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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

On China
by Henry Kissinger

The Penguin Press, 2011 ISBN
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Hardcover, 586 pages

This is a singular book that only Dr. Henry Kissinger could have written. Dr. Kissinger titled the first chapter of his book "On China", "The Singularity of China" to contrast this "civilisational state" (in the words of Martin Jacques, author of "When China Rules the World") with American claim to "exceptionalism". This is the belief that as the US was founded on democratic values, such as freedom and individual rights, it had the duty to proselytize these values to all of mankind.

What makes this book so singular in the view of this reviewer, is that the author provides at least four perspectives on US-China differences. These may have been written up by others separately, but only the inimitable Kissinger could have put together so cogently. Collectively, they make a powerful case for the need to develop a foundation of trust and to build bridges of understanding between erstwhile opponents such as the US and China which are surrogates for the different ideas that spring from the Socratic and Confucian traditions.

The four perspectives are the historical, the strategic, the diplomatic and the futuristic.

In terms of history, Kissinger teaches us how the Chinese narrative of its own mythic origin differs so markedly from foundation stories of Western states that usually trace their origins to a identifiable ruler.

As a political strategist, Kissinger is able to highlight the differences in the paradigm or mindset of people brought up in the logical rationalism of Western thought as opposed to the holistic view point of Eastern philosophers.

As a diplomat and one who was instrumental in America's drive to recruit China to its side in its nuclear face-off against the Soviet Union in the 1960s and early 1970s, he gives us a ringside seat to history as it was being written.

Finally, as a futurist, he answers the question that worries all of humanity today – will a risen China challenge American supremacy resulting in a new collision that will engulf the world?

Let's examine these four insights.

Historical Perspective

In the West, there is a founder of a nation. In China, its people had always existed in harmony with Heaven and Earth. Although they have acknowledged the Emperor, Qi Shi Huang, as the unifier of Chinese states, the consciousness of the Chinese people is that their race had existed long before unification in the mist of time. Moreover, its most prominent philosopher, Confucius, taught that ideals of good governance existed in the past and leaders could do no better than look to the ancients for examples of how best to govern even in modern times.

According to Kissinger, while US exceptionalism is about conversion, China's singularity is about attraction – an example for people to follow its ways voluntarily if they so wish. These differences bedevil relationship even today between not only the US and China but also all countries that subscribe to the Westphalian order. But while the American sense of mission can be measured in centuries, starting from the birth of the nation in 1776, Chinese consciousness of singularity has existed for several millennia. The consequence of their separate historical beliefs is that while the West is outward-looking, China, until its recent opening up in 1978, has had a preference to focus inward.

Dr. Kissinger makes the interesting observation that even in the height of Mao Zedong's frenzy to force his people to catch up and surpass the West, his Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution were internally-focused and only marginally affected other countries. He acknowledged though that the fear which had prevailed in both the West and in South East Asia of "Red China's" expansionism was real, possibly influenced by Communist doctrine that its dogma had universal application.

The truth, however, is that Communism, despite protestations by leaders of their commitment to its ideals, is no more than a passing phase in Chinese history. Communist tenets are more observed in the breach than in their practice! As China celebrates 90 years of the founding of the Communist Party on July 1, 2011, one should see this in the perspective of the millennium that it took for Buddhism to be recognised by the Chinese along with Confucianism and Daoism, as an integral part of the three philosophies which rule the lives of common people.

Political Strategy

In terms of political strategy, Kissinger makes this striking observation – that the thinking of a people may well be reflected in the intellectual games they play. He contrasts, for example, Western chess to the Chinese version, Weiji.

In the game of chess, he says, the objective is total victory. "The purpose of the game is checkmate, to put the opposing king into a position where he cannot move without being destroyed."

Weiji, on the other hand....."implies a game of strategic encirclement. The board, a grid of nineteen-by-nineteen lines, begins empty. Each player has 180 pieces, or stones, at his disposal, each of equal value with the others. .....The balance of forces shifts incrementally with each move, as the players implement strategic plans and react to each other's initiatives. .....The margin of advantage is often slim, and to the untrained eye, the identity of the winner is not always immediately obvious."

According to Kissinger, "What distinguished Sunzi from Western writers on strategy is the emphasis on the psychological and political elements over the purely military.

"Its maxim found vivid expression in the twentieth century Chinese civil war at the hands of Sunzi's student Mao Zedong, and in the Vietnam wars, as Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap employed Sunzi's principles of indirect attack and psychological combat against France and then the United States.

"Sunzi addresses the means of building a dominant political and psychological position, such that the outcome of a conflict becomes a foregone conclusion. Western strategists test their maxims by victories in battles; Sunzi tests by victories where battles have become unnecessary."

And Kissinger added in a telling aside, "...it was the way the North Vietnamese fought America (though Hanoi usually translated its psychological gains into actual territorial conquests as well)".

To those of us who lived through the turbulent era of America's Vietnam War, the book has still to be written as to how much the Vietnamese factored in opposition to the war in the US into their strategic calculations.

Diplomacy

As a leading player in the rapprochement between the US and China, Kissinger has had a ringside seat in the rise of a great power. The cynical may also say that his ringside seat also enabled him to observe the growing recognition by the predominant power of the day, of its limitations. Whichever view taken, he had revealing stories to tell of the secret manoeuvring that took place in the initial stages of negotiation. One incident was absolutely hilarious and could come straight out of a Woody Allen movie. At the time, American and Chinese diplomats did not speak to each other in public. But they did meet as guests at events hosted by third parties. In the Polish capital of Warsaw at a fashion show to which representatives of both nations were invited, the American diplomats were instructed to approach their Chinese counterparts to advise them of the next stage of proceedings. However, when the US team approached their Chinese opposite numbers, who were without instructions, the latter fled!

In another revealing aside, Kissinger tells of a meeting with Zhou Enlai, whom he greatly admired, in the height of the Cultural Revolution. Then he happened to mention in an innocent aside how much Chinese tradition continued to exert a positive influence on its people today. Zhou, to his surprise, reacted violently to this remark and delivered a tirade against old-fashioned ideas that held back the Chinese people from progress. Kissinger later explained Zhou's reaction as part of the role he was playing to support Mao's Cultural Revolution which was running strongly at the time.

The Future

Here, Kissinger acknowledges the current concern of Western political theorists who continue to remain sceptical about China's protestations that they have no secret plans for expansionism. In the view of these sceptics, China's current rise vis-a-vis the US is akin to Germany's rise to challenge the supremacy of Great Britain in the 20th century.

Kissinger addresses this sceptical viewpoint by quoting at length from the Krowe Memorandum. This was a document written by a senior official in the British Foreign Office, Eyre Crowe, in 1907, in which he said that as nations are not prone to announce their intentions for conquest in advance, once Germany achieved naval supremacy, this in itself – regardless of German intentions – would be an objective threat to Britain.

This is the seductive argument applied today for a pre-emptive action to be taken against China as it builds its armaments in space, on land and now at sea with a blue-water fleet.

However, Kissinger says in the Epilogue to his book, "Historical parallels are by nature inexact" and warned against experts not to "analyze themselves into self-fulfilling prophecies". He goes on further to say "The existence of weapons of mass destruction and modern military technologies of unknowable ultimate consequences define a key distinction from the pre-World War I period. The leaders who started that war had no understanding the consequences of the weapons at their disposal. Contemporary leaders can have no illusions about the destructive potential they are capable of unleashing." In other words, would they have done then what they did if they knew what we know now?

Pacific Community

The solution, in his view, is the creation of a Pacific Community where both the US and China can take their seats along with other nations that make up the geographic area.

In this forum, both the US and China can work out their concerns which he defines as "....the Chinese fear that America is seeking to contain China – paralleled by the American concern that China is seeking to expel the United States from Asia." A Pacific Community could "ease both fears". They could participate in a joint enterprise for development along the lines of the Atlantic Community "one of the great achievements.....of the Second World War". Together the United States and China would not only, as Zhou Enlai told him as they prepared their joint communiqué on re-establishing relationship "shake the world" but help to "build it".

Whether we share Dr. Kissinger's optimism or remain pessimistic about the rise of China, this book is an essential compendium for anyone interested in how the political, social and economic development of a quarter of mankind will **shape** the world.

Low Siew Thiam
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