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China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power

China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power

REVIEWED BY THOMAS MAXWELL*

KRISTOFF, NICHOLAS D. AND WUDUNN, SHERYL, CHINA WAKES: THE STRUGGLE FOR THE SOUL OF A RISING POWER, Times Books, a division of Random House (1994); (\$25.00); ISBN 0-8129-2252-2; 488 pp. (pbk.).

The collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe began about five years ago, a period of time in geo-political terms rather comparable to the period after a major volcanic eruption, during which we expect to see the dust settle and "things" begin to stabilize. Sunsets clarify, weather patterns return to typical expectations, and we see what ballast there is to stand up to the winds of the ordinary, which we geo-politically interpret to be self-interest-driven open markets and free elections. So far so good, western diplomacy analysts conclude; no madman with a following has come forward with a mandate to re-command the nuclear threat that used to dictate our policy, and no existing balances among western nations have been thrown out of kilter by the new free-lance nations that are jockeying to join the western mix.

Part of the non-event for the west arises from the perception that courting formerly communist interests commercially has proved to be unattractive: a lot of confused and dispirited people with very little money burdened with an inherited commercial infrastructure that redefines hopeless disaster in every way there is. They must heal, the way someone who's broken every bone in his body in a car wreck must heal, before prospects for improvement can be discussed.

Western investment is not rushing in to fill the vacuum. Rather, it is being coaxed to come forward on humanitarian grounds or to create a presence that might later prove useful. There is also the strategic initiative that cautions that desperation among our former enemies, due to their uncertainty whether they can even meet the basic requirements of simple existence, could torque into something ugly. So we watch and wait with a good deal of pity for these people coloring our optimism for their emergence-to-be, and also with amazement that the communist regimes could have maintained the illusion of vitality for as long as they did.

The massacre at Tiananmen Square occurred at roughly the same time as the fall of the Berlin Wall. The course of China since that time tends to be analyzed in the west under the same eurocentric lamp: the

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upheavals in central and eastern Europe succeeded, while the one in China did not. The Europeans can look forward to a light of freedom and prosperity at the end of their torturous tunnel, the Chinese to more bleak communist repression. On top of that, China's victory in its struggle against the United States over MFN status seems to have sent a clear message that the Chinese communists will do what they want, and we can't stop them. North Korea, Viet Nam, and Burma, Asia's other communist locks, seem to feel no anti-communist reform pressure either, as a consequence of China's stone-wall. So, we watch China and wait, pity coloring our pessimism.

Of course those who look closer know that this interpretation by no means tells the whole story about China during the last five years; it is perhaps not even the most important part of the story. The salient fact of the situation is that China has accomplished far more extensive, and far more successful, "free" market reform *without* an overthrow of communism, than all but a few areas of formerly communist Europe have. Making this even more remarkable is the equally well-established fact that China's human rights and personal freedom record is improving very rapidly, adamant communist rhetoric and all. In this area, it certainly has not reached the level of European reform, especially when evaluated in traditional western terms, but it is also true that there is no struggle ongoing in China equal in intensity or savagery to the civil war in Bosnia.

China Wakes is an eye-opening, up-to-the-minute account of China as seen over the last five years by husband and wife Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn, until recently American correspondents for the *New York Times*. Working out of Beijing, the two became the first husband and wife team to win a Pulitzer Prize for journalism in 1989 for their coverage of Tiananmen Square. As this book shows, however, they also spent a tremendous amount of time in the countryside, away from the capital, often with what they describe as an unusual degree of freedom from "handling." They believe, moreover, that the knowledge gained from these visits is more telling in describing modern China than what goes on in the city. Ms. WuDunn is Chinese-American (speaking somewhat weak Chinese), and her ability to blend in often gained her extraordinary access, and more than once saved her backside when she was caught going too far. Beyond that, the search for the meaning and message of her ancestral roots allows her further access to peasants and villagers. These interactions give them the sense that they have cracked another bit of the code of communication, a self-assurance that on the odd occasion they truly see down to the level of the actual, where the official charades meet the flow of reality.

The collaboration is achieved by interweaving alternate chapters by each author rather than by an undifferentiated pastiche. Primarily, the two authors differ, to the small extent that they do, in personality,

rather than in writing style, focus, or intelligence. They make no excuse or apology for their blatant western outrage at the horrendous disregard for human rights and decency that is common in Chinese life, nor for their rather firm belief that nothing short of full democracy deserves to be called political freedom. But despite these conventionalities, Kristoff and WuDunn effortlessly convey a sense of *otherness* about China that many more mystically dazzled observers never have. And they succeed also at breathing new life into the not very original conclusion that China is Confucian, clannish, and dynastic, that it always has been and always will be, and that the communist dynasty is just another blip on the Chinese time-line. Arriving at this conclusion independently of prior indoctrination is the thing that makes their work fresh. Sometimes the wheel of scholarship reinvented is just the wheel you want to have.

Nevertheless, the lack of secondary scholarship in general is this book's weakest aspect. Depending on the reader's need to make connections between this new understanding of and appreciation for China and relations with China of a more technical nature — finance, commerce, politics, the law, and so forth — *China Wakes* will seem either more or less comprehensive. We are told China's economy is growing, for instance, but this news is not interconnected with the kinds of hard statistics that articulate market dynamics. The authors state that inflation-control in China is good for a developing country, but it's hardly analyzed at all in specific terms, and likewise for currency exchange rates. That China has signed certain intellectual property conventions is reported to us, but not which ones or how the government plans to enforce them. How Chinese corruption works internally is wonderfully, distressingly detailed in chapter after chapter, but very little is told about the sort of corruption foreign commercial and legal interests will encounter if they explore opportunities in China. Related to this is the problematical issue of refugees and their legal defense, made especially complicated by the current inclination of sinophone countries not to antagonize each other by sheltering refugees, no matter how valid their reasons for fleeing. *China Wakes* presents a few cases of this problem quite vividly, but the technical details of how the cases are structured legally are not described. It's possible the authors do not follow technical fields very closely — although Kristoff was trained in law at Oxford — and don't wish to embark on analyses they can't see through to their ends, or possibly their purpose is so clearly tied to their autobiographical moments that they assume they're addressing an audience similarly disposed to casual and personally felt perceptions. Even granting the validity of this approach, however, the least the other sort of reader could expect is the rudiments of a tie-in pointing the way to certain technical reference points, and these are few in *China Wakes*.

Be that as it may, this book portrays an *emerging* China. It is clarifying and demystifying, and it acts as a potentially valuable guide

for understanding the present and probable future of legal relationships between China and the west and with other Asian countries. Foremost in the picture is the observation that in China, gradualism is working, whereas in Europe a total break from central control has seemed a grim, unavoidable necessity. Indeed, the European experience has seemed to bear this out, and attempts at finding a middle way appearing gallingly pathetic.

European people in formerly communist controlled countries, however, strike one as very much abandoned and stranded by comparison with the Chinese. Kristoff and WuDunn speak of a deep, ages-old collective consciousness among the hundreds and hundreds of millions of Chinese that the communists have demonstrated they are unfit to oversee, a conclusion that most people have drawn but in whose fabric they must remain entwined until a new dynastic network has formed to take its place. The authors find a new use for the distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian state structures, used previously in State Department explanations for US policy in Central America during the early eighties, presenting it as the single most cogent description of social and political change in China. If the totalitarian-authoritarian generality is a valid model to describe China, it could be of great value to persons pursuing practical international relations with that vast land: the new *authoritarian* China allows considerable freedom of action and private ownership for its citizens, so long as the enterprising souls who try it do not openly criticize the government; the old *totalitarian* China disallowed both. The suggestion is that an outside partner or consultant should recognize that this process of variant imagery is part of the transition game and not get too alarmed.

When Chinese communism wore Chairman Mao's face, gradualism was decried as the most fearful of western tactics: the slow infiltration of values and seduction of the masses. Ironically, western influence is doing just this, a conclusion that both authors arrive at time and time again, and there is so official party rhetoric condemning it. Their continual reference to Deng Xiaoping as the emperor, at first in quotation marks but later without, suggests that it is respect for the traditional role of royal leadership, rather than that of explainer and educator, that Chinese communism is falling into demanding. As for Confucianism, which communism pledged to eradicate along with capitalism, the last forty-five years have touched it and transformed it so that it still serves at some subliminal level as the social bonding agent of the culture, but many of its most severe precepts have been truncated. The traditions that have kept China's peasants poor, sick, starving, and uneducated, have especially been challenged resolutely and with considerable success. Literacy, infant mortality, childhood education, and life-expectancy are now expressed in numbers quite comparable to those of America. For instance, a prohibition against satellite dishes is quite openly flouted throughout the country — and, for a price, ignored by the authorities — and the whole TV wasteland is beamed down just

like it is everywhere else, bringing exposure to the same consumer-conformist culture.

As one reads *China Wakes*, the steady reciprocation between discouragement and encouragement, ultimately leaning toward encouragement, creates an emotional flow for the book that is a bit too pat, too predictable. The fact that this flow is so heartfelt and so strongly based on fact — the authors are fine reporters — basically saves it from the usual fate of the too-predictable: death by tedium. It's when the reader finally realizes that it doesn't matter in the least whether the authors feel encouraged or discouraged about China, that one gives into it, or at least accepts it. It's an achievement to have acquired the perspective through sheer emotional will of viewing a nation of 1.2 billion people as family, about whose members one feels a right and an obligation to *worry*. In the final analysis, Kristoff's and WuDunn's intuitive, anecdotal, occasionally picaresque narrative proves well-suited for their task.

Troubling, however, is the thin treatment given the questions of the expense of the Chinese economic miracle and who will pay. The book describes a few of the most alarming environmental trouble-areas, such as having an ozone depleting refrigerator in every hut or burning coal from one corner of the country to the other, yet discussion of these issues is fleeting. Desertification is not even mentioned. Another potential cost is human, measured in social and cultural displacement. It's quite possible for an ancient culture to meet its demise in the human prosperity it helps makes possible; four thousand years old or not, there's nothing in China's longevity that *guarantees* its future, nor is there any assurance that continued communist presence, with its constant power to strike out and suppress whenever it chooses, would be able to stop a slide of Chinese society into formations more characteristic of the west. Whether western journalists should feel they have the perspicacity to comment on what is and what is not "Chinese" is beside the point. More directly, we must ask if it isn't possible that China could change so much that, so far as the miracle goes, all bets would be off, and Kristoff and WuDunn do not venture very far toward supplying an answer.

This question must be addressed by any outside interest seeking to form a relationship with China. If we can assume that over the next few decades China — and the rest of Asia, for that matter — will exist in a state of active flux as a miasma of chaotic contradictions, then one must hedge opportunities against one another, putting together a broad enough exposure-base to assure picking up on the general trend. But broad exposure is, well, broad exposure, and aside from picking up on the general trend, we need assurances as well that the general trend itself has some legs.

Does *China Wakes* provide these assurances? Does it supply us with the keys to negotiating the local chaos of China's nearly eleven

per cent annual GNP growth rate, and indeed to knowing whether the trend will continue? By itself, no. The professional and technical press must be researched as well. But as a clear-eyed look at what is truly important in the lives of the Chinese people, *China Wakes* is in a class by itself. In fact, the book creates another sensation in the reader quite apart from the nominal subject at hand. Because of the book's unique perspectives, and because of the type of tight, journalistic analysis each anecdote and each issue is given, there arises a distinct shock of recognition that there *we* are, too: the self-censorship, the resourcefulness of government to preserve itself, the fascism of imposed "traditional" values, the wide disparity of wealth, the brazen truth about what privileges and concessions money can buy. All are characteristic of both cultures in differing degrees. Though we often say it, we usually don't mean it when we say our country is universally corrupt; what we mean is that a few people are corrupt but they're to be found just about anywhere. Our institutions, in theory at least, are essentially clean. *China wakes*, however, gives pause to that thought. Perhaps arousing this sensation is the farthest thing from the authors' minds, but their portrait of authoritarianism in China has broad application around the globe.

The disturbing trend emerging in some minds that competitiveness and public order are best achieved where personal freedom is guided by the cool hand of central control has begun to reach the level of public policy in some places, the United States being an example. While Kristoff and WuDunn make it quite clear they do not share this interpretation of how things ought to be, they express little confidence that the trend will be easy to reverse.

That might be the book's most important message, that as China emerges we must avoid partially submerging ourselves in order to meet them half-way. We must accept our occasional inefficiencies and sentimentalities as part of the tableau of freedom and hope that China will emerge all the way too, finally to be caught up in the same glorious, cluttered exuberance.