Review: *China’s Megatrends: The Eight Pillars of a New Society*

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By William A. Callahan


The future is a hot topic in China; bookstores are full of tomes asserting the 21st century as China’s century: Liu Mingfu’s *The China Dream* (2010) and Chan Koon-chung’s *The Gilded Era: China 2013* (2009) are but two of the most recent books that describe how China is destined to become the number one country in the world.

While there are many books by academics — and even novelists — what about the prognostications of professional futurologists? Sadly, futures studies institutes in China are thin on the ground; indeed, last month when I visited the address listed on the China Society for Futures Studies website, I found that its headquarters was being torn down — leading one witty colleague to wonder whether China’s future was likewise chaile 拆了 (i.e. torn down).

Luckily, noted international futurologist John Naisbitt has come to the rescue with his new book, *China’s Megatrends: The Eight Pillars of a New Society*, which is co-authored with his wife Doris. Frustrated with how China has been (mis)represented in the western media, the Naisbitts’ task is ambitious: to tell us the good news about the Real China. They argue — at length — that westerners can’t understand China because they are blinded by their own values, which are inappropriate for seeing what is actually happening in China. Their solution is to see China from the inside-out by listening closely to Chinese voices and the positive stories that they tell.

While most authors (including me) likewise claim to use Chinese sources to understand the PRC, the Naisbitts conduct their research in a novel way: in 2007, they founded the Naisbitt China Institute in Tianjin. Since neither Naisbitt speaks Chinese, they hired dozens of students and instructed them to comb provincial newspapers for the facts of the dramatic changes taking place in China. Using this pile of “objective facts” to understand China in a new way, the Naisbitts come to this exciting conclusion: “China in 2009 was creating an entirely new social and economic system — and a political model, which may well prove that ‘the end of history’ was just another pause along history’s path.”
China’s Megatrends describes this new model of governance in terms of eight pillars that hold up China’s new society: Emancipation of the Mind, Balancing Top-down and Bottom-up, Framing the Forest and Letting the Trees Grow, Crossing the River by Feeling for Stones, Artistic and Intellectual Ferment, Joining the World, Freedom and Fairness, and From Olympic Gold Medals to Nobel Prizes.

The book thus explains how China liberated itself from its Maoist ideological mindset and reactivated China’s “entrepreneurial gene” when Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978. The Chinese leadership is praised for creating new values and culture that build trust rather than fear. Instituting the “right mixture of control and freedom,” the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) thus has been able to direct the people’s creativity towards positive economic development — rather than political reform, which is seen as negative. The key to China’s success, the Naisbitts tell us, is its continuity of leadership, able to make long-term plans rather than having to address short-term electoral pressures; the CCP’s legitimacy thus is based on results, rather than votes. This has made China the workshop of the world, and its next goal is to be the “innovator of the world.” The Naisbitts thus are confident that China will soon move from winning Olympic gold medals to winning Nobel prizes.

The Naisbitts should be careful what they wish for: much to the chagrin of the CCP leadership, Liu Xiaobo became the first PRC-based Nobel Laureate when he won the Peace Prize this year.

While China’s Megatrends is quite hostile to democracy — which it calls western democracy — the book spends a fair bit of space talking about it. At times, the Naisbitts see China as democratizing, albeit at a much slower pace than “western critics” demand. Their prediction for China’s democratic future is enigmatic: “The last steps toward full political emancipation will be to let the butterfly fly and to call it what it is: a butterfly.”

But their main argument is that China has developed a different — and better — form of democracy, which they call “vertical democracy.” Freedom, they argue, means something different for Chinese people: social order and harmony. The focus of democracy thus shifts from individual choice to group harmony. The main task of vertical democracy is not to represent the people’s will, but to harmoniously balance top-down and bottom-up forces. Top-down refers to the CCP leadership’s plans and policies; yet the book’s examples of bottom-up influence are not so clear: mass demonstrations were okay when Shanghai residents successfully stopped the East China Maglev Project (2007-08), but were a threat when they took place in Tian’anmen Square in 1989.

For all this talk about the importance of bottom-up influence, China’s institutional structures for listening to popular needs, concerns and ideas are quite weak, and it seems that the CCP decides what is “acceptable” bottom-up activity ex post facto – which is hardly a good formula for building trust. The Naisbitts’ new model of good governance thus begs many questions that are familiar to both pundits and political theorists: “Who watches the watchmen?”

Rather than get caught up in a debate about Asian collectivism vs. Western individualism, we can best understand the strengths and weaknesses of China’s Megatrends by examining its methods and sources in more detail.

Recall that the Naisbitts have concluded that western media can’t properly understand because it is biased by western values; their solution to this problem is to use Chinese media sources that have authentic Chinese values. Unfortunately, the Naisbitts don’t grasp how tightly the party-state controls the Chinese media. As Anne-Marie Brady explains in Marketing Dictatorship (2007), China’s propaganda system goes way beyond negative censorship to produce positive stories of China’s many successes — which are often contrasted with European and American failures.

Hence while the dozens of students at the Naisbitt China Institute were instructed to gather the facts — and only the facts — about China’s rise from media clippings, the tight ideological control of the Chinese media means that we cannot so easily separate “the facts” from the narrative promoted by the CCP’s Central Propaganda Department. Indeed, the party-state’s official formulations (tifa 提法) form the book’s conceptual backbone: emancipation of the mind; learn truth from facts; crossing the river by feeling for stones; scientific development and social harmony; and so on.
This uncritical use of Chinese media products (or any country’s media products, for that matter) means that *China’s Megatrends* tells us less about what is “really happening in China,” and more about how the party-state wants everyone (including Chinese people) to understand the dramatic changes taking place in the PRC.

While *China’s Megatrends* is weak on truth-value, it is strong in another sense. The Naisbitts were given extraordinary access to China’s movers and shakers. Who would not be envious of their list of sources, which includes a two-hour interview with President Jiang Zemin; indeed, John Naisbitt explains how this book was actually Jiang’s idea: “President Jiang, Taiwan has a small story to tell, and tells it very well. China has a big story to tell, and does a terrible job in telling it.” To which Jiang replied: “Why don’t you tell it? We will give you all the support you need.”

The strength of *China’s Megatrends* is that it tells us how China’s elites want outsiders to understand them. Curiously, some of the Naisbitts’ business sources have a view of their country and its politics that strays from the official line, giving us a hint of China’s future direction.

Rather talking about the PRC as a nation-state, these entrepreneurs see China as a corporate enterprise. This formulation caught the Naisbitts’ attention, leading them to conclude that “China has reinvented itself as if it were a huge enterprise.”

The Naisbitts thus explain China’s fundamental transformation between the Cultural Revolution and the present:

“China in 1978: A visionary, decisive, assertive CEO takes over a very large, moribund company that is on the verge of collapse. The workforce is demoralized, patronized, and poorly educated. The CEO is determined to turn the run-down enterprise into a healthy, profitable, sustainable company, and to bring modest wealth to the people. And he has a clear strategy for achieving this goal…. China in 2009: The company has changed from an almost bankrupt state into a very profitable enterprise, the third largest of its kind in the world. It has made clever moves in its challenges and crisis, and its economic success is now recognized around the globe.”

This appeal to corporate governance also helps explain the Naisbitt’s idea of vertical democracy: people in corporations don’t have rights, they have tasks; a corporation is not a commonwealth organized for the good of its members — its purpose is profit. As the Naisbitts explain, “Survival of the company has to take priority over individuals’ interests and benefits. Those who would prefer to fight against the company’s culture and goals would have to choose: leave or adjust.” Since this is a country we are talking about, I suppose resigning means you leave China, while being fired means you end up in jail.

This shift from the PRC as a nation-state to China as a corporation clarifies how a free-market capitalist like John Naisbitt can so enthusiastically endorse CCP rule: both are pursuing an authoritarian capitalist model of governance, at the expense of democracy and social welfare.

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