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Book Reviews

**Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*
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**John Pomfret, *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China, 1776 to the Present.*
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Reviewed by Michael Andregg

Allison's book is divided into four parts. The first is on "The Rise of China." The second is "Lessons from History." The third, "A Gathering Storm," includes a whole chapter on "Clash of Civilizations," a perennial ISCS theme. The final section, "Why War is not Inevitable," attempts to balance the pessimistic tone of the rest by searching for policy solutions to the dilemmas described in the first three parts.

There is one area where Allison, Thucydides and I are in complete agreement. His introduction notes that, "Proximate causes for war are undoubtedly important. But the father of history (Thucydides) believed that the most obvious causes for bloodshed mask even more significant ones." (p. iv.)

The "Rise of China" is obvious to everyone and is quite impressive. Therefore, I will limit further comments on this book to the remaining three parts. Among the many "Lessons from History" that Allison identifies, the most cogent to me pertain to a "Century of Humiliation" for China that I had not known about. For example, on page 112 he notes that, "From 1854 to 1941, US gunboats cruised China's inland rivers to protect American interests." That certainly would wound any nation's pride! Imagine Chinese gunboats cruising our Mississippi River during the same period, when Chinese immigration was limited by a US Congress fearful of "Yellow Perils." On page 122, he describes a campaign in contemporary China to "never forget our national humiliation" or "wawang guochi."

In the "Clash of Civilizations," Allison spends a lot of ink on recalling former ISCS member and Harvard colleague Samuel Huntington's work on that theme, with special reference to differences between Chinese or Confucian cultures and American or Western cultures. This recalls Ada Bozeman's work on the importance of culture itself, as opposed to the ephemeral quirks of particular leaders and events.

On page 141, Allison provides a very useful table of the “Clash of Cultures” between America and China today.

He ends that chapter with the sensitive topic of how contemporary China views the seas around China, especially the South China Sea. The last chapter of this section is titled “From Here to War,” where Allison charts the trends of most immediate concern for ‘war forecasters’ like me.

Having rung his warning bell as loudly as he could, Allison then offers “Twelve Clues for Peace” in his conclusion that “War is Not Inevitable” even though the first 200 pages of his book contend that war between America and China is extremely likely. I will not itemize those 12 ideas here; that is what whole books are for. Allison accomplishes his main purpose of sounding an alarm, aided by the considerable resources of his publisher and Harvard University devoted to marketing this book. It has undoubtedly attracted more attention than the two that follow. However, sometimes the loudest voices are less wise than some of the quieter ones.

The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom by John Pomfret

John Pomfret’s “Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom” is a *magnum opus* on US-China relations over the last 240 years, written by an accomplished journalist who clearly loves both countries. It is exquisitely detailed and full of vivid stories about the men and women who participated in perhaps the most fruitful intellectual exchange of the last two centuries. Pomfret does this with an ideal journalist’s reverence for objective truth, so he does not avoid sensitive topics and writes candidly about the defects and hidden agendas of many key personalities as lucidly as he describes their idealism and good works.

For example, as early as page 6 he describes the heroism of Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, who regrettably died in prison. And on page 15, Pomfret claims that many of America’s founders saw China as a source of inspiration, despite flaws and tensions on both sides. He ably describes the most important hubris, the deeply felt belief on both sides that Chinese and Americans are “exceptional” and that much of the rest of the world are “barbarians” (野蠻人, or Yěmán rén).

This journalistic style of looking at dark sides as objectively as the lighter, easier sides is very different from diplomatic style, which seeks never to offend. It is also central to this book’s utility. Like a doctor, Pomfret describes his subjects “warts and all” because he knows that real healing and healthy growth requires a little pain, and a lot of objective truth.

On page 157 in Chapter 10, on “American Dreams,” Pomfret observes that “In 1902 China rediscovered America,” and that “By the 1920’s the US hosted more Chinese students than all the nations of Europe combined.” One third of those students were women, by the way, a rarity with long-term consequences.

The author then slogs through the Pre-World War II history of China and Japan in particular, because the resulting alliance between China and America would be so important for the future of the entire earth. When describing the tragic invasion of what Japan would call “Manchukuo” (NE China) in 1934, Pomfret also observed that “Japan’s population had doubled in 50 years.”

On page 243 Pomfret emphasizes the enduring importance of America’s alliance with China against Japanese aggression. On page 246, he begins a great story of an American adventurer and pilot, Claire Chennault, who among many other martial acts created an American volunteer fighter group called the “Flying Tigers” that distinguished itself long before the regular US army was near.

A danger of this book for reviewers is that it is so rich in detailed stories about vivid personalities and events that time is gone long before we get to the end. However, before leaping to Pomfret’s conclusions, I must highlight the seminal importance of a Chinese scholar, P.C. Chang, who had great impact on the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Pomfret claims that Chang has mostly been forgotten in mainland China. He writes, “Marrying Western belief in the primacy of the individual with Chinese concern for the greater good, Chang personified the dream of the ‘Great Harmony’ between China and the United States.” (p. 368)

Pomfret’s Chapter 28, called “Hate America,” relates the enduring consequences of the Korean War, where we were on opposite sides of a very lethal conflict, which by any estimate killed many more Chinese than Americans before resulting in the dangerous stalemate that we observe today. Chapter 29 is titled “Hate China” and describes the reciprocal propaganda in the US that emphasized all that could be criticized about the Middle Kingdom. Pomfret always regrets the negative consequences of such campaigns on any side.

In “The Cold War,” Pomfret reveals that our President Eisenhower “threatened Mao Zedong’s regime with nuclear annihilation eight times.” (p. 405). I did not know that, but it is obvious that this would leave a lasting impression on anyone.

In the last few chapters, Pomfret dwells on the tensions now afflicting US-China relations. The Chinese philosopher-diplomat P.C. Chang reappears here, and a detailed story about why Liu Xiaobo died in jail despite winning a Nobel Prize for peace in 2010.

He supported the students at Tiananmen Square in 1989, better known as Liosi here in China. Pomfret was expelled from China then because of his reporting for the AP on those tragic events.

This is a magnum opus, and well worth reading. On to my favorite among these three books, Howard French's *Everything Under the Heavens*.

***Everything Under the Heavens* by Howard W. French**

French's first chapter is titled "National Humiliation" and added much texture to what I had learned about this only recently. An equally noteworthy concept was "barbarian management," which illustrates the exceptional worldview that China has always been the only "real" civilization, surrounded by uncivilized "lessers" who come in two varieties, "raw" and "cooked." You would enjoy learning what French means by that, and who he cites for his cogent quotes.

Considerable space was devoted to why many Chinese hate Japan today, which is understandable when one knows the terrible history of World War II. I did not know about deeper historical roots extending over the past 13 centuries, but I can understand now. Mr. French is not trying to resurrect historic roots of hatred, rather to promote a more nuanced understanding of cultural attitudes and their origins. If every country hated every other country that ever attacked them, the world would be one writhing mass of historic resentments, which we must overcome if we are to create a healthy, global civilization able to face the challenges of a new millennium.

French ends this section with three quotes. On page 21, he notes that, "More than two hundred anti-Japanese films were produced in 2012 alone, with one scholar estimating that 70 percent of Chinese TV dramas involve Japanese-related war plots." On page 30, he cites a senior editor of a major Japanese paper, the *Asahi Shunbun*, who claimed that "Hundreds of smaller societies have been absorbed by China over the last 200 years." Thus, animus can run both ways. (American examples of that are legion.) "Exceptionalism" is a curse both of our great countries share. One parallel was the concept of "Manifest Destiny," which rationalized a century of conquest here.

I was especially pleased to read a long treatment (pp. 95-107) of legendary Admiral Zheng who sailed as far as Africa "in 1405 with an armada that included some of the biggest wooden ships ever built." Stories of this fleet have always been impressive, and the mystery of why it was eventually destroyed has always been curious (change of Emperors). French adds much more detail to these events, which very ably captures both the yin and yang of China's relationships with neighbors.

On page 112, French introduced me to the concept of “hua ren” (or Wénmíng de rén, 文明的人) which I aspire to be. One challenge is always who defines what constitutes a civilized person.

The fourth chapter, “A Pacified South,” is a historic review of what we call Southeast Asia and its relations with China, rich with detail and insight. By page 181, French is describing dramatic changes catalyzed by Deng Xiaoping that had much to do with the extraordinary rise of Chinese economic and diplomatic power ever since. There are too many to list in this brief review, but they reveal a leader of remarkable vision and ability to incorporate the best of other civilizations without sacrificing the best of his own. Here too, I see glimpses of the “Great Harmony,” which is the best hope of global civilization to come.

French closes this chapter with some major economic and demographic observations. One is the profoundly complex effects of the “One Child Policy” that Deng began. This enabled the greatest expansion of economic prosperity in human history (along with many other factors of course). But one side effect is an aging population. French claims that “Current trends...suggest that by 2040 the Chinese population will be more skewed in favor of old people than Japan, the ‘grayest’ major country in the world today.” China is undoubtedly becoming rich and powerful. The key question for our world is whether China will become wise enough to handle such responsibilities without any catastrophic failures. America has gone through a similar transition, but whether US “wisdom” has grown as fast as our GDP or military clout is, at the least, extremely questionable.

Like the other authors, French’s closing chapters focus on contemporary frictions like the South China Sea, and the rise of Xi Jinping, while America descends into whatever Trump represents. I will spare you all the details of these chapters, and simply note that, like Pomfret, French is able to call a spade a spade without calling it a shovel. All thoughtful and well-informed people today wonder if the rise of China and the probable decline of America can be handled with maximum diplomacy and minimal strife, following the wisdom of Sun Tzu. I have quoted Sun Tzu for more than 40 years because he simply stands above all others in his advice to generals and emperors, written 2,500 years ago. That alone says much about Chinese civilization.

So, each of these books has substantial merits and none is perfect. Allison issues a strident warning to the West, and his book is filled with high-end political science theory along with a boatload of facts to support his views on that. Pomfret is the most in love with China, and he provides the most vivid and personalized history of US-China relations over the last 240 years. French is the easiest to read and may be the most insightful. But who am I to judge? I am not by any measure a scholar of China. Therefore, I came as a pilgrim to learn more about the ancient sages who inform Chinese culture.

Rather, I am a serious student of war and peace with some reputation. Therefore, I urge everyone under heaven to attend to the tasks of peace on earth before Weapons of Mass Destruction spread far enough to find the spark that could set them off.