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When China Rules the World

Description

Review of *When China Rules the World*

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When China Rules the World

Posted on **February 1, 2010** by **Editor**



Review by **Jeffrey Barlow**

Martin Jacques' work, *When China Rules the World*, is an important one. It argues that the global order is in the process of rapid and fundamental changes. China, as a new economic giant, will begin to be much more influential, particularly in East and Southeast Asia, but also globally. This will necessarily result in major changes in the international economic and political order [1].

From the above summary, *When China Rules the World* might be thought to be one of a series of such cautionary analyses of the "rise of China." However, this work is very different. Jacques argues not that China is on the rise, but that it is re-attaining the dominant position it has usually enjoyed in the world economy. In making this argument, Jacques redefines many critical issues. For example, most Western analysis prefers to see the brief period of Western world domination as a natural result of cultural superiority. That is, the Judeo-Christian tradition produced a culture uniquely capable of rapid advances in science, exploration, and business, whereas non-Western countries like China were doomed to backwardness, unless, of course, they adopted Western institutions.

Jacques believes, correctly, in my opinion, that Western dominance was largely a result of European colonialism. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the West at its strongest, and Asia at its weakest; this was particularly the case for China. China remained politically divided and backward until the mid-twentieth century. From that point forward, it has grown steadily, despite the slowdowns caused by Maoist extremism from 1958-68.

The banking crises of 2009 created an environment where it suddenly has become obvious, in Jacques' perspective, that there is in fact more than one path and, perhaps, infinitely many paths, to development. This may seem a simple truism. But Jacques argues that along with China's return to prominence the world order is itself being changed by the mere presence of the successful Chinese model. In addition, as China is not a new player at the top of the global order, it will come to the table with a great deal of previous experience, even with institutions which served it well in the past. These are quite alien to the Western models to which it temporarily was

forced to conform by the violence of colonialism.

These arguments are staggering in their implications, and suggest that a very conflict-ridden period may lie ahead of us as China pushes its way into the world order on significantly different terms than other recent arrivals. It may be a harbinger of similar stresses accompanying the imminent arrival of the other “BRICS” — Brazil, Russia, India, and China herself.

Jacques’ credentials are impeccable. He has the familiarity with Asia necessary to understand China, and the scholarship to build on much previous work. He has been awarded major visiting positions at a number of first-rate Asian and Western universities and is currently a Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics [2]. He also writes regularly for a number of periodicals and has established, over the years, a circle of contacts whose information and perspectives enrich this work. He is clearly left-leaning and has been associated with a number of moderate Marxist journals. This orientation enables him also to analyze Chinese Communism, which, in sum, he finds largely irrelevant to an understanding of contemporary China.

Jacques is, however, much more than a scholar and a journalist. He has learned a lot from personal circumstances. For example, his wife is an overseas Indian from Malaysia. This causes him to reflect upon Chinese attitudes toward other ethnicities, particularly those with darker skins.

The work, of course, deals with Internet-enabled communications as an important factor in the current international political and economic structure. While Jacques uses an astonishing number of classical and new scholarly resources, he also draws on Chinese blogs and Web pages to sample Chinese opinion on a variety of issues. His personal contacts in Beijing and Hong Kong also prove to be very worthwhile additions to the research base of the work.

Jacques’ title is deliberately inflammatory and intended to shock and/or to sell books. But his arguments are very cogent ones. Not all of them are by any means new, but he has assembled them into a highly organized and unified perspective. His key point is simply that China, if it will not actually rule what is, after all, a multi-polar world, will be the first Western equal in Asia, dominant in Southeast Asia, and among the world’s ranking powers at a global level. This situation will be unprecedented. Japan, for example, broke into the international political order largely as a Pacific ally of the British. Once Japan truly went its own way, violence began to mount. Adapting to China will also severely stress the international order.

One of Jacques’ several key perspectives is that, in understanding China, we should not look at its recent Communist past, but at its ancient Confucian imperial culture. In his opinion, we would do better to understand Confucius than Marx or Mao.

Jacques argues, for example, that China will employ a sort of variant on the old Confucian Tribute System for its relations with other states, and particularly with East and Southeast Asian ones. This system is quite different than the Western Westphalian order, in which all states are

presumed to be equal; China was forced into that order in the mid-nineteenth century as a result of the Opium Wars.

In the Tribute System, other states revolved around China in informal recognition that China was the center of the regional order. China expected these states to play by Chinese rules, such as recognizing Chinese influence as dominant. At the same time, in recompense, China owed subordinate states a stable order and a generous Chinese hand with political and economic support.

This position might seem, to many, to be ludicrous. But in China, ancient symbols have great staying power. I am reminded, for example, of some television footage I saw of a major world conference being held in Beijing, perhaps three years ago. (I was in China at the time, so I have no way of knowing if the footage to which I refer here was seen internationally.) It was customary at these meetings for the guests to wear the costumes of the host. In this case, the guests rode up in their limos, stepped onto a red carpet and walked toward their host, bowing before him — Hu Jintao as I recall, but it may also have been Jiang Zemin, both state and Party leaders at the time.

All the guests wore brightly colored Chinese silk gown — every color but red. Red is reserved for the Emperor, in this case, worn only by Hu Jintao, who laughed with great pleasure as the President of the United States, George W. Bush, bowed before him in a blue robe. To anyone familiar with Chinese culture, the entire ceremony was an obvious 21st-century kowtow; the symbolic bow with which foreign emissaries presenting tribute acknowledged the superior power of the Chinese emperor and the moral authority of the Confucian world order [3]. Jacques may indeed have a point here.

The return of China to world prominence will have its costs, both for China, and for the rest of the world. The Chinese, Jacques believes, do not understand that, following the impact of the Internet, there are no longer any issues which can be regarded as purely internal. The Han (the dominant Chinese ethnic group) Jacques argues, are in fact a fictive group and the Chinese insistence on rigid ethnic divisions is merely a political cover for internal control purposes. But for us outside the Chinese system, the Han treatment of minorities is a sort of foreshadowing of how Chinese might well choose to treat us if they had external influence equivalent to their internal influence over other ethnicities.

The author feels, correctly, I think, on the basis of my own experience, that the Chinese are deeply and unthinkingly racist...so much so that a rational debate of prejudice in Chinese policy and attitudes is not even possible. As I was teaching in China while reading Jacques, I tried this idea out on my sophomore students, using some of his examples. What, I asked my class, are we to make of the fact that, as Jacques shows, Chinese newspapers located in diaspora communities all over the world universally refer to the majorities around them as “waiguo ren,” foreigners? (That is, to Chinese living in Italy, Italians are “foreigners”.) My students found the question puzzling. After all, aren't they, in fact, foreigners?

Jacques also argues that there are going to be many changes when Chinese influence begins to increase in the West, as it is already so obviously doing. Many of these will amount merely to a diversification of the previously dominant influences. Chinese language will be used more broadly on the Internet; more people will choose to study it; it will become a major influence on world culture. In addition, Chinese films will begin to compete with Hollywood, extending Chinese cultural influence through a channel hitherto dominated by the United States. We will learn more about important Chinese historical events and famous personages. But some of the changes will be less comfortable ones.

Jacques believes, for example, that the days of the domination of the dollars as a reserve currency are numbered. China clearly intends to make its national currency, the Ren Min Bi, an international one, and to replace the dollar in at least East and Southeast Asia as a reserve currency. This will take some time, of course, as the value of the RMB is now carefully controlled, both to isolate the Chinese economy from harmful surges of “hot” investments which can do great damage to an economy, and to decrease the price of Chinese goods abroad, stimulating the great export machine which the Chinese economy has long been.

But the Chinese now must reorient their economy, given the collapse of effective demand in Western markets. As part of employing their huge dollar surpluses, Chinese will be buying more and more businesses abroad. They will also, one presumes, buy more and more political influence in at least the United States as well.

We once had a Senator from California, William F. Knowland, who was so responsive to Chinese Nationalist interests — represented by Chiang Kai-shek and Madame Chiang — that he was known as “The Senator from Formosa” [4]. It is possible that we will also have “Representatives from Beijing” in some Congressional districts when Chinese firms become large employers.

Europe too has some painful adjustment to make as China increases its influence in world political and economic systems. The big problems, however, according to Jacques, will be for Americans. The return of China requires that the United States make room in what has happily been a U.S. dominated world order.

Within the current decade the triumphalist Neo-Cons sincerely believed that the entire international order could and should be redesigned to reflect the undeniable fact of American supremacy. What will it mean, for example, when China becomes the largest aid donor to some countries in the Western hemisphere? It has long been the major donor for many African countries, which has enabled it not only to construct their transportation and port facilities but also to ship out key natural resources to China under favorable contracts. China just became the largest aid donor for the Philippines, which hitherto might safely be regarded as an American colony.

There are, of course, some shortcomings in *When China Rules the World*. Some reviewers have argued that Jacques pays inadequate attention to the many obstacles which China potentially

faces as it tries to adjust its economy from a tightly controlled one to a necessarily more open one. It may be that Jacques also overlooks, in his enthusiasm, the restraints China will face in a multi-polar world.

In the imperial era, China never really faced equals so much as inferiors. Vietnam and Korea were the primary tribute states, both sharing land borders with China. Others like Japan were at a sort of secondary remove. The Westphalian order, while ostensibly open and democratic, in fact was carefully stacked to the advantage of a few great Western powers, notably Great Britain and the United States.

China thus went from a superior status to an inferior one in a few decades. It has never really faced a world in which it must conform to international usages while wielding great power and influence. As the current conflict over Google and the censoring of the World Wide Web in China shows, this will not be an easy transition for anybody.

Jacques also posits, in my opinion, too much continuity in Chinese culture. Confucianism is, I agree, a powerful model for explaining even contemporary China, but it will be much changed in the era of the one-child family [5]. Just as Confucianism must adapt, so will many other elements of Chinese culture. The other work reviewed in this issue, Marina Yue Zhang's *China 2.0* makes a very powerful argument for the strong democratizing effects of the interactive Web upon China, for example.

The book, to me, was not only highly instructive but also enjoyable. The author has a journalist's ability to explain abstruse elements of history and economics, while leavening them with human-interest stories drawn from his personal experience. *When China Rules the World* should be read by anyone with a serious interest not only in China, but in the future global order. His arguments, if occasionally strained, introduce new and very important issues into the discussions of the "Rise of China."

Endnotes

[1] For a good review of the book, see "Waking Dragon," by Joseph Kahn (A former U.S. ambassador to Beijing), The NYT, December 31, 2009, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/books/review/Kahn-t.html?ref=review>

[2] See Jacques' Wikipedia biography at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Jacques

[3] See Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kowtow>

[4] See Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_F._Knowland

[5] I have written from China upon this point. See: entry of January 3, 2010 "Yea for Confucianism...but what about the Bad Emperor?" at: <http://chinatripper.wordpress.com/2010/01/>

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