

When China Rules the World

(Martin Jacques, When China Rules the World, Allen Lane, 2009)

This is a formidable book which is also provocative. At its Kuala Lumpur launch, the author Martin Jacques asked that its title not be read literally, but its subtitle “The Rise of The Middle Kingdom and The End of The Western World” will not sit easy even among those who might not mourn the passing of that Western World.

The narrative is relentless, with remorseless, somewhat scary, conclusions. The central thesis is clear-headed: China will come to be the dominant power in the world and will bring to it its own hegemonic system based on its long history, civilization and culture which have special embedded characteristics different from those in the global system we know today. It will not be the same world simply with China at the top. It will be a world re-formed in China’s image where these special characteristics will determine the values, standards and practices of the international system.

These special characteristics are painstakingly related in a rendition which is comprehensive and compelling. The study establishes many concepts from Chinese civilization in a cogent manner that apply in a continuous fashion in Chinese history, when China was the Middle Kingdom, right to the present time. China’s expanse - in time, space and historical existence - makes it deeply engaged with its own past. China may be a Communist state but it operates on Confucian principles. There is a highly specific Chinese polity which delivers or performs its responsibility but is not accountable in the Western sense. There is no popular sovereignty, just state sovereignty. All this has stood the test of time. The 200 years of the Western-dominant system are but a drop in the ocean against this expanse which has long established those deeply rooted characteristics that Jacques identifies. China is a civilization state with a sense of its long history and race, and of its sheer size whose unity, though sometimes challenged, has not been broken. And when China, once again, becomes the pre-eminent power in the world, that unity and the country’s stability will not only be preserved but also protected through the tributary state system that has underlined China’s dominance in the past.

As to how and when China will become that pre-eminent power, Jacques clearly associates himself with the belief that military and political power rest on economic strength. He appropriately relates China’s outstanding success in the past three decades of economic growth which has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty and modernized large swathes of the economy. Indeed Jacques does not only look at those three decades but also describes how China’s (and Asia’s) potential had been limited by colonial predators (Chapter 4 “China’s Ignominy” captures this systemic colonial transgression); actually, at the end of the 18th century, Europe was in the same position as China, but could forge ahead economically and in other ways as it did not have to deal with outside powers. Therefore there was nothing magical or special about European and Western economic development, or China’s now, as it comes to take its due place in the world economy after having been prevented from taking the same route of development in the past by the West. However, China’s route will end at a place and in a world quite unlike what we see today. It would be a world which China will dominate with profound and indelible Chinese characteristics. According to Jacques there is not just one modernity in the world; he introduces the concept of “contested modernity” – the contest, in all its expressions, against the old form and order being led by a resurgent China. Jacques attacks Western hubris and assumption that all its representations in all aspects of human activity are the best and the modern norm. They are not.

The reaction to the book has, understandably, been mixed. There are those few who have cheered it on and, no doubt, some who must have found it pleasurable to read. But, there are also many in the Western World who find its thesis rather contentious, who cannot or do not want to imagine what Jacques believes will happen.

Certainly, the book would have benefited from being more rounded, both in discussing concepts and categories and in terms of a more rigorous analysis of the likely future direction of the global economy, including China’s, as well as of the international political system in the new world he so boldly describes. While Jacques has been detailed in espousing Chinese characteristics, he has not considered contending

concepts, which may be considered universal, even with China included. Also, he has not been sufficiently rigorous in considering the likely future direction of the world and Chinese economy, or given enough emphasis to the dynamics of the international system and players who are not going to simply fade away, even if he does allocate a specific chapter on “China’s Own Backyard.”.

Amartya Sen, in his *Identity and Violence, The Illusion of Destiny* (London, Penguin Books, 2006), raises the kinds of universal issues on concepts and categories which Jacques did not, or only did in relation to China. What Jacques offers plentifully about identity in China comes only in its solitary Chinese form whereas Sen discusses it against the reality of many affiliations in a shared humanity. Had Jacques spread his canvass it would have been interesting to read if all the shock and awe about Chinese singularity and exceptionalism could only mean conflict against the rest of the world “through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity,” which Sen feels is the cause of many barbarities. In a different context, Sen had described Samuel P Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996) as imposing a “restriction of the intellectual horizon.” Jacques’ book would certainly have benefited from a widening of that horizon.

In respect of the economy, the current global crisis does raise some issues on its future direction. Uncertainty has never been an economic good and, while China has done remarkably well even in present circumstances and proved pundits wrong by the rigor of its economic stimulation, there still remains the question of how much and how long the Chinese economy will continue to grow. The global economy is in *reset* and this bears serious discussion in the context of China’s economic development under its previous incarnation. The timing of all these events may not have been perfect for Jacques in this regard, but from the numerous books that have been published since the full flood of the global crisis in September 2008, at least one on the systemic issues of world economic order might have been usefully weaved into Jacques’ narrative on China’s rise as an economic power – Andrew Gamble’s *The Spectre at the Feast, Capitalist Crisis and the Politics of Recession* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Jacques believes China will come up trumps from the crisis, but this is far from certain even if, in relative terms, the Chinese economy will grow faster than the American. While this may seem to make the point that China will be forging ahead, it does not allow for situations where some of the bases in the operation of the world economy may change. It is generally accepted the end of an economic cycle, such as has been brought about by the financial crisis of 2008 and recession of 2009, does not return to where it was at the beginning.

There is the looming threat of protectionism. The era of globalization may be over when it does not benefit the American interest. About 18 per cent of Chinese exports go to America, 22 per cent to Europe. This is not easily replaced both in quantum and direction, or in terms of total output if it were translated to domestic demand.

GDP growth alone will have a new number, over however many years it is difficult to say. China’s model of growth, which Jacques describes as one “with a hyperactive state”, that will power it along has come for close examination with so many imbalances clearly unsustainable. The Anglo-American growth model that has held sway since the 1970s and perfected in the 1980s and 90s may well go, but what will take its place is not certain to generate growth for Chinese and East Asian exports and the markets for their savings.

As everybody realizes, things will have to change. Growth models, currency rate determination and regulation. The Siamese twin of export markets and dollar reserves has still to be operated on. It still remains to be seen how successfully all this change will take place. A regional predisposition may likely ensue – which could give further credence to Jacques’ expectation of a Chinese tributary system – but rates of growth may not be what the Chinese economy has become accustomed to, with impact on employment the creation of which has perhaps been the single most important success story of China’s political economy.

The new trajectory of China’s economic growth would have at least an impact on Jacques’ assumed timing of China’s rise which, in the Goldman Sachs’ forecast that he goes by, would be around 2050, the year the Chinese economy is extrapolated to become number one in the world. Of course, if the whole world grows

at a slower pace, but China still at a relatively higher one, the Chinese economy could still overtake the American by that time. However, the per capita income growth will be at a much lower level than in the pre-crisis economic circumstances, with probable implications on the total weight of Chinese economic power and its political-military expression. The issue of the sustainability of economic growth in China in general also cannot be assumed to be peculiarly unaffected by factor endowments, constraints and social stresses. As the Americans say, stuff happens. To be more specific, and to use an example Jacques himself offers, if China were to enjoy the same level of per capita ownership as the US does today, it will have 1.1 billion cars compared with the present worldwide total of 800 million; and it would use 99 million barrels of oil a day compared with a worldwide total production of 84 million barrels in 2006 (the figure Jacques uses). There is no accounting for human ingenuity in the world of course, but the stresses and environmental consequences of growth are becoming all too evident around the world and in China.

What might happen elsewhere is equally important. How is this global crisis going to pan out, particularly in America? It would be too easy to assume America is in terminal decline, and Jacques himself recognizes American dynamism. After a short 50 years of a total 200 years of European dominance, are the Americans ready to go down, and how fast? America seems now to be ready to adapt to a multilateral world, but still under its leadership. What will be the texture and architecture of the international political system? It cannot be singularly Chinese. How will America and China sort out the future between them? These are issues equally relevant to China's rise – and how fast.

This is a profound book offering deep knowledge and understanding of China not before available in a comprehensive fashion, certainly by a Western writer. But there has been too much of China, and not enough of the rest of the world to provide a balance before it can be more persuasively declared: *When China Rules the World*.

Munir Majid