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AUGUST 1999

NOTES & COMMENT

China: A World Power Again

*What is usual for China is unusual for the West -- at
least in recent memory*

by [Robert D. Kaplan](#)

WHERE China ends, mountains, deserts, and nomadism begin. China's historical borders extend to the edge of arable land in the eastern half of Asia: the Himalayas to the southwest, the Gobi wastes to the north, and the Central Asian khanates (which is what these new post-Soviet states really are) to the west. Its sheer size has meant that China's dynastic transitions have been vulnerable to rebellions, warlordism, and a weak central government. The Ming and Qing Dynasties both collapsed because population growth led to worsening poverty among peasants and more prosperity among merchants and landowners: the peasants revolted against their poverty, and the wealthier stratum revolted against imperial control and taxation.

The same vulnerability persists today. Jack A. Goldstone, in a paper for the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at the University of Toronto, writes,

The combination of forces revealed in the Tiananmen Square Uprising of [June 4,] 1989 -- a coalition of merchants, entrepreneurs, urban workers, students and intellectuals, with some support from within the regime, in revolt against a government that survived only because of continued loyalty of key military



Unbound.

and bureaucratic leaders -- is quite similar to that of past patterns of Chinese revolt.

From the archives:

"Tibet Through Chinese Eyes," by Peter Hessler (February, 1999)

The truth about Tibet is not simple. Chinese repression is real -- but even if repression did not exist, Tibet's culture would be threatened by economic forces that neither the Tibetans nor the Chinese can fully control.

"Our Real China Problem," by Mark Hertsgaard (November, 1997)

The price of China's surging economy is a vast degradation of the environment, with planetary implications. Although the Chinese government knows the environment needs protection, writes the author, who spent six weeks inside China investigating the growing environmental crisis, it fears that doing the right thing could be political suicide.

"China's Gilded Age," by Xiao-huang Yin (April, 1994)

A journey through a country bursting with new wealth but besotted by corruption and threatened by a split between its prosperous cities and its stagnant rural areas.

"China's Andrei Sakharov," by Orville Schell (May,

The lessons that China's leaders learned from Tiananmen Square were from their own history. They knew that, as in the past, many of the demonstrators were more concerned about economic conditions than about freedom per se. They also knew that anarchy in former times, from the Ming rebellions to Mao Zedong's Great Cultural Revolution, cost millions of lives. Western journalists and intellectuals who have been raised in secure, upper-middle-class environments may call for China to welcome a bit of instability for the sake of change, but for China's leaders chaos and instability have never been abstractions. Deng Xiaoping, China's ruler in 1989, lived with the memory of his son's having been forced to jump from an upper-story window by a crowd during the Cultural Revolution.

To satisfy the population while preventing chaos, after Tiananmen the Communist Party opened up both the economy and the society -- the former much more than the latter. In the past decade probably more people in China have seen their material lives dramatically improve than ever before in recorded history, even as democracy has led to social collapse and mafia rule in Russia. The Chinese have also experienced a dramatic increase in personal freedom. Two China experts, David M. Lampton, of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and Burton Levin, a former ambassador to Burma, have observed that the Communist Party has gone from controlling every facet of daily life in China to controlling the media and the political opposition. Chinese can travel, buy any books and videos they want, open bank accounts, live together if they are gay or unmarried, and so on.

It has been a long time since the Chinese people have experienced such a degree of security and freedom. Early in this century, following the 1911 collapse of the Qing Dynasty, China was roiled by mob violence; the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek was only the first among equals in a nation ruled by warlords. Then came the Japanese devastation of China in the Second World War, with some 10 million Chinese casualties. In 1949 Mao Zedong's Communists came to power, unleashing decades of mass murder and government-inflicted famine. Now the most liberalizing regime in Chinese history is the one most attacked by the U.S. media, politicians, and intellectuals -- the same groups that in many cases tolerated both Mao's and Chiang Kai-shek's abuses.

Westerners defend their intolerance of China's regime by claiming that new standards of behavior now obtain

1988)

The speeches of the astrophysicist Fang Lizhi have galvanized students and given political discourse in China a new depth of field, and although he has been expelled from the Chinese Communist Party his influence is undiminished

From *Atlantic Unbound*:

Flashback:
"Property Pirates"
(June, 1996)

As the U.S. government reproves China for its disrespect of intellectual-property rights, we may do well to remember that our own past record in that area has been less than impeccable

Flashback: "One China?" (March, 1996)

U.S.-Chinese relations have been characterized at times by collaboration and mutual goodwill and at other times by betrayal and hostility. Contributions to *The Atlantic* through the years have documented this evolving relationship.

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worldwide, owing to the West's victory in the Cold War and heightened concern about human rights. Even by those standards China's leaders might be singled out for qualified praise: they effectively dismantled communism in the 1980s, years before the Berlin Wall collapsed. The Tiananmen uprising was to no small degree a reaction to the economic dislocations caused by China's early post-communism. At present the so-called Communist Party in China has less control of its nation's economy than the governments of France and Italy have of theirs. Russia and some of the prospective members of NATO from the former Warsaw Pact have yet to undergo the kind of entrepreneurial revolution China has already accomplished. Indeed, if the country is not liberalizing fast enough, that's news to Motorola, which assumes that China will be the world's biggest market for cell phones in the early twenty-first century.

Whereas the media often reduce China to a government that oppresses dissidents, the real story is almost the reverse: in fostering economic success since 1989, China's rulers have unleashed social forces that significantly weaken their control. As in the late Ming and late Qing Dynasties, there has been tremendous population growth. The one-child policy collapsed more than a decade ago, and China's population may now be close to 1.5 billion. Population pressure on arable land has led to scarcity and to farmers' revolts against corrupt officials. As the amount of arable land shrinks, the regime cannot prevent many millions of citizens from migrating to urban areas. Yet, as Goldstone points out, urban growth will only expand the numbers and the leverage of the students and business elites who are likely to demand further democratization. Thus, like previous Chinese dynasties, this one will be increasingly beset by both poor farmers and wealthy merchants. The near-double-digit annual growth in China's gross domestic product has generated a new subproletariat of low-paid factory and construction laborers -- a historically volatile class, full of frustrated ambition and yearning. The more than 100 million unemployed workers could still bring chaos on a significant scale. Drug smuggling, gambling, prostitution, pickpocketing, and other criminal activities flourish. The issue is not how much control the Beijing regime has but how little.

Given that China is chronically short of water and has one of the highest air-pollution indexes in the world, and also that two thirds of the population lives in flood zones, Party rulers have little margin for error. For all China's problems the West has the same easy answer it had during the violence of the warlord-dominated 1920s: democracy. But democracy in a country with roughly five times the population of the United States, a tiny middle class, and

grave ethnic disputes could shred the relative social peace that the Party has for the most part maintained during a mammoth economic transition.

* * *

Western intellectuals long fixated on Europe see Chinese authoritarianism through the distorting lenses of German Nazism and Russian communism. They forget that all political systems take their attributes from the cultures to which they are applied. Russian communism, for instance, was determined less by Karl Marx than by the effect of the absolutist Eastern Orthodox Church on turn-of-the-century Russian intellectuals and political radicals. Chinese communism, at least since Mao's death, in 1976, has been influenced by Confucian pragmatism. The comparisons some right-wing commentators make between the rise of Hitler's Germany and the re-emergence of China are invidious. From the moment Hitler achieved power, he steadily narrowed the scope of individual freedom; China's rulers have expanded it.

After a 200-year hiatus -- since the Qing Dynasty began to weaken, in the early nineteenth century -- China is returning to the world stage as a great power. That may be usual for China, but it is unusual for the West, given that the last period of Chinese greatness occurred when countries were far more isolated than they are today. As the recent revelations of Chinese nuclear spying in the United States demonstrate, ascendant powers tend to be particularly aggressive and crude. Moreover, they will use any opportunity to undermine their adversaries. NATO's accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade may have briefly provided Beijing's rulers with extra leverage to use against us in human-rights and trade negotiations -- but that leverage disappeared when the full extent of Chinese nuclear spying was revealed. The United States-China relationship, so prone to cultural and historical misinterpretation, could be among the most unstable great-power relationships in history.

The political and demographic direction Chinese civilization takes will significantly affect world politics in the twenty-first century. Continued central rule from Beijing over such a vast and increasingly populous nation may require more tyranny, not less. But because more tyranny would ignite further strife, China may well separate into economic fiefdoms, organized around great urban regions such as Shanghai, in the north, and Kunming, in southern China's Yunnan Province, whose economic power is extending into Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. "The future of China may resemble that of Classical Greece, with its rival cities, blood feuds, and a

contest of militarism with commerce," Ralph Peters, a former Army officer and national-security expert, writes in *Fighting for the Future* (1999).

Chinese influence is seeping into more and more of Asia. However justified our positions may be, dealing with China will require cool realpolitik and scholarly know-how, not self-righteous hysteria.

Robert D. Kaplan is a correspondent for *The Atlantic* and the author of six books, including *Balkan Ghosts* (1993), *The Arabists* (1993), *The Ends of the Earth* (1996), and *An Empire Wilderness* (1998).

Illustration by Istvan Orosz.

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