



China Incorporated: The Politics of a World Where China Is Number One

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Book Review

Kerry Brown. *China Incorporated: The Politics of a World Where China Is Number One*. Bloomsbury, London, 07 Sep 2023. pp. 208. Hb. £20.00. ISBN 9781350267244

The West has frightened itself by staring into a mirror. All the worst traits of Western culture and imperial ambition are seen reflected in Xi Jinping and the Communist Party of China (CPC). In the mirror, China wants to build a global Empire, sending out missionaries to convert (and subvert) the West and the rest with a variant set of universal values incommensurable with those proselytised by Washington and Brussels. This threat to faith is intolerable and must not be allowed to proceed unchallenged.

For Kerry Brown this is all a mirage; conjuring up a threat that isn't there. In Brown's view, China has no expansionist ambitions. Since 1949, ventures into its near abroad, whether in Korea, India or Vietnam, have been defensive, not offensive. Hanoi, in particular, might not agree. Nevertheless, on balance, Brown has a point. In juxtaposition with the serial interference and intrusions, invasions and occupations of the United States (US) and its allies in West Asia and elsewhere, Beijing's predatory instincts fall short. As for proselytising, state-funded Confucius Institutes hardly equate with the missionary influx of the 19th century and after, whether the missionaries wore cassocks or combat boots. More importantly, Beijing would be trying to sell a model to Western civil society that could hardly look less attractive. Having said that, it should be acknowledged that we are doing a rather fine job of making our practice – if not our paradigm – look equally inimical from a Chinese perspective.

As *China Incorporated* headlines, there cannot be two sets of universal values. In Brown's view, China makes no pretension in that regard. The situation was more dangerous under Mao than now, when the Chairman's Little Red Book spewed across the West's university campuses. But since the 1980s, the era after Deng Xiaoping took power when greed replaced creed, the CPC has been selling a different modernity from that of the West, and core China bought it. The real 'China problems' that Washington and its partners are grappling with are those of quantity, not quality, problems of wealth not values. America is less worried about China losing its way on the path to democracy, than about it finding the path to economic success. China's single market has made it the largest

trading partner for 128 of the world's 190 countries and, in 2019, was responsible for a sixth of global trade. Beijing is now parlaying that economic heft into political and military power. Emerging as a second superpower, it threatens US global primacy. China's 'Belt and Road Initiative', the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and, most recently, the establishment of the BRICS+6 international grouping threaten to pick the dollar's lock on the global economy. China's rise sounds, to Washington's hawks, like death bells for an American World Order born a century ago in the wake of the First World War.

China Incorporated makes an eminently rational case for not demonising Beijing and for coming to terms with a future 'dual track' world. It argues for engaging with Beijing despite its faults and threats. In the backwash of the Covid pandemic shock, 'de-risking' supply chains makes sense but, as we have seen elsewhere, those who sow the wind can reap a whirlwind. The illusion of caging China in isolation begs a question about who would be inside the bars and who would be outside. It's not as if Western governments are not used to dealing with, and even partnering, regimes whose patterns of behaviour are sharply at odds with its own, without blinking an eye.

Kerry Brown knows China better than he knows the West. His natural mistake is to assume that our world is led by reasoning actors. No US president could possibly be willing – or able – to watch China pass by in the outside lane without attempting to stop them. An American movie, 'Cold War 2 – the Sequel', is already being cast, even if the script doesn't rhyme with reality. It could be worse though. The US could redeploy its Japan playbook from the late thirties. The message of *China Incorporated* may be received better among America's partners, still in the process of being knitted together in a security embrace around China, and among those yet to choose sides. Groucho Marx summed up their China dilemma, "Who are you going to believe? Me or your own eyes?" The problem is that, apart from an isolated minority like Kerry Brown, it is not clear anyone in Brussels or London is looking.

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