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Review: History With Chinese Characteristics: How China's Imagined Past Shapes Its Present

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Review by: Elizabeth C. Economy

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History With Chinese Characteristics

How China's Imagined Past Shapes Its Present

Elizabeth C. Economy

Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power

BY HOWARD W. FRENCH. Knopf, 2017, 352 pp.

The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China, 1776 to the Present

BY JOHN POMFRET. Henry Holt, 2016, 704 pp.

On November 15, 2012, the day he became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping stood onstage at the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing, to reflect back on his country's 5,000 years of history. After citing China's "indelible contribution" to world civilization, Xi called for "the great revival of the Chinese nation." And he acknowledged that others had "failed one time after another" to realize that goal. Implicit in Xi's remarks was a promise:

ELIZABETH C. ECONOMY is C. V. Starr Senior Fellow and Director for Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Follow her on Twitter @LizEconomy.

unlike his predecessors, he would not fall short.

Xi's narrative of rejuvenation has resonated deeply among today's Chinese. It places the country not only at the center of the international system but also above it, casting the nation as one that inspires emulation by the force of its advanced culture and economic achievements. It also evokes historical memories of a time when China received tribute from the rest of the world, was a source of world-class innovation, and was a fearless seafaring power. And it implies that in the past, China did not need to use force: its virtue alone engendered deference from others.

Xi is not the first contemporary Chinese leader to call for national revival. Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao all embraced the theme of rejuvenation or invigoration to remind the Chinese people of past glories in an attempt to bind them to modern China. Xi has, however, surpassed his predecessors in the sheer scale of his efforts to achieve the goal of national revival. He has put in motion a massive infrastructure plan, the Belt and Road Initiative, which is designed to revive the ancient Silk Road and the maritime spice routes that flourished as early as the Han dynasty, thus reinforcing the claim of Chinese centrality. He has also articulated the idea of a "new type of great-power relations," whereby China would enjoy the status of a global power on par with the United States. And he has revived the country's centuries-old claims to the South China Sea and other disputed areas.

Beyond providing China's leadership with a legitimating rationale at home, this narrative also has the benefit of

suggesting to the rest of the world that the current situation—in which the United States is the reigning Pacific power, the global leader in innovation, and the country with unrivaled soft power—is merely a historical aberration. Xi's rhetoric suggests that China today is simply reclaiming its proper place in the global order and righting the scales of history.

Because of the confidence with which Xi, other officials, and Chinese strategists assert their historical right to future greatness—as well as the Communist Party's lack of a vibrant tradition of historiography—this story has gone largely unchallenged. Yet two fascinating new books—Howard French's *Everything Under the Heavens* and John Pomfret's *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom*—suggest that there is much more to the story. French's book raises important questions about the accuracy of the rejuvenation narrative, and Pomfret offers a nuanced study of China's relations with the United States. Both books use their historical findings as a jumping off point to explain contemporary China and advise U.S. officials formulating policy toward it.

THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY

French pays greatest attention to China's relations with its neighbors. He doesn't dispute the basics of the rejuvenation narrative, portraying China as the preeminent power in Asia for the roughly 1,300-year period from the beginning of the Tang dynasty, in 618, to nearly the end of the Qing, in 1912. As French describes, under the principle of Chinese centrality known as *tian xia* (all under heaven), China loosely governed the region through a

hierarchical order of relations in the form of the "tribute system" (although, as French notes, the Chinese did not use that term). Under that system, countries acknowledged the cultural and political superiority of China and expressed deference to Chinese authority—including literally kowtowing before the Chinese emperor in order to trade with China.

Yet French calls the rejuvenation narrative a story of "a half-idealized, half-mythologized past." In many respects, he suggests, form masked substance. While seeking to placate their giant neighbor, the countries on China's periphery often used various forms of subterfuge, subversion, and even outright defiance to get their way, contributing to a significant gap between China's self-image and the geopolitical reality. As early as 600, for example, Japan subtly began to assert its independence from and sense of equality with China. In that year, a Japanese delegation brought a letter to the Sui dynasty's emperor referring to Japan's empress as the "son of heaven in the land of the rising sun" and to her Chinese counterpart as the "son of heaven in the land of the setting sun"—implying that the two stood on equal footing.

Beginning in the early 1600s, Japan also conspired with the kingdom of the Ryukyu Islands to deceive China. While pretending to be a loyal tributary of China, the kingdom was secretly a vassal of Japan; unbeknownst to the Chinese court, a Japanese clan selected each of the Ryukyu kings. According to French, one Ryukyu leader believed that if the kingdom offended China, "it could explain things away, but if it



Don't touch my junk: an Edward Duncan painting of an 1841 battle in the First Opium War

offended Japan, it would be punished.” Other regional monarchs rejected Chinese rule more overtly. An emissary of the Ming Chinese emperor once visited Burma to demand an end to that kingdom’s insubordination. The king replied, “Ruling this country, I only understand that others kowtow to me, how do I kowtow to others?”

French also takes on the deeply entrenched idea that China was a fundamentally different kind of hegemon. As the Chinese version of the story goes, unlike other colonial powers, China managed its neighbors through kindness and virtue and so had little use for military power. As Xi himself noted in a speech to the Australian Parliament in 2014, “Countries that attempted to pursue their development goals with the use of force invariably failed. . . . This is what history teaches us. China is dedicated to upholding peace.” Or

as Chinese Premier Li Keqiang put it in a speech in London that same year, “Expansion is not in the Chinese DNA.”

In French’s retelling, however, China has not lacked for expansionist and colonial impulses. For example, over the course of 1,000 years, various Chinese dynasties invaded what is now Vietnam and attempted to conquer it. The Vietnamese defeated China seven times. When the Ming finally prevailed in the early 1400s, they killed as many as seven million Vietnamese in the process. And as colonial rulers, the Chinese did not prove particularly enlightened: they required Vietnamese schools to teach only Chinese, confiscated Vietnamese literature, barred local traditions, such as betel-nut chewing, and forced Vietnamese women to wear Chinese dress. No surprise, then, that Chinese colonial rule lasted only 21 years before the Vietnamese pushed out the Ming army.

French even calls into question the righteousness of the legendary Zheng He, the Ming dynasty explorer who remains much revered to this day. Zheng is typically portrayed as a peaceful admiral whose mission was to spread, in the words of two Chinese academics quoted by French, “knowledge of the emperor’s ‘majesty and virtue.’” But French unearths evidence suggesting that Zheng was actually an agent of Chinese expansionism; when Sumatra and Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) refused to yield to China’s hegemony, for instance, Zheng invaded. Although his expeditions were not designed to secure territory, they were intended to ensure that nations subordinated themselves to China, a demand that it would enforce with military power if necessary. The Chinese, it turns out, discovered Finlandization centuries before the Soviets did.

By demythologizing China’s past, French provides an important addition to contemporary political debates over the nature of China’s rise. Chinese scholars and officials routinely claim that their country is different from other powers—peaceful, noninterventionist, and noncolonial—to assuage concerns about its growing military strength. As French shows, however, such claims have little merit; China, like all imperial powers, used force in the service of territorial expansion.

Nonetheless, the broader rejuvenation narrative has proved so potent because it portrays the triumphal return of China to its rightful position after having endured the “century of humiliation”—the 100-plus years between the mid-nineteenth-century Opium Wars, during which China suffered dramatic military

defeats and acquiesced to unequal treaties, and the Chinese Communist Party’s 1949 triumph in the country’s civil war. Over this period, China was penetrated, plundered, and otherwise bested by outside powers—above all, Japan. Japan not only annexed the Ryukyu Islands in 1879 but also defeated China in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895 and invaded and occupied Manchuria in 1931 and 1932. What made Tokyo’s conquests so humiliating was that the Chinese had long viewed Japan as inferior and largely derivative of their own country. China’s domination by this upstart contributed to a deep-seated sense of insecurity that Chinese leaders still have yet to shake.

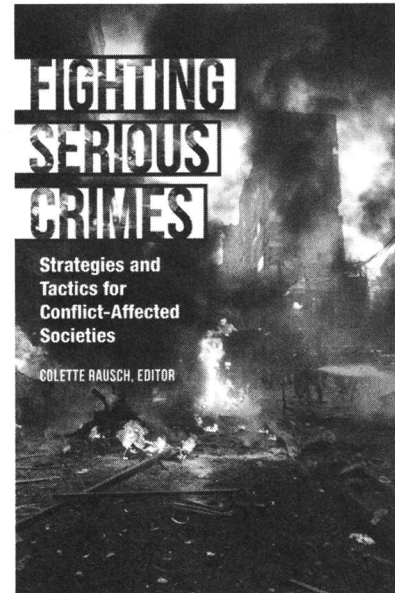
AN OCEAN APART

Thousands of miles away and independent only since 1776, the United States engaged with China in a radically different manner from the way the Middle Kingdom’s neighbors did. As Pomfret reveals, starting in the 1780s, China and the United States enjoyed a rich, two-way relationship, with important players on both sides admiring the accomplishments of the other. In 1915, for example, the American poet Ezra Pound published his translations of Tang and Song dynasty poems in *Cathay*, a collection that inspired other American writers, such as Ernest Hemingway. Prominent Chinese figures studied in the United States, including the Nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen (who went to secondary school in Hawaii), the philosopher Hu Shih (Cornell and Columbia), and the businessman T.V. Soong (Harvard and Columbia). Many of them subsequently called on their compatriots to learn from the United States’ innovative spirit and political system.

When Americans traveled to China to do business during the early 1800s, Chinese officials and merchants often described them as polite, compliant, and respectful; the Chinese particularly appreciated the Americans' preference for paying in the in-demand commodity of silver as opposed to opium. The Americans, in turn, benefited from the Second Opium War (1856–60), which, through the treaties that ended it, forced China to open more of its ports for trade with the outside world and enabled American Christians to proselytize inside the country. In the decades that followed, the number of missionaries swelled, to nearly 4,000 by 1900, many of them American, and U.S. dollars funded a number of charitable organizations, medical schools, and YMCAs and YWCAs.

Cultural exchanges between the two countries flourished. In the 1920s, basketball and baseball took China by storm. Around the same time, Chinese restaurants debuted to great acclaim in the United States, as did stories set in China—including the 1933 children's book *The Story About Ping*, featuring a duck who lived on the Yangtze River. And Chinese who trained in the United States went back to China prepared to help transform their country. Pomfret recounts the story of Shi Meiyu (also known as Mary Stone) and Kang Cheng (also known as Ida Kahn), two women who were educated—and, in the case of Kang, raised—by a U.S. missionary in China. In the 1890s, the Methodist Church supported their education at the University of Michigan's medical school, after which the two returned to China as doctors and started their own clinics. Universally admired in both

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China and the United States, Shi and Kang inspired a generation of Chinese women to become physicians.

Yet as Pomfret describes, the growing interaction between the two countries also led to growing friction. In 1862, China opened up its educational system to Western ideas and established a government school known as the Tongwenguan, which originally trained interpreters in foreign languages but later expanded to teach other Western knowledge. Chinese traditionalists fought the incursion of Western intellectual influences, and many Chinese resented the American missionaries' efforts to spread Western religions. One essay, "A Record of Facts to Ward Off the Cult," claimed that church rituals included Sunday orgies and smeared blood.

The United States confronted its own debates over the relationship. In 1868, with the signing of the Burlingame Treaty, it prohibited discrimination against Chinese workers and mandated reciprocal treatment for Chinese and Americans residing and traveling in each other's countries. But then came the long depression in the United States that began in 1873. Some Americans blamed Chinese immigrants for the poor economy, and anti-Chinese sentiment flared. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned all Chinese immigrants.

Unlike China, the United States never had a deep debate over the insidiousness of the values and ideas flowing across the Pacific. But some Americans did have concerns about undue Chinese influence. When Madame Chiang Kai-shek, the Wellesley-educated first lady of Nationalist China, traveled to Washington in 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt

and other U.S. officials worried that her call for help in defeating the Japanese would undermine his Europe-first policy. And in the wake of China's successful communist revolution and the Korean War, Washington feared that American prisoners of war had been brainwashed into seeking to spread communism on their return. Rather than celebrate the soldiers' homecoming, the U.S. Defense Department locked them up and subjected them to intense psychiatric deprogramming.

BACK TO THE PAST

French and Pomfret could easily have limited their ambitions to writing informative new histories of China's foreign relations. Both, however, try to use their findings to enhance understanding of China today and to offer advice to U.S. policymakers.

The parallels between China's historical relations with the outside world and its relations today are easiest to see in the country's relationship with the United States. As in the past, Pomfret notes, the Chinese debate whether the country should emulate the West's self-reliance, innovation, and ability to meld so many cultures or reject Western influence in order to preserve an essential Chinese culture. Meanwhile, China's current efforts to spread its own values—by setting up government-funded cultural centers called Confucius Institutes around the world and by broadcasting state-run English-language radio and television—are increasingly raising concerns among U.S. officials.

French, too, finds ample evidence that China's historical mindset continues to resonate. He suggests that its rejection of the decision by the Permanent Court

of Arbitration (which found the country's claim to all the territories in the South China Sea within the so-called nine-dash line to be without merit) exemplifies China's traditional sense that its great-power status allows it to ignore international law. Echoes of imperial China's tribute system can be heard in what French characterizes as China's main message to the rest of Asia: "In order to ensure your prosperity, hitch your wagons to us. Yes, we expect deference, but isn't that a small price to pay for stability and co-prosperity?" According to French, some in the region actually accept this message and are willing to return to the past. The Philippine scholar Eduardo Tadem, for example, argues that states should reach a bargain with China in which they might again pay deference to China in exchange for Beijing's relaxing its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. Of course, many others in the region would consider such a deal unacceptable.

That said, French also sees continuity where none may actually exist. His claim that "habits of mind and of statecraft" are so "deeply ingrained in China" that they still shape policy today sounds reasonable. But his prime example misses the mark. He argues that China's offer to the United States to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank reflected its "cultural self-confidence and belief that as China gradually but inevitably becomes number one, other countries including the United States will slowly come to appreciate that resistance is pointless and will petition for admission into the Chinese court." The reality, however, is that from all accounts, the Chinese leadership was astonished at its success in bringing advanced

industrialized nations on board to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Jin Canrong, a professor at Renmin University of China, told *The New York Times*, "Such wide and warm support was unexpected." Many Chinese officials and analysts believed that the bank would fail or, in the best-case scenario, attract only developing countries.

WHAT NOW?

French and Pomfret differ on what constitutes the biggest challenge to U.S.-Chinese relations. French identifies Chinese expansionism as the main problem, arguing that Beijing seeks to supplant the United States in Asia. "Everything about its diplomatic language says that it views the Western Pacific as it once did its ancient known world," he writes. Pomfret, in contrast, argues that the greater concern is citizens in both countries who actively oppose "a Great Harmony"—on one side, "populists who seek to blame China for the world's ills," and on the other, "anti-American bigots."

Despite their differing diagnoses, French and Pomfret arrive at the same prescription. Both think that the best way forward is a better version of what the United States has tried in the past: engagement. Both sympathize with China's desire for greater power and influence. French, for example, calls on Americans to understand the feelings of exclusion that China suffered as a result of bad historical timing: it was right after World War II, just when China had reached its lowest point, that the international community established a raft of treaties and organizations. He argues that the United States should welcome China's voice more and accept

Chinese initiatives with more serenity. Pomfret says that the United States should “redouble its efforts to complete its historic mission to pull China into the world and to seek this Great Harmony, even if it is ultimately unattainable.”

At the same time, French and Pomfret recognize that domestic political and economic forces also shape each country’s foreign policy. After recounting China’s many domestic economic and social challenges and the United States’ economic and cultural strengths, French concludes that the United States can hold its own against the “Chinese juggernaut.” He also points out that China continuously risks overplaying its hand, with its assertiveness giving India and Japan reason to rise up in opposition. Pomfret urges U.S. policymakers to follow China’s lead and focus on developing the United States’ own “comprehensive national strength”—in other words, invest in infrastructure, education, and smart immigration policies. And he suggests that China will have to undertake political reform in order to preserve both peace at home and good relations abroad. None of these recommendations breaks new ground, but French and Pomfret do readers a favor by anchoring their advice in an understanding of China’s historical patterns of interaction with the outside world.

On the face of it, the authors’ proposals for the United States to meet China halfway (or more than halfway) in its bid to shape global institutions, while shoring up the United States’ economic and security capabilities, appear wise. Yet the reality is that a largely business-as-usual strategy is unlikely to be sufficient for managing an increasingly powerful and illiberal

China. Pomfret’s depiction of a time in which ideas, culture, and trade flowed expansively between China and the United States does not reflect the present reality. Xi’s government seeks to limit the flow of foreign ideas and capital into China while asserting China’s own political, economic, and military influence abroad.

For now, then, the best path forward for the United States is to acknowledge the importance of cooperating with China while adopting a greater element of reciprocity in the bilateral relationship. For example, Washington might limit Chinese firms’ access to the U.S. market in areas where China’s economy remains largely closed to U.S. companies, such as media and the Internet. Or it could insist that since China is establishing Confucius Institutes in the United States, the U.S. government has the right to sponsor similar institutions to promote American culture and values in China. U.S. policymakers should take to heart the lesson that China’s “century of humiliation” taught: unequal treatment breeds dissatisfaction and resentment. The relationship will thrive only if each country remains open to the goods, ideas, and culture of the other. An open door must go both ways. 🌐