

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***China: The New Superpower***

When I was in graduate school, the reigning view of the future was the domination of Japan economically and financially—in Asia and in the West. There was the fear of Japan buying more and more American real estate, of overwhelming American automobile makers and American electronics firms. Rarely do you hear of those projections anymore. Rather, it is China as the future economic, financial and military power of Asia—and of the world. China is positioning itself as the next superpower. In the words of Judith Shapiro, “the Chinese era is upon us.”

Howard W. French, former reporter for several major newspapers, has written a new and important book: *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power*. One of the central themes of his book is that, in the words of reviewer Judith Shapiro, “China’s historical and cultural legacy governs its conduct of international relations, a legacy that sits uncomfortably with the Western notions of equality and noninterference among states.” For much of its long history, French argues, China’s diplomacy was based on the concept of *tian xia*, which holds that everything “under the heavens” belongs to China. “A superior civilization demanded deference and tribute from vassal neighbors and did not hesitate to use military force. China’s testy relationship with Vietnam became fraught whenever a Vietnamese leader dared to demand equal footing with a Chinese emperor; the Japanese claim to divine origins was unacceptable.” China lost its dominance during the Opium Wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Western colonial powers carved up China and then in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Japan invaded mainland China. But the Chinese always viewed these developments as temporary. French demonstrates powerfully that China’s primary goal is to displace America and “correct historic humiliations imposed by those who dethroned China from its rightful position at the center of the world.”

What evidence is there for French’s thesis?

1. China’s claim of land (a “land grab”) in the South China Sea is a natural, inevitable development of China’s new position in the world. All in the world community should accept it, not question it, they contend!!
2. China has established the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which is set to rival the World Bank and to some extent overshadow the International Monetary Fund—both of which were established at the behest of the United States after World War II. China is thereby challenging the world order established and led by America.

3. President Trump's repudiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement is a major gift to China, for it demonstrates that America will not be a major player or leader in Asia—China is!!
4. China has launched the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative which provides an overland and overseas infrastructure connection between China, Africa and Europe. The "One Belt" part of it refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt while the "One Road" refers to the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road. It is a remarkable vision of an entire economic and trading partnership between three major continents. [OBOR is estimated to cost over \$900 billion!] Nearly 70 countries and international organizations have signed up for the mega infrastructure project. Iran has been most receptive to Chinese infrastructure projects, hoping it will help make Iran a key trading hub between Europe and China. Earlier this year, the first freight train from eastern China—traveling through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—completed the journey in just fourteen days, compared to forty-five days by sea. Sino-Iranian trade increased from \$4 billion in 2003 to \$52 billion in 2014, and Tehran hopes to boost that figure to \$600 billion over the next decade.
5. Russia and China are developing a much cozier relationship than in the recent past. The relationship between China and Russia has always been tenuous and filled with mutual suspicion. But Xi and Putin share some common goals: Both are authoritarian rulers and both despise the Western way of doing things, especially democracy, freedom and human rights. Both desire to challenge the post war order. Xi has visited Moscow more than any other capital since he took office in 2012. Since Russia's access to international capital has been severed due to sanctions, China has become Russia's main source of funds.
6. As President Trump backs away from the multilateral, rules-based system of global trade and order, Xi Jinping of China is filling that vacuum. Angela Stenzel of the European Council on Foreign Relations argues convincingly that "The election of Trump has facilitated China's aims in Europe . . . Trump facilitates China's narrative of being the defender of multilateralism and especially global free trade, and China sees Germany as defending that, too, as a kind of sidekick. And it fits into the Chinese idea of creating an alternative leadership to the United States." The Chinese see the European Union as "an essential partner for the kind of multilateral, globalized world China wants to see, where each region looks after itself and comes together flexibly to meet global challenges . . ."

Under Barack Obama, America began to withdraw from key parts of the world—for Obama, especially, the Middle East. President Trump continues to expand this penchant for withdrawal by radically withdrawing from TPP and by isolating America from key relationships in Western Europe. The bottom line reality is that China is filling this vacuum in global leadership left by the US. In the language of its cultural history, China seeks to restore itself to the center of the world—to its rightful place "under the heavens." China is indeed becoming the new

superpower—and the US is facilitating that development. It is certainly emerging as the dominant economic power of Asia. The amazing and (overly-?)ambitious OBOR initiative seeks to integrate the economies of three continents together under China’s leadership. Is China the new superpower of the world? Only God can answer that. But the Bible speaks of the “powers of the East” and China certainly fits the description of that prophecy.

See Judith Shapiro’s review of French’s book in the *New York Times Book Review* (18 June 2017); Steven Erlanger in the *New York Times* (6 July 2017); and *The Economist* (29 July 2017), pp. 35-36.