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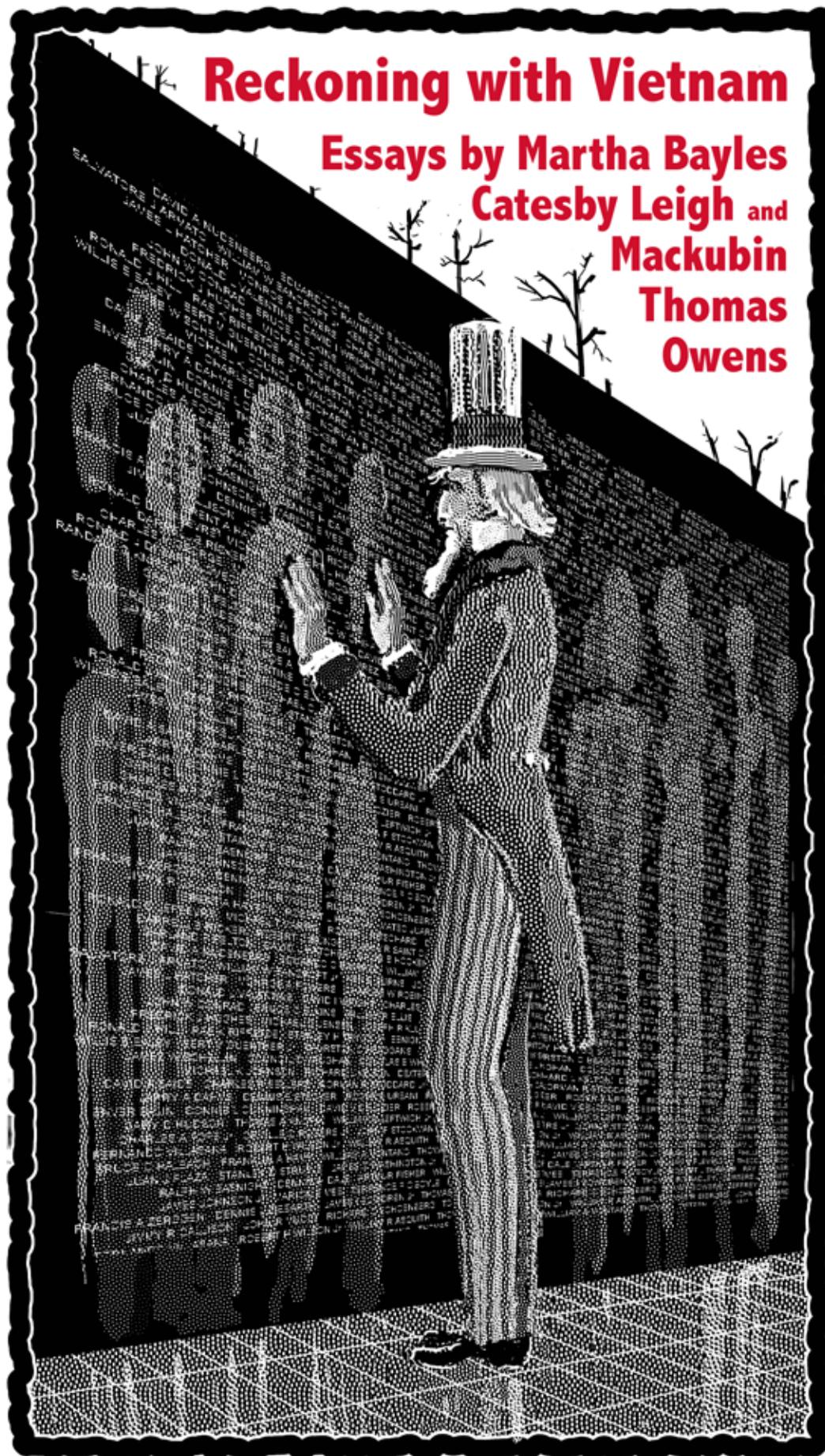
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Book Review by Charles Horner

THE PAST IS PROLOGUE

Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power, by Howard W. French.
Alfred A. Knopf, 352 pages, \$27.95

The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power, by Fei-Ling Wang.
SUNY Press, 342 pages, \$95



IN 1959, AS PART OF WELL-SCRIPTED TENTH anniversary celebrations of its founding, the People's Republic of China (PRC) opened the National Museum of Chinese History in central Beijing where it now occupies a piece of choice real estate on Tiananmen Square, opposite the Great Hall of the People. Here, in this enormous place with countless artifacts, the Communist Party of China tells its story in the best tradition of the Ministry of Truth from George Orwell's 1984: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past."

The party frequently changes the past to help preserve its monopoly on power in the present. These days, its obsession is China's "century of humiliation" at the hands of the West and Japan, beginning with the first Opium War of 1839–1842 and ending, as one might guess, with the founding of the People's Republic in

1949. But why start in 1840? Why not 1640, when a hitherto obscure Inner Asian people, the Manchus, began their campaign to gain control of China proper after toppling a homegrown despotism, the Ming Dynasty? Two and a half centuries later, 2 million Manchus were still ruling 400 million Chinese. *That* was the humiliation for the Chinese revolutionaries who overthrew the Manchus' dynasty and who regarded the Western way not as a humiliation but as an inspiration. They founded a revolutionary Western-style republic, not just another traditional tyranny.

The Communist Party once liked this anti-Manchu story, but today it celebrates the empire of the Manchus, which annexed Tibet and East Turkestan ("Xinjiang" in official parlance). The PRC, having done the same, no longer has a quarrel with those once-villainous colonialists. Another old story portrayed

capitalism as an evil imposed by foreign imperialists. After Deng Xiaoping's semi-capitalist reforms of the 1980s, capitalism became a phenomenon with many homegrown sprouts. Older texts also taught that the USSR was China's best ally—until it wasn't. Then the United States, once China's implacable enemy, became a friend. Now the United States is again said to be determined to subvert—in-
deed, to humiliate—China. Our own challenge in the face of this always-changing curriculum is to figure out which, if any, of its lessons of history will be a reliable guide to Beijing's future actions.

HOWARD FRENCH, A VETERAN FOREIGN correspondent and now a professor of journalism at Columbia, has reported from around the world. He worked in Africa where he saw firsthand what it was



like to be on the receiving end of rising China's global outreach. In *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa* (2014) he described the extraordinary energy with which Chinese migrants of all sorts were replicating the efforts of 19th-century white imperialists on the "dark continent"—and not just ordinary migrants, but also massive state-backed petroleum, telecommunications, and construction enterprises. Here was China, Inc., on the move.

French's later assignments in Asia no doubt inspired his study of the deeper origins of "China's push for global power," and in his new book, *Everything Under the Heavens*, he has homed in on East Asia:

There are many ways to try and grasp the enormity of China's ambitions in the East Asian realm that it once fancied as being entirely its own. They all center on the sea. Soon after 2010, Beijing began a concerted push toward something that, if it succeeds, will constitute the biggest grab of territory the world has seen since Japan's imperial conquests of the 1930s and 1940s.

FRENCH OFFERS AN ACCOUNT, RICH IN informative detail, about why the Beijing regime thinks "everything under

the heavens"—well, maybe not *everything*—belongs to the People's Republic of China.

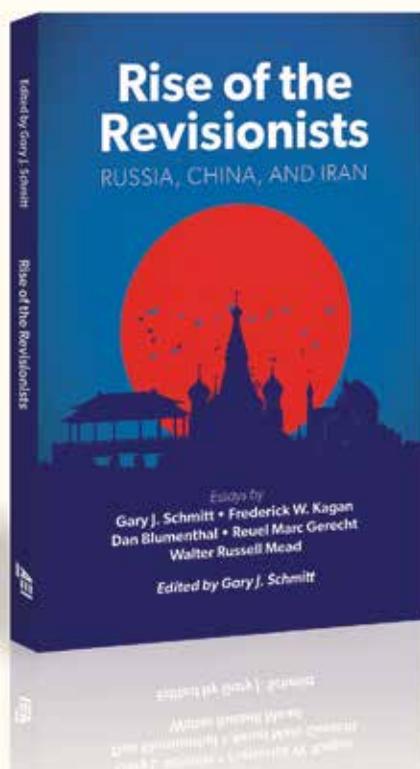
Ideology explains little about Beijing's strategic choices in the region. China's real motives stemmed from a calculus that was far older and ran much deeper. Its basic instinct, which is still operative today, was to cling to and shelter states that behaved like tributaries and to oppose, cajole, subvert or subdue those that stood in the way of its project to hold onto an old-fashioned realm.

This is a very common view of what Beijing is up to, and it may even be right. After all, we have no way of knowing whether the Politburo actually believes this view of China's strategic history, or whether it has another view entirely, or whether it has no fixed view at all but instead—as a self-described Leninist regime—maneuvers based on the exigencies of the moment. What we do know, however, is that there were many dynasties in China's history—some the creations of Chinese and some the creations of non-Chinese—and that whatever their inbred instincts, each dynasty had its own peculiar sense of how to gain and hold power. Indeed, the last two of China's dynasties, Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912), had almost opposite approaches to grand strategy.

The problem that American strategic planners have in understanding the PRC's grand strategy today is that it too embodies polar opposites. It has a conspicuous naval and maritime focus, but it also has a continental and Eurasian one. The party's current head, Xi Jinping, who became president in 2013, has been a tireless advocate of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which calls for investing about \$1 trillion to build infrastructure in dozens of countries. Not only has Beijing established an Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank with an initial capital of \$100 billion, it is also relentlessly pursuing investors from all over the world.

But this is not big-hearted nation-building. "Its ultimate aim," *The Economist* explains, "is to make Eurasia (dominated by China) an economic and trading area to rival the transatlantic one (dominated by America)." Put another, more "strategic" way, it is nothing less than an effort to create a great land-based empire like the ones rendered obsolete by the world-transforming maritime revolution, which began in the 15th century and led to the creation of several great seaborne empires. If only in its method, Xi's imperial plan is a far cry from that of his hero, Mao Zedong. In the 1950s and '60s, Mao's ideology was "proletarian internationalism" and his technique "people's war." To this end, cheered on by admirers

New and Noteworthy from AEI Scholars



Rise of the Revisionists

Russia, China, and Iran

Edited by Gary J. Schmitt

In *Rise of the Revisionists: Russia, China, and Iran*, Gary Schmitt, codirector of the Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, with AEI scholars Frederick W. Kagan and Dan Blumenthal, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies Senior Fellow Reuel Marc Gerech, and Walter Russel Mead, distinguished fellow at the Hudson Institute, analyzes the threats posed by Russia, China, and Iran as they challenge the liberal international order. In the volume's five chapters, the authors examine the strategic objectives of the three states and, in turn, America's potential response. *Rise of the Revisionists* combines in-depth historical and strategic analysis with recommendations for US policymakers.

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all over the world, Mao invested heavily not in infrastructure but in armed insurgencies and guerrilla movements.

In the country's long history there were regimes which followed a land-based way, a sea-based way, or a radical transformative way—sometimes even a bit of all three. Any one of them can be taken as an example of how some actual rulers of China—as distinct from the thing called “China”—have thought about world order. We can and should ask: why did each choose one vision and not another?

FEI-LING WANG'S BOOK, *THE CHINA ORDER*, is a magisterial history of what the Chinese people, and both their Chinese and non-Chinese rulers over the centuries, have thought about how the entire world should be arranged. China-born and with an American Ph.D., Wang teaches at Georgia Tech; he has also taught at West Point and in Japan, South Korea, and China itself. Wang is one among many Chinese scholars, as distinct from an older generation of American-born and educated ones, who are rapidly becoming our country's primary interpreters of the Chinese world. Beijing has chased away many brilliant scholars and intellectuals; some now live in the United States and are deepening America's understanding of their homeland. This resembles the Eastern Europe-born academics—Richard Pipes, Adam Ulam, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, and others—who taught us about Communist ideology and about Russian history, and how Soviet foreign policy was shaped. None of these men was an admirer of the Soviets, and Wang is no admirer of the Chinese Communists.

“The China order,” in Wang's account, “was first created by the Qin Empire (221-207 BCE)... [It] peaked in thoroughness, rigidity, and power” between 1279 and 1912. The regime of the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, lasted only a few years, but its grip on the Chinese imagination has been so powerful that subsequent regimes took it as their first point of reference, each deciding how much it should, or would, or could, emulate it. For Wang, Qin rule was totalitarian and, ever since, a longing for totalitarianism—defined by Giovanni Amendola at the turn of the

20th century as “everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state”—has been the aspiration of almost all of China's greatest state builders. A fear of an unbendingly hostile outside world was also needed to “sustain the power concentration, top-down command of socioeconomic and cultural lives, mass mobilization and extraction, censoring of information, total obedience and elimination of opposition and critics, atomization of the society with the state as the only internal organization, harsh dictatorship and brutal use of force, and endless sacrifices of human rights and human life.”

TO BE SURE, THE ACTUAL HISTORY OF China shows that unremitting totalitarianism of this sort came closest to being realized only briefly in Qin times and also briefly during the ascendancy of Mao Zedong, a self-proclaimed admirer of the first emperor and his policy of, as Mao put it, “burning the books and burying the scholars.” He was also an admirer of Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming Dynasty (1388–1644), notorious for his brutal and autocratic ways. On the other hand, the last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1912), was multicultural and multiethnic, unlike its predecessor. The Qing also governed lightly by comparison with the Ming. Its subjects appreciated its low taxes and small bureaucracy, but they also feared its efficient secret police.

In March 2018, the ruling Communist Party changed rules of succession for the country's leaders that had been in place since the 1980s. To prevent a recurrence of an unbounded personal dictatorship of the sort that enabled Mao Zedong to do serious damage to the country, Deng Xiaoping instituted term limits, so that the paramount leaders who followed him could serve two five-year terms, but would then have to retire. Now that those limits have been lifted, there is no formal barrier to Xi Jinping, like Stalin and Mao, holding power for life. This change confirms, in its own way, the bad trends already underway during Xi's ascendancy. He may not be a first emperor, Ming founder, or Chairman Mao, but Xi's brutality exceeds that of his immediate predecessors, and he is carrying out the most thoroughgoing effort to establish total

state political control since the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

OVERALL, ARGUES WANG, THOSE WHO thought they were resurrecting some prior golden age were mistaken. For “contrary to the official narratives of Chinese history, the real golden eras have been the few centuries before Qin's unification of the Chinese world, the Song Era [960-1279] when the peoples of the Chinese world departed from the China Order, and the time since the late 19th century when China was forced into the Westphalia system of international relations.” Thus, he writes,

the 1840s–1940s held much more than defeat and disgrace for the Chinese. It was indeed a long century of humiliation for the Qin-Han ruling elites and their indoctrinated subjects. But it redefined and remade China with great experimentation and comprehensive progress.... The second half of China's great Century of Experimentation and Progress [i.e., 1900–1950], as opposed to the Chinese official narrative of the Century of Humiliation, rivals any other period in Chinese history.

Regrettably, the Communists' victory caused “both Chinese internal politics and foreign policy to take a giant leap backward.”

Wang's views will be welcomed neither in the upper reaches of the Beijing regime nor among those who think they are dealing with a regime so inherently “Chinese” that it can never be superseded by one committed to a genuinely civilized, humane order at home and abroad. It is one thing for the ruling dictatorship to say repeatedly that it alone embodies Chinese-ness, that it alone can express the political genius of the Chinese people, that it is seeking not only the best of all possible Chinese worlds but the *only* possible Chinese World. It is another—quite dangerous and ignorant—for the rest of the world to believe it.

Charles Horner is senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, and author of Rising China and Its Postmodern Fate, volumes 1 (University of Georgia Press) and 2 (E.J. Brill).

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