

# **A Critical View of China**

**by**

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I have been watching China now – as an amateur untutored in the language but attentive to what I could glean about the country’s culture and institutions – for nearly sixty years. Like nearly everyone else, I have been delighted and in some measure amazed by the transformation that has taken place over the last three decades. Never in human history has an economically backward country advanced so far, so fast.

And the country has also opened up. The Chinese do not have unrestricted access to the internet, to western movies, to western television. But the restrictions they face are modest, and often they are temporary. Westerners teach in institutions throughout China; and, though they would be well-advised not to broadcast all of their opinions, they are relatively unfettered.

Even more to the point, the great classics of the western canon are for the most part available in Chinese, and with every passing year the list of accessible works grows by leaps and bounds. Chinese presses have begun translating and publishing western scholarly works – and not just in the hard sciences. Works on literature, in history, in economics, and in the social sciences more generally are rapidly being rendered into Chinese.

I have been touched by this myself. Thirty-three years ago I published a single-volume, 1200-page book entitled *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution*. It reappeared in a three-volume paperback edition in 1994 and remains in print to this day. Those three volumes are slated to appear in Chinese one-by-one this year, next year, and the year after.

Nor is this the end of it. The Chinese have become travellers. Everywhere that one goes in Europe and in the United States as a tourist, one encounters Chinese in considerable numbers. I

would not at all be surprised to learn that Chinese tourism abroad trumps that of the Japanese. To this one can add that there are more than a quarter of a million Chinese nationals studying in American universities today – many of them drawn from families prominent in the leadership of the country.

The China of the late 1960s and the 1970s – when I was an undergraduate, a graduate student, and a beginning assistant professor – looked something like a mildly improved version of today’s North Korea. The people were, for the most part, desperately poor and profoundly ignorant of the larger world. Access to information was tightly controlled. There was little, if any room for political disagreement. There was no private property, and purges were routine. In his ruthlessness, in his cruelty and brutality, Mao Tse Tung made Joseph Stalin look positively humane. Today’s China may not be a paradise. It is certainly not an open society. It is not cosmopolitan. Nor is it in any way, shape, or form a democracy. But it is comparatively prosperous. It is not closed to the larger world. It is astonishingly dynamic, and – albeit within certain limits – public policy can be discussed.

From the outset, there were those who hoped that the opening to China initiated by Richard Nixon and implemented on his behalf by Henry Kissinger in the 1970s would work such a transformation. Richard Nixon was himself among them. In 1967, in the lead-up to his nomination as the Republican Party’s Presidential candidate the following year, he proposed that we “persuade China that it must change.” “Taking the long view,” he argued, “we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors.”<sup>1</sup>

As his choice of language suggests, Nixon’s hope – and that of many another American policy-maker in his wake – was that our “opening to China” would not only give rise to economic development but would also effect a transformation in the political culture of the country. He and they hoped that over time contact and commerce with the outside world would

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1. Quoted in Andrew Browne, “The China Rethink,” in *The Wall Street Journal* (13-14 June 2015): C1-2 (at C1).

dispel prejudice and hostility, would promote interdependence and amity, and would foster the incorporation of China within a world-wide system devoted to accommodating the real, material interests of its members. He and they also hoped that this “opening” would transform China internally; that it would give rise to a literate, well-informed middle class equipped with a benign cosmopolitan outlook; that this class would demand a say in public policy; and that the demise of totalitarianism in China requisite for commercial prosperity would lead to a decline in Chinese authoritarianism and to the gradual emergence there of a liberal democracy on the western model.

These hopes were by no means utopian. They were, in fact, an expression of a project first intimated in 1748 in the baron de Montesquieu’s *Spirit of Laws* and then rearticulated and refined in 1795 in Immanuel Kant’s *Essay on Perpetual Peace*. In one chapter of his prescient work, Montesquieu had argued,

Commerce cures destructive prejudices, and it is an almost general rule that everywhere there are gentle mores, there is commerce and that everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle mores.

Therefore, one should not be surprised if our mores are less fierce than they were formerly. Commerce has spread knowledge of the mores of all nations everywhere; they have been compared to each other, and good things have resulted from this.

One can say that the laws of commerce perfect mores for the same reason that these same laws ruin mores. Commerce corrupts pure mores, and this was the subject of Plato’s complaints; it polishes and softens barbarous mores, as we see every day.

In that chapter’s sequel, he had then added,

The natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace. Two nations that trade with each other become reciprocally dependent; if one has an interest in buying, the other has an interest in selling, and all unions are founded on mutual needs.

But if the spirit of commerce unites nations, it does not unite individuals in the same way. We see that in countries where one is affected only by the spirit of commerce,

there is traffic in all human activities and all moral virtues; the smallest things, those required by humanity, are done or given for money.

The spirit of commerce produces in men a certain feeling for exact justice, opposed on the one hand to banditry and on the other to those moral virtues that make it so that one does not always discuss one's own interest alone and that one can neglect them for those of others.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere in his book, Montesquieu intimates a connection between extensive commerce and political liberty, suggesting that the English know best how to take advantage of both. If the English model were adopted everywhere, he intimates, there might well be less grandeur in the world, less nobility, less generosity. But, at the same time, wars would be less frequent and liberty more common.<sup>3</sup>

In his essay, Kant took up this theme, suggesting that if certain conditions were met, there would be perpetual peace, and implying that the requisite conditions might soon be met. In a world constituted by democracies, an unfettered press, and freedom of trade, if these democracies formed a pact of mutual defense and a league of nations to serve as a forum and a locus for negotiation, they could work their will within the world, crush despotism, and maintain peace with one another.<sup>4</sup>

The thesis sketched out in part by Montesquieu and developed in full by Kant formed the basis for American policy in the post-World War II world. With an eye to tempering nationalism and promoting cooperation, we founded the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank; promoted regional defense pacts and free trade; and encouraged the negotiations that produced between Germany and France the European Coal and Steel

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2. See Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, tr. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, and Harold Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4.20.1-2.

3. Consider Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, 2.11.6, 3.19.27, 4.20.7, in light of Paul A. Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty: War, Religion, Commerce, Climate, Terrain, Technology, Uneasiness of Mind, the Spirit of Political Vigilance, and the Foundations of the Modern Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

4. See Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace," tr. Lewis White Beck, in Kant, *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs Merrill, 1963), 85-135.

Community, that later gave rise to the Common Market, and that eventuated in the European Union. For seventy years, as a consequence of the efforts undertaken by the Europeans in those years with our encouragement, there has been peace in Europe – matched with a measure of prosperity hitherto unknown and supported by vibrant democratic institutions.

After World War II, we fostered something similar in Japan, and our onetime enemy forsake war and became one of our chief allies and principal trading partners. We have had similar success with South Korea and Taiwan, and we have maintained good relations with Australia and New Zealand on similar terms. In fact, in cooperation with like-minded commercial democracies, we created a liberal international order that kept the peace and gave rise to an astonishing measure of prosperity. All that Nixon proposed to do was to incorporate China gradually and unobtrusively into this new world order.

I will have to confess that I never believed in the rosy scenario imagined by Nixon and the China enthusiasts – and I do not believe in it now. We were able to do what we did in Europe and Japan solely because we caught them at a moment when the Europeans and the Japanese were exceptionally malleable, prepared to rethink, and open to change. We also had quite a bit to work with. At one point or another before World War II, if not in every case for a very long period, most of Europe had conformed to the western model of governance; and the continent was devastated and demoralized when we appeared on the scene. There were, to emphasize the most important point, plenty of Frenchmen and Germans who wanted to bury the hatchet; and, faced with the Soviet threat, they were more than willing to cooperate. Japan had long before embraced the West. The country had representative institutions before World War II, and the defeats that the Japanese had suffered, the loss of life, and humiliation left them more than willing to cooperate in the building of liberal democratic institutions at home and a liberal international order in the larger world – especially, given the fact that the Emperor played ball with us.

China was, by way of contrast, proud heir to an ancient civilization. It had never had viable representative institutions; and, to the extent that it had embraced anything western, it was

Marxism, the communism promoted by the Soviet Union, and a totalitarian order. Moreover, the Confucian ethos of pre-communist China was authoritarian in the extreme. China in the 1980s may have been poor and backward, but it was neither devastated nor defeated. In many ways, as Nixon expected, it would, as it opened up, profoundly “change.” But it was apt, once it entered “the family of nations,” to continue “to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors.”

When we ponder the conduct of today’s China, we should think about Germany in the period stretching from 1871 to 1914. In these years, the latter experienced economic growth and urbanization on a scale and at a pace unprecedented. In 1871, Germany was an economic backwater; in 1900, its steel production exceeded that of Great Britain. In some ways, Germany was then better situated than China would be later. It was western. It was Christian. It had long had representative institutions. Nonetheless, the constitution devised for the Kaiserreich by Otto von Bismarck was designed to neuter those institutions and to perpetuate and extend to Germany as a whole the rule of Prussia’s king and of the Junker nobility that had long been the monarchy’s mainstay.

There was in Germany private property. Commerce flourished in these years; internationally, free trade was the norm; Germany’s trade with its neighbors expanded by leaps and bounds; and its urban middle class grew greatly in numbers, weight, and importance. But none of this prevented the Germans from nurturing their fantasies, cherishing their hates, and threatening their neighbors.

Germany was by its situation a land power, as is China. Controlling the sea was not essential to its security. In fact, seeking to control the sea was apt to alienate neighbors who would otherwise have been friendly and to weaken Germany in the process. Great Britain had long followed a policy of splendid isolation. It would never have allied with Russia and France had the Germans not devoted their steel production to the building of a fleet of battle ships.

If I dwell on the conduct of the Kaiserreich in the early years of the last century, it is because China is doing today precisely what Germany did then. China is now wealthy. She has

the wherewithal to become a major military power; and, instead of focusing on the defense of her territory, she has turned to the sea. She has developed ballistic missile accurate enough to wipe out in short order every base we have in or near Asia. She insists on her ownership of the uninhabited islands and reefs and the sea lanes well off her coast and seeks to bully Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Japan, and other countries whose security requires in this region full freedom of the seas. If we do not forge a defensive alliance of sorts within this region capable of deterring Chinese aggression, these states will in time all become satellites of China, and before long we will be confronted by another Greater Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese do not seem to be willing to abide by the rules of the liberal international world order that we have built. In 1994, Richard Nixon remarked to William Safire, “We may have created a Frankenstein.”<sup>6</sup>

There is another reason why I am not sanguine. There is apt to be a bloody upheaval in China. Here I think of another regime, lacking representative institutions, that experienced rapid economic growth and unparalleled prosperity. I have in mind France in the late eighteenth century. China resembles it in one crucial particular. It was ruled, as China is today, by a regime whose legitimacy was being called into question. In this particular, eighteenth-century France was much better off than China is today. It possessed a monarchy a millennium old, and that monarchy commanded respect and in many quarters elicited devotion. The old order was nonetheless eroding. The thinking that had produced the Glorious Revolution in England and the American Revolution in America was rapidly gaining ground in France. The aristocracy was resented. Birth no longer commanded respect – and when Louis XV, angry that the *parlements* stood in his way, briefly cashiered that ancient juridical institution, he undermined the foundations of his own authority. As long as the economy grew, the French remained quiet. But when state bankruptcy loomed and the economy came a-cropper, they turned with a vengeance

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5. In this connection, see <https://ricochet.com/archives/chinese-aggressiveness-in-asia/>.

6. Quoted in Andrew Browne, “The China Rethink,” C2.

on the ruling order. Looking back on these events in *The Ancient Régime and the Revolution*, Alexis de Tocqueville described what had happened as a revolution of rising expectations.<sup>7</sup>

The regime in China is, if anything, in worse straits than the French monarchy was in the late eighteenth century. It embodies the rule of a Communist Party that has renounced communism in practice without renouncing it also in theory – without putting in communism’s place another theory of legitimacy. The country is ruled by a formerly red aristocracy, and resentment is rife. In China, as in the Arab world, family loyalty has always trumped public spiritedness. And those called the “princelings” – young people descended from those closely associated with Chairman Mao in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s – have grown fabulously rich. Corruption is the norm. Everyone knows it, and everyone hates it. For no one has articulated a rationale to justify the privileged status of these “princelings.” Twenty-seven years have passed since Tiananmen Square, and nothing of substance has changed. What happened then could easily come to pass again – especially if there were a dramatic slowdown in economic growth. If things are getting better all the time, that is a damper on the resentment inspired by corruption. When things get worse or the economy stagnates, corruption is apt to seem intolerable. And as we sit here, pondering China’s future, a dramatic economic slowdown is taking place. You should not assume that, if things seem calm, they will remain so. The French Revolution came out of nowhere. So did the collapse of communism in eastern Europe. So did the Arab Spring. So did the protests in Tiananmen Square. There were those who foresaw each of these developments, but next to no one got the timing of even one of them right.

I am not alone in thinking that China is in a pre-revolutionary situation. There are men who know China far better than I do – far better, in fact, than anyone in this room or in the United States – and they think as I do. I have in mind the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the princelings in China possessed of great wealth.

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7. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, ed. Jon Elster, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).



Three years ago, shortly before Xi Jinping came to power, the leaders of the party asked all of the cadres in China to read Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime and the Revolution* – the work in which he laid out his thesis that the French Revolution was a revolution of rising expectations.<sup>8</sup> Why, I ask you, would they do this if they did not think that the book had something of such vital importance that every last member of the party needed to digest it? It was surely not the fate of France that they chiefly had in mind. If Tocqueville's book is being read, it is because at least some of the men who rule China are wondering whether their country is near a tipping point — in which a seemingly minor event (the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor, for example) sets off a conflagration.

Here is another piece of evidence, which shows just how worried the leaders of the party are. Shortly after the party began urging its cadres to read Tocqueville, after Xi Jinping had taken over, the new leadership of the Chinese Communist Party circulated within the party “Document no. 9,” which spelled out seven dangerous western values that it was forbidden for anyone to embrace. Here is what is off limits::

1. Promoting Western Constitutional Democracy.
2. Promoting Universal Values (such as human rights), which would establish a standard by which the rule of the CCP could be judged.
3. Promoting Civil Society (which would compromise the party's monopoly of power).
4. Promoting Neoliberalism (which is to say, genuinely free markets).
5. Promoting the West's idea of journalism, challenging China's principle that the media and publishing system should be subject to Party discipline.
6. Promoting historical nihilism, which is to say, trying to undermine the rosy depiction of the history of the Chinese Communist Party and of New China promoted by the CCP.

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8. See <http://www.businessinsider.com/tocqueville-becomes-chinese-best-seller-2013-1>.

7. Questioning Reform and Opening and the socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which is to say, suggesting that the red emperor has doffed his red clothes..

This is the China that Xi Jinping is fostering,<sup>9</sup> and it is a China that he and his minions do not want us to see. This past April the seventy-one-year-old Chinese journalist who leaked this document to the western press was sentenced to seven years in prison.<sup>10</sup>

There is every reason to suppose that Xi Jinping and his comrades are deadly serious about this project. Just yesterday, I came across the following report:

China's Communist government is rolling out a plan to assign everyone in the country "citizenship scores." According to the ACLU, "China appears to be leveraging all the tools of the information age—electronic purchasing data, social networks, algorithmic sorting—to construct the ultimate tool of social control. It is, as one commentator put it, 'authoritarianism, gamified.'" In the system, everyone is measured by a score ranging from 350 to 950, and that score is linked to a national ID card. In addition to measuring your financial credit, it will also measure political compliance. Expressing the wrong opinion—or merely having friends who express the wrong opinion—will hurt your score. The higher your score, the more privileges the government will grant you.<sup>11</sup>

This is particularly disturbing – for China is about to enter a brave new world. As I wrote online in response to this news,

Totalitarianism is a function of technology. Prior to recent times, governments might claim to be absolute, but they did not have the record-keeping, administrative capacity to make good on that claim. Now they can do so far more easily than ever before —

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9. See <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

10. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concerning\\_the\\_Situation\\_in\\_the\\_Ideological\\_Sphere](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concerning_the_Situation_in_the_Ideological_Sphere).

11. See [http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/articles/china-s-creepy-new-form-oppression\\_1042860.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/articles/china-s-creepy-new-form-oppression_1042860.html).

without hiring armies of spies. All that they have to do is follow the population on the Internet and use computers to collect and analyze the data.<sup>12</sup>

And what, you make ask, about free enterprise? Are political liberty and free enterprise not inextricably linked? Will there not be widespread resistance to this project throughout China? Will China's business leaders not object? Apparently not, for Alibaba and Tencent have agreed to administer the system. As Vladimir Lenin long ago observed, "When the time comes for us to hang capitalism, the capitalist will sell us the rope."

And the princelings? They are desperately trying to get their riches out of China, and they are also going to great lengths to get a foothold for their families abroad. They are buying property in the United States, in France, in Britain, in Cyprus.<sup>13</sup> They are sending their wives to have anchor babies in the U.S. so that someone in the family will have a right to American citizenship.<sup>14</sup> In vast numbers, also – more than a quarter of a million, as I said – they are sending their children (many of whom speak little or no English) to American universities.<sup>15</sup> Some of these students are here to get an education. Most are here to search out the means to stay.

So I would say to you by way of conclusion this: when the rats begin to abandon the ship, it is because they think that it may be beginning to sink.

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12. See <https://ricochet.com/china-harbinger-brave-new-world/>.

13. See <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/07/10/chinas-trillion-dollar-question-348397.html>;  
<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/fcc2d346-bcd3-11e4-9902-00144feab7de.html#axzz3owQIqcr1>; and  
<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/351606a8-159b-11e5-be54-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3owQIqcr1>.

14. See <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-asian-anchor-babies-wealthy-chinese-20150826-story.html>,  
and [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karthick-ramakrishnan/asian-anchor-babies-some-\\_b\\_8054908.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karthick-ramakrishnan/asian-anchor-babies-some-_b_8054908.html).

15. See <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jnylander/2015/07/13/how-chinese-students-are-cheating-to-get-into-u-s-universities/>, and <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/12/asia/china-education-agencies/>.