 1," *What Matters: Ten Questions That Will Shape Our Future* (McKinsey & Company, 2009), pp. 152-154.

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domination is an option. China will have to get hold of the resources that it needs through economic means. Balance of power with other major powers rather than expansionism will be the formula for sustaining prosperity when China is the world's biggest economy. If things continue as they are, the changes that we face will be less revolutionary than the ones that have already come to pass.

Although these predictions are less zero sum than Jacques's, they are as cautious as his in the sense of predicting more of the same. Such on-path predictions are always the safest kind to make, because most of the time things do continue moving in the same direction. The problem is that they do not do so forever.

In an intermediate time frame, say ten to twenty years, more-of-the-same is indeed the safest prediction, but it is even safer to predict that sooner or later something unpredictable will occur—we just don't know what. In China's domestic politics, there are two leading possibilities: democratization and system collapse. Although the Chinese state is resilient, the society that it rules is turbulent, questioning and dissatisfied. The state's grip on its people is under constant challenge—not only its physical grip but also the cultural grip that so fascinates Jacques. Should social turbulence increase, or state capacity decline, regime change would occur. Given the constraints that the regime has placed on political opposition, a democratic leadership could only emerge from within the ruling party itself. Even complete regime collapse could lead to de-

mocracy through a longer pathway; earlier such events in China have been followed by attempts to create democratic institutions. Democracy remains the only form of government that commands deep legitimacy in China.

Democracy is the outcome most Westerners prefer, in the hope that China's policies in Tibet and Xinjiang might soften, human rights improve, and cooperation with the West increase in fields like the environment, public health, and global trade and finance. But democratization could also make China's policies more nationalistic, both vis-à-vis its internal minorities and toward outside powers like Japan and the West. The implications of a Chinese political collapse for the outside world would likewise be mixed, but in many ways negative. An economic downturn would ensue. Ethnic breakaway movements would surge. Cross-border environmental, refugee, public-health and crime issues would move to the forefront. A military regime, if one took power, would be more assertive about territorial disputes. Of one thing we can be sure: a Soviet-style breakup is not in the cards, for the national minorities in China constitute only 6 or 7 percent of the population and lack the demographic clout or institutional separateness required to set themselves free.

Even if China's domestic politics do not produce a change in regime type, events around the country's periphery could force major shifts in the orientation of its foreign and security policies. Regime change or collapse in North Korea, Pakistan or neighboring Central Asian states would draw China

in, either to cooperate with other regional powers (the United States, Japan, Russia, India) or possibly to conflict with them, and depending on the outcome could end up giving China either a lot more, or a lot less, influence in the region in question as well as greater, or diminished, security on that frontier.

Another scenario, unfortunately less likely, would occur if India were to make peace with its neighbors. Its ability to compete with China in the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and Central Asia would then grow. If the United States played its cards right it could align with the emerging South Asian power center and reduce China's maneuvering room. Power shifts that are still less probable would involve the resurgence of Russia or Japan through a combination of smart economic policies and clever strategies. To be sure, China will be less affected than the United States by even large-scale changes in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America, because its ties in these places will remain shallow and easy to shift. But the international environment which is currently so favorable to China's rise is full of possibilities that could make life more complicated for Chinese policy makers and offer power-balancing opportunities to the United States.

The most momentous off-trajectory change that could occur in world affairs in the decades to come would be a marked decline in American power. This would produce complex results for China. It would shift the relative power balance in China's favor but confront it with numerous new problems, such as the insecurity of the ener-

gy supplies and sea lanes of communication that the United States currently protects. But of course, this change is entirely within our own hands to determine. China cannot do anything either to prevent it or—as strategists in Beijing are fully aware—make it happen.

Also overlooked in Jacques's analysis are long-term trends beneath the surface of world politics that could impair China's rise. By 2050, a quarter of China's population will be over sixty, while India's population will be both larger and younger. Climate change will probably hurt China more than the United States by exacerbating the already critical water shortage that afflicts the northern half of the country. As long as humanity survives, a lot of us will be Chinese. But the heavy burden of population on the land, and a geostrategic position surrounded by other large and heavily populated states, means that China will remain in numerous ways more vulnerable than the United States or Europe. It will rule the world only if America and its allies put a halt to their own economic, technological and military growth.

China, certainly, is here to stay, and its tastes and mores are increasingly part of a two-way traffic with other cultures. But if the American project to rule the world after the fall of the Soviet Union proved to be a chimera, how much more illusory would any such project be on the part of a country as vulnerable, for all its accomplishments, as China. What China aims for is not world rule, but multipolarity. That is a reachable goal. □