

Cracking the 'Fortune Cookie' of Chinese Power

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Howard W. French

*Everything under The Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's
Push for Global Power*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017

In the Realist theory of international relations, states as the units of socio-political order experience the world they inhabit as anarchic, and one devoid of a moral check on the power of coercion and violence that remains unevenly distributed among competing human political entities. To illustrate this, Realists need only point at world history in its entirety, wherein accumulation of power, in any degree possible, has been the primary goal of polities that saw survival as their foremost concern. This is accepted as a generally valid claim and, therefore, one would surmise that there is little new to be discovered in history that would explain afresh an ascendant state's push for power.

Nevertheless, China continues to remain the focus of such inquiries even after decades of close and near uninterrupted observation, analysis, and 'conclusive' interpretations of its past and likely future behaviour as a rising or a risen great power. It is a testimony to our unwavering interest in having China explained to us and the heterodoxy characteristic of historical and international relations research in our times, that each new study on China promises ever greater depths of investigation on the subject and ever more

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tantalizing snapshots of the world of tomorrow.

Former New York Times foreign correspondent Howard W. French's *Everything Under the Heavens: how the past helps shape China's push for global power* is a welcome addition to the class of literature on China which draws on systematic textual analysis of historical sources while remaining accessible to readers without an extensive grounding in China studies. French spent almost twenty years reporting overseas as the NYT's bureau chief, half of them posted in Tokyo and Shanghai, and his previous book, *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants are Building a New Empire in Africa*, received universal acclaim.

In the present book, French attempts to deconstruct the People's Republic of China's global aspirations by following a prominent strand in the civilizational view on China, that of Chinese exceptionalism. The title of the book projects that the eponymous phrase, "everything under the heavens", encapsulates the Chinese nation's self-awareness of its place in the world, cultivated and cherished through a time period spanning over two thousand years. The title draws from the Chinese term *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven), made famous after Zhao Tingyang's 2005 book *The Tianxia System: The Philosophy for the World Institution* (Tinyang, 2005). Zhao's revival of the traditional concept coincided with the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to articulate the "Peaceful Development Road", a vision of an ascendant China's approach to the world, under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. It is worth recalling here that Zhao proposed *Tianxia* as an inclusive lens for China to deal with the world instead of adopting parochial nationalistic tools (Ibid, pp.108-140). William Callahan offers a useful interpretation of Zhao's work in his essay entitled "China's Strategic Futures: Debating the Post-American World Order" (Callahan, 2012). Zhao's *Tianxia Tixi* is critical of China's aspiration to follow a Western model of modernization and argues that China must "exploit its own indigenous resources of traditional thought" such as the utopian ideals enshrined in Chinese classic *Dao de Jing* to frame its own world view as well as to provide solutions to the world's problems (Ibid, pp.617-619).

The problem is that Zhao interprets *Tianxia* both as “the World” and as “Empire” and does not explicitly divorce the latter from its connotations of superiority, hierarchy, and domination, all alarming ideas from the perspective of contemporary international norms. Thus, the imperialistic overtones of the concept’s historical origins demand far greater attention, as China’s contemporary outward behaviour arouses suspicions and insecurity in other states, and has come to be understood as deeply entrenched within China’s modern worldview. According to French, to understand the fashion in which China conceptualised this self-image of a benign and manifestly civilizing empire in response to its experiences with foreign entities would be to understand the determinants of China’s “push for global power” today.

The book’s six chapters traverse China’s global history along a non-linear path which begins with “national humiliation” in and after the Opium Wars, to then go back through the periods of prestige (tribute system), prosperity (Silk Road), and proud outreach (the voyages of Zheng He). The chapters are rich in anecdotal details, contemporary accounts, personal interviews, and an exhaustive review of cultural artefacts that preserve the memory of China’s influence on the history of the neighbouring regions in East Asia. The South China Sea, for its island disputes and multi-party tensions, has been given special emphasis in a chapter dedicated to the topic. French analyses China’s reactive behaviour toward other claimants of sovereignty and its disregard for arbitration on the maritime issues as particularly illustrative of a strong dualistic tenor of victimhood and superiority in contemporary Chinese nationalism.

In the course of this narrative, French’s investigations ultimately lead him to the conclusion that China’s ambitions throughout history have been global in nature and barring periods of internal disunity and external decline, China has always used trade, diplomacy, the threat of force, and war to consolidate its centrality and hegemony in its interactions with the outside world. As per the author, these tenets, when fused with China’s current aspirations to dislodge the United States from East Asia and secure regional hegemony, do not bode well for the status quo. China’s problems of

demographic transition and potential economic stagnation notwithstanding, the country poses a long-term challenge to prominent international actors as well as international institutions if they want to keep violent conflict at bay.

The core strength of French's book lies in its expert handling of sources, opinions, and themes coming from the author's extensive experience in investigative reporting combined with his ability to place specific details within the ambit of macro-level theories. The book's dissection and reinterpretation of many well-known issues regarding China certainly holds considerable academic value for new inquiries into the subject. An interesting clarification, found at the end of the book, reassures the reader that:

"Thinking like this does not flow from any obsession with what many in the United States already fancy as a Chinese threat. In fact, what I've set out to do is to "normalize" China. Having said so much in this book to explain the particulars of its history, this is the place to deexceptionalize its attitudes toward strength and power. The prevailing impression, of a China in a great hurry, is what leads many people to think of it as a threat. But however great its apparent haste today, many of its seemingly outsized present-day energies may gradually diminish or even peter out in due time."

The book's intended purpose and its contents, however, do quite the opposite of "deexceptionalizing" China. French cannot be faulted for systematically building the case he sets out to make, but this also unambiguously brackets his book among non-Chinese perspectives that essentialise China and ultimately conflate notions of Chinese character with Chinese strategic culture, a theoretical debate that is still far from being settled.

Many recent trends of thought on Chinese history will perhaps dispute even the fundamental assumptions of the author on *Tianxia* or the tribute system.* Zhang Feng details two alternative analyses of the tribute system which differ from the 'Sino-centrism' of John K. Fairbank's work on the history of China's foreign relations in East Asia. In one view, the tribute system is a bureaucratic mechanism built around organizational rules, procedures, and

* Two significant examples of these trends are: Zhang Feng, "Rethinking the 'Tribute System': Broadening the Conceptual Horizon of Historical East Asian Politics," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, 2009, pp. 545-574; and William A. Callahan, "Sino-speak: Chinese Exceptionalism and the Politics of History," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 71, 2012, pp. 33-55.

ritualistic practices to provide a functional structure to China's imperial court's relations with foreign states during medieval period. The second view adopts the English School perspective wherein the tribute system was an institution made of formal and informal rules and practices which prescribed behaviour and shaped expectations towards the realization of common goals. These diverse analytical models account for the rise and decline of Chinese dynastic empires that ought to have forced China time and again to reconsider the assumptions of its centrality or cultural superiority. It is important to acknowledge these alternate models as they help refocus on the similarities of human needs and motives in political science and the need to pay attention to all the evidence for retaining analytical rigour.

French's book, being aimed at the wider readership, will still enjoy greater acceptability outside academic circles. This means that ways of thinking about China at a popular level are more likely to follow the methodology of books such as these. Callahan calls this "Sino-speak," wherein the authors seek to venture predictions about how China will pursue and exercise power in the world, basing these on its unique civilizational traits. Similar claims have been made about great powers in the past, including Japan and it is debatable how the outcomes of great power politics and conflicts varied depending on their cultural uniqueness. It would have served this book extremely well had French also allowed for a discussion of how differently did other great powers behave in history when they too possessed similar grand self-images and exceptionalist worldviews.

Finally, even though French's deductions are in close consonance with Realist predictions of China's behaviour, the premise of the book that rests on a causative link between historical Chinese tradition and modern Chinese behaviour gives the impression that ideas and identities have and will play a more potent role in 'constructing' Chinese power. In the closing argument, French too, endorses the potential value of what can be correctly characterized as Constructivist means for "mellowing" China's advance. Since the 2000s, many Chinese officials and scholars have engaged in debates over how China will behave differently from other great powers as it rises. The

conceptual ambiguities inherent in terms such as “Harmonious World” and “Tianxia” are not lost on their Chinese proponents and public intellectuals. While China’s foreign policy seems to mirror the US and other great powers in the 19th and 20th centuries, its domestic compulsions of political legitimacy, social order, and economic prosperity are important sources of parallel and competing world views. For instance, the Belt and Road Initiative is viewed within China as a benign and magnanimous offering of peace and economic dividends to the world but the government is also being calculative in its strategic considerations, drawing accusations of promoting clientelism and neo-colonial exploitation of its weaker foreign partners.

The key element to note here is China’s self-recognition as a legitimate member of the existing international order within which it should be able to shape rules and norms in its favour while simultaneously retaining assurance and insurance mechanisms through economic diplomacy and military means. As Alastair Ian Johnston has argued in *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000*, China by now is well-accustomed to institutional parity with the other great powers (as in the United Nations Security Council) and an informal hierarchy vis-a-vis many of its neighbours and other weaker states. This indicates that Tianxia has been used far more as a fount of attractive and transformative ideas for Beijing to manoeuvre through existing international norms, and shape outsiders’ perceptions than to delude itself with simplistic pretensions of imperium. The costs of revanchism can be extremely destructive and ignoring them would belie the criticality of China’s unimpeded growth for its leaders.

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