

Haunted by Chaos: China's Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping

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One often hears the question “What does China want?” Behind that query linger more specific ones about whether the People’s Republic since 1949 has had a strategic culture and what it might be. “China,” we are told by some, “always has a plan.” Others are sceptical. These problems have been addressed by, amongst others, scholars like Alastair Iain Johnston.

That China does have a largely coherent overarching strategic narrative in the era since Mao is something Sulmaan Wasif Khan holds fast to in this clearly written and well-researched account. The merit of his book is that his lines of argument are very clear, and he wisely refrains from getting buried in too much detail. In just under 250 pages he covers a huge amount of terrain.

Almost half the book is devoted to Mao. That makes sense. The parameters of the Maoist project for a unified China whose strength was founded on military power, a balance of interests around it, and the ability to make its own decisions in its own way, pragmatically, continue to this day. The Dengist transformation after 1978 should not distract us from this central fact, Khan argues: Mao, just as clearly as Deng, “grasped the idea that the economy was the final guarantor of national security; it was only that having understood so much, he had little idea of what to do” (p. 144). And interestingly, Khan imputes many of the initial moves to reform the economy to the period just before Mao’s death, not after it (p. 123).

Since then, while the strategic overall aim has been the same – to keep China unified, strong, stable – the style of different leaders in promoting this aim have been different. That raises the question of how much these stylistic variances can be interpreted as having a deeper, structural impact. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, in Khan’s account, were more low key and simply promoted the larger aims through consolidation and incremental patience. With Xi Jinping, he sees a significant step change to a much more expressive, assertive approach to at least the signalling of strategic intent. This has done more than just change the tone of Chinese foreign policy, but the nature of it too. In essence, China under Xi is far more proactive and assertive.

Remarkably, for a book on this theme, Khan does not refer directly to the “24-character” statement imputed to Deng after Tiananmen in 1989 when he cautioned China to bide its time, build its capacity and basically fit in to the international order. That mantra is, under Xi, largely seen as outmoded now. China is too big to simply tidily fit in to the global order. And many of Trump’s actions can be interpreted as provocation to make China declare its hand more, and thereby make itself more susceptible to criticism and reactive strategy.

There are a lot of issues that this timely book raises in a fresh way. The first is the evidence from the time of Mao onwards of how poor China’s ability has been to interpret the US. “The trouble with the Americans” for the Chinese, Khan states, “was that one never knew what they would do” (p. 184). That applies as much to the current trade wars and the confusion these have created in Beijing as to the misreading of the US over the Korean War in the 1950s, and the issue of Taiwan from the late 1970s onwards. As Khan penetratingly comments, while the US is forever being accused of getting Chinese public opinion wrong, at least it has the excuse of

lack of transparency. Evidence of the status of US public opinion is available almost everywhere – and yet, it seems, Chinese leaders consistently misperceive or misunderstand the parameters within which American leaders work, and the ways in which this opinion restrains and constricts them.

The other issue is the ways in which from the time of Mao onwards, ideology – while important – has always been balanced by pragmatism. The nature of this pragmatism, of course, changed from the early era onwards. But Mao cannot easily, except in the aberrant era of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1969, be accused of enslavement to predetermined ideas. He was flexible with the Soviet Union, and, in his later life, with the US. His aim was to acknowledge the awful geography in which China existed, with so many potential enemies ranged around it, and to find a balance of power through diversification of alliances. To this day, Xi Jinping maintains the same stance, visiting small countries because “they still have a role to play in shaping a balance of power favourable to China” (p. 232).

Two other factors are striking about this book. The first is that the discussion of grand strategy means that a great number of domestic issues disappear. The Great Leap Forward, the famines in the early 1960s and the Cultural Revolution, while mentioned, simply get subsumed in discussion on the network of alliances and emerging foreign policy issues around China. Did Chinese leaders really divide their thinking up in this way? One’s impression reading their works is that they thought from a very clear domestic context, and in many ways this book is light on the detail of that. The second is that despite Khan stating at the start of his work that study of China’s grand strategic thinking has been neglected, he fails to mention that there has been lots of discussion about at least one very clear Chinese strategic objective: the nationalistic one of creating a powerful, strong country. Lots has been written on this desire, predating even Mao. It is odd that this crucial formula of making a “great, strong country” doesn’t appear in the book, especially as it has been the overarching slogan for the whole nation-building project from the late-Qing era down to today.

Nevertheless, *Haunted by Chaos* is an accessible and well-informed account of a complex issue, and it merits wide readership. It is good for general readers, for those on international relations courses, and for students of contemporary Chinese and Cold War history.

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The Great Han: Race, Nationalism, and Tradition in China Today

KEVIN CARRICO

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Kevin Carrico’s book *The Great Han* investigates participants of the Han clothing movement and critiques their ideology. Carrico’s ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in 2010 and 2011 in several cities with active movement organizations. The movement began in the early 2000s, and its active participants were “young and fairly educated professionals, with a roughly 1:1 proportion of men and women” (p. 40). They utilized internet forums and urban performances of Han dresses to promote their ethno-nationalists beliefs.