

Everything Under the Heavens

How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power

BY HOWARD W. FRENCH

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Reviewed by Robert W. Foster



For the past several years, I have traveled in China at the end of September as the country ramps up for National Day on October 1. In the cities, one cannot avoid Xi Jinping's China Dream campaign, with various attractive posters urging "Chinese spirit, Chinese culture, Chinese forms, Chinese expression." On an internal flight, I watched Jackie Chan's over-the-top "Kung-fu Yoga," in which he plays a Chinese archaeologist working with a beautiful South Asian colleague to find missing Silk Road treasures. At one point, Chan's character turns to his counterpart

and notes that their cooperation will help promote the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative (more on this below). And, indeed, in Xi'an, with its park and statuary commemorating the Silk Road, banners proclaimed the imminent OBOR meeting. Somewhat more darkly, television programming was replete with anti-Japanese war dramas. All these things point to a concerted effort to restore Chinese pride at home and abroad. This nationalist trend is at the heart of Howard W. French's *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power*.

French's book is quite readable. It is aimed at a general audience and succeeds in making complicated issues clearer. It is suitable for high school world history teachers or undergraduate classes. The central issue is how China's rise is challenging the international power structure, particularly the position of the United States. Unlike many other works on contemporary China, French explains Chinese foreign policy through the lens of the imperial tribute system. His catchphrase for the system is *tian xia*, which he translates as "everything under the heavens." French writes:

Whatever the needs of the moment, the ideological foundations of China's move to take over its near seas were bound up in the concept of tian xia, namely that it was China's manifest destiny to once again reign preponderant over a wide sphere of Asia—the old "known world"—much as it supposedly had in a half-idealized, half-mythologized past. Only by doing so could the country realize its dreams; only in this way could its dignity be restored. This kind of thinking was shared not just by Deng and Mao, but by every modern Chinese national leader since Sun Yat-sen . . . (248)

French applies this historical understanding to China's current attempts to expand into both the East China and South China seas, which has led to conflict with its neighbors. One of the strengths of French's work is that it examines the neighboring relations through the lenses of both Chinese and non-Chinese history. For example, much effort is spent on the fraught relations with Japan. French provides a balanced overview of the territorial and ideological disputes from the 1500s to the present. The

equally tense relationship with Việt Nam is given similar treatment. French argues that what seems like a new, aggressive shift in Chinese foreign policy is in keeping with the historical sense of hierarchy based upon the Chinese tribute system. In 2010, this attitude was summed up by Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's response to a Singaporean official who questioned China's grab for the South China Sea: "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact" (126). Acquiescing to the big neighbor was the foundation of the historical Pax Sinica in East Asia. The choice for "small countries" historically was "accept [China's] superiority and we will confer upon you political legitimacy, develop a trade partnership, and provide a range of what are known in the language of modern international affairs as public goods" (5).

While China was unable to make good on this vision for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its economic growth over the past thirty years has provided leverage with its neighbors. Like any power, promises of aid and trade are often linked to political concessions from the recipient. French points to a moment in 2014 when the Philippines challenged Chinese territorial claims in international court. A Chinese official remarked to Filipino reporters that Malaysia had US \$100 billion in annual trade with China, despite being much smaller than the Philippines, which only had US \$20 billion in annual trade with China (83). His point was none too subtle.

The clearest and most ambitious attempt to shift economic power away from the United States is the OBOR initiative. According to one source, the project "would encompass 4.4 billion people, sixty-four countries, and a combined economic output of \$21 trillion—roughly twice the annual gross domestic product of China, or 29 percent of global GDP" (258). Through developing overland infrastructure in Central Asia, China will connect with Europe; through developing maritime infrastructure, China will connect with Asian neighbors and Africa. China would become the hub of this international system, leaving the United States and its floundering Trans-Pacific Partnership on the outside. OBOR would be the carrot to the stick of its expanding navy. The vision of OBOR is of a benevolent China that treats all impartially within the system. The vision fits with Liu Ming-fu's 2010 book *The China Dream*, which argues that China has never been expansionist. French quotes Liu: "The Chinese empire, at its peak, could have looked at the world in disdain, because there was no other nation strong enough to challenge it, and if China had had the desire to expand, no other nation could have resisted . . . As we can see, China is a nation that does not invade smaller or weaker nations and does not threaten neighboring countries" (243). And yet, conquest and expansion is a constant theme in Chinese history—Việt Nam being a classic case.

The introduction and six chapters of French's book make a clear case for understanding the PRC's current irredentism as historically grounded. Interestingly, the conclusion posits that the current urgency for territorial expansion is the party leadership's recognition that China's window of opportunity may close soon. French argues that China's power will soon wane, for a number of mainly domestic reasons, so leaders hope to get what they can while they can (270, 282). While the majority of the book seems a wake-up call to Chinese expansion, the conclusion attempts to reassure. French believes that China's actions will, on the contrary, promote America's position in the region, the main reason being that the tribute system of *tian xia* is a power hierarchy without higher ideals. French believes that American liberal values still have cache internationally (284), though he does argue that the US will have to deal with China's rise skillfully (282).

This is a thoughtful and thought-provoking book. The only caveat is that China's internal problems, which French argues motivate China's current assertiveness, are not dealt with in detail; however, the book cannot do everything. Yet it does what it does—linking past foreign relations with

those of the present—well. In a classroom, I would use it with a source that examines China's domestic dynamics. Susan L. Shirk's *China: Fragile Superpower* and James Kynge's *China Shakes the World* both predate Xi's rise, but introduce domestic concerns.¹ Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom's *China in the 21st Century* is more current, but I find it harder to use since it is written as brief responses to related questions and issues, rather than having a strong central thesis.² For a Chinese perspective, one might look to the English-language works of Wang Jisi, dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University.³ ■

NOTES

1. Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). James Kynge, *China Shakes the World: A Titan's Rise and Troubled Future—and the Challenge for America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).
2. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
3. Jisi Wang, "China's Search for Stability with America," *Foreign Affairs*, September 2005, 39–48. Joseph S. Nye Jr. and Wang Jisi, "Hard Decisions on Soft Power," *Harvard International Review* 31, no. 2 (2009): 18–22.

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Editor's Note: Two reviews of the following title were intentionally solicited in order to provide readers with contrasting perspectives on a potentially influential book.

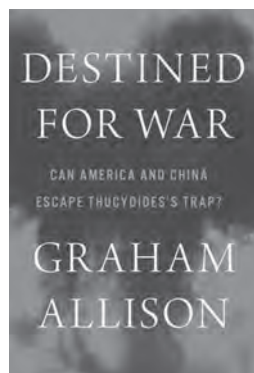
Destined for War

Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?

By GRAHAM ALLISON

BOSTON: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT, 2017

384 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0544935273, HARDCOVER



Reviewed by John F. Copper

Most readers will likely find Graham Allison's newest book, *Destined for War*, interesting and fresh. Many will agree with this reviewer that it is a work that may entitle Allison to join the ranks of Francis Fukuyama (*The End of History*) and Samuel Huntington (*The Clash of Civilizations*), who offer powerful templates, if not plausible theories, to help explain current international politics.

This book is therefore highly recommended to students of US–China relations, strategic studies, international politics, modern history, and more.

Allison provides an easily understandable formula to unwrap the foremost strategic issue that faces the world right now: the likelihood of a war between the United States and China, and the implications of such an event.

How so? He draws on a classic in international relations as the springboard of his analysis: Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. The ancient Greek thinker deemed it likely, if not inevitable, that due to the circumstances of a status quo power (Sparta) and a rising power (Athens) in contention, there would be a war or wars between the two. Sparta regarded Athens a threat, while Athens perceived Sparta as wanting to block its rise and keep it down; that was the basis for their conflict.

Bolstering the argument, the Belfer Center at Harvard University, where Allison serves on the faculty, carefully studied subsequent situations wherein the Thucydides “trap” applied to the relations of major world powers and reported that in twelve of sixteen such cases, war was the result. This Allison offers as proof positive the theory works.

There is more. China is not only a rising power, it is also a resentful one, given its humiliation by the West for almost 150 years after the Opium Wars in the mid-1800s. Chinese regularly recalling the sting of imperialism and China's intense desire to restore its status as a great power, which China held throughout most of its history, contribute powerfully to its urge for change.

Then, there is the reality that China is an extremely fast rising power, while the US exhibits many signs of being a declining power, not just a status quo power. Add to the fact that China is demonstrating its dominance in certain elements of power that are especially predictive of it becoming the global power. Its arguable supremacy in artificial intelligence and quantum computers, which many thinkers see as the critical assets to dominate the coming new world order, has special salience.

Last but not least, as Richard Haass in his recent book, *A World in Disarray*, observes, the international system is in a state of breakdown. This means that the contest between the world's status quo power and its rising challenger is more acute and pressing than it would be otherwise.

But there is a major flaw in Allison's analysis: His theory predicted the Cold War would turn into a hot war. Also, the bipolar system was a zero-sum system and was asymmetric or out of balance throughout its history; that should have made war even more likely. However, mutually assured destruction (MAD) served as a damper on the desire to win harbored by the United States and the Soviet Union. Another factor was they colluded to keep their superpower prerogatives, and that also kept the system stable.

Currently, the leaders of the US and China seem to realize the critical importance of their relationship as they are recreating the bipolar system. MAD is still around. President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping have established working, if not cordial, understandings and may be willing to collude. The term Chinamerica, coined by historian Niall Ferguson, describes this vividly.

Alas, both leaders also seem very cognizant of the reality that the global financial system, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, environmental issues, and more cannot be managed satisfactorily without US–China cooperation. Thus, their relationship is “too big to fail” for everyone.

There are other variables. Fortuitously, the wannabe powers, Europe and Japan, have pretty much resigned themselves to second-class status (though Russia has perhaps not), and India is rising but is too distant in economic and military power to be a contender. Thus, a multipolar system is not in the cards. In addition, Trump and Xi harbor no illusions that international institutions are not capable of serving as the driver of a universal system.

That the US–China-based bipolarity is asymmetric, with China dominating in economic power and the US dominating in military power, seems to be a condition that both their leaders accept. Trump has “signed on” to China's One Belt, One Road initiative to connect the world and run global commerce, quite in contrast to President Barack Obama, who opposed US