China 2.0. The transformation of an Emerging Superpower...And the Opportunities

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Recommended Citation

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Posted on February 1, 2010 by Editor

Reviewed by Jeffrey Barlow

One of the pleasures of working out of Hong Kong for even a few days, as I have recently done, is being able to browse shelves of books in English dealing with contemporary Asia. Online ordering is useful, but usually I wait for a book to be noticed by others before I invest. At my favorite Swindonis outlet in Kowloon, I recently discovered Marina Yue Zhang's China 2.0., published in Singapore.

Briefly put, the work is a valuable one, which offers the insights of a very well trained and highly experienced expert in management who has impeccable cultural credentials as well. Maria Zhang is a native speaker of Chinese who attended college in Beijing (B.A. Biological Sciences, Beijing University), then went on to get her MBA and a Ph.D. in Management at Australian National University. The author's special area of interest is high-tech, and she has lectured widely in Asia, and now lives once again in Beijing.

Zhang approaches her subject sympathetically in that she feels, as do I, that Western perspectives on China are all too often warped by centuries of accumulated preconceptions, making it difficult to understand China during periods of rapid change like the present. At the same time, sympathetic or not, she has an excellent grasp of the subject and views it both broadly and objectively. For example, Zhang was directly and personally involved in the Beijing spring protests of 1989, but has decided that China's recent economic and political success has benefitted more from a stable regime than it would have benefitted from idealistic attempts to somehow graft Western democratic institutions onto such an ancient and highly developed culture [1].

This position, which will seem paradoxical to many American readers, stems from Zhang's belief
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that China is, because of its stability, achieving staggering economic progress, which is the only way that the hugely overcrowded and formerly poverty-stricken country could possibly have come to the point where substantive political reform could ever be considered a realistic project. China 2.0 does an excellent job of describing recent progress, not only in the data-driven language of economists, but also with numerous insights and anecdotes made possible by the author's residence in China and her ability to follow Chinese blogs and other popular cultural materials.

One of Zhang's many strong points is that she is able to decipher the language of Chinese political slogans such as calls to achieve "a Harmonious Society" and therefore understand the underlying models for reform which they represent [2]. She also understands the issues that vex foreign corporations and political leaders in trying to come to terms with China's sudden economic clout both at home and abroad. She discusses in some detail all the usual aspects of such stresses, from intellectual property rights to currency manipulations, and in doing so greatly illuminates their meaning for China, and for the rest of the world.

The book is ambitiously organized. It's part chronicle of China's rise and part a how-to manual for Western businesses hoping to take advantage of this booming economy. The end result may be that it will appeal primarily to very serious scholars or businesspeople seeking detailed explanations of various elements of the Chinese economy in the context of the global economy.

The overarching metaphor of the book, "China 2.0," is an apt one in that the work focuses on the impact of interactive social media on all aspects of Chinese life, with an emphasis upon the changing Chinese customer and his or her orientation toward life and politics, as well as upon changing consumption patterns. The author's many public appearances and consulting jobs have also given her a great deal of insight into not only Western firms in China, but also into Chinese ones, and into the minds of those who direct both. Her close analysis of many such firms, such as those involved in the milk scandal in China, also give her a micro- as well as a macro-perspective. Her analysis gives the reader a very good sense of who operates the Chinese economy now, and how they have changed substantially from the grey Maoists of the past.

Zhang shows that Chinese society is making a transition from the sort of broadcast version of Chinese society emanating from the top (the Communist Party) to an interactive one which is empowering common Chinese people, using the tools of the World Wide Web, to begin to impact the Chinese political system in a manner which amounts to forcing serious and substantive reforms. Ordinary people are now routinely challenging corruption and authority, and the state is hurrying to catch up with them rather than be left in their wake.

In the West in general, and in the United States in particular, these events are invariably reported as though they are mere cracks in the totalitarian façade of one party-rule, remarkable precisely because they are exceptional. By reporting them in this fashion, we emphasize not change, but continuity: China is still totalitarian. Zhang rather argues that such events are becoming, not
exceptions, but part of the daily fabric of Chinese life. This is not to say, as the author cautions us, that the results will bear much resemblance to Western ideas of democracy.

The metaphor of 2.0 is also important, the author argues, for businesses trying to succeed in China. The old ways of doing business — spray advertizing and pray — will not work much longer. The more successful businesses are those which take advantage of interactive processes, such as facilitating customer responses to sales campaigns, utilizing every possible social media, and those which will see Chinese production facilities, not as an entrée to the Chinese market, but as part of an international production chain which will inevitably shape the corporation globally.

One very serious shortcoming of the book is that it was edited much too hurriedly. This might be thought by some readers to be a minor issue but in this case it sometimes becomes an exercise in the surreal as a reader begins to feel that he or she has already read a given sentence or paragraph. It is as though two different versions of the manuscripts were hurriedly pasted together in an attempt to make a publishing deadline.

I read much of the work in the economy class dungeon of an aged jetliner on an extended transpacific flight. Repeatedly experiencing the reader’s equivalent of déjà vu, I initially feared that I was losing my mind from bad air, bad lighting, dangerous noise levels, inadequate nutrition, and overcrowding and might soon begin to gnaw off body parts in an effort to escape. I was relieved to encounter a paragraph of some six or eight sentences ending with the two identical sentences with which it had begun, proving definitively that it was the editor who had lost his or her mind, not me [3]. One expects more from a John Wiley publication, particularly from a relatively expensive one (36 USD). One can imagine that the author is very tired of jokes about the quality of outsourced work in Singapore, where the book was edited.

But despite the cavalier treatment the press gave it, China 2.0 is a remarkable book, which should be read by all those trying to understand the effects of the rapid economic, political, and social changes which China is undergoing, and their effects upon the world.

Endnotes


clothing question
on February 3, 2014 at 2:39 PM said:

We’re a group of volunteers and opening a new scheme in our community. Your site offered us with valuable info to work on. You’ve done a formidable job and our whole community will be grateful to you.

christian church experience
on February 6, 2014 at 11:49 AM said:

Having read this I thought it was rather enlightening.

I appreciate you spending some time and energy to put this informative article together. I once again find myself personally spending way too much time both reading and posting comments. But so what, it was still worthwhile!