Six Takes on Martin Jacques

Jeffrey Wasserstrom
University of California, Irvine, wasserstromjeff@gmail.com

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February 3, 2010 in Uncategorized by jwasserstrom | 1 comment
By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

I have a commentary that’s just appeared online at time.com (it’s in print as well in Time Asia’s February 8 issue), in which I focus on the distinction between what I call “Big China Books” (with “titles that cry out to be put in bold type”) and the quite different works that take a “worm’s eye” rather than “bird’s eye” view of the country, and which usually avoid predictive assertions. I state my preference for the latter genre, which I call forays into “scholarly reporting,” taking my cue from Andrew Ross.

While I mention several books falling into each category, the one that gets the most extended discussion is Peter Hessler’s Country Driving: A Journey Through China from Farm to Factory. I spell out my reasons for thinking it an exemplary contribution to the growing corpus of elegantly crafted journalism-meets-ethnography “worm’s eye” analyses of the People’s Republic. No work that take a “bird’s eye” view approach gets as much praise (or, indeed, as much scrutiny), but one that I discuss early in the essay, When China Rules the World by Martin Jacques, is my focus here.

My goal in this spin-off to the Time piece is not to offer an expanded version of my own thoughts on that particular Big China Book, but rather to direct the attention of interested readers to six recent essays by other people that engaged with the thesis of When China Rules the World. Between them, this sextet of reviews and opinion pieces provides, I think, a good sense of both the range of positions staked out in the debate generated by 2009’s most talked about Big China Book, and a sense of some of the ways that writers, including Jacques himself, have taken to claiming that each new event can be used to either prove or undermine its claims.

1. Perry Anderson’s “Sinomania” offers a wonderfully astute critique of When China Rules the World, which is too elegant (and eloquent) to try to summarize here. Like so many of his contributions to the London Review of Books, this is an essay to savor (for the language) and learn from (due to the erudition). Though the piece is totally different from mine in length, form, and focus, Anderson does conclude, as I do, with appreciation for a work of grassroots analysis he admires—in his case not a work of reportage but rather sociologist Ching Kwan Lee’s excellent recent book on social unrest, Against the Law: Labor Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt.

2. John Gray’s New Statesman review of Jacques’ book. This is perhaps the most enthusiastic assessment of the book to date to appear in a significant publication and be written by a notable intellectual. And it is hard to imagine it being supplanted from that post, since Gray refers to it as “by far the best book on China to have been published in many years.”

3. Minxin Pei’s “Why China Won’t Rule the World”. The title says it all: this is a refutation of the book’s claims, which focuses largely on questioning the conventional wisdom on the strength of China’s economy—and also notes how hesitant many Chinese are about thinking of their country as surging to full superpower status. (This brings to mind Susan Shirk’s important point, in her China: Fragile Superpower, that Americans she told about her proposed title would often raise their eyebrows at her use of the word “fragile,” while Chinese she mentioned it to would query the validity of the final word in it.)

4. Will Hutton’s “China is in crisis, not in the ascendant”, which again has a give-away title but, unlike Pei’s essay, is a full-fledged critical review of the book as a book, not just an effort to counter its thesis. The special interest of this review lies in the fact that, in Britain in particular (where both the reviewer and Jacques are better known than elsewhere and each contribute to the same newspaper, The Guardian), When China Rules the World is often treated as a direct response to Hutton’s earlier Big China Book, The Writing on the Wall. (To follow this thread further, John Gray, perhaps not surprisingly, was left “unconvinced” by Hutton’s book when he reviewed it for the Guardian back in 2007. And there’s an exchange between Hutton and Jacques available online as well—at the Guardian’s site, of course.)
5. Michiko Kakutani’s *Will the Dragon Swat Down the Eagle?*. This is a characteristically smart and stylish assessment by one of the best book reviewers working for a newspaper on this side of the Atlantic. She takes Jacques to task in part for his “tendency to cherry-pick information,” seizing upon facts and figures that support but overlooking those that call into question his vision of the future.

6. Martin Jacques’ *No Chance Against Google.* This recent *Newsweek* commentary by Jacques is subtitled “Google’s defeat foretell the day when Beijing rules the world.” The debate will go on, but this seems an appropriately up-to-the-minute place to leave it, and since my own stance toward his book is critical, it is fitting, perhaps, to end with Jacques making the case once again for his Big China Book’s biggest claim.