

***The China Questions: Critical Insights into a Rising Power.*  
Rudolph, Jennifer and Szonyi, Michael eds. Cambridge:  
Harvard University Press, 2018, 204.**

Areeba Arif\*

*The China Questions: Critical Insights into a Rising Power* is basically a collection of 36 chapters written by various scholars affiliated with the Fairbank Center for the Chinese Studies at Harvard University. The main argument of the book is that “China matters, and therefore understanding China matters. In a certain obvious sense, China has always mattered and always will.”(p. 8). This book is a noteworthy revelation of expertise on China, commanded by a single institution and a strong challenge to other institutions to continue investing in their own study of China. The brief essays are divided into many sections, covering the Chinese politics, international relations, economics, environment all issues, society and history. Nonetheless, the essays struggle to achieve the unity of a specific purpose. Instead of fully embracing the interdisciplinary backgrounds of the collections, the authors bring their perspectives into direct conversation with each other. The essays read like the beginning of conversations that regrettably go unfinished.

In every chapter, the authors try to portray how China’s past shapes the present and present shapes the future. By doing so the editors, Jennifer Rudolph and Michael Szonyi have tried to reduce the trust deficit of America on China.

However, in the sections related to politics and international relations, while discussing the continued influence of Mao Zedong especially as it relates to the rule of Xi Jinping and his desire to turn over precedent and remove term limits from the office of the presidency, the question was also posed that “Does Mao Still Matter?” The question of the Chinese Communism’s legitimacy was also considered, which explores that why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) party continues to be viewed as a

---

\*The book reviewer is Research Assistant at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.

legitimate party by the people of China. It has been found out that idea of the CCP is contingent to its legitimate performance.

However, if looked at the performance of the CCP, it also inadvertently opens the door for criticism of Mao Zedong's policies such as anti-rightist campaigns, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. In order to avoid the unexpected narrative of criticising the CCP's efforts "out-of-the-blue," including "historical nihilism," which Joseph Fewsmith describes as "any historical writings or research which conflicts with the party's approved historiography (p. 10)."

The question related to the legitimacy of the CCP attains more relevance again, in chapter seven where Yuhua Wang argues that "What the CCP can learn from rise and fall of different Chinese Emperors." Interestingly his findings are inexplicable for the CCP. In his point of view average time period of every dynasty in China is 70 years and the CCP will reach 70 in 2019, and it is highly expected that it will be overthrown by not only political powers but also by the societal elites.

In Chapter nine, Andrew S Erickson focuses on the strength of the armed forces of China. In his point of view, China's near-term progress in developing and fielding and other complex systems of technology will remain the key weakness of China. Furthermore, Erikson anticipates that the development of cutting-edge technology and escalating personnel costs, especially as to supporting its developing retiree population. If China continued with this growth rate, it will be higher next year. On the other hand, if China did not get the utmost benefit of its technological development, the Chinese economy will be in a recession.

In a chapter dealing with urbanisation in China, Meg Rithmire concludes that without considerable reforms to the Chinese household registration and land rights systems, China will be able to successfully manage the rural-to-urban migration in order to maintain the successful economy. While another author Nara Dillon is quite confident that China is capable of making the right kind of data-driven developmental and welfare reforms.

The essays on society, history and culture that constitute the second half of the book cover a much more varied and disjointed set of topics. Through their writings on Confucius, religion, propaganda, education, law and

literature the authors try to outline the limits and critical events that shape the Chinese thinking and society.

Of note is Paul Cohen's closing piece in which he pinpointed the several technological, political and socio cultural factors that have changed the study of China over the years. Overall, the *China Questions* is a worthwhile read and its short essays are perfect primers for quickly exposing the complexity of a specific subject without dwelling too deeply on the details. The individual essays may lack the depth and nuance of a published paper but their ease of understanding opens the subject to the uninitiated and encourages further research.

Yet, perhaps what is most striking about this collection is the absence of any critical examination of the fundamental assumptions about the West's engagement with China. Apart from trade, there is a very little material discussion about how China is shaping global norms and institutions; the chapter on the Silk Road reflects its author's background as an anthropologist but sheds little light on what the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) portends. The result is a book that ignores almost entirely the most important shift in how the West thinks about China since the reestablishment of relations. The West is increasingly disillusioned that China's prosperity will lead to democratisation as had once been hoped. Independent of the Trump administration, the consensus is moving away from engagement towards confrontation. This book is a starting place for anyone wanting to gain insight into the political, economic, social and historical drivers shaping the Chinese thinking and calling for a solid ground from which to begin.