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In Case You Missed It: Fragile Superpower
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I was in the Chicago O'Hare Airport a few weeks ago and noticed that a re-release of Peter Navarro's *The Coming China Wars: Where They Will Be Fought and How They Can Be Won* had made it onto that prized bit of airport-bookstore real estate, the shelf directly below the cash register.

Anyone who has followed news on China in the past decade is familiar with the narrative Navarro, a professor of business, spins out here in hyperbolic boldface. His view, as one reviewer put it, is that “the Chinese will eat us for lunch” by building a massive military, manufacturing defective products, and undercutting American foreign policy. If, that is, China doesn’t crumble under the weight of its internal problems—pollution, corruption, disease—first.

The Scary China approach is tired and dangerous. It carries an undertone of glee at China’s potential demise and its proponents have a tendency to talk about “China” and “the Chinese” as a single entity that work in lock-step for the demolition of American power. Books like Susan Shirk’s *China: Fragile Superpower* are important antidotes to the Scary China Syndrome.

Written, like *China Wars*, to be read in bite-sized pieces and also loaded up with facts and figures, *Fragile Superpower* instead portrays a China both strong and weak, preoccupied with its own domestic issues but eager to play a role as a regional and world leader. As Shirk, a political scientist based at UCSD, points out again and again, China has largely built its thirty-year economic miracle by cooperating with its neighbors and not making waves internationally. However, Shirk also outlines the potential trouble spots on the horizon for China, from domestic protests to media control to issues with Taiwan, Japan, and the United States. While outlining the many points where American and Chinese policy positions diverge, Shirk’s approach is one of measured diplomacy, not hyperbole and fear.

Moreover, unlike the propagators of Scary China, Shirk doesn’t make Chinese leaders out to be petulant children throwing food in hopes they’ll be invited to the adult table. Instead, she lays out the strategic reasons that Chinese leaders sometimes issue seemingly-shrill denunciations of the US or Taiwan, even if they don’t believe it wholeheartedly themselves. And Shirk’s diplomatic experience (she was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State from 1997 to 2000) means that the concluding suggestions are not one-sided—she includes lists of recommendations for both China and the U.S.; for
Americans the list contains suggestions like "don't flaunt U.S. military strength," and "don't overreact to China's economic rise."

As Shirk writes, “everything Americans say and do regarding China reverberates through Chinese domestic politics...China’s people, and its leaders, are listening to what we say and watching what we do.” At a time when there are calls for boycotts of Chinese goods and media emphasis on the supposed powder keg of Chinese nationalism, reminders that the US-China relationship is a two-way street are more necessary than ever.