



BOOK REVIEW

End of an Era: How China's Authoritarian Revival is Undermining its Rise (1st Edition). By Carl Minzner. New York, Oxford University Press, 2018, xxiii+255p.
ISBN: 978-0-19-067208-9.

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In recent years, China is getting more and more aggressive and assertive both in foreign and domestic behaviors. On the one hand, Chinese domestic security situation is continuously deteriorating, and the stability maintenance measures are becoming hard as well; on the other hand, China's disputes with its neighbors or with other main competitors, like India, Japan and US, are escalating and Chinese foreign policy is changing their moderate tone increasingly. These abrupt developments in Chinese long-lasting moderate behaviors, foreign and domestic alike, surprised many people and draw wide attentions. As interests in learning what happening in China today arise, scholars tried to understand and explain these new developments in this country. As outcomes of such efforts, some valuable works are being presented to the public, responding to those questions: what is happening in China today? Why is happening? Which direction will China take? What are the possible scenarios for China's future? The book under review by Carl Minzner is one of them.

Carl Minzner is a Law Professor at Fordham University Law School, whose works focus on Chinese legal institutions. He is an expert in Chinese law and governance, and has written extensively on these topics in both academic journals and the popular press. Although Professor Minzner is a specialist on the Chinese legal system, but this is not ,as he says (p. xvi), a book about law.

It takes for the author over a decade to write this book. Most of general ideas for this book originated while the author was at the congressional-executive commission on China from 2003 to 2006, as a senior counsel. Others were developed between 2006-2007, while he was a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, joining Public Intellectuals Program from 2011 to 2013. He was able to meet a much wider range of experts from different research areas under that program and went to China among them. Aimed at encouraging midcareer academics to communicate with general public, the program played a crucial role in prompting the author to write this book (p. ix).

In this book, Carl Minzner puts forward that China's Reform Era is over. To support this hypothesis, he discusses how over the last decade changes in China's society, economy, politics and ideology led to the end of the Reform Era, endangering the country's further development. In this regard, The book presents a shocking message, making use of its author's decades of China-watching expertise, which reflect on mounting problems in China today, and the Party-state's responses to them.



Meanwhile, the book not only explains the End of an Era, but predicts a darkening possibilities with serious scenarios for the future of China and the world.

As the author states, “This book draws on nearly two decades of conversations with a range of Chinese citizens and activists outside the party-state, officials inside it, and academics with a foot in both worlds” (p. x). According to the author, they are who will shape the direction that their country will take, and more than anyone, they are deeply aware of the dangerous shifts that are beginning to take place within China. They also see how the system is beginning to slide. In part, this work represents an effort to combine and to reflect back their views as to what is happening.

In the beginning of this book, the author retrospectively scans Chinese long history of modernization and reform. In this way, he focuses on long process of political changes and law reform in china from fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912 to the end of Reform Era started in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping, the second top leader after Mao in the communist China history (p. xv). In the early 20th century, China witnessed some efforts to carry out democracy and rule of law. But these efforts failed because of conservative counter-reaction. “In the 1980s, China’s leaders embraced legal reform as a key part of their efforts to transition away from the political chaos of the Maoist era toward a more institutionalized model of governance, this was the birth of the Reform Era – an era of political stability, rapid economic growth and relative ideological openness to the outside world”. Now, the Reform Era is beginning to end as law is becoming less and less relevant to the Chinese future, as indicated by the author (p. xvi). Some tentative efforts during 1950s to build stable mechanisms of governance failed in the face of Mao Zedong’s distrust of institutionalized constraints on the exercise of power and his fear of political rivals. So, the author regards, this is not surprising and this is not first time in the Chinese history. But this has consequences, as warned by the author in his words, “When prospects for gradual reform are stifled, pressure for revolutionary change rises”. According to him, now, this cycle is repeating itself again (p. xvii).

This book has several aims. First, it seeks to explain what is taking place in China today. In this respect, the author tries to demonstrate what China really experiencing right now: the end of Chinese Reform Era, in which China transitioned out the Maoist era (1949-1976) in the late 1970s and early 1980s (xvii). Second, this book seeks to explain the complex interplay between state and society that has developed in China during the Reform Era. Third, this book attempts to think through various possibilities as to what might happen in China and how outsiders might respond (p. xviii).

The book is comprised of six chapters (pp. 17-161), plus an introduction before the main body and a conclusion after it, except additional sections like acknowledgments and preface. Lots of notes and index section (pp. 197-255) are also included in the end of the book. As mentioned above, the main body of this book is organized in the six chapters which are divided into various subtitles, broadly



discussing current direction, dynamics underlying this direction and possibilities to explain what is exactly happening in China today.

The *introduction* (pp. 1-15) of this book is very meaningful for its wonderful starting. It begins with recalling the long journey of the Chinese rulers' search for legitimacy by taming the natural resources or protecting people from natural disasters throughout the Chinese history. In this section, the author especially mentions the Yangtze and Yellow River – the two long and big rivers in China. Generations of modern Chinese rulers such as Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong all also dreamed of taming the rivers (p. 1). However, the historical ambition was finally realized under Chinese leadership in the Reform Era, after Mao in the Communist China, the Chinese “red dynasty”. According to the author, the two rivers have played a critique role in the Chinese political life. So, every dynasty in China in history tried to tame them to get legitimacy and show its power. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) successfully completed Three Gorges Dam project, the two-decade-long construction over the Yangtzi River, showing its capability and power. For the CCP, this is not only economic project. In some regards, it's a big national security policy to guarantee regime security, getting legitimacy and demonstrating power. Seeing this project as a great success for the Chinese authoritarian regime, the author explains its importance to the CCP, citing Confucius: “the ruler is the boat, the people the water. The water can support the boat, it can also sink it. The ruler should consider this, and realize the risks.” (p. 2). Although big infrastructures such as river dam and railway are demonstrated by government as a political success, they have some shortages. In different perspective, therefore, the Three Gorges Dam project is one of the most weaknesses of China in several ways: political, economic and military, as Minzner reminds (p. 3-4). As implications of recession in Chinese society, the section mentions civil riots, being reduced in humanity and values and increasing trends toward religion in large scale in today's China, following the social order getting worse, with several examples (pp. 5-6). Some specific information about subsequent chapters are also predicted in this section (p. 8-15).

Chapter 1, “Overview: The End of Chinese Reform Era” (pp. 17-35) goes through the whole Reform Era from “The Birth of Reform” to “Counter-Reform Era”. China started wide range of reform movements in 1978 under the second generation leadership of the CCP, which was headed by Deng Xiaoping, the second top leader in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Under the Reform, China has realized great achievements in social, economic and political areas. Especially the Chinese economic “miracle” attracted a lot of attentions and shocked many. But in recent years, as the space of the Chinese economic growth slows, social riots and political discontents arose. Following this, state behaviors, foreign and domestic alike, are getting aggressive and stability maintenance measures are being hard. Why are these happening? To explain these new developments in this country, the chapter surveys all of the reform process by analyzing the underlying reasons. The main reason lies in lack of political reform, as shown by the author: “since 1989, Beijing has firmly adhered to one core principle: uphold the rule of the CCP at all cost” (p. 18). According to the author, political reform



in china has stopped in 1989, after Tiananmen Square protests. The Chinese Reform then has been realized in economic area, not the political area. The chapter concludes that Chinese Reform Era, which is characterized by economic growth and social stability, is over, as China enters economic recessions.

Chapter 2, “Society and Economy: The Closing of the Chinese Dream” (pp. 37-66) talks to the readers about generations of the Chinese youth pursuing for their dreams. While young generations in the imperial China tried to realize their dreams through education (p. 38); the Chinese youth in communist China wished to be equal under socialism (p. 49). Although one generation’s dream was different form another, every generation in the Chinese history had a main dream which holds them loyal to the state. In the Chinese history, when young people lost their hopes, to high extent, there were revolutionary changes. As the author underlines, “China’s rise was intimately tied to offer citizens hope for a better future” (p. 65). So, the Chinese leaders are now looking for a new hope to inspire citizens. This can be seen from efforts by Xi Jinping since his coming to power in 2012. Xi Jinping is promoting his own version of The Chinese Gream (zhongguo meng) (p. 59). In this context, the chapter analyzes increasing social instabilities and political discontents in China in recent years, binding them to the Chinese youth’s losing hopes for future.

Chapter 3, “Politics: Internal Decay and Social Unrest” (pp. 67-112) is dedicated to analyze the main social and political issues in the Chinese society. It mentions the political institutionalization process in China as a long unperfected journey, dating from late Qing dynasty to the present. Political institutionalization has become “the core governance problem” in China for several centuries. Every government in China searched for solutions, but “one step forward, one step back” (p. 73). Institutionalizations helped governments to control society, so every government tries to maintain the stability through institutions, such as independent judicial system. But independent institutions create risks to authoritarian leaders, so every authoritarian leadership does not like more institutionalization, fearing of losing full control of state power. To address this problem, Chinese authoritarian regimes has had an additional petitioning system, besides their non-independent judicial systems in history. In this chapter, the author argues the petitioning systems as a problem and describes it as a long historic issues backing to Qing dynasty. Meanwhile, he discusses official response to the petitions, the government’s attitude increasingly getting tougher and this is driving peaceful protests to violence fueling radicalization (p. 86). The petitioning system in China today, in other words, is tool in hands of the CCP to monitor its local officials. But it is a main obstacle in face of rule of law and judicial independence, as shown by Minzner (p. 89). Besides the failure of institutionalization reform throughout history in China, basically, three main issues facing the Chinese society today are discussed in this chapter: 1) increasingly aging of the Chinese population, 2) environmental pollution, 3) corruption inside the CCP (p. 79).

Chapter 4, “Religion and Ideology: What Do We Believe?” (pp. 113-141) focuses on an essential problem facing the Chinese society today: faith famine.



Everyone who is familiar with China knows that there is an enormous hungry for faiths, religions or any other beliefs alike, among the Chinese people today. In this chapter, the author describes this situation as “an ideological vacuum caused by the collapse of the communism as a belief system”, after “decades-long repression of tradition” (p. 113). In front of these new trends, The Chinese government, on the one hand, partially loosens the tight control of religions, reviving the Chinese traditions; on the other hand, it tries to remodel the Marxist ideology, hoping it benefits to control of society. Realizing these purposes, the Chinese authorities allow religions to practice, but control them, and don’t allow any religion to become a political opposition organizing a political entity. The CCP wants religions to harmonize sacred teachings with party doctrine, requiring Catholics to deny the Pope, or Muslims to eat during the Ramadan fast. So government-led religious organizations lost credibility among believers. This led to rise of underground religious sects as well (p. 130). To explain this trends, the chapter outlines the big picture of various faiths and religious evolutions in China, categorizing them into three basic zones: the gray zone (unregistered faiths), the black zone (repressed beliefs) and the red zone (state supported sects).

Chapter 5, “China in Comparative Perspective” (pp. 143-160) looks at China from comparative perspectives, regional and global. First, the chapter begins with recalling some positive views raised in 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, about peaceful transition from authoritarian regime to democracy, including China. Then, it compares China to new democracies in the region, like Taiwan and South Korea, regarding their democratization processes as a “successful East Asian Model” (p. 152). Furthermore, other several countries’ democratization processes, ranging from India to Mexico, are also discussed from global perspective in this chapter (p. 154). “For many, China is the prime example of a nation in the middle of authoritarian modernization. The Chinese economy has extended tenfold since 1978.” (p. 144). However, regardless its amazing economic growth, China didn’t show any implications for democratic transition, while its neighbors such as Taiwan and South Korea have completed this processes successfully with theirs less economic growth than China today. China’s economy passed that of Taiwan and South Korea, but China is getting more authoritarian. In this way, China was different from “the East Asian Model”. Why? The chapter tries to answer this question. The author argues that only economic growth is not enough for successful democratic transition, it also needs some “limited political liberalization at a relative early stage” (p. 152), like was in Taiwan and South Korea. In China, even the limited political liberty did not exist at all. So China followed another path. The author regards, in this way, China today resembles the late-nineteenth-century Russia (p. 158).

Chapter 6, “Possible Futures” presents several scenarios for China’s future, but none of them is positive. Some darker possibilities for the Chinese future, such as “demise of liberal dream” (p. 162), “continued authoritarian rule” (p. 164), “populist nationalism” (p. 166), “the dynastic cycle: redux” (p. 169) and “regime collapse” (p. 172), are discussed in this chapter. The chapter also criticizes America for its superficiality in



assessing other countries as a whole rather than separating governments from their people and hence reminds US foreign policy makers of a new approach towards China. According to the author, “regime change should not be America’s business” (p. 185) and neither should support the existing regime; instead, the United States must have stronger “liberalism at home” (p. 187). The increasing new trends toward radicalization of viewpoints, like as nationalism, nativism and mutual distrust, both in China and America, are also mentioned in the end of this chapter.

The *conclusion* of this book is meaningful too, with its unique end, as its *introduction* was. While the *introduction* begins with recalling the Three Gorges Dam project, “as an analogy for Beijing’s late Reform Era response to escalating social and political pressures”; the *conclusion* ends with reminding another Chinese water construction project: Dujiangyan, “one of the oldest and unique water diversion and irrigation projects in the world... completed around 256 BC”, as a choice representing an alternative model of the Chinese governance (p. 194). The section mainly stays on the tie between state and society, highlighting interactions among them (p. 192). In this section, lack of institutionalizations in China is mentioned once again as a main problem, indicating that the Reform Era was a golden opportunity for China to slowly complete institutionalization. But this opportunity was gone as the Reform Era is over.

Finally, the book, *End of an Era: How China's Authoritarian Revival is Undermining Its Rise* by Carl Minzner is an insightful work that offers a comprehensive picture of the diverse and significant transformations in China, after the beginning of the Reform Era in 1978, putting the period in the whole Chinese modernization history. Because of lack of background informations about China, for common readers, who are not familiar with China, can be difficult to understand some events mentioned in this book and to bind the ties between them. It also seems to be a range of radical assumptions to some scholars and students of China studies admired by the Chinese economic “miracle”. However, both of them benefit from this book. The book provides most important informations about China for common readers, while it presents an analysis framework for scholars to understand and explain the developments in China. With these characteristics, the book is a must-read for China-watchers, but highly recommended for people who want to get a realistic view of China’s future. In summary, the book is a valuable read for all those interested in understanding what is happening or will happen in China.