A Conforming China

Enrico Fardella

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China, one of the most extraordinary examples of humankind's ability to create order out of chaos, capable of achieving both effectiveness and simplicity, and the apotheosis of continuity spanning millennia has always fascinated Western politicians and intellectuals. However, just as yin exists alongside yang, the awe and fascination for such a sound order exist alongside fear of the chaos that the lack of order could bring about and of the actions that such huge masses, if breaking away from order, could perpetrate.

This is perhaps the framework that the two books being reviewed have in common. Both are by sophisticated intellectuals, Central European émigrés who found fame and fortune in the US and who look at the world and at China from a particular perspective, one that mirrors Beijing's Sino-centric perspective. Both authors write from their 'centre', a centre in whose power and glory they have taken part, a centre to which their work, especially as far as relations with China are concerned, has contributed. By doing so, they have defused Maoist antagonism and favoured China's integration in a system built around the United States. This is probably the best explanation for the perfect unison of these two books: today, more than ever, the centre from which the two authors are writing is feeling fragile, at the very time at which it is called upon to stand up to another centre, the Chinese centre, the counterpart *par excellence* of any plan for Western centrality.

With their books, both authors return to a leading role and chart a course whereby the interaction between these two centres can regain harmony, thus creating a new world order. It seems that there is no alternative: either dialogue or confrontation. However, confrontation is not an option, it can only lead to chaos.

To persuade his readers, Kissinger looks at history, but he does so thinking of the future. He states that he is writing this book as ''an effort to explain the conceptual way the Chinese think about problems of peace and war and international order and its relationship to the more pragmatic, case by case American approach'' and that in order to do so a ''basic appreciation of its

Enrico Fardella is Bairen Jihua Research Fellow, Peking University and Fellow of Science and Technology Program, European Commission. Email: enricofardella@gmail.com

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[China's] traditional context'' (Kissinger, 3) is necessary. Perhaps this can help us understand why the book focuses on the decline of the Qing dynasty and on post-1949 China, dismissing all the events spanning from the Boxer Rebellion to the foundation of the People's Republic in just four pages.

However, this narrative choice seems to induce the author, when analysing contemporary China, to subscribe to the 'culturalist' view of the Chinese tradition – epitomised by Chinese intellectuals such as Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-Sen – which influenced the way in which China managed its foreign relations over the 2000 years of history before the 20th century.

Chinese 'culturalism' was rooted in a clear-cut distinction between 'us' (the Chinese) and the 'others' (the Barbarians) in which 'we' was based on a cultural criterion rather than on ethnic differences. In this regard, James Harrison writes: ''the traditional Chinese self-image has generally been defined as 'culturalism', based on the historical heritage and acceptance of shared values, not as nationalism, based on the modern concept of the nation-state''.[1] Chen Zhimin writes that the perception of China itself lay in the acceptance or refusal of Chinese cultural values and that this was the foundation of Chinese cultural universalism (*tianxiazhuyi*).[2] Therefore, Sinocentric universalism was the criterion by which China shaped its vision of the world order, a criterion based on cultural relations, not on relations between states or between nations.

Kissinger takes up this strictly cultural element of Chinese universalism – a universalism without proselytism, or to put it in Fairbank's words, an ''empire without imperialism''[3] – setting it against the missionary spirit inherent in 'American exceptionalism'. But this dichotomy is so fascinating that several authors, including Kissinger, tend to stretch it too far.

In any case, the encounter with the West challenged the pillar on which traditional culturalism was founded, namely the supremacy of Chinese culture. To intellectuals of the time, nationalism became instrumental as a surrogate for culturalism. Yet, the difference between the two is substantial: culturalism, with its purported cultural superiority, banned foreign ideas but, as Levenson writes, ''it may actually invite or not actively oppose foreign material force. Nationalism reverses these relations; it may admit foreign ideas, but it will blaze against foreign material incursions''.[4]

By leaving this transition out of his story, Kissinger risks neglecting its conceptual relevance. The encounter with the West has resulted, in the words of Pierre Loti, in ''the collapse of a world'' (*l'effondrement d'un monde*),[5] a world that knew no symmetrical relationships because it did not conceive of hierarchies that could assign them a place. China became aware of

[1]J. Harrison, *Modern Chinese Nationalism,* Hunter College of the City of New York: Research Institute on Modern Asia, 1969, 2.
[2]Chen Z., ''Nationalism, Internationalism and Chinese Foreign Policy'', *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 42 (2005), 35–53.
[3]J.K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968.
[4]J. Levenson, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China*, 2nd revised edition, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959, 110.
[5]P. Loti, *Les Dernier Jours de Pekin,* Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1902, 464.

this asymmetry at the very moment these asymmetrical relationships were created. From then on, China, a hegemonic power by geographical and cultural vocation, discovered its weakness. The shame that the humiliation elicited – and that inspires Chinese nationalism to this very day – drove China to emulate the West by appropriating its categories and, in doing so, to lose progressively a part of itself in order to coexist in an international system to which it was extraneous.

In the Maoist revolution, nationalism was an implicit part of the ideological component. By freeing the country of external interference and asymmetric relations, it restored its territorial unity and gave it a language, that of class struggle, which was instrumental to China's return to the centre of the international system. However, this language was instrumental to the goal of the time: when the ideological drift of Maoism threatened to undermine the very essence of the revolution, class struggle was replaced by another kind of 'development', namely economic development, as an instrument of the country's revolutionary mission. The revolutionary fervour was the same, but the object changed and this time it could be both consumed and produced. The closing of the Cultural Revolution and the opening to the United States under Mao were the logical premise that made it possible for Deng to launch the economic reform, thus effectively salvaging the 1949 revolution and the very legitimacy of the party. Thus, the revolution was actually saved with Washington's endorsement and support.

Kissinger shows how the Maoist rivalry of the 1960s and the isolation into which it cast the country – a country that now had nuclear weapons – began to be seen as a dangerous pathology of the system in the US and gave rise to the first integrationist plans to bring China back into the 'family of nations'.

The fear of disorder thus led the West to establish a new order. Kissinger, an undisputed protagonist of that phase, accurately describes those steps, but at times he is reluctant to draw the logical conclusions that derive from them. His journey, which took place in the aftermath of the army's intervention against the Red Guards in 1968, inaugurated a strategic alliance between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as the guarantor of stability and order in the heart of Asia, and the core of Western democratic capitalism, the United States of America.

The entente between the CCP and the Nixon administration allowed the US to oust the Soviet Union from Asia, thus accelerating its decline and crisis. It also inaugurated a progressive pacification of the continent, not only preventing an insane Soviet nuclear attack against Beijing – which Kissinger himself reveals was imminent – but also allowing the US to gradually disengage from Vietnam and Taiwan.

This anti-Soviet tactical agreement became strategic when economic development officially replaced class struggle as an instrument of the Chinese revolution: the relationship with the United States was thereby 'internalised' as a crucial factor in relaunching the country's economy and regaining its central position in Asia. This process had a profound impact on both Chinese society and politics: on the domestic front it promoted the process of economic and political liberalisation of society and favoured the consolidation of a new reformist leadership guided by Deng Xiaoping; on the international front, it elevated cooperation with the US to a higher level and opened the way for a new era of international relations dominated by globalisation and Sino-American

centrality. The tacit alliance with Washington cleared the horizon for Chinese reform by mitigating the obsession with the Soviet social-imperialist threat, and marked the beginning of China's 'return' to Asia under the banners of peace and development. But, the alliance between Vietnam and Russia rekindled China's traditional fear of encirclement and threatened the future of the reform, and thus the revolution itself. As a result, the Sino-Vietnamese war in February 1979 was needed to rid China of this obsession.

Up to this point Kissinger is quite exhaustive, but he omits one key element: the war against Hanoi also played an important role in the transition process within the party. In order to carry out his plans for modernisation at such a delicate moment in Chinese politics as was 1978, Deng had to create the largest possible support base within the CCP, and the Vietnamese issue was essential to achieving this. Deng had already been accused at least twice of revisionism by his adversaries, for being too strongly in favour of talks with Hanoi: by taking revenge for Vietnam's betrayal – its links with Moscow – Deng showed the party that he had not lost his warlike spirit. In order to reduce risks to a minimum and avoid repercussions on the modernisation of the country, however, Deng needed support from Washington.

Kissinger is not clear on this point and resorts to some rhetorical acrobatics to conceal the level of American involvement in the conflict. Nevertheless, the White House *de facto* legitimised Beijing's action by publicly linking the Chinese withdrawal from Vietnam to the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia. Washington even threatened Moscow not to get involved in the conflict and included military intervention among the possible reprisals. It was Carter's advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who went the furthest during hostilities. He met daily with the Chinese ambassador, Chai Zemin, supplying him with American intelligence reports and satellite images of the Red Army's movements on the northern border and probably also of the positioning of Vietnamese troops.[6] As Brzezinski himself says, the war marked the ''baptism of fire'' of the new Sino-American strategic entente.[7]

''The war changed the history of East Asia'', said Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. (Kissinger, 376). Beijing's punitive expedition against Hanoi marked the resumption of a long journey that would gradually bring China to recover its historic position in Asia. And this was made possible mainly thanks to the understanding between Washington and the Chinese Communist Party in its reformist version open to the market. Furthermore, thanks to this new entente with Beijing, the US could maintain good relations with both China and Japan, an unprecedented development in Cold War history and an enormous plus in the American global strategy. At the same time, the process of internalisation of the relationship with Washington resulting from Deng Xiaoping's 'reform and opening' seemed to realise the old American dream of bringing China back

[6]J. Mann, *About a Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton*, New York: Vintage Books, 2000, 100. On the images regarding the movements of Vietnamese troops, see N. Chanda, *Brother Enemy: the War after the War*, Chicago: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1986, 360 and 452, note 79.

[7]Z. Brzezinski, *Powers and Principle. Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981*, New York: Farrar, 1983, 414.

into the family of nations. The progressive opening of China to international trade therefore marked a twofold success for Washington, ideological and economic. The most populous and radical communist country opened its giant doors to American investments and, by so doing, unavoidably fostered the progressive Westernisation of its society.

Brzezinski was the main character in this historic transition, but Kissinger, while recognising the importance of this conflict, forgets to emphasize it. In Brzezinski's eyes, Deng's reform and opening up became a crucial element for the success of US strategy. This explains why Deng was the Carter administration's preferred candidate for the leadership of the CCP during the internal struggle of 1978–79. As Brzezinski wrote to Carter in April 1978: ''Deng Xiaoping appears to share with Western theorists of modernization the view that development requires specialization, hierarchy, and urbanization. After a 20-year search for a distinctive path to modernity, the Deng-administered regime appears to be joining the rest of the world.''[8]

At the same time, Deng, in order to receive US support, needed to help the administration sell the new cooperation with Beijing to the Congress and the American people. To do so, he had to appear as the symbol of a 'new China', a post-communist leader in a cowboy hat, a reformer with promising democratic inclinations, a pragmatist wishing to open up millions of Chinese homes to American products and ideas. As a result, and for the first time since the foundation of the PRC, the domestic levels of the two countries became decisive for the evolution of the mutual relationship: hence, China's domestic policy became an integral part of Washington's China policy; and vice versa, US domestic policy became an important part of Deng's strategy.

This dynamic has not changed over time. The relationship between China and the United States can remain stable only if the forces faithful to the Dengist tradition – in favour of reform and opening to the synergic relationship with Washington – continue to hold the reins of the party. If, instead, forces that are more conservative and suspicious of the West were to triumph, this decade-old balance could be shattered. In this regard, suffice it to mention Bo Xilai.

In the US, the self-destructive tendency triggered by the financial crisis is reinforcing the myth of a 'China threat' and is threatening to drag the country back to the witch hunt atmosphere of the 1950s. The result back then was the Korean War, a conflict between two powers that had much more interest in cooperating than in squaring off: ''The misconception of both sides compounded each other,'' Kissinger writes, ''The US did not expect the invasion; China did not expect the reaction. Each side reinforced the other's misconceptions by its own actions. At the end of the process stood two years of war and twenty years of alienation.'' (Kissinger, 132). It seems as if the authors are telling us that it could happen again, but with far more devastating effects.

Both agree that the future of Asia will be shaped to a significant degree by how China and America envision it and by the extent

[8]Memorandum, Brzezinski to Carter, 7 April 1978, *National Security Council Weekly Reports* 53, Box 41, Z.bigniew Brzezinski Collection. Jimmy Carter Library. Quoted in E. Fardella, ''The Sino-American Normalization'', *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 4 (September 2009), 557.

to which both nations are able to achieve some congruence with the other's historic regional role. But each has his own recipe for facilitating this congruence: Kissinger vaguely proposes to apply the example of the Atlantic community, of which NATO is an expression, to the Pacific: ''It would reflect the reality that the US is an Asian power and that many Asian powers demand it. And it responds to China's aspiration to a global role. [. . .] Both China and US would have constructive relations with each other and all other participants, not as part of confronting blocs.'' (Kissinger, 528-9). Brzezinski seems to be more convincing in terms of grand strategy. In order to project strength and influence externally, the United States must first rebuild domestically, and thus revamp the appeal of the West by expanding it eastward through the involvement of Russia and Turkey. In Brzezinski's view, a revival of the West, led by America, must be accompanied by a balancing act in Asia: ''the United States can and should help Asian states avoid a struggle for regional domination by mediating conflicts and offsetting power imbalances among potential rivals. In doing so, it should respect China's special historic and geopolitical role in maintaining stability on the Far Eastern mainland'' (Brzezinski, 189). Engaging with China in a dialogue regarding regional stability, he adds, would not only help reduce the possibility of US-Chinese conflicts but also diminish the probability of miscalculations between China and Japan, or China and India, and even at some point between China and Russia over the resources and independent status of the Central Asian states. ''Thus, the United States' balancing engagement in Asia is ultimately in China's interest, as well'' (Brzezinski, 190).

Therefore, the authors – with whom various 'China hands' like Jonathan Pollack and Kenneth Lieberthal have recently been associated – seem to indicate the need to rediscover the lost path, a path whose virtue lay in recognition of the national character of the Chinese revolution, a process that has, in fact, brought peace and development to Asia for over thirty years and has greatly strengthened the role of China and the US in Asia and worldwide. Along this path, the relationship with Taiwan and, thus, Western interference in the Chinese civil war has gradually receded but has not yet fully vanished. That is why Brzezinski, thirty-two years after terminating the Mutual Defence Treaty with Taiwan to achieve normalisation with Beijing, now proposes to return to the same logic by permanently discontinuing the supply of defensive weapons to the island. This could eliminate a powerful obstacle to entente with China and facilitate the integration process with the motherland of the 'renegade provinces', according to the well known formula of 'one country, two systems'.

In recognising the need for a positive nationalism for Chinese reformists, Brzezinski's vision seeks to strengthen the Sino-American entente in order to continue along the virtuous path inaugurated by Dengist transformations. In Kissinger's book, on the other hand, the culturalist approach that inspires its logic to some extent runs the risk of not capturing the essence of these changes and, by overestimating China's peculiarity, of stumbling into a feeble relativism that shies away from this complexity rather than understanding it.

The modernisation of China is founded on the ability of its leadership to synthesize Western models and adapt them to the country's conditions. Thanks to the synergic relationship inaugurated with the cooperation between the reformism of the Communist Party and the United States,

China is now much closer to the West than it has ever been. To allow this relationship to continue, the Party should reject conservative temptations and avoid traditionalist degenerations. The West and the United States have every reason to encourage this process and extend peaceful cooperation in Asia and around the world, but to do so, they must acknowledge the historical role of the Chinese revolution and strive to build a symmetrical relationship with Beijing.