

Book Review

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Tom Miller, *China's Asian Dream: Empire Building along the New Silk Road*, London: Zed Books, 2017; xii + 292 pages with bibliography and index. ISBN 978-1-78360-923-9 (paperback)

In *China's Asian Dream*, Tom Miller takes his readers on a trip across China's border regions and remote parts of Asia. Along this journey, he interviewed dozens of people residing in those terrains, both locals and Chinese expatriates, investigated the Chinese-backed infrastructure investment projects and analysed the roles China is, and will be, playing towards the Asian region. As a product of a two-year comprehensive research, this book is a fine account of detailed description on China's grand mission towards its return of national dignity and self-respect.

As suggested by its title, a central theme running through the entire volume is with regard to China's dream of building a 'community of common destiny' in Asia or, as the author posits, 'Asian Empire' with China at the apex. Primarily by virtue of its mega project 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) or alternatively named 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR), China's leadership targets to convert its economic capability into a political clout in Asia and substitute the present US-administered regional order with a Chinese-led one. The book starts with a vivid fictional illustration of a dystopian future of Europe in 2050 – where the once most affluent and advanced civilisation on earth shrinks to a minor player in a global order led by Asia-Pacific nations – in an approximation of what happened to China during the 'Century of Humiliation' – a period spanning from the start of the Opium War in 1839 until the Chinese Communist Party consolidated power in 1949. Combining the past disgrace with today's phenomenal economic capability, the Party's current leader Xi Jinping finds it legitimate to abandon its traditional humble approach in foreign policy in an attempt to flex its muscles overseas. This anecdotal prologue beautifully attracts the readers with a hook and cast a noticeable milestone to the entire work.

The first chapter concentrates on the 'Belt and Road Initiative' and the founding of its pertinent organizations, particularly the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund. These mechanisms are planned to play pivotal roles in developing infrastructure and increasing connectivity among Asian states, which will benefit China's economy and influence projection in return. Nevertheless, their emergence is inevitably

poised to challenges from former establishments such as Japan and the US. Beijing's ambition also raises much concern among its neighbours of its intention for regional hegemony. Despite some countries showing signs of bandwagoning, impulsive resistance from the others seem inexorable. The rest of the book is divided into five chapters according to geographical classification: Chapter 2 is on dynamism in China's Western regions, entailing Xinjiang and Central Asia countries; Chapter 3 is on Beijing's relatively successful economic leverage in the Mekong River areas, namely Laos and Cambodia; Chapter 4 is on China's failure to obtain a sea exit via Myanmar; Chapter 5 is on the fear and mistrust of South Asian states towards China; and Chapter 6 is on China's dispute and diplomatic tensions with Vietnam over the South China Seas.

Based upon the overall findings, Miller's book ends with a short, yet concise, revisit to President Xi Jinping's new proactive, or 'reactive', foreign policy towards China's dream of building an Asian Empire, in collaboration with the 'Chinese dream towards national rejuvenation'. The author argues that China will indeed become a much more manifest player across Asia in the upcoming decades. But the crux of matter is that in protection of its interests and pursuit of its dream, sacrifice of its steadfast 'non-interference' axiom can be deemed essential. China may be obliged to act in a way the other great powers do. Moreover, in terms of overall regional security, the Beijing government still need to struggle with formidable security tasks that lie in the Asian security system hitherto dominated by the US. 'But as China pursues its vision of national rejuvenation, something has to give,' concludes Miller, '[i]f it does not, the "Chinese Dream" could tragically morph into an Asian nightmare' (p. 248).

There are three main points to be appreciated in this contribution. Firstly, Miller's work is timely. Not only has the 'Chinese Dream' been at the centre of attention among academics and government strategists around the world for recent decades, but China's strategic moves since Xi Jinping claimed presidency have always made the headlines. Despite its primary focus on Asia, Miller's evaluation of the rise of China as an Asian power can be used as a tool to comprehend its ambitions towards the world. Secondly, the discursive nature of the book means that it provides numerous observations on both specific and broad issues. *China's Asian Dream* performed excellently in conveying essential information to a wide variety of audiences, ranging from academics and government practitioners to the general public having interest in China studies. Thirdly, finely nuanced data sources of Miller's research, covering intelligentsia, business tycoons, political elites and laypeople such as sales assistants, workers and taxi drivers, clearly reflect practical insights of the subject.

Even good books like this can certainly be criticized. In this case, I have only two disappointments with regards to Miller's story-telling. For the first point, I wish to understand a wider context of China's roles and rationales towards Asia as stressed in the title, as well as other dimensions of China pertaining to the main theme, including domestic politics and cultural aspect. China regularly employs Confucius thoughts, for instance, as a theoretical/spiritual foundation in policy making and even exports them to the wider world. Yet they are completely omitted in this book. In addition, although the title is *China's Asian Dream: Empire Building along the New Silk Road*, other neighbouring countries in Asia are, albeit not directly related to the New Silk Road, undeniably significant in deciding China's success in yearning for its dream. Japan is often considered a main geopolitical arch-rival in East Asian security. Issues in the Korean peninsula; in particular, nuclear proliferation in the North and US military presence in the South also deserve spotlights when discussing the responsibility of a rising China within the region. Giving more analysis on these points could be beneficial to the readers in understanding international politics and relations in Asia.

Second, the author mentions the 'Century of Humiliation' discourse to discuss China's underlying motive for the 'Chinese Dream' quest, maintaining that "[w]ithout China's "century of national humiliation" in mind, it is impossible to understand the resonance of President Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream"" (p. 8). This statement is true, but the readers should be reminded that other factors in policy making; to name but a few, international environment and competition among Great Powers, are also worth taking into account. Likewise, relationship between the 'Century of Humiliation' and the historical context of specific regions presented in each chapter still lacks thorough scrutiny.

Despite the comments above, I recommend this worthwhile book to those interested in Chinese foreign policy, particularly in the Belt and Road Initiative, and Asia watchers. All in all, this book can help readers grasp how the rise of China really mean to the world.

Attawat Assavanadda
 Research Assistant at the Chinese Studies Center,
 Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University

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Special Issue

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TEL: 886-2-8237-7377 FAX: 886-2-2939-7352
E-mail: issues@nccu.edu.tw
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