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In Case You Missed It: China Dream

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By Christopher R. Hughes


*China Dream*, by Colonel Liu Mingfu, a professor at Beijing’s National Defense University, is the latest of several books to speculate on how China can displace the leadership of the United States after the global economic crisis. Understandably, Liu’s military background has led to conjecture over whether his views reflect the ambitions of the PLA or even China’s leaders. Yet *China Dream* is most interesting not so much for what it recommends for foreign and defense policies, as for what it says about the deployment of nationalistic themes in the debates over China’s domestic politics.

As with works like Jiang Rong’s *Wolf Totem* (2004), and the 2009 title *Unhappy China* (co-written by Huang Jisu, Liu Yang, Song Jiang, Song Xiaojun, and Wang Xiaodong), *China Dream* contains much that will be of interest to anyone monitoring the belief in China’s racial supremacy, militarism and political voluntarism. Yet, although Liu joins the chorus calling for a stronger military, it is wrong to present him as an adventurist hawk. He is even prepared to acknowledge that the United States has made some positive contributions to the world, quoting Mao’s view that the good American people should be separated from the bad interest groups who drive its anti-China policies. He proposes that war can be avoided if the United States behaves itself and China gives it enough time to adjust to the age of “yellow fortune”, a synthesis of the superior civilisation of the East with the best elements of the West.

This is quite different from the venomous anti-Americanism found in some of the authors of *Unhappy China*, or the influential geopolitical thinker Zhang Wenmu, a professor at the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics. Combined with other elements of the book, this raises the possibility that *China Dream* reflects concerns in the military to divert the nationalist wave away from a showdown with the United States. This view becomes more compelling when the book shifts its focus steadily towards a strong critique of what it regards as the low status of the military and the corruption of the current political elite.

This trajectory can be seen in the way that Liu addresses the orthodoxy of China’s “peaceful rise”. On the one hand he is happy to align with the leadership by citing Hu Jintao’s statement to the 17th CCP Congress as evidence that China will not be a hegemonic or expansionist power. Yet he then goes on to criticize those who harbour naive illusions about the intentions of the United States because they do not understand that concepts like “peaceful world” and “harmonious world” can only be realised in the context of an international balance of power.
In case the relevance of this for contemporary debates is lost, Liu finishes this argument with a critique of Zheng Bijian, the architect of the "peaceful rise" orthodoxy. Agreeing that China will not become a "hegemonic" power, Liu differs from Zheng by insisting that great military power is still necessary to protect national security, uphold world peace and achieve unification. A country with a big economy and no military, he concludes, is like a plump sheep waiting in the market.

The significance of this argument becomes clearer when Liu adds his voice to those currently calling for a revival of China’s “militaristic spirit” (shangwu jingshen 尚武精神). China Dream presents this in the context of a grand historicist vision of the founding and decline of great dynasties, which is similar to the argument developed in Wolf Totem. Rather than looking to the warlike culture of China’s nomadic minorities, though, he looks to the founders of three great dynasties, Qin Shihuang, Han Wudi and Tang Taizong as models for using force for unification, going on the offense to expel enemies and combining soft with hard power. But Liu is careful to add that it was the CCP that revived the “militaristic spirit” most recently, as demonstrated by the Korean War.

This is important, because when China Dream looks for an explanation of why the militaristic genes of the great founders degenerate, the answer is found in the corruption of the bureaucratic political elite and the enervating life style that comes with wealth and prosperity. The Song dynasty is thus singled out as the source of China’s “culture weakening” (wen rouhua 文弱化), because it centralised power in the Confucian bureaucracy in order to prevent the possibility of a military coup. The result was an emphasis on compromise and retreat in foreign affairs, a mainstream philosophy that emphasised peace at the expense of security, and a mistaken strategy of defending the south and neglecting the north that left the country open to attack. Overall, argues Liu, the dynasty that produced by far the largest number of theoretical texts on war craft ended up with a military that was bloated and lacking in quality.

In this context, Zheng Bijian becomes just one representative of a much broader crisis afflicting China’s political elite. This is made very clear when the last section of the book consists of four chapters devoted to an exploration of the theory that China will collapse. One might expect Liu to dismiss such a theory at the end of a book celebrating China’s rise to world dominance. Instead, he quotes a warning given by Mao Zedong in 1956 that the most dangerous time for China would arrive 40-50 years later, when the country would have to deal with the temptations of corruption, bureaucratism and great power chauvinism. He also cites Deng Xiaoping’s concerns over the threat to stability posed by growing inequality of wealth. Returning to his grand historicist cycle, Liu then cites a poem by Du Fu, of the Tang Dynasty, which attributes the demise of the Six Kingdoms and the Qin Dynasty to internal causes.

Anger over corruption and inequality is of course widespread in China and makes up a significant part of a book like Unhappy China. What China Dream shows is that the military also has a voice in this clamour. Liu indicates that he is not alone in this respect when he cites an article carried in the press cuttings section of the PLA newspaper Jiefangjun bao, in 2009, listing the problematic areas in which China stands as number one in the world, such as the number of its bureaucrats, the cost of government administration, the amount of public money spent by officials and the accidental death rate. Neither does Liu pull his punches when he fixes the blame for this degeneration on the CCP, using the fate of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union to show what happens when the founding generation of idealists is replaced by a group of people who pursue their own material interests.

Rather than dismiss the theory of China’s collapse, then, Liu doubts whether a possible economic decline can be managed on the basis of growing inequality and corruption. This allows him to argue that domestic corruption and ossification (jianghua 僵化) are the problems that will obstruct the search for solutions to enormous domestic concerns like the greying of the population, rather than US-led Westernisation and division.

When it comes to offering real solutions, however, aside from calling for “creativity” to solve the “three big contradictions” of the environment, society and international affairs, Liu does little more than side with the authoritarian and moralistic turn taking place in Chinese politics. At one point he adds to the still tentative calls for a strong leader that are now appearing in Chinese texts, pointing out that a rising nation needs a Lenin, Stalin, Mao or Deng to succeed. Interestingly, given current
speculation over divisions between the Youth League and the Shanghai factions at the top of the Party, Liu even adds Jiang Zemin to this list of great dictators.

In the context of a China that is now looking beyond the CCP for ideological inspiration, it is also notable that the figure of Sun Yatsen looms large throughout the book, although it is the National Father’s advocacy of Chinese racial superiority that is stressed, rather than his contribution to republican democracy. The paucity of this search for indigenous solutions is revealed, however, when Liu falls back on a foreign author like John Naisbitt’s popular China’s Megatrends, to argue for the possibility of a vertical, one-party “democracy with Chinese characteristics”. Again, such arguments are only interesting to Liu because they are compatible with his desire to build a political system that is superior to US democracy insofar as it can consolidate the use of power and creativity for the demands of national strategy.

Yet it is the pessimistic conclusion of China Dream that is most striking, as Liu despairs that the present situation is worse than it was under Mao and that CCP rule will be challenged if corruption cannot be controlled. Even the creation of a stabilising welfare system seems impossible when CCP cadres are working with “two hands” – one to serve the people, one to help themselves. Yet Liu remains stuck on the horns of China’s political dilemma as he is unwilling to countenance the return to using mass political movements to combat corruption, while the alternative of multiparty democracy is condemned as part of an anti-Chinese US conspiracy.

That the best Liu can do to inject a note of optimism into the conclusion of China Dream is to cite a number of quotes from Martin Jacques to confirm that China will not follow the fate of the Soviet Union because the CCP will remain in control and the Chinese government is imbued with a high degree of creativity, can only be taken as symptomatic of the conflicting emotions and political paradoxes that are reflected in the current spate of political literature from China. Yet, rather than expecting coherent theories and clear arguments, it is the ways in which nationalistic themes are adopted and deployed by numerous actors in the discourse of domestic politics that makes such texts so useful for gaining insights into China’s trajectory. In this respect Liu might have hit even more headlines around the world if he had given his book the title Unhappy PLA.

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