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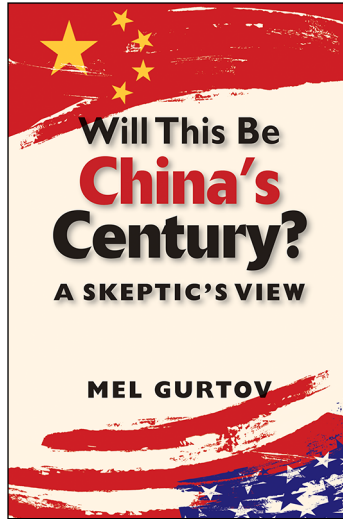
Will This Be
China's Century?
A Skeptic's View

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1

Exploring the “Century” Issue

In an attention-grabbing speech delivered before overseas Chinese in Mexico, China’s new leader, Xi Jinping, said in 2009: “There are some foreigners who have eaten their fill and have nothing better to do than criticize [*zhi shou hua jiao*: point their fingers at] our affairs. First, China does not export revolution; second, it does not export poverty and hunger; third, it does not cause unnecessary trouble. What else is there to say?”¹ China’s nationalistic press was quick to support these lines, saying it was time to stand up to “foreigners” (i.e., Westerners) and stop being so defensive about China. In fact, although Xi’s comment reflects a bold self-confidence in China, it doesn’t end the story. There is a lot more to say about what China “exports,” and even more to say about what is actually going on in fast-rising China.

The chief purpose of this book is to challenge the notion that the new century belongs to China in the same way that the preceding century was claimed to belong to the United States. This is no small issue. The notion of an “American century,” as explained in Chapter 2, has been used by political leaders and foreign-policy pundits right up to the present to explain and justify a unique role for the United States as world leader. This exceptionalism embodies both the realities of global military and economic power and a nationalistic conviction with regard to the universal relevance of US values and ideals. China’s leaders do not claim a “Chinese century”; nor do they claim a Chinese exceptionalism. Yet the extraordinary pace of China’s economic development has led to numerous predictions that just such evidences of global leadership are forthcoming or have already taken hold. The question mark in the book’s title is there to propose that, whether in domestic or international terms, a Chinese century is far into the future, if it will happen at all.

The United States occupies a good portion of this book. In part that is because Sino-US relations have become the most important bilateral

relationship in world affairs, as leaders of both countries assert. Another reason is that while comparisons of China and the United States are often inappropriate, there are points of similarity worth noting, such as increasing income inequality, weak positions on global warming, and a sometimes dangerous nationalism. Moreover, leaders in both countries eye one another with a mixture of awe and wariness; they find each other's political institutions unpalatable and their militaries potentially threatening. Yet, especially in China's case, many decisions are framed with the United States in mind.

Lastly, I do not want to leave the impression that the improbability of a Chinese century means that US citizens can rest secure in the belief the new century will still belong to the United States. As in my other writings, I take a human-interest approach to international affairs, which puts the global community's security and well-being—specifically, the impoverished and repressed peoples of the world—ahead of any one country's priorities. From that perspective, as stated in my concluding chapter, this century should not belong to any great power. The United States, like China, has a multitude of pressing domestic concerns that demand attention—and, in some cases, also demand renewed efforts to engage with one another for their own sake as well as for the sake of the planet. In our time, leaders and publics of both countries should recognize, to invest in global security is to invest in national security.

Analyzing China's strengths and weaknesses, then, here involves both traditional and nontraditional approaches. On the traditional side, I explore the usual indicators of national power, hard and soft; China's relations with various countries, regions, and international organizations; and issues of internal governance, such as leadership, social controls, the behavior of institutions such as the military and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and political legitimacy. But I also examine how China measures up, primarily at home but also abroad, when it comes to human development and human security. In that category are income distribution, respect for human rights, protection of the environment, and social welfare. In the end, my desire is to produce a brief but fair assessment of how far China has come, and how far it still has to go, to be a global leader.

Note

1. Speech of February 11, 2009; at <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/02/xi-jinping-%E4%B9%A0%E8%BF%91%E5%B9%B3-on-foreigners-pointing-fingers-at-china-with-video/>.