Duihua Academic Exchange

The China Fantasy, Fantasy

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The dust jacket on James Mann's polemic, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression*,[1] visually conveys its central points. The main title telegraphs Mann's belief that an interlocking directorate of leaders, academics, and businesspersons have foisted the "fantasy" of a progressing China on a gullible American people and Congress. In the subtitle it conveys the idea that the central story of today's China is "repression." And the cover illustration of a gagged Chinese, a blindfolded American, and a smiling Chinese presumed to be a Beijing leader, is evocative of a dark version of the three monkeys who see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil about developments in China. The text of this slim volume adds little to the dust jacket. You will look in vain for systematic evidence beyond anecdotes, unsupported assertions, and speculation about individuals and groups.

This is a curious book, vaguely reminiscent of the dynamic in the early 1950s in the United States, where the hopes for Chinese democracy were shattered by Mao Zedong's victory in 1949. Those persons in and out of government (such as Owen Lattimore and John Service) who had questioned those admirable, but unrealistic, hopes by observing Mao's successes and Chiang Kai-shek's failures from the early 1940s on subsequently were blamed for having contributed to the outcome. There is a tendency to blame "China experts" for outcomes as they seek to understand the Chinese condition.

Of all the curious aspects of this tract is the inflated position and intellectual unity Mann ascribes to "China experts" in the US policy process. While over the course of the last almost 40 years outside academic experts (such as Richard Solomon, Michel Oksenberg, Kenneth Lieberthal and Susan Shirk) have been more or less involved at the senior levels of Washington's China policy process, this book came out at the end of a period notable for weak outside China expert input. As the George W. Bush Administration came into office a pronounced characteristic of personnel choices was the degree to which expertise on Japan was promoted and the so-called China expert community frozen out. To the degree that there was outside China expertise, it was more oriented toward Taiwan than the Mainland. And more to the point, with immodest senior officials like Vice President Dick Cheney, then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, and then Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, it is pretty clear they were listening to the advice they wanted to hear, if they were listening

1 James Mann, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression* (New York: Viking [The Penguin Group], 2007).

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at all. In the permanent government bureaucracy, of course, there have been skilled experts on China all along.

Mann doesn't like what he perceives has happened in China during the reform era. Nor does he like the rather consistent American policy response. He quite simply does not like the fact that while economic and social reform have moved ahead with rapidity in the PRC, change toward electoral and multi-party governance (a system of institutionalized and open political contestation) has been slow to non-existent and that the Beijing elite has made it abundantly clear with the violence of 1989, putting down the Falun Gong, crushing the infant China Democratic Party, and ongoing media control that it will use harsh means to preserve Party authority. His fear is that China may prove to be a country that has market capitalism and rising prosperity without political democratization for a long time. He finds fault with those trying to understand and explain all of this and offer policy advice. He labels those who believe that economic modernization, globalization, social pluralization, and a growing middle class eventually should contribute to more humane (arguably democratic) governance purveyors of the "soothing scenario." One purpose of this scenario allegedly is to preserve scholars' own access to China by currying favour with Beijing. Another purpose, in Mann's view, is to preserve and enhance corporate profits by selling a view that will get the American people and Congress to overlook current abuses in the hope that engagement now will produce better governance in the future. He variously calls the "soothing scenario" a "hoax," "illusion," and "fraud."

The central, flawed proposition of the book is found on pp. 25–26: "If China's political system stays a permanently repressive one-party state, that will mean that US policy toward China since 1989 has been sold to the American people on the basis of a fraud – that is, on the false premise that trade and 'engagement' with China would change China's political system." In Mann's world of black and white, if reality doesn't conform to theories, expectations, or hopes then someone purposefully misled you – probably for self-interested gain. He calls in such articulate terms for democracy in China and yet has little respect for democracy's long-standing outcome at home by asserting that the people who compose the American polity can fall, year after year, for the lie that he alleges rests at the heart of US policy toward the PRC. He either must assume the citizenry is witless or that the American political process is hopelessly dysfunctional. If the latter is the case, his concerns should rather more be with the American political system than that in China.

"Engagement" with China did not start as a policy in 1989, it began in 1971/1972, and it has not been promoted exclusively, or even principally, as a device to make China democratic, but rather to pursue US interests. At any given moment reasonable people can differ over what constitute American interests and the definition of those interests has shifted over time. Indeed, Mann goes to some length to explain why he believes a democratic China is a key American interest. It is particularly notable, therefore, that US presidents as different from

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one another as Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush, not to mention Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford, have all ended up pursuing a broadly consistent China policy, even though they came to office with quite divergent inclinations and domestic contexts. Given the responsibilities of being in office, they each concluded that in a world of limited US capabilities, America cannot alone solve all the globe's problems and it needs cooperation from the 20 per cent of mankind that lives in China. There are economic, security and intellectual gains to be made from co-operation; these require no apology.

Mann is entitled to place relatively rapid democratization in China as his paramount candidate for the US national interest, but one can observe that the harsh realities of international affairs and the arguable necessities of American security and economic prosperity have led seven consecutive very different presidents to disagree with him and, instead, pursue a road premised on the hope (with some evidence, like the recent Beijing policy decision to reduce the scope of the death penalty) that engagement and the logic of change in China itself gradually will produce more humane governance domestically and more co-operative behaviour internationally. At the same time, these presidents have hedged our national bet in case these positive developments fail to materialize – a policy of "hedged integration." These presidents have not arrived at this continuous policy position because Rasputin-like China experts, in league with revolving door businessmen and officials, have whispered in their ears.

What Mann calls the "soothing scenario" reflects what much of development theory has suggested since the 1960s, theory that has been reinforced by events thereafter (e.g., Haiti, Russia, Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan). That is, it takes time to build institutions, particularly genuinely participatory political institutions; there is the need to pass through a sequence of stages from building national identity, to constructing appropriate and capable state institutions, to assuring participation in those institutions, to distributing benefits more equitably; institutions must be embedded in social values and behaviours that are supportive of them; there are different paths to more pluralistic, participatory, and humane governance (e.g., Singapore, Indonesia and Taiwan); and societal demands that exceed the capacity of institutions to handle them often result in disorder and massive violations of basic human rights. There is not a scintilla of recognition in this book that the scale of China, its dramatic internal income and other disparities, and the diversity of cultural levels throughout the country have anything whatsoever to do with the PRC's political development.

So, for example, the Soviet Union falls, Russia experiences a decade of disorder and declining life expectancy following its "democratization," and then a Vladimir Putin comes along and pushes things in more authoritarian directions. Or, take the case of Iraq, where it proved easier to decapitate Saddam Hussein's ruthless regime than to subsequently develop new, stable, just and participatory governing institutions. Or take the West Bank and Gaza – it is

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one thing to hold elections, but what do you do when Hamas is elected? In the vein of positive examples, the gradualist developments in South Korea and Taiwan that Mann gives the back of his hand, though far smaller societies in very different circumstances, offer support for the proposition that middle classes that gain economic security and material assets eventually demand political participation and governance constrained by law. This is not a guarantee and, as Mann appropriately notes (p. 53), the middle class in China may fear a democracy that equalizes a city dweller's vote with a peasant's.

While life and development theory offer no guarantees, most observers of the PRC would agree with the following observations that Mann largely fails to acknowledge: Today's China is much more cooperative on issues important to the United States than in 1989, not to mention thirty years ago; China is less of a proliferation danger than in the past; China's people have much more freedom to realize their individual potential than they had in 1989; the Chinese system has moved from totalitarian, one man rule under Mao Zedong in which no dimension of life was beyond the ambitions of government control, to an authoritarian system in which a small, but thickening elite clings to political monopoly while possessing greatly diminished ambitions for control over society and the individual. A major challenge is for more political participation, and China's leaders know it. What they will do about it remains to be seen, and what the Chinese people will do about it also remains to be seen. But, it simply is not sustainable to deny the progress that has been made because of frustration over remaining deficiencies, some severe.

A huge defect of this volume is that it offers NO policy alternatives. The closest Mann comes is: "Once America finally recognizes that China is *not* moving inevitably toward democracy, we can begin to decide what the right approach should be" (p. 111). After his hundred-page indictment of policy, he recommends a debate?

To the degree that there are implied policies (perhaps more sanctions, political rhetoric, or military pressure?), there is no consideration given to whether or not US capabilities are sufficient to implement them, other world powers would co-operate with Washington, or to whether or not the possible resulting chaos in China would be worse for US interests, and the human rights of Chinese, than the current, evolving situation.

Another curious aspect of the book is that, without virtually any documentation, Mann asserts that China experts have fostered the illusion of progressive and relatively rapid democratization in the PRC. With the exceptions of Bruce Gilley and Henry Rowen, I know of few or no such experts who have in their academic or popular writings made optimistic predictions about the likely pace of democratization. Indeed, the usual criticism of the China field is that it is too pessimistic about the prospects and/or that most analysts speak of a possible democratic future in the fog of a very distant and indefinite future.

Also with little apparent research and documentation, Mann makes factual errors; I will note two: on p. 80, Mann says, after the 1989 massacre, "the World

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Bank froze more than US$2 billion in interest-free loans.'' Not true. Disbursements for ongoing projects continued, with consideration of new loans suspended for nine months. On p. 84, he says, ''Congress enacted legislation opening the way for China to become a member of the World Trade Organization…'' Not true. China would have become a WTO member with or without that legislation, once the Clinton Administration agreed. The legislation of 2000 removed a major contradiction between US obligations as a WTO member (to extend members permanent normal trading status) and existing US legislation (Jackson-Vanik).

This book, in short, is more an expression of frustration than analysis. It is harmful, not because it calls into question the motives of a broad diversity of China scholars, government officials and business persons for whom the written record is an entirely adequate defence, but principally because it leads us to ask the wrong question. Mann asks, ''How can we change China?'' I would ask, ''How is China changing and does change in China, particularly its mounting intellectual and economic strength, require change in America?'' On p. 102, Mann disagrees. We will see who is right – and it won't take decades to do so.

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