

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

Howard W. French, former New York Times Asia correspondent (Tokyo and Shanghai), is currently a professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. He has written an interesting, thought provoking, and timely book: *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Shapes China's Push for Global Power*; Knopf published it in March 2017.

The book examines China's view of itself and uses an extensive analysis of China's long history to both set the scene and propose how history informs China's recent push for global power. The writing is clear, coherent, and vibrant.

China's diminished global position in the 19th and 20th centuries was very much an historical anomaly. For over two millennia China was effectively without a peer; it was the largest country by population and seemed not to want for anything. From its own perspective, China had a natural dominion over everything under the heaven, a concept known as *tian xia* (天下); it sees itself as the cultural and economic center to which all else is peripheral hence the Chinese name for itself *zhong guo* (中国) the Middle Kingdom. Combining historical research with investigative journalism, French draws the links between this historical concept and the country's current aspirations, particularly with regard to the South China Sea.

China spent the 20th century either locked in conflict with foreign powers or mired in internal strife. After a return to relative stability in the 1980s the country, led by Deng Xiaoping, began a period of growth that would raise hundreds of millions from poverty, sparking spectacular expansion in its economic and military spheres that still continues. For the first time in recent memory, China is daring to reclaim its past.

The post-Deng period was largely defined by Deng's 24 Character Strategy: 冷静观察, 站稳脚跟, 沉着应付, 韬光养晦, 善于守拙, 绝不当头 (*lěngjìng guānchá, zhàn wěn jiǎogēn, chénzhuó yìngfù, tāoguāngyǎnghuì, shànyú shǒu zhuō, jué bù dāngtóu*) "Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership." Until 2012 and the arrival of Xi Jinping as the chairman of the Communist Party of China the strategy largely held. It is apparent that the new leader, *Xi dada* as he is known in China, feels that it is time for the Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and for it to realise the Chinese Dream. China is no longer biding its time; maintaining a low profile; and eschewing leadership.

The most interesting part of the book is the description of history and China's view of itself as a once great power humbled by outside countries. French outlines many of China's current political and strategic policies and how China views itself from an historical perspective. There is an excellent discussion of China's use of the "Nine Dash Line" to provide historical justification of its claim to nearly all the South China Sea.

China refused to take part in the international Permanent Court of Arbitration tribunal in the Hague and ignored the 2016 ruling that firmly rejected the legal basis of such claims. This puts the 1982 UNCLOS, to which China is a signatory, in some danger should it withdraw. For

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anyone wanting to understand how China strives to use its perspective on history to justify its expansionist actions in international law the book is recommended.

Moreover, China has engaged in large-scale island building projects within the nine-dash line: it is estimated that it has constructed about 30 hectares of new real estate at Fiery Cross, Subi, and Mischief Reefs in the Spratlys, and North, Tree, and Triton Islands in the Paracels. By 2017, it had established anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems and extensive buildings on some of these artificial islands. These are Beijing's largest bases in the area, containing air fields and harbours capable of supporting the largest military aircraft and vessels.

Using historical reference French lays out the case that it has a long history of dominating its smaller and weaker neighbours. He spends much time providing background on the often fraught Sino-Japan relationship. The historical relationship during the Edo period is examined in some detail. It is brought up to date with the recent situation in the East China Sea and the control of the Senkakus or Diaoyu Islands. The diplomatic and military manoeuvring between Japan and China is well covered.

One of the major points raised by French that contradicts the official Chinese narrative is the story of Admiral Zheng He who led a Chinese armada to Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka and the east coast of Africa under the Ming in the 15th Century. In China, Zheng He is glorified as an unconventional explorer; an ambassador of Chinese benevolence. Unlike Western explorers and colonisers, whose expeditions were marked by greed, violence, and conquest. French reminds us that Zheng's massive ships were actually troop carriers, whose arrival off the coast carried a distinctly menacing message to the coastal kingdoms being visited.

Modern China continues to proclaim this concept of benevolent internationalism that is contradicted by events well-known to those living outside of China. In a very detailed exposition French examines the historical relations between Vietnam and China. It was in Vietnam that China's last went to war with thousands paying with their lives in early 1979. French, with two soldiers who fought in the conflict, visited the graves of PLA soldiers in Yunan. The war is not well known in China and the graves are hidden in the jungle hills of Yunan. Later he also describes in harrowing detail the massacre of 64 Vietnamese sailors and soldiers on the Johnson Reef by the PLAN in March 1988. The grainy YouTube videos of the March 14, 1988 incident are well worth viewing for a sobering reminder of the brutality of the regime in Beijing. (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=14+march+1988+china+vs+vietnam)

The book clearly lays out how basic economics is the driving factor in much of China's behavior toward its neighbors. The ruling Communist Party recognises the obligation to continue expanding the Chinese economy in the face of structural issues such as high levels of institutional debt and a rapidly aging population. The often provocative acts conducted by China in the last number of years have occasionally produced a nationalist backlash among the Chinese citizens that the ruling party may have trouble controlling. This is particularly the case with anti-

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Japanese propaganda and resulting public action. In one possible scenario described in detail, an unintended clash in the disputed Senkaku Islands between Japan and China could easily erupt into a global crisis through miscalculation and rapid escalation.

China has a very unbalanced demographic because of the former one-child policy; it may be destined grow old before it grows rich. The social and economic issues China is likely to face through mid-century are expected to increase. The leadership will face a rapidly aging population requiring extensive social services that will undermine the country's economic growth exacerbating instability within the country. This may put continued pressure on the regime to justify its legitimacy and claim to power, making more possible the potential for continued hegemonic acts to distract from internal social strains.

It is an excellent and very well written book that I highly recommend.