
Understanding China: The Silk Road and the Communist Manifesto Peter Nolan. Taylor & Francis. 2015. 174 pp. (ISBN 10: 1138943568)

Although China is now a global power, it has not always been one. Arguably, until the early 2000s, it was first of all a fast-growing regional power, and before the beginning of the reforms in 1979 a huge but isolated country, incapable of asserting itself vigorously in global affairs. Nolan argues that up until the eighteenth century China was by far the world's largest and most vibrant economy. More importantly, the fundamentals of the British Industrial Revolution were established by transferring key technologies from China to the West through the Silk Road (Land and Sea).

The first two chapters of the book focus on aspects of China's international relations by reaching back to the Han dynasty and by using terms such as the maritime and land Silk Road(s) to justify an overture on the present-day South China Sea controversy. Nolan rightfully argues that throughout its long history, China had intense commercial and cultural interaction with its hinterland. Certainly, in recent times, China's economic and diplomatic influence in East Asia has been clearly and globally on the rise.

The remaining two chapters frame skillfully the legacy of the Communist Manifesto, the class struggle, the Marxist view of historical change and their relevance to the contemporary China. The author highlights a number of well-documented policy challenges faced by China while attempting to move from a low-middle-income to a high-income country. These challenges include an aging population, exhaustion of rural labor surplus, corruption, catastrophic environmental pollution, a low level of indigenous innovation, the weak global competitive position of indigenous firms, wide disparity in income and wealth, etc. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is still an authoritarian polity, dominated by a communist party which, while keeping some of its original precepts, has turned into an essentially nationalist, 'statist' and entrepreneurial ruling organization. Most certainly, the author believes that managing future economic development and China's Marxist legacy are two of the significant policy challenges facing the decision makers in Beijing.

The cadres of the Communist Party of China (CPC) are currently engaged in elaborate research, debate and reflection on both of those questions. The rationale behind this approach is related to their efforts to redefine the main tenets of 'communism,' which has great ideological and practical importance for contemporary China. In order to build a proper 'socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics,' to ensure a stable and harmonious development, Chinese leadership examines and reevaluates not only the disastrous domestic experiences regarding the 'class struggles' during the Cultural Revolution, but also takes a serious look at the history of class struggle in Britain.

In that sense, British experience can be quite illuminating. The nineteenth century is often called the “English century” because England then attained the peak of her visible power and world-wide influence. Yet, the seventeenth is probably the most exciting and creative century in English history, and the success of the nineteenth was built on the greatness of the seventeenth. Although revolution by consent may sound like a contradiction in itself, yet the examples of 1688 (The Glorious Revolution establishing first constitutional monarchy in a major European country), 1832 (the British reform of the parliamentary representation by transferring political power from the gentry to the middle classes), and 1945 (the British working class becoming the principal political element in the state) prove that it is possible to effect fundamental political and social change without bloodshed. However, it is important to remember that the traditional forces by stubbornly resisting mild reform may make radical revolution inevitable. Nolan argues that Britain experienced a long slow evolutionary path towards resolving class struggle through trade union organization and following the Parliamentary road to socialism instead of a radical, sudden and violent change through class warfare as predicted by Marx and Engels. The book is most certainly a great addition to China studies and will benefit scholars and researchers of international relations, political science, and area studies.

Cagri Erdem
Keimyung University, Korea