



THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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EXPLAINING CHINA'S ACTIONS ABROAD An Erudite Defense of Beijing's Policies and Perceptions

Toh Han Shih, *Is China a Menacing Empire?* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2025), 476 pages, US\$38.

U.S. President Donald Trump's reciprocal tariffs come into effect. Argentina continues to reel under economic pressure, the aftermath of taking loans from the International Monetary Fund, with President Javier Milei's cuts to numerous social programs (such as pensions). Russia and Ukraine continue to fight. The plight of, and utter unjustness against, the Palestinians continues to be ignored; Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues carrying out offensives in Gaza in order to save his skin and distract his people from his graft case. The new Syrian government tries to unite the country under demanding circumstances. A civil war is about to commence in South Sudan with the arrest of its Vice President Riek Machar. And Trump aims to take Greenland and Canada.

Perhaps, China is behind all these events!



The One-sided Narratives

In such times, when China has become a useful punching bag for extracting political and professional mileage, *Is China a Menacing Empire?* offers a much-needed objective analysis. The deafening one-sided narrative about China is questioned in this book, where the author exhaustively investigates the verity behind the contentions showered against China. Open-mindedness is an essential attribute for those reading this book because it questions the conventional presuppositions and understandings of China.

The book has eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the apprehension over the rise of China globally. It illustrates the anxiety of the United States, in general, and the West, historically, by indicating the racial undertone of such angst. Chapter 2 addresses the trite epithet of China's "debt trap" diplomacy. At pains, the author diligently lays out the evidence against such claims. Chapter 3 considers the platitudinous corrupt dealings of China on foreign soil. The author shows that the efforts China has been making to tackle corruption internally, and the demand for kickback traditions of the host states, amply displayed in the chapter, indicates the complex nature of corruption. Chapter 4 is an extension that further details explicitly the agency of the host states in exploiting the funds meant for development projects, and how these are used by high government officials in collusion with other elites to maintain their grip on power and extend their patronage system. In Chapter 5, the focus is on Hong Kong. Despite the conventional view about how China is about to forcefully bring Hong Kong under its communist grip, the author spares no details in patiently demonstrating why the "one country, two systems" policy is essential for China's own interests, and why such fears are unfounded. The impact of China's entry into the world economy and the immensity of its trade with other states

is examined in Chapter 6. It suggests how the trade war with China is a subterfuge for internal class struggle between the elites and the “ordinary households” in the United States and China (p. 376). The concluding Chapters 7 and 8 address the prospect of war between the two powers, China and the United States (p. 389–393). The author provides plausible scenarios but highlights the importance of co-existence (p. 402), and recommends strategies to manage China (in chapter 8). The managing of China requires the inclusion of this giant, not its exclusion (p. 427). Now, what do we make of, or take away, from this book?

Anyone but China?! This is what one can glean from the book. Perhaps one is stretching the arguments put forth in the book, but this is what one gathers from this very exhaustive and erudite work. Certainly, the whole rationale of the book is to investigate “how justifiable are the claims that China is ‘menacing’ [and hence the title of the book] to other nations especially the US” (p. 1–2). However, in investigating this claim, one not only finds such claims to be unjustifiable, but also infers from the evidence presented that it hints toward something more disturbing. Indeed, one can deduce that it is plainly not just ‘Anyone but China,’—rather the echo of ‘No one other than the West!’—that is perhaps more applicable, more palatable. One can find here a tint of racial undertone. It may offend many, but this is what the evidence suggests. Maybe I am reading too much into the book, but any objective reading of the evidence presented points to this direction. Much like the reason why the United States dropped the atom bomb in Japan (Asian) and not Germany (White). Can the West, with its six centuries of domination, find it unpalatable that anyone other than itself should dominate the world, which naturally involves the implicit dictation upon others of what political, socio-economic, and philosophical values, as well as historical facts and religious beliefs are valid and considered to be ‘truth’? In other

words, what the West deems ‘good’ is ‘good’ for all, and how it perceives political as well as human relations should be adopted by all.

Constructing a New “Yellow Peril”

Just as one of the endemic elements in cultural genocide is the dehumanization of the other, so do we find the dehumanizing of China. How else is one to deduce former U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo’s labeling of China as the “biggest threat we’ve ever had” (p. 1)? Or former U.S. Vice President Michael Pence remarking that “China is not yet an evil empire, but it’s working hard every day to become one” (p. 1), which is reminiscent of U.S. President Ronald Reagan branding the Soviet Union during the Cold War as an “evil empire” (p. 14)? Or the successive U.S. Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and Mike Pompeo describing China’s development initiatives across the globe as “quite disturbing,” “predatory,” and “bullying” (p. 13)? Such belittling labels and remarks are but subterfuge that prepare the conditions essential to vilify the other and ascribe to them all that is “evil.” Thus, the notion of the “Yellow Peril” (p. 16–17) fits in well with the narrative that the West is under threat from the barbaric east, for “yellow” signifies the racial features of the “evil” enemy. Will the West construct a similar “peril” if the rising power happens to be India? Will it construe a parallel “brown peril”? The answer seems to be in the positive, perhaps. Or how about if the rising power is Canada or any one of the Scandinavian countries? It is doubtful that the West will denounce these powers in the same way.

It may not be too far-fetched to propose that the notions of the *threat*, the *enemy*, and the *us versus them* orientation are possibly the most essential aspects of the Western mind. This principle of *duality* (illustrative in its philosophical terms such as ‘contradiction’) or *either/or* binary is how the Western mind is wired, which, through its

centuries of world (and cultural) domination, is now a pervasive aspect of how societies that are variously different from how the west perceives itself. Even the title of the book under review, *Is China a Menacing Empire?* is illustrative of the absorption of an us versus them orientation (discussed further in the concluding paragraphs).

The rancorous characterizations of China, such as evil, the biggest threat, predatory, lawless, and so forth, manifest such orientation. In a conflict between the forces of good and evil, it is evident who is 'good' and who is 'evil.' Therefore, the denunciations of China by former U.S. Commerce Secretary Raimondo, former U.S. Secretaries of State Clinton and Mike Pompeo, and former U.S. Vice President Pence confirm the *either/or* duality that these officials exploit for their own purposes. Here, you are 'either' with us 'or' against us, you cannot be nonaligned or remain neutral (no doubt, the United States saw neutral states as hostile threats during the Cold War). This is evident in the fact that the United States goes around forming security alliances (which is also evident in Europe during the age of empires where the formation of alliances was part and parcel of how they operated). Illustrative of such pacts are the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the more recent Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and the Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS) security agreement. Because everything the West does is 'good' and well-intentioned, such as development projects, economic aid, financial loans, extraction of minerals and natural resources, hence a country such as China trying to do the same is motivated solely to dominate and exploit others.

Cheque-book Diplomacy

When U.S.-funded international development agencies and financial institutions (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary

Fund) implicitly imposed loans on developing states that they cannot get out of (look at Argentina, Sri Lanka, Pakistan), it is called responsibility, accountability, and good governance.¹ The author, Toh, demonstrates that when China gives loans and development aid, it is labeled “debt trap” diplomacy, even though the evidence seems contentious. Sri Lanka, for instance, has become the poster boy for “debt-trap” diplomacy linking the collapse of the Sri Lankan economy to Chinese loans. There is a great deal of scholarly literature on both sides of the debate, some blaming China for its role in strapping small countries with unmanageable debt and bringing them to the brink of default and economic collapse,² and others showing it to be otherwise.³

¹ Graciela Monteagudo, “IMF Holds Argentina Hostage Again: As More than a Third of Argentines Live in Poverty, Debt and Austerity Threaten to Push Politics toward Further Polarization,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 54, no. 4 (2022): 365–68; European Foundation for Southeast Asian Studies, *Bailout Politics Pakistan’s Economy and the IMF*, EFSAS Study Paper, no. 5 (2024); Alex Irwin–Hunt and Jiyeong Go, “The IMF’s Top 10 biggest debtors,” *FDI Intelligence* (2025), <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/091c7d50-1b0c-5b7c-a28b-30017b57c589>; and Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, “How the International Monetary Fund is Squeezing Pakistan,” *Dossier no 69* (2023).

² Brahma Chellaney, “China’s Debt–Trap Diplomacy,” *Project Syndicate*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-one-belt-one-road-loans-debt-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-01>; Abel Kinyondo, “Is China Recolonizing Africa?: Some Views from Tanzania,” *World Affairs* 182, no. 2 (2019): 128–64; Bernard Condon, “China’s loans pushing world’s poorest countries to brink of collapse,” *Associated Press*, May 19, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/china-debt-banking-loans-financial-developing-countries-collapse-8df6f9fac3e1e758d0e6d8d5dfbd3ed6>; Jonathan Eales, “China’s Debt Trap Diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan,” *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/chinas-debt-trap-diplomacy-in-kyrgyzstan/>

³ Deborah Brautigam and Meg Rithmire, “The Chinese Debt Trap Is a Myth: The Narrative Wrongfully Portrays Both Beijing and the Developing Countries It Deals With,” *The Atlantic*, February 6, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/02/china-debt-trap-diplomacy/617953/>; Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, “Debunking the Myth of ‘Debt-trap Diplomacy’: How Recipient Countries Shape China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Chatham House, The*

In Chapter 3, the author raises a pertinent question as a way to illustrate what has been discussed. While addressing China's ability to tackle corruption, the author asks:

If China ever becomes as proactive as the US in pursuing cross-border corruption, will US officials accuse China of imperialist behaviour, even though the US is the world policeman? If that happens, China will be in a bind. If the Chinese government is too lax on overseas corruption, it will give ammunition to accusations by US officials like Bolton and Pompeo of corruption in the BRI [China's Brick and Road Initiative]. On the other hand, if the Chinese authorities aggressively fight international graft and arrest non-Chinese nationals in other countries, US officials may accuse it of imperialism, lack of due process and violation of human rights (p. 156).

The passage is suggestive of “damned if you do, damned if you do not” dilemma—meaning no matter what China does, it will be vilified simply because it is the ‘peril,’ the ‘evil empire’ threatening the West. It is a truism that for the West, China is an emblem of “. . . the ultimate Other.”⁴ Otherwise, why are there no other analogues to the “Yellow Peril.”

Royal Institute of International Affairs (August 2020), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-25-debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy-jones-hameiri.pdf>; Umesh Moramudali, and Thilina Panduwawala, “The Political Economy of Hambantota Port: Unveiling the Realities of Debt Trap Diplomacy and BRI Vision,” *Asian Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 3 (2024): 380–99; and Michal Himmer and Zdeněk Rod, “Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy: Reality or Myth?” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 18, no. 3 (2022): 250–72.

⁴ Zhang Longxi, “The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 11 (1988): 110.

This is why the West cannot perceive the possibility of ‘the United States *and*’ since that would mean that the West is no longer the sole dominant force, nor the sole emblem of human civilization and progress. ‘*And*’ would suggest that many countries or societies (racially too) can co-exist and prosper together, but such statements are anathema to *either/or* orientation. *Either* the West is at the top *or* it is not, that is the logic behind their worldview. Thus, only one sole dominant power (the United States), culturally and, perhaps, racially (the West and white). The popularity of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century BCE, stemming from the ancient Western tradition, in contemporary times is a real-time illustration of this orientation. It even led some of the leading contemporary political scientists to theorize the *Thucydides Trap* about the possibility of war and how to avert such wars among great powers during the power transition.⁵ Titles such as “destined for war?” and “Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?” are suggestive of one’s orientation that enables such questions to be conjured in the first place. They indicate how the West views ‘reality.’ No doubt, the questions are valid if one ascribes to the particular lens—*either/or*—because it matters from this lens, not all the lenses. However, from a lens other than the Western one, such questions may not be even conjured simply because the mental frame or orientation will not consider such a question to be worth asking since it does not matter. A passage cited in this book perhaps best illustrates this message of differing lenses: “In the West, the words of politicians and statesman do not differ very much but in Chinese there is a big difference. A statesman has good character, excellent ability to serve and to achieve things for

⁵ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides Trap?* (Mariner Books, 2018).

the country and society. A politician, on the other hand, is a fickle, double-dealing, dishonest person who acts for personal gains” (p. 272). The same line of reasoning applies to differing views between China and the United States concerning Taiwan, Hong Kong, world politics, development projects, international law, transparency, human rights, security, political and economic systems.⁶

The South China Sea, however, is a symptom of a possible future clash. China’s claim to the entire South China Sea worries Southeast Asian countries. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague ruled against China’s expansive claims in the South China Sea, finding that China’s “nine-dash line” and its related activities violated international law, specifically the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Southeast Asian countries are, nonetheless, welcoming of Chinese investments, but they are also hoping that China relinquishes its expansive territorial claims to international waters. Above all, they wish to see China rising peacefully.

Notwithstanding these events, it is essential also to note that there are overlapping territorial claims not just and solely between the ASEAN and China, but also among the member states of ASEAN.⁷ With regard to the Paracel Islands, for example, Vietnamese claims overlap those of Malaysia and the Philippines. On the other hand, the Philippines’ claims over the Spratly Islands puts them on a collision

⁶ Salikyu Sangtam, ““All-Under-Heaven” is Timeless: An Anthropology of Chinese Strategic Behavior,” *Rising Asia Journal* 3, no. 2 (2023): 293–331.

⁷ Nicole Jenne, “Managing Territorial Disputes in Southeast Asia: Is There More than the South China Sea?” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 36, no. 3: 35–61; Rodolfo C. Severino, “The Philippines and the South China Sea,” in *Entering Uncharted Waters? ASEAN and the South China Sea*, ed. Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 166–207 (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2014); and Ashley J. Roach, *Malaysia and Brunei: An Analysis of Their Claims in the South China Sea* (Virginia: CNA Corporation, 2014).

course with Vietnam and China. The territorial disputes in the waters of the South China Sea also extend between Indonesia and Malaysia over the islands of Ligitan and Sipadan.⁸ Yet, China's disputes and claims have received more media exposure than the disputes between Southeast Asian states.

What's more, the world (culturally, racially, politically, and internationally) is viewed from this Thucydidean lens, i.e. there cannot be two or more powers that can co-exist, *either* one *or* the others must become the sole power and dominate the system. Two or more powers in a system beget instability. For stability's sake, only one sole power is preferable. The same is applied to the cultural realm, too. There cannot be two or more equal cultures (or races). The Western mind seems reluctant to register or imagine alternative possibilities.

A Few Questions

Lastly, despite the aforementioned insights one collects from the book, there is one drawback. The problem here is how the author, perhaps subconsciously, ascribes to the Western mental map. This is clear from the title of the book, *Is China a Menacing Empire?* First, China may be seen from a Western orientation as an 'empire' or from the author's own words "semi-empire," but does China see itself as such? Toh and other scholars have argued that China never saw itself as an empire (or semi-empire).⁹ Yet it is also generally recognized that China had no proper word for empire until the late nineteenth century. Only then did it begin

⁸ Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (Yale University Press, 2014); Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (Random House Publishing Group, 2014); and Jenne, "Managing Territorial Disputes in Southeast Asia: Is There More than the South China Sea?"

⁹ Salikyu Sangtam, "Timeless stratagem: Understanding Chinese strategic behavior," *Contemporary Strategy* 42, no. 4 (2023): 574–586.

to call itself an empire, and compare itself to the Japanese and European empires.¹⁰ Caution must, therefore, be exercised while using distant terminologies (which are heavily context-laden) such as “empire” when we try to understand ancient civilizations, whose meaning may be incommensurable and hence produce more misunderstanding than clarity.

Second, China’s rise is seen as “menacing” from the U.S. perspective, as well as from the perspective of some of its neighbors in the Indo-Pacific with whom Beijing has prickly relations. Because the United States sees itself as ‘good’ and thus as the world’s sole powerful leader, whatever it proclaims, it proclaims on behalf of the world—that is the implicit assumption with centuries of cultural and knowledge domination. Hence, when the United States declares China as “menacing,” anyone ascribing to the Western outlook immediately cognizes China as a menace for all, for every country, and a menace to the world itself. The author may not necessarily believe that China is a menace, but he has done well to respond to the widespread question that looms over the foreign affairs space, whether China is really a menace. In doing so, the author presents a favorable image of China by dismissing many of the common allegations it faces.

Toh’s book packs substantial scholarly heft by relying equally on academic journals and magazines, reports from think tanks and specialized area studies research centers, and books and newspaper reports. With his use of a broad spectrum of sources, the book is highly relevant and makes for an interesting read. It is exhaustive but necessarily so due to the evidence it presents in weighing the

¹⁰ Krishan Kumar, “Was China an Empire and, if so, of What Kind?” National University of Singapore, October 22, 2024, <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/events/20241022-krishan-kumar/>

contentions that are being loaded against China. In times where imposition of trade tariffs by the United States occupies a central position in all policy talks and papers, it seems all the more essential that this book be read and understood because contained in it are cautions, or “stones,” which policymakers, experts, and scholars can use to cross the murky waters of present-day international relations among states. Or as one Chinese saying goes, “crossing the river by feeling the stones.”

Note on the Reviewer

Salikyu Sangtam is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Tetso College in Chumoukedima, India. He teaches political theory and research methods. His research focuses on Chinese thought, and non-western political thought. He is a regular contributor for the *Rising Asia Journal*. In 2023, he was invited to an international conference held in Beijing, China organized by the School of Philosophy, Renmin University of China on the theme “Chinese-Style Modernization: Philosophical Perspectives in a Global Context.” And in the early parts of 2024, he was also invited to an international conference organized by the Wuyi Research Institute of Chinese Civilization, Wuyi University, Nanping, China on the theme “Wuyi Forum on the Two Integrations of Five Millennia of Chinese Civilization and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” In addition, he has served on numerous invited occasions as a resource person in academic workshops as well as delivering lectures.