

The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power. By Fei-Ling Wang. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 330. \$95.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper.

Fei-Ling Wang's *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power* aims to provide "a careful, holistic, and revisionist deciphering" of "what China is" and "what the rise of the PRC [People's Republic of China] truly represents" (pp. 2, 3, 9). He argues that "the PRC is a reincarnated Qin-Han polity" (p. 7) that is "destined" or "dictated" to construct "the China Order" (pp. 4, 197). As "the China Order" "contrasts fundamentally" with the "American World Order" (p. 4), Wang's conclusion echoes the alarming contention that China's rise represents a combined "Thucydides's Trap" and "clash of civilizations."¹

According to Wang, the "Qin-Han polity" is "a Confucianism-coated Legal[ist] authoritarian or totalitarian autocracy that is predestined and compelled" by a "powerful inner logic" to "order and rule the entire [known] world . . . in reality or in pretension" (pp. 39, 46). It is "mandated to seek constant expansion" because it cannot be "content, secure, and peaceful when there is any meaningful comparison or competition outside of its control, internally or externally" (p. 46).

In Chinese history, the Qin-Han polity was "first created by the Qin Empire (221–207 BCE), "reconstructed and legitimized by the two Han empires (202 BCE–9 CE and 25–220 CE)," and "further improved, internalized, and perfected by the Sui-Tang empires (581–907 CE)," before it "peaked in thoroughness, rigidity, and power by the Yuan-Ming-Qing empires (1279–1911)" (p. 39). This polity "dominated the peoples of Eastern Eurasia from the third century BCE to the mid-nineteenth century CE" under the "China Order" (p. 3).

Dictated by this deep history, the PRC was "born" to seek "a revolutionary change of the current world's political order in its own image whenever and wherever possible, so as to ensure the security and power of the ruling CCP [Chinese Communist Party]" (p. 197). Thus, Mao Zedong dreamed to "take over from Moscow the leadership of the world Communist revolution and from the United States the world leadership" (p. 180). Although the PRC has experienced "many dazzling changes" since Mao's time, CCP rulers "have not transcended or abandoned their Qin-Han polity that mandates and predestines" the restoration of the China Order (p. 210).

¹ Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?," *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2015 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>); idem, "China vs. America: Managing the Next Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (September/October 2017), pp. 80–89.

Wang's prognosis is grim. He contends that the China Order cannot be changed "from inside" (p. 113). "External factors and influences" are "the major, often only, source of innovation, change, and progress" (p. 113) but they are normally defeated by the Qin-Han polity's "inner logic." For instance, the Republic of China (ROC) "tragically failed to . . . transform China out of its Qin-Han polity to be a genuine democracy" because its leaders were "all basically Qin-Han style Confucian-Legalist authoritarian strongmen" (pp. 150, 159). Other external forces, especially Soviet and Japanese aggression, further condemned the ROC (p. 159). Wang lists four possible future scenarios: (1) transition to a softer form of authoritarianism, (2) resurgence of Mao's totalitarianism and militarism, (3) return to Deng Xiaoping's strategy of "biding its time," and (4) collapse before another cycle (pp. 216–17). With Xi Jinping's recent push toward harder rather than softer authoritarianism, the most likely scenario is the bleakest one. It is even more worrying now that the PRC "has acquired ever more gold and guns" to pursue the predestined China Order (p. 193). Nevertheless, a closer reading of the detailed discussions hints at a less deterministic diagnosis.

A key mission of *The China Order* is to challenge the PRC's official narratives (p. 29). Wang highlights that "the two-millennia history from Qin to Qing was never really a linear series of dynasty cycles repeating the same Qin-Han polity and the same China Order" (p. 75). He observes that China's "real golden eras" reside not with the unified Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties as in the official narrative, but with the "politically pluralistic" periods of "de facto international systems absent of a centralized world empire" (pp. 30, 75).

How often did China enjoy such "golden eras"? Wang is inconsistent on this. In the Introduction, he notes both that there were "frequent pretensions and several, impermanent intervals or disunions" and that "there was only one major pause of the China Order in the Chinese World, the Song Era" (p. 3). Chapter 1 adds two more periods: "the few centuries during the Spring-Autumn and the Warring States Eras, prior to the Qin Empire" and the late Qing and the ROC in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (p. 30). The list continues to expand in subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 observes that, before Liu Bang "followed [the Qin-Han polity's] inner logic fully" (p. 48) to establish the Han dynasty, another power contender Xiang Yu "did not follow the inner logic" but sought to restore the pre-Qin "feudal . . . and less tyrannical political order" (p. 47). During the Tang, the court maintained "active military, business, and cultural interactions" with "the many nations along its borders and far away," resulting in "practical incompleteness and inconclusiveness of the China Order" (pp. 59–60). The Tang even entered into a treaty of equality with Tibet in 821–822 (p. 83). This was not unlike how the ensuing Song dynasty was compelled by a "stalemate" to agree to the celebrated Chanyuan Treaty 澶淵之盟 (p. 83). Chapter 4 further asserts that "the early Han, early Tang, early Ming, and early

Qing were all in fact still under a de facto non-*tianxia* world order with meaningful and rewarding external competition, interaction, and exchanges in and around the Chinese World” (p. 122). In all, “the Chinese World was under an effective Grand Unification for at most only 45 percent of the time,” which renders most emperors as “failed leaders” (p. 104).

Why did the Qin-Han polity repeatedly fail to realize the supposedly mandated China Order? Wang argues that the Qin-Han polity became “nearest to perfect” in the Tang (p. 61), and “near perfect” in the Song (p. 62) and the Qing (p. 74). Yet, such a polity could achieve “effectiveness” only “at great costs” of “suboptimal performance” (pp. 54, 189), “inefficiency and ineptness” (p. 111). Most importantly, totalitarianism was “costly and limited, even compromised, by . . . state capacity” (p. 41). “Technology . . . resource scarcity, and simple demography and geography (size and distance)” combined to hold back the Qin-Han polity (p. 41). It was only in the PRC that state power began to deeply penetrate the society (p. 187).

If the Qin-Han polity was always limited, then it is not necessarily true that China first tasted freedom only at the turn of the twentieth century (p. 151). Wang observes that the late Qing accepted “representative democracy, capitalist entrepreneurship, and guaranteed freedoms and rights for the people” in the New Policy not as “a sincere effort by the imperial rulers” but “thanks to the decline of the Qing’s central power of control” (p. 148). Along the same logic, some measures of freedom must have indigenously emerged whenever the Qin-Han polity was weakened. Wang agrees with me elsewhere that there was “considerable freedom, individuality, mobility, choice, and prosperity” in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (p. 35),² but insists that such a development would be “rarely seen again . . . after Qin” (p. 35). Nonetheless, the Tang was “less totalitarian and more Confucian,” with “relaxed” state-society relations and “substantial tolerance of religious, racial and ethnic, lifestyle, and gender differences” (p. 59). The Song and Ming eras experienced “local communal autonomy and social critique even political opposition to . . . overly despotic imperial rulers” (p. 53). The Ming-Qing transition further gave rise to thinkers with “Enlightenment-like ideas” (pp. 112–13).

Moreover, if the Qin-Han polity was always restrained by low capacity, the China Order must necessarily be incomplete. Even if the Qin-Han polity was “predestined and compelled to order and rule the entire world” (p. 39), it “easily drained itself dry” and “had to adopt compromising and accommodating policies like trade and tributary-bribery ties” with neighbouring regimes (p. 49).

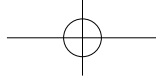
² Wang cites Victoria Tin-bor Hui, “How China Was Ruled,” *The American Interest* 3, no. 4 (March/April) 2008, pp. 53–67.

If Song-style “departure from the China Order” (pp. 65, 98) was a recurrent phenomenon rather than the only exception, then we should reconsider the claim that China “could hardly change from inside despite the extremely costly ways of replicative rejuvenation” (p. 113). Wang maintains that “Westernization” was “the way to survive” (p. 141). It is curious that eras of division are labelled “un-Qin-Han” or “anti-Qin-Han” (pp. 145, 151), “un-Chinese” (pp. 84, 88, 151), “non-*tianxia*” (pp. 75, 88), “Westphalia-like” or “quasi-Westphalia” (pp. 35, 75, 80, 84). Wang calls the Song period “a Westphalia-like world order six centuries earlier than the Europeans” (p. 65). He is more correct to say that the era “should be rightfully called the Chinese World” (p. 82). Invoking the term “Westphalia” only opens another can of worms. Mainstream international relations scholars see the European system as “Hobbesian” and “Machiavellian.” Wang chooses to see “Westphalia” as representing “glory and peacefulness” (p. 32), but the data in Table 1.2 do not establish any correlation between division and peace on the one hand and unity and war on the other (pp. 36–37).

Wang’s revisionist analysis is the most interesting when he details the twists and turns of the last century. Most of all, the so-called century of humiliation (1840s–1940s) brought not just shame but also Enlightenment (p. 135). Western powers demolished the China Order but also “assisted in securing, reshaping, and elevating the new China” (p. 156). The ROC was not hopelessly weak but succeeded in ending all unequal treaty terms and even shepherded China’s entrance to the United Nations as one of the five permanent members of the Security Council (p. 155). The CCP claims to champion national independence but it was directed and financed by the Soviet Union in its early decades (p. 162). Before the CCP crushed the Nationalist Party, Mao Zedong supported in 1945 “Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles, Lincoln’s of the people, by the people, for the people, and Franklin Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms” (p. 173). Once he took power, Mao built not a “new China” but a millennia-old totalitarian Qin-Han polity (pp. 137, 177).

Such a China indeed presents immense challenges to the post-Second World War liberal world order. Yet, if the Qin-Han polity has always been limited and the China Order incomplete, then there is no immutable “internal logic” for any resurgence of totalitarianism and militarism. If anything, Chinese history has been repeatedly driven by agency “rather than . . . historical inevitability” (p. 175), from the “focused, sustained, and skillful human efforts” that created the Qin dynasty (p. 43) to the “concerted human efforts and errors” that reproduced the PRC (p. 175).

Wang’s *The China Order* offers an elegant analysis of “what China is” and what China’s rise represents. But this book could push the revisionist analysis further in challenging the long-standing view that China was backward and stagnant in history. By blaming totalitarianism and expansionism on history, Wang paradoxically agrees



with the CCP that one-party dictatorship is what China needs. By seeing indigenous mechanisms for change as “un-Chinese,” he unfortunately echoes the party line that freedom is a Western construct alien to Chinese soil. China’s past is contingent, so is its future.

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