

REVIEW ESSAY

INTELLECTUAL THUGGERY

Jan van Tol

Mann, James. *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2007. 127pp. \$19.95

Few contemporary national security subjects generate more controversy than debates about, on the one hand, military implications of the growing strength of China in most dimensions of national power and, on the other, the primacy of promotion of democracy and such other “universal” principles as the foundation of U.S. foreign policy. Their confluence vis-à-vis American policy toward China reveals a troubling inconsistency—or perhaps not so troubling to many.

This book is not about China per se but about the language that American elites use about that policy. In his introduction, tellingly headed “Euphemizing China,” Mann notes that

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it is about the language, images, hidden assumptions, and questionable logic that powerful people—politicians, business executives, scholars, and diplomats—use when they discuss modern-day China. Over many years, a collection of ideas, phrases, rationalizations, and doctrines has emerged, all of which serve to deflect attention from the persistence of China’s one-party state and its repression of political dissent. One might think that the problems of China’s political system would raise both moral questions and practical ones, but apparently they don’t.

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Los Angeles Times Beijing bureau chief between 1984 and 1987. He is the author of two other books on China as well as the recent best-selling *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*.

Mann begins by describing two broad schools of thought encompassing most contemporary views of China and its future development. The first, and dominant, view is the “Soothing Scenario,” which states as its main thesis that economic development will lead inexorably to far-reaching political change: increasing trade and prosperity will eventually bring political liberalization to China. This argument has been used consistently in bipartisan fashion to overcome those recurrent, awkward moments of regime repression that occasionally threaten to arouse congressional and public ire.

The second school believes in the “Upheaval Scenario,” which states that “China is headed for some sort of disaster, such as an economic collapse or political disintegration, because it will not be able to maintain political stability while continuing on its current course.” Various proponents recite a litany of huge problems facing China, such as rising political unrest, the fragility of its banking system, and the huge and growing disparity between the rich coastal regions and the poverty-ravaged interior. It is argued that preventing China from falling apart has been a fundamental U.S. policy objective for over a century and that its logic pertains today (leaving aside the question of what the United States could actually do to influence it meaningfully). Thus anything that the United States does that might further weaken Chinese leaders, such as criticizing them, is unhelpful.

Mann suggests instead a third scenario. China could well continue its rise as a formidable economic competitor and member in good standing of the “international community” and of its various organizations and yet continue to be a repressive, one-party state. In fact, Mann argues that this is far more likely than either of the two widely accepted “scenarios,” since democracies consistently have tended to underestimate the durability of stable authoritarian states.

More seriously, the comfortable syllogism of the Soothing Scenario (China is now run by the Communist Party; China has an emerging middle class; when these two forces collide, the party will give way to democracy) ignores the fact that the urban coastal minority—that is, the emerging middle class—has every incentive to protect the existing order and its own economic interests. Considering that the sixty-two million or so people living in China’s ten largest cities still represent only 5 percent of the total Chinese population, why would one-man, one-vote democracy prove especially compelling to this group?

This is reinforced, Mann argues, by the fact that American businesses and political elites have with their Chinese counterparts a commonality of interest in maintaining the status quo. Chinese elites obviously benefit, but so do American

business and political interests, the latter in the form of cheap imports and the low interest rates and inflation enabled by huge Chinese investments in the U.S. monetary vehicles that have resulted in widespread economic benefits that have kept voters happy. Thus there is considerably less effective pressure from a United States ostensibly committed to democracy and human rights than one might expect.

Why does this matter? Mann offers three reasons. First, the Chinese deserve political freedom like any other people, but they will not get it while “the country is still governed in an unrepresentative fashion by a Communist party with a long, unsavory, violence-prone history, a love of its own privileges, and a weakness for corruption.”

Second, the Chinese regime actively supports, or is at least friendly with, authoritarian regimes around the world like those in Zimbabwe, Uzbekistan, Myanmar, North Korea, and Putin’s Russia. “China gives what amounts to ideological sustenance to these dictatorships; it lends support to the idea that democracy is an alien Western concept, something imposed by Americans or Europeans.” Indifference to the nature of the regimes it supports considerably enhances the efficacy of its “money diplomacy,” often to the disadvantage of the United States.

Third, “if China’s political system stays a permanently repressive one-party state, that will mean that U.S. policy toward China since [at least] 1989 has been sold to the American people on the basis of a fraud—that is, on the false premise that trade and ‘engagement’ with China would change China’s political system.” In other words, “day after day, American officials carry out policies based upon premises about China’s future that are at best questionable and at worst downright false.”

The China Fantasy is especially useful in examining how language used to support U.S. policy since the 1970s has been used to delegitimize opponents of that policy. It has pithy compendiums of freighted terms (the “Lexicon of Dismissal”), descriptions of key underlying elite attitudes (the “Credo of the China Elites”), and the “standard TV China graphics” that constitute the pictorial shorthand for what most Americans think of when they imagine China. A separate chapter examines the language that each president since Richard Nixon has used to explain and justify his China policy.

This short book is a superb, readable introduction to the major currents in thinking about China policy over the past thirty years and as such is highly recommended reading for naval officers, especially younger officers, for whom the rise of China will be a significant factor during their careers. Mann certainly proffers a specific substantive point of view regarding the nature of the Chinese regime (one shared by this reviewer), but the real value of the book is his

examination of the often dishonest employment of language by American elites to stifle debate.

Such intellectual thuggery—going beyond mere “political correctness”—is an increasing plague in America (including within the Navy) generally. Mann’s examination of that process at work makes for refreshing reading. After all, “not fooling ourselves” ultimately depends on the capacity for robust, intellectually honest debate.