



*The Burden of History and Its Bearing on China's
Geopolitical Present and Future:
Two Incomplete Views*
(Review article)

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Graham Allison. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston and New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

Howard W. French. *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power.* New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017.

Allison and French have written important and influential books on China that have already (by late 2017) been widely read and discussed. Both of them have made extensive use of history to inform their understandings of China's present, and both have constructed a great deal of their perspective and understanding around now-outdated scholarship by John K. Fairbank (1907-1991), an influential professor of Chinese history at Harvard from 1936 until his retirement in 1977. Fairbank is widely regarded as the doyen or grand progenitor of historical scholarship on modern China in the United States and was, to be certain, a very important academic entrepreneur who enthusiastically promoted Chinese historical studies and supervised the work of graduate students who today are among the most prominent historians of modern China in the United States and abroad. But in spite of Fairbank's fame, influence, and energy and the reverential awe with which he is viewed by many non-China specialists, the field of Chinese historical studies has gone on after his passing (as he himself would have wanted it to) and has developed new perspectives and conclusions that now sometimes differ from his. Actually, Fairbank might well have smiled at this: "Each generation learns that its final role is to be the doormat for the coming generation to step on. It is a worthy, indeed essential, function to perform,"¹ he wrote in the somewhat whimsical Foreword to his penultimate book in 1987.

There is no doubt that Graham Allison, who knew John Fairbank, is a very sharp, important, and influential scholar and that his new book will carry much weight. This is not just because Allison has been ensconced at Harvard for nearly five decades. Allison was founding dean of the Harvard Kennedy School (the John F. Kennedy School of Government), has served as Assistant Secretary of State, and has advised the secretaries of defence under every president from Reagan to Obama. For academics, policy wonks, career government officials, businesspeople, military personnel, and students who engage with China in one way or another, Allison's book will and should be required reading. It will lead to much fruitful discussion; indeed it has already, as a quick Google search of the book's title will show.

Allison's main point or argument is that throughout world history, emerging powers have alarmed and unnerved established powers and more often than not, the

¹ John K. Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution: 1800-1985* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1987), p. ix.

two have wound up going to war against each other. This “primal insight” was, he claims, first identified and iterated by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides (c. 460 – c. 400 BCE), to wit: “It was the *rise* of Athens and the *fear* that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.” This he dubs “Thucydides’s Trap,” and it is the historical lesson he applies to relations between the United States and China today: “When a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, alarm bells should sound: danger ahead. China and the United States are currently on a collision course for war – unless both parties take difficult and painful actions to avert it” (vii; emphasis in original). Allison knows that his argument will provoke objections and criticisms, but he defends it robustly. His dismantling in Appendix 2 (287-88) of seven fallacious straw-man objections to his work in Harvard’s Thucydides Project is effective and incisive.

But Allison is, for all of his foreboding analysis, somewhat hopeful as well. He distills several important “clues” from his historical studies in Chapter 9 (“Twelve Clues for Peace”; 187-213) that point to ways of preventing war between rising and established powers. But some of these come across as astute observations (“Wily statesmen make a virtue of necessity”; “Timing is crucial”; “MAD really does make all-out war madness”) rather than the concrete policy recommendations for the “difficult and painful actions to avert it” he discusses urgently in his Preface. For more specific, brass-tacks strategic and tactical recommendations for achieving downward spirals of de-escalation (rather than upward spirals of escalation) between the United States and China, Goldstein’s *Meeting China Halfway* (2015) is much more useful.

Allison’s overall point is solid and makes sense empirically and intuitively: Of *course* a rising power unnerves an established power, and a violent clash is more likely than not to break out between them. Any observant child who pays attention to the schoolyard and playground dynamics of a tough new kid moving into the neighbourhood can tell you this – tension and fisticuffs might well break out between the new tough and the established tough on the block. This is common sense, and the kids would not need Thucydides to help them understand what was going on and what was likely to happen.

One remarkable thing about Allison is that it sometimes really does seem that he might even actually *believe* that Thucydides was the first historian in the world to discover and articulate this basic (and even pedestrian) truth, that his was the first

iteration of its kind, its premier debut on the stage of historical writing. But in one of the Chinese classics, which have been available in translation ever since the publication of James Legge's (1815-1897) English-language rendition of them in 1872, we find that in ancient or pre-imperial China, the rising power of the state of Yue (? – 334 BCE) during the fifth century BCE unnerved and alarmed Wu Zixu (d. 484 BCE), the most prominent general in the state of Wu (11th century – 473 BCE), the major established power in China during the first decades of the fifth century BCE. Wu Zixu viewed Yue as a mortal threat to Wu and counseled its prompt and utter destruction through preemptive attack while it was still weaker than Wu. In the event, Wu Zixu's advice was ignored, and Yue did end up conquering Wu in 473 BCE. The *Zuo zhuan*, an ancient and engaging narrative history traditionally credited to the authorship of Zuo Qiuming (556-451 BCE), records Wu Zixu's prescient, urgent advice and stark zero-sum geopolitical reckoning and calculation to the leaders of the state of Wu:

When Wu was about to attack Qi, the viscount of Yue came with a large retinue to its court, and the king and all of the officers about the court received gifts and bribes. The people of Wu were all delighted, but [only² Wu] Zixu was afraid, and said to himself that this was [like³] feeding Wu [for the shambles].⁴ 'While Yue exists, we have a disease in our vitals. Its land and ours are of the same character, and it has designs against us. By its mildness and submission it is trying to further these designs. Our best plan is first to take measures against it. You may get your will with Qi, but that is like getting a stony field, which can be of no use. If [the capital of] Yue be not reduced to a lake, Wu will perish. There never was such a thing as employing a doctor to cure a disease, and telling him to leave some of it.'⁵

² James Legge, *The Chinese Classics, with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes, in five volumes*, v. 5. part 2: *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tsuo Chuen* (Taipei, TW: SMC Publishing Inc., 1991). (reprint; first published in 1872.) does not include "only" (*wei* 唯) in his translation, but it is necessary here.

³ "Like" here is my addition to the translation.

⁴ In other words, this was tantamount to keeping and fattening an animal for eventual slaughter.

⁵ Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, (1872), pp. 825-26, with Legge's Cantonese romanization of proper names converted to the Pinyin system in proper Mandarin Chinese. The translation in Durrant et al. 2016 is: "As Wu was preparing to attack Qi, the Master of Yue led his multitude to visit the Wu court. The king and his officials of all ranks received gifts. The Wu men were all pleased, with the exception of Wu Zixu, who alone was alarmed and said, 'They are fattening Wu!' Remonstrating against Wu complacency, Wu Zixu

More detail about the two implacably hostile states and their inexorable course towards war is given in *Guoyu*, *The Discourses of the States*, an ancient Chinese historical record of speeches and discussions by the ruling authorities of several rival states during the Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BCE):

The generals of [King] Fuchai [of the state of Wu] wanted to heed [the suggestion by the state of Yue] and complete [a treaty] with them [Yue]. [Wu] Zixu said in remonstrance, 'Impermissible! Sir, Wu's [relationship] with Yue is [one between] hostile and warring states. The Three Rivers⁶ encircle them [the two states], and their people have nowhere [else] to move. If Wu is to exist, there will be no Yue; if Yue is to exist, there will be no Wu. The generals cannot hereupon change [this]!'⁷

Allison's single best chapter is his Chapter 5, "Imagine China Were Just Like Us" (89-106), which might well have been named "Imagine Xi Jinping Were Just Like Teddy Roosevelt." Allison asks, "How did Washington act just over a century ago when Theodore Roosevelt led the U.S. into what he was supremely confident would be an American century?" (89) While he was serving under President McKinley as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Roosevelt had already begun preaching the virtues of being a "fighting race" and was soon arguing for a much stronger American Navy. He worked tirelessly for American dominance in all of the Western Hemisphere and grew eager for a war with Spain to expel Spanish influence and power from the hemisphere, all in a concerted effort to enforce the Monroe Doctrine. When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, he was an eager participant with a combat command that saw plenty of battlefield action. He built the Panama Canal and outwitted and outmanoeuvred Canada in getting Britain to adjudicate the Alaska Boundary Dispute in America's favour. "As we watch Beijing's renewed assertiveness in its neighborhood, and the

said, 'To us[,] Yue is a disease of the heart and the vitals: their territory is the same as ours, and they have something that they desire from us. With this docile submission of theirs they are seeking to further their desires; it would be best to take care of business with them immediately. Winning our aims in Qi is like securing a field of stones: there is no way to use it. Unless Yue is made into a swamp, Wu will go under. There has never yet been anyone who told a doctor to treat his illness but said, 'Be sure to leave a sample of it there.'" Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition/Zuochuan*, 3rd volume (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2016), p. 1901.

⁶ In this context, the Three Rivers were the Wu River, the Qiantang River, and the Puyang River.

⁷ *Guoyu* 20, *Yueyu A*, this reviewer's translation. Original Chinese text viewable at The Chinese Text Project, <http://ctext.org/guo-yu/yue-yu-shang> (accessed 4 December 2017). Thanks to Academician Wang Fansen of Taiwan's Academia Sinica for providing these references.

South and East China Seas along its border in particular,” Allison asks rhetorically, “should we hear echoes of TR’s actions in the Caribbean? If China were to become half as demanding now as the U.S. was then, will American leaders today find a way to adapt as adroitly as the British did?” His answer is a soft “no”:

Reviewing the record to this point, the differences between Xi [Jinping] and TR are more striking than the similarities. However, there are few signs that Americans are preparing to accept Britain’s fate [in the Western Hemisphere, acceding to American ascendancy]. Watching the trend lines, Thucydides would likely say: ‘buckle up – we ain’t seen nothing yet.’⁸

Allison relies on Fairbank to a significant extent for his notions about Chinese military history. For instance, he claims quite incorrectly that “War for Chinese strategists is primarily psychological and political; military campaigns are a secondary concern” (149), and after quoting the widely misunderstood and misapplied statement in Sun-tzu’s *The Art of War* that “The highest victory is to defeat the enemy without ever fighting,”⁹ he concludes that “China’s history of domestic political upheaval and struggle between competing kingdoms has led its strategists to favor means other than fighting” (150). But this is humbug. Using only normative Confucian philosophical texts and tired, half-digested proof texts wrenched out of context from Sunzi’s (Sun-tzu’s) *Art of War* will tell readers about as much about China’s military history as reading the New Testament and Vegetius would tell them about the military history of the West. Such a flawed and constricted historical epistemology yields only the standard Confucian caricature of what really happened on the battlefields and in the military councils in Chinese military history, a caricature that has misled historians, journalists, and the reading public for far too long now.

⁸ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydide’s Trap?* (Boston, MA and New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), p. 106.

⁹ On the misunderstanding, misapplication, and non-contextual exegesis and use of this passage, see Alastair I. Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 99-105. These same pages also contain a strong corrective: “...the notion that ‘not fighting and subduing the enemy’ is the core of Sun Zi [Sunzi, Sun-tzu] loses sight of what the rest of the text tells a strategist what to do: the last eight of the thirteen chapters explore the principles of mobile warfare – attacking, defending, and invading other states under maximal geographic, logistic, and tactical conditions” (pp. 101-02).

The unfortunately influential and hopefully last iteration of this hoary legend about China's putative pacifism (relatively speaking) in its military history is traceable back to statements made by Fairbank in his introductory essay to a volume of articles by other scholars that Frank Kierman and he edited and published at Harvard in 1974.¹⁰ In speaking of the entire period of imperial Chinese history (221 BCE – 1912 CE) in general terms, Fairbank argues that "Warfare was disesteemed in this imperial orthodoxy of the Han bureaucrats, and the disesteem was given an ethical basis that has colored Chinese thinking ever since."¹¹ He speaks of the "disesteem of physical coercion" in imperial Chinese history, the "pacifist bias of the Chinese tradition,"¹² the "downgrading of warfare,"¹³ and "the efforts of scholar-moralists to tame the men of violence"¹⁴ before concluding that "a tendency to disesteem heroism and violence, not to glorify it, and to prefer nonviolent means in overcoming others or achieving one's aims" (25) is one of the distinguishing features of Chinese military history.¹⁵

This entire trope or cultural canard of "disesteeming" violent military coercion in Chinese history has been comprehensively and penetratingly debunked, indeed demolished, by Alastair Iain Johnston, Allison's Harvard colleague at the Kennedy School whom he mentions in his Acknowledgements! Fairbank's views were based on Chinese philosophical texts that are manifestly normative rather than descriptive. Johnston characterizes this standard Fairbankian received wisdom view before effectively deconstructing it:

...most students of Chinese strategic thought and practice could be placed safely in a strategic-culture school of analysis, though few use the term explicitly. Moreover, most would fit comfortably in the first-generation literature. Most would argue that Chinese strategic culture uniquely stresses nonviolent political or diplomatic means to deal with adversaries, or – when force is absolutely necessary – the controlled defensive use of

¹⁰ Frank A. Kierman and John A. Fairbank, eds. *Chinese Ways in Warfare* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵ Nonetheless, Fairbank did seem, to his credit, to have had the prescience (probably more than Allison) that his conclusions and perspectives might someday turn out to have been overstated: "Such generalities are perhaps easier to make in our present ignorance than they will be after further research. Chinese ways of warfare extend over a broad range in which there are many opportunities for future enlightenment" (260).

violence. This has given Chinese strategic behavior a distinctive minimally violent character.¹⁶

Johnston then shows that the *Seven Military Classics of China*,¹⁷ of which Sunzi is but one, tell quite a different story about China's military past:

...for the most part, the texts accept that warfare and conflict are relatively constant features of interstate affairs, that conflict with an enemy tends towards zero-sum stakes, and consequently that violence is a highly efficacious means for dealing with conflict. Together these three sets of assumptions create a *parabellum* or hard realpolitik view of security whereby the *sine qua non* of state security is sufficient military capabilities and, preferably, the military defeat of the adversary. This *parabellum* paradigm at the core of the military classics stands in contrast with the standard image of Chinese strategic thought found in much of the secondary literature.¹⁸

The actual *Realpolitick* content and tenor of discussions and debates in the emperor's war councils in imperial Chinese history are not the only evidences against the woolly and wishful thinking over China's supposed relative pacifism. Perhaps even more important is the marked *preference* that Chinese rulers and their court officials very frequently expressed for violent military means of eliminating threats to state security over any other alternative, including Confucian education, moral suasion, and acculturation. Johnston goes on to argue persuasively that this strategic preference for violent military action when it was possible was a central feature of Ming (1368-1644) China's struggle with the Mongols on its northern borders.¹⁹

Henry Kissinger and especially the late Lee Kuan Yew²⁰ are, probably even more than Fairbank, Allison's Pythian Oracles, his Jedi masters,²¹ his fonts of wisdom and

¹⁶ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, p. 22.

¹⁷ For complete and annotated translations of these, see Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, p. 61.

¹⁹ See *Ibid.*, pp. 175-247.

²⁰ Lee Kuan Yew (1923-2015) was Singapore's semi-authoritarian Prime Minister from 1965 to 1990 and, after his retirement in 1990, more or less Emperor Emeritus 太上皇 in his positions as "Senior Minister" from 1990 to 2004 and then even "Minister Mentor" from 2004 to 2011.

²¹ Indeed, cf. the title of Graham Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, and Ali Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

insight. Yet both of these men trafficked in easy generalities and tired old boilerplate,²² and neither of them kept up on the field of Chinese military history as it expanded and matured in both the West and in East Asia from the 1990s to the present. If they had kept up with this scholarship, they would have realized that a very significant portion of their confidently held and expressed Fairbankian assertions about China's past and present strategic culture has been called into very serious question by students of Chinese military history, including Graff and Higham (2012), Graff and Wright (2012), Sawyer (2007), Scobell (2003), Wang (2010), and especially Johnston (1995). Allison's overweening confidence in *ex cathedra* pronouncements on China by Fairbank, Lee, and Kissinger seems to reflect what, and how little, he (Allison) has actually read about China's military past.

In addition to problematic matters of theory and interpretation, Allison makes an occasional error of fact. He repeats the propaganda about China having "five thousand years of history" (215), but in reality it has slightly little less than four thousand years of recorded history. (Where those extra thousand years come from is something Chinese propaganda never actually specifies.) He claims on page 223 that 23 million people fled Mao and built a successful democracy in Taiwan, but 23 million is the approximate population of Taiwan today, and only around 2 million mainland Chinese actually fled to Taiwan in the late 1940s, especially 1949.

Still, for all of its quirks and its occasional errors, Allison's basic point is solid and important. But then again, why is it necessary to attach any sort of historical or literary label to it all, Greek or otherwise? And what, *mutatis mutandis*, is Thucydides's Trap anyway but John Mearsheimer's offensive neorealism in a shiny new Peloponnesian wrapper?

²² Lee's worldview was a bizarre chop suey, an incoherent and crudely racist hodgepodge of eugenics, ductless glands, and his half-digested understanding of Arnold Toynbee's old "Challenge and Response" paradigmatic approach to world history. (On this see, *inter alia*, Michael D. Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture, and Genes," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29/2 (1999): pp. 145-66.) As for Kissinger, as late as 2011 he was still parroting the same old same old about China's supposed lack of historical experience prior to the nineteenth century in treating any other country as an equal: "China, by contrast [with the modern Western conception of international relations] was never engaged in sustained contact with another country on the basis of equality for the simple reason that it never encountered societies of comparable culture or magnitude" (Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2011), pp. 16-17). On pages 26-29, he more or less repeats the conventional (and discredited) Confucian and Fairbankian received wisdom about warfare in Chinese history.

Howard French's main point in his meandering and sprawling travelogue-cum-geostrategic analysis is that the Chinese concept of *tianxia*, or "Everything Under the Heavens," entailed China's dominion over Asia for two thousand years. *Tianxia* might have meant the entire world but usually referred to the countries at the edges or outer environs of China:

For the better part of two millennia, the norm for China, from its own perspective, was a natural dominion over everything under heaven...It is not a term to be taken too literally. From very early times, China had an awareness of faraway places, including other great empires, like Rome, but contact with such distant regions of the world was tenuous at best and hence both economically and politically marginal.²³

In this traditional Chinese understanding of *tianxia*, all countries surrounding China had great reverence for Chinese civilization and sent envoys as tribute bearers to see the Son of Heaven, the Emperor of China, offering him gifts and performing the kowtow before him, a ritual of extreme obeisance involving getting down on one's knees and elbows and knocking one's forehead audibly on the floor. In so doing, the tributary envoys recognized the superiority and suzerainty of China and its Emperor over their lands and rulers. In return, China might deign graciously to trade with the country that sent the tribute-bearing envoys and to guarantee its security, provided that it continued to display the proper ritual fealty and did not defy or annoy China in any way. There was absolutely no thought or conception in all of this of a modern Westphalian community of equally sovereign states because no state could possibly think itself equal to China, much less superior to it. When China's last imperial dynasty collapsed in 1912 it took with it an entire conceptual model or understanding of the rest of the world: "What collapsed in China was more than simply a dynasty. It was *tianxia* itself, an international system that had proven flexible and dynamic enough to survive in one form or another for two millennia."²⁴ Echoes or analogues of the *tianxia* hierarchy of states survive vestigially today, French argues: "China has one of the world's most rigid and carefully choreographed protocols for meetings on its soil with foreign leaders, and

²³ Howard W. French, *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), pp. 3-4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

its stylization, with its *tianxia* trappings, descends directly from the kowtow of ancient court tradition.”²⁵

The ultimate indicator of China’s eventual restoration of something analogous to the tribute system will be clear enough:

...today, as China’s self-regard has swollen, along with its newfound power, Japan has returned to the center of the Chinese gaze in the form of a bull’s-eye; the focus of Beijing’s approach to the country (and indeed to the entire sea-bound region that once defined the tribute system, and especially Vietnam and the Philippines) is to restore what from the perspective of the Central Kingdom [China] is considered the natural order. This, it must be said, is not merely the preoccupation of the Chinese state, though. It has also increasingly become a consuming obsession of rising populist nationalism...

China’s ultimate goal, however, is not merely to restore a semblance of the region’s old order, an updated kind of tributary system in which the nations of Southeast Asia or even a wealthy and customarily diffident Japan will have no choice but to hitch their fortunes to it and bow to Beijing’s authority. A larger, more ambitious goal is already edging into view. This ambition, evident from behavior even if still not fully avowed, involves supplanting American power and influence in the region as an irreplaceable stepping-stone along the way to becoming a true global power in the twenty-first century. Shi Yinhong, one of China’s most prominent foreign policy realist thinkers, has written that Xi Jinping’s goal is nothing less than ‘to give [China] a dominant role in Asia and the Western Pacific – at the cost of the U.S.’s ascendancy.’²⁶

It should be noted here that when French and many other geostrategic analysts speak of restoring the “Chinese world order,” the tribute system, or China’s traditional dominion over Asia, they do not mean to state or imply that China wants a *literal* restoration actually requiring diplomats from countries officially deemed as inferior to China to prostrate themselves and perform the kowtow before Xi Jinping. What they refer to is, rather, a modified international dispensation in the region that entails all

²⁵ Ibid., p. 235.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

neighbouring countries deferring to Beijing's wishes and taking China's geostrategic imperatives into primary concern in their relations with other countries.

French's understandings of "everything under the heavens" and the traditional or imperial "Chinese world order" seem to have been very largely based on one book published nearly fifty years ago. *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, a volume of articles edited and with an introduction by John Fairbank, was published by Harvard University Press in 1968. It seems that the key passage in Fairbank's introductory essay for French's understanding of what he calls "Everything Under the Heavens" (*tianxia*) is as below:

Age, size, and wealth all made China the natural center of this East Asian world. Geography kept the whole region separate from West and South Asia and made it the most distinctive of all the great culture areas. In European parlance, it became the Far East. But in Chinese terms this Far Eastern world was Sinocentric. *T'ien-hsia* [*Tianxia*], 'all-under-Heaven,' presided over by *T'ien-tzu* [*Tianzi*], the 'Son of Heaven,' sometimes was used to embrace the whole world, including everything outside of China (*Chung-kuo* [*Zhongguo*], 'the Central States,' the Middle Kingdom); but in common usage it was taken to designate the Chinese empire, which in any case included most of the known world.²⁷

Likewise, French's *locus classicus* in Fairbank for his understanding of the "Chinese world order," whatever that may or may not have been, seems to have been this:

One well-marked feature of this [tribute system] tradition was its preservation of the theory of Sinocentrism [China-centredness] by the constant use of Sinocentric terminology, as was evidenced in all aspects of the tribute system, which indeed by Ming [1368-1644] and Ch'ing [Qing; 1644-1912] times was partly preserved by means of terminology. Outside countries, if they were to have contact with China at all, were expected and when possible obliged to do so as tributaries...In the last resort, even if the foreigner did not actually comply with the forms of tribute, the terminology of tribute would be applied to him in the Chinese record nevertheless. The case of Lord Macartney in 1793, who only bent the knee

²⁷ John K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 1-2.

before the Ch'ien-lung [Qianlong] Emperor but was recorded as prostrating himself in the kotow [kowitz], was not unique.

Thus, Nationalist and Communist China have inherited a set of institutionalized attitudes and historical precedents not easily conformable to the European tradition of international relations among equally sovereign nation states. Modern China's difficulty of adjustment to the international order of nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has come partly from the great tradition of the Chinese world order. This tradition is of more than historical interest and bears upon Chinese political thinking today.²⁸

But Fairbank's pronouncements on the "tribute system" and the "Chinese world order" in his introduction to this volume are now as threadbare as his clichés about China's military history published in 1974.²⁹ A consensus is evolving in Chinese historical studies that "China in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (656-221 B.C.) was a system of sovereign territorial states similar to Europe in the early modern period."³⁰ What is more, as early as 1983, Morris Rossabi was pointing to the Song (960-1279) dynasty's treatment of some states on its border as true diplomatic equals (including formally recognizing and addressing their rulers as "emperors") and challenging the notion that any one institution, system, or mechanism was used in imperial China's foreign relations. As Rossabi wrote in his introductory essay to the volume he edited,

The papers in this volume suggest that the so-called Chinese world order...did not persist for the entire period from the second century B.C. to the Opium War [1839-1842]. From the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, China did not dogmatically enforce its system of foreign relations. The Sung [Song] (960-1279), the principal dynasty during that era, was flexible in its dealing with foreigners. Its officials, recognizing the military weakness of the dynasty, generally adopted a realistic foreign policy...Diplomatic parity defined the relations between China and other

²⁸ Ibid., p. 4. French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, quotes part of this on p. 9.

²⁹ Kierman and Fairbank, *Chinese Ways in Warfare*.

³⁰ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), page before title page. See also Jingshen Tao, *Two Sons of Heaven: Studies in Sung-Liao Relations* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 5 and David Curtis Wright, *From War to Diplomatic Parity in Eleventh-Century China: Sung's Foreign Relations with Kitan Liao* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2005), pp. 9-10.

states during these three centuries. The tribute system did not, by itself, govern China's contacts with foreigners.³¹

As well, back in 2005 this reviewer was questioning the very existence historically of many aspects of both the tribute system and the Chinese world order in imperial Chinese times:

We may doubt, then, that anything approximating the conceptual neatness, ontological tautness, or monochromatic, synchronic invariability of a single system or fixed order really governed premodern China's foreign relations and diplomacy. Indeed, not many scholars speak or write of a 'Chinese world order' any more, and those who still do recognise that 'The concept underlying the terms remains...a fundamental and yet ambiguous aspect of China's civilizational inheritance today' and think of it in larger terms as a conflated 'Chinese perception of the world' which 'might well be broadened to embrace social and cultural dimensions outside the framework of the international relations of the empire.'³²

In sum, it is now beyond high time that journalists and non-Sinologists recognize that the world of Chinese historical studies has moved on from Fairbank's decades-old conclusions. Historical study, like time itself, moves on.

French spends most of his time arguing that China's imperial geopolitical past will significantly bear on its future geopolitical course, but a little more than halfway through his book he introduces a dramatic factor in China's geopolitical machinations: In one or two decades, China's population will be very old and grey, more so even than Japan today:

China, therefore, although newly powerful, still feels tightly boxed in, and is determined to win space for itself, beginning with the pacification of its periphery. This it will seek to do first with economic strength, but as it grows stronger it will not shrink from using its newfound and growing military strength as the need arises. There is urgency in all of this too, for the fundamentals of the country's demographics and the uncertainties

³¹ Morris Rossabi, ed., *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th – 14th Centuries* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 4, 12.

³² Wright, *From War to Diplomatic Parity*, 17 (quoting Billy K.L. So, John Fitzgerald, Hujang Jianli and James K. Chin, eds., *Power and Identity in the Chinese World Order: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Wang Gungwu* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), pp. 1-2).

linked to its economic expansion, already decades old and slowing, showing more and more signs of imbalance, make the next decade or at most two the period of its greatest relative strength, and hence its moment of greatest opportunity. Current trends, which do not look amenable to dramatic improvement, 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.³³

French takes up this theme of demography again in his conclusion, this time more extensively, thus making his book seem more like two distinct volumes: the body on his historical argument about *tianxia* and the conclusion largely on China's aging population and the challenges and dangers it will create:

Above and beyond all other constraints, though, it is China's demographics that will constitute the country's greatest challenge by far over the coming decades, and for the United States it is this same population factor that will provide its greatest buffer against a sustained challenge. Furthermore, the changing dynamics of the Chinese population more than anything else explain Beijing's apparent present haste. China has embarked on a process of aging that is due to proceed with almost unprecedented speed, soon placing the country in a situation unparalleled in world history: that of a newly and still very unevenly modernized country that must build a social welfare system on the backs of a rapidly declining workforce. In journalistic shorthand, China's new dilemma is known as the paradox of growing old before growing rich.³⁴

Thus, the next two decades will be perilous times for the United States because Xi Jinping may well try to do something very dramatic while China's demography still permits it: "...Xi has made his dramatic break with the famous Deng Xiaoping strategy of biding one's time. Xi has decided that China must seize whatever advantages it can now before its window of opportunity slams shut within the next ten or, at best, twenty years. This will make the immediate future a moment of maximum risk between the United States and China."³⁵ But frustratingly enough, French does not give many concrete and specific measures for the United States to follow for the next two

³³ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, p. 185.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

decades.³⁶ There is thus a crying need for an X Article or Long Telegram to formulate a coherent strategy for the U.S. to weather the stormy waters in the decade or two ahead, until China's ticking grey time bomb detonates.

French makes a few errors of basic fact as well, such as his assertion on page 256 that no American president has ever visited Central Asia. Here French neither acknowledges the controversies over what "Central Asia" means and what countries it does and does not include nor informs his readers that President George W. Bush visited Mongolia for a single day in November 2005. French does seem to know some Chinese,³⁷ but in one place he commits a blundering linguistic error: confusing the character *Yue* 粤, an abbreviation of sorts for Guangdong province, with the character *Yue* 越 in *Yuenan* 越南, the Mandarin Chinese pronunciation for Vietnam:

The kingdoms of the southeast and their inhabitants, residents of present-day China's Fujian and Guangdong provinces and extending southward all the way into the northern reaches of present-day Vietnam...were referred to [by Chinese conquerors] not by their own names but by a portmanteau description, the *Yue*. The term survives as an etymologically obscure label for the south still in popular usage in modern China (as an abbreviation for Guangdong province, for example, used there on vehicle license plates), and in the name of Vietnam itself.³⁸

Still, French is essentially correct in his basic point about China wanting to restore something roughly analogous its former dominion over Asia. But China still does not fully understand that nationalism, a potent new force introduced to East Asia from the West that first took hold in Japan during the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) and later in China during and after the May Fourth Movement (1919 - ca. 1923), has now taken hold in *other people's countries* as well, including those in Central and Southeast Asia. These countries are in no mood to accept anything even vaguely smacks or is reminiscent of the old tributary system. Lee Kuan Yew himself saw this long ago, in 1996:

³⁶ Allison's *Destined for War*, for his part, acknowledges China's looming demographic catastrophe exactly once (p. 117), and that blithely and only tangentially.

³⁷ The reader of the audio edition of French's book, Nicholas Hormann, does not speak Chinese well if at all. He tries much too hard to pronounce the tones of words and phrases in Mandarin Chinese and, in the process, mangles and murders them.

³⁸ French, *Everything Under the Heavens*, p. 130.

As China's development nears the point when it will have enough weight to elbow its way into the region, it will make a fateful decision – whether to be a hegemon, using its economic and military weight to create a sphere of influence in the region for its economic and security needs, or to continue as a good international citizen abiding by international rules to achieve even better growth...All countries in Asia, medium and small, have this concern: will China seek to re-establish its traditional pattern on international relations of vassal states in a tributary relationship with the Middle Kingdom? Any signs of this will alarm all the countries in the region, and cause most countries to realign themselves closer to the U.S. and Japan.³⁹

Today, with its hegemonic behaviour in the South China Sea and East China Sea, and its threatening posturing towards Japan's Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands in Chinese), China has indicated clearly which direction it intends to follow. There could be no more perfect compliance with American and Japanese geostrategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region than China's current strident and bellicose behaviour in its region. The United States, for its part, is now telling China essentially the same thing that my father's generation told Japan: "To be Specific, It's Our Pacific."⁴⁰ The United States and China do indeed appear to be on a headlong, head-on collision course, and in spite of their errors in historical interpretation and fact, Allison and French both do well to point this out to the reading public and to warn: "Danger ahead."

³⁹ Lee Kuan Yew, speech, the 1996 Architect of the New Century Dinner, hosted by the Nixon Center, Washington DC (24 November 1996).

⁴⁰ This is the title of a jingoistic Tin Pan Alley song that became popular in the United States in the aftermath of Japan's extraordinarily foolish attack on Pearl Harbor.

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