The Mao That Roars

Daniel Burstein and Arne de Keijzer have written the best recent book on China for the general reader. Big Dragon is aimed at business people and foreign-policy workers. But the authors' lively prose and commonsense balance address all the major issues, from generational change to Tibet to nuclear proliferation and China's spiritual upturn. They present their views with dramatic liveliness and professional erudition.

Big Dragon is strongest on foreign-policy issues. The authors examine the risk of a gratuitous second Cold War between the United States and China and dissect the weird coalition of right-wing old-but-cold warriors and left-wing human rights warriors that threatens to bring this unnecessary conflict upon us. They argue persuasively against the policies (denying China most-favoured-nation trade status, excluding it from the World Trade Organization, upgrading relations with Taiwan, threatening it over human rights) that may provoke a new Cold War without achieving the ostensible objectives of those policies. Crucially, the authors point out that no Asian ally will support the U.S. in a confrontation with China.

Burstein and de Keijzer belittle those who consider every technological advance of the Chinese army a threat to the U.S. They argue correctly that China will be militarily weaker than the U.S. for decades to come, and quote an American naval officer who says that if he were Chinese, he would aspire to an aircraft carrier too. But they make such judgments from a position of realism and patriotism: "Our view presupposes that America remains strong militarily, stays in Asia, and leads the world in military R&D."

Throughout the book the authors are scrupulously fair, abandoning the ethnocentrism that affects much Western writing on China: "With the high moral dudgeon characteristic of post-Cold War triumphalism, the pundits assume that Americans may rightly intervene in China's affairs; we, after all, are working for democracy and the good of the Chinese people. But when they intervene in our affairs, it is for siren and evil reasons, to corrupt our system and manipulate our leaders into appeasing their aggression."

They are at their best when they skewer chauvinists on both sides with their own words. For example, they quote the Chinese authors of China Can Say No as alleging that the CIA invidiously encourages young Chinese to have sex and has enlisted television anchorman Connie Chung as part of an anti-Chinese conspiracy. One presumes that, with a population of 1.2 billion and a species-threatening appetite for rhinoceros horn, the Chinese need no encouragement regarding sex. The authors also have the courage to believably discuss New York Times columnist A.M. Rosenthal and his ilk, who compare China to Nazi Germany and Saddam Hussein's Iraq and publish exaggerated descriptions of Chinese militarism, as the mirror image of young Chinese chauvinists.

Occasionally Big Dragon serves up Analysis Lite. It presents Lester Brown's now-discredited statistics on China's imminent inability to feed itself with the people of Africa, rather than with the devastating ripostes that have been published in Foreign Affairs and elsewhere. The authors' discussion of China's rising domestic economic inequality is heavy with cliches. They count 10,000 elected officials in China, whereas the correct number is over 4 million. They have Zhu Rongji being elevated to premier in 1997, whereas that promotion occurred in March this year.

At the core of Big Dragon lies a thoughtful balance of the arguments of those who believe the China bulls and China bears. Burstein and de Keijzer state both cases eloquently, reject the extreme views and come out as Cautious Bulls. Along the way, they list China's burdens: For example, the number of disabled people in China is greater than the population of France; by 2025 China will have as many people over 60 as the rest of the world; and while an American on average is supported by four fertile acres of land, a Chinese has to live off the produce of a farm the size of a typical American backyard. China also has seven of the world's 10 most-polluted cities.

Big Dragon leaves its foot- ing seriously only once, in the section on Hong Kong where the authors succeed
to paranoia. For instance, they take at face
value the argument that the South China
Morning Post’s decision to employ a senior
journalist from China as a consultant im-
plies a decision to kowtow to Beijing’s
political sensitivities. They ignore the fact
that the Post’s indignant China critic and
chief China correspondent, Willy Wo-Lap
Lam, remains at his post, fiery as ever. It
is simply untrue that Hong Kong journal-
ism has been repressed, and there is no
logic to the authors’ view that Chinese
companies’ investments in Hong Kong
firms are politically insidious. On the con-
trary, it would be surprising and disturb-
ing if Chinese companies did not invest in
Hong Kong companies.

The authors conclude by proffering a
policy of Dynamic Engagement, which
entails “understanding that one of the
great, epochal positive events of world
history is taking place in China and that
we, in the United States, wish to be part
of it, support it, contribute to it, and ben-
efit from it.” This is the ultimate rebuff to
those newly minted human-rights advoca-
tes who worshipped China during the
Cultural Revolution—one of the most hid-
eous events in a century of hideous
events—and who have become great en-
emies of China now that, for the first
time in centuries, the Chinese have enough
to eat, have the de facto right to say just
about anything they want to say, and the
de jure right to sue their government.

Everyone from China specialists to
novices should read this book.

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