

WAR-MONGER OR JUDICIOUS REALIST? LIU MINGFU AS A HISTORICALLY-MINDED AMERICA WATCHER

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Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post American-Era* (New York: CN Times Books, 2015); 288 pages; \$24.95

The publication of Liu Mingfu's *China Dream* in English this month makes for an opportune occasion to take stock of his ideas critically.¹ In 2010, when the original book was published in Chinese, it caused quite a sensation due to the sub-title reading: "soldiers must speak out."² Though it is said to have foreshadowed, even informed, President Xi Jinping's first use of the term *China Dream* in November 2012,³ the original book never received the kind of page-by-page detailed critical and semantic analysis it deserved in the West, perhaps because its rhetoric seemed misaligned with Hu Jintao's administration, which adhered for the most part to a "low profile" in foreign affairs. Instead, Liu was mostly dismissed in the Western media as a typically loose-lipped PLA commissar: triumphalist, anti-American, hawkish and conspiracy-obsessed.⁴ Aside from Chris Hughes and Philip Saunders' online overviews – no serious attempt to my knowledge has been made to engage with Liu's rationale in detail, particularly as regards his

1 Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era* (New York: CN Times, 2015).

2 Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo meng: ZhongMei shiji duijue, junren yao fayan* [The China Dream: Soldiers Must Speak Out on the Coming Sino-American Showdown] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2010).

3 For an authoritative study of the term, see e.g. William Callahan's, *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

4 Isaac Stone Fish, "Col. Liu and Dr Pillsbury Have a Dream," *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/04/col-liu-and-dr-pillsbury-have-a-dream-the-inevitable-clash-between-china-and-america/> (accessed November 30, 2015).

insistence that China is inherently “war averse” or his historical heurism.⁵

The following passages try to cast a deliberative sidelight on the book by engaging with the Chinese original version rather than the recently published English version, which is now being promoted in the US.⁶ Far from re-dismissing Liu off-hand as a sensationalist, the aim here is to show the extent to which Liu dwells on other Chinese and Western thinkers in reading international relations, and the extent to which his ideas are shared by others. It is hoped that Liu’s narrative can thereby be more lucidly interpreted and its policy relevance better construed. The review will be taking issue with the paradox of Liu’s calling for greater military budgets, whilst clinging to a self-perceived Chinese tradition of “war aversion” (*bu duwu*) as the most desirable strategy for the country.⁷

In the West, Liu’s positions were perhaps understandably cast as militaristic without due reference to their underlying historical mainspring. In fact, that streak of militarism is for Liu a counterweight to what he sees as a “scholarly-civilian” (*yanwu xiwen*) ethos that came to over-script Chinese society since the fall of the Northern Song Dynasty (1127) and the subsequent entrenchment of what Liu sees as pernicious, superstitious and effete neo-Confucian tendency through much of the late-Imperial era.⁸ The historical generalisation offered here is hardly unique. It is reminiscent to one degree or another of ideas pronounced in two other highly popular books that have been published in China over the last decade and have gained some notoriety in the West: *Wolf Totem* and *China Can Say No*. The former, whilst written by Tiananmen democracy-movement veteran Jiang Rong (pseud.), is a novel that nevertheless idealizes throughout the martial spirit of the nomadic steppe people living on the fringes of the Chinese sedentary heartland.⁹

5 Chris R. Hughes, “In Case You Missed It: The China Dream,” *The China Beat*, April 5, 2010, <http://www.thechinabeat.org/?p=1814> (accessed November 30, 2015); Philip C. Saunders, “Will China’s Dream Turn into America’s Nightmare ?,” *The Jamestown China Brief*, April 1, 2010, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36217#.VXbTKc9Vlkp

6 Liu Mingfu, “The World Is Too Important to be Left to America,” *The Atlantic*, June 4, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/china-dream-liu-mingfu-power/394748/> (accessed November 30, 2015).

7 Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo meng: ZhongMei shiji duijue, junren yao fayan* [The China Dream: Soldiers Must Speak Out on the Coming Sino-American Showdown] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 99. The term as used by Liu is a negative derivation of the ancient idiom *qionbing duwu* which describes trigger-happy, war-mongering generals. In a modern sense, the term *bu duwu* can also connote avoidance of militarism or peace-loving.

8 Ibid., 235-238. The idiom itself, *yanwu xiwen*, emerged almost a millennium before the Song.

9 On Jiang Rong, see e.g. Anonymous, “Living with Wolves,” *The Guardian*, November 22, 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/nov/22/china.features11> (accessed November 30, 2015).

Described at once as a novel of nomads and settlers and their relationship with wolves, a guide to doing business in New China, an ecological handbook, as well as a piece of military strategy, *Wolf Totem* is partly based on the author's own experiences as a Red Guard who left Beijing during the Cultural Revolution to work with Mongolian shepherds. Indeed, Jiang Rong repeatedly condemns his own Han ethnic in-group for their placid "sheep-like" Confucian obedience to authority and ignorant destruction of nature. Ironically, Jiang Rong may have been imprisoned a number of times by the Chinese authorities for his non-conventional views, yet his idealization of the martial spirit has brought Wolfgang Kubin, a world leading expert on Chinese literature, to label *Wolf Totem*, as no less than "fascist."¹⁰

China Can Say No is a collection of sensationalist anti-American political essays rather than a novel. Yet it, too, was authored by individuals who are thought to have at least in part been sympathetic of the Tiananmen democracy movement back in 1989 only to turn to the nationalistic tide less than a decade later.¹¹ The essays are by and large devoid of overt pokes at Confucianism or prevailing Chinese societal norms. In fact, they can be read as scathing critiques of American individualism rather than a rallying cry for more thereof in China. But they do share a platform with Jiang Rong and Liu Mingfu in calling for more assertive Chinese foreign policy, particularly vis-à-vis the USA and Japan.¹²

Where Liu arguably innovates beyond the two aforementioned books is in the analogies he draws from Western history. The case is not made for more military power alone but for the right balance between military and scholarly (read: economic) power. Liu's example is the Dutch Republic, which had been a great rival to England in the 17th century but – in his somewhat idiosyncratic account – then invested too heavily in peace-time mercantile prowess to the neglect of its fighting navy until it was finally subdued in 1713. The Dutch parable is told, it seems, specifically so as to warn Chinese leaders of focusing on GDP growth alone and letting their people become too livelihood-oriented (*jingji minzu*).¹³

10 Clifford Coonan, "Jiang Rong's Wolf Totem," *The Independent*, September 18, 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/jiang-rongs-wolf-totem-the-year-of-the-wolf-768583.html> (accessed November 30, 2015).

11 Shannon Tiezzi, "The 'China Can Say No' Effect," *The Diplomat*, August 7, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/the-china-can-say-no-effect/> (accessed November 30, 2015).

12 Song Qiang, et al., *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu: Lengzhanhou shidai de zhengzhi yu qinggan jueze* [China Can Say No: Political and Mental Choice in the Post-Cold War Era] (Beijing: Zhonghua Gongshang, 1996).

13 Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo meng: ZhongMei shiji duijue, junren yao fayan* [The China Dream: Soldiers

The Anglo-Dutch preoccupation speaks to a broader research agenda among Chinese scholars of international relations. At Tsinghua University, Sun Xuefeng has argued for example that the common Western perception of democratic countries as less likely to go to war with one another ('democratic lineage theory') was irredeemably naïve. Notably, Sun pointed to the three Anglo-Dutch wars, fought over hegemony of global maritime trade during the latter part of the seventeenth century, as a classic counter-example. England had been at the time a nascent parliamentary democracy and the Netherlands was a progressive Republic but neither showed 'liberal trust' in its neighbour and mutual draconisation was rampant. As its power declined in the early twentieth century, the British Empire did not go into war with an ascendant US: this was *not* because the two countries shared cultural baggage, but because containing the Kaiser was considered a more achievable goal by Britain. By 1900, America's GDP was nearly double than that of Britain, but Germany's GDP had just edged above Britain's and so the temptation to check the advancement of that Middle-European Power was more compelling.¹⁴

Underlying Liu's narrative is a frustration often expressed in private by many Chinese: China is big and populous, has illustrious imperial history and has posted stellar reform achievements over the past three decades. Yet, it is still packing well below its weight on the world stage from sports through to science, popular cultural or military might. In order to bear out the illustriousness of pre-modern China, and in construing Sino-American relationship in the modern era, Liu draws heavily *not* on Chinese authors but in fact on English-language literature from Paul Kennedy, through Warren I. Cohen to Angus Maddison. The latter's quantitative work is popular in China but controversial in the West because it suggests China remained the biggest economy in the world as late as the 1830s.

Neither is Liu's book simplistic to the extent he tars all facets of American life with the same brush in the manner of *China Can Say No*. He heaps superlatives on the Clinton Presidency, for example, for unleashing America's creative spirit and community mobilisation. He also favorably

Must Speak Out on the Coming Sino-American Showdown] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 246-249. Incidentally, most Western standard historical accounts of Dutch decline in 1713 do tend to ascribe it to the country's over-investment in land forces to curb French encroachment.

¹⁴ For a comprehensive discussion, see Niv Horesh, "In Search of the 'China Model': Historic Continuity vs. Imagined History in Yan Xuetong's Thought," *China Report* 49 (2013): 337-355.

compares the stability of post-bellum America with the incessant revolutions in 19th and 20th century Europe. For Liu, America – in contrast to the older European powers (*lieqiang*) – is a relatively *benign* imperialistic power that aims at cowing strategic competitors rather than occupying them outright.¹⁵ Nevertheless, China in Liu's view would make an even more benign world power because it has a track record of “internalising” conflict: whilst European over-population, religious dissent, social inequalities and scarce resources led in the 16th century to outward expansion – demographic stress and scarce resources are resolved in China through peasant rebellions.¹⁶

More specifically, Liu praises Abraham Lincoln for his abolition of slavery, interpreting it above all as a pragmatic exercise in nation-building rather than an expression of morality. He uses the American Civil War as a rallying cry with which to denounce the rationale of Taiwanese independence and US arms sale to Taiwan. China, he avers, would never contemplate selling arms to Hawaii separatists.¹⁷

In a departure from mainstream prominent Chinese foreign-policy commentators like Wang Jisi or Shi Yinhong, Liu seems to be expressly arguing that a Sino-American showdown is inevitable in the long-run despite economic and other geo-strategic complementarities.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in his view, that either side has recourse to nuclear weapons means the showdown would be determined in points rather than knock-out; indeed, precisely like his personal friend but ideological arch-enemy, Pentagon insider Michael Pillsbury, Liu likens Sino-American rivalry to a “marathon.” In the face of popular Chinese adulation of Putin as “macho,” Liu seems to discount Russia as a global contender, when averring that the choice for the world is between America and China. He predicts China would eventually win the hearts and minds of people elsewhere because China does not seek to shape the world in its own image, hence it is more difficult for Americans to demonise China than it was for them to demonise the now-defunct USSR.¹⁹

What is then China’s aspirational narrative of global leadership? China, in Liu’s view, would create a fairer world for the great bulk of humanity because it is not hobbled by an “original sin” – colonialism in

¹⁵ Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo meng: ZhongMei shiji duijue, junren yao fayan* [The China Dream: Soldiers Must Speak Out on the Coming Sino-American Showdown] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 39, 47.

¹⁶ Ibid., 118.

¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

¹⁸ Ibid., 170-173.

¹⁹ Ibid., 56-58.

the European case and slavery as well as Native-American annihilation in the US's case. Liu then reverts to classic Maoist clichés in suggesting China would not seek hegemony but would instead rid the world of any kind of hegemony; he uncharacteristically signs off with overt chauvinism when stating that China possesses “superior cultural genes” (*zui youxiu de wenhua jiycin*) that would help it stake a claim for global leadership.²⁰

Hardly trigger-happy, Liu counsels China above all patience in dealing with the US. Its ultimate decline may be inevitable, but it would be a long process and obituaries this decade are premature. History teaches Liu that the USA had in fact been written off many times in the past – most recently in the waning days of the Carter presidency – only to come back on the world stage with a vengeance.²¹

The secret of that vitality, in Liu's historical judgement, is the fact that the USA had a much longer “hide and bide” incubation than Deng Xiaoping's China. It announced the Monroe Doctrine after half a century of unique isolationism (*Meiguo de tese taoguang yanghui*) during which successive presidents strove to disentangle themselves from European strife. In that sense, the USA nurtured hegemonic aspirations in a low-cost, surreptitious manner.²² Moreover, Liu tells his readers China must emulate the American historical trajectory when it comes to isolationism. Like Sun Xuefeng, Liu suggests American economic might, for example, had long overtaken Britain's by 1900; yet the US did not out itself as the global power *par excellence* until 50 years later.²³

Contrary to how Liu is sometimes depicted in the West then, he is in fact extremely wary of overt Chinese triumphalism. The best way forward for China, in his view, would be to fight complacency. Chinese leaders should continue to be, Liu hints, haunted by paranoia and embrace a crisis mentality as drivers of self-improvement. In that sense, US “China imminent collapse” seers are rendering an important service to the cause of China's rise as they help obfuscate the true dimensions thereof. Furthermore, for Liu, a continual, haunting sense of crisis would ensure China's leadership would not degenerate into Brezhnev-like mediocracy and conservatism.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 73-76.

²¹ Ibid., 134, 144-147, 192.

²² Ibid., 151-158. N.B.: elsewhere, Liu credits Deng with lifting up China's fortunes on the world stage dramatically. Nevertheless, he is trenchantly avers it had been Mao who more significantly helped China rid itself of servile mentality, see 174-175.

²³ Ibid., 81-82.

²⁴ Ibid., 268-282.

Granted, Liu does repeatedly call for China to increase its military budget. But he emphasises throughout the book that this should be used as a deterrent only. The point is that for China to deter the USA from all-out war it would need a stronger army.²⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, all the paragons of military vitality (*gaishi wenwu*) in his narrative are from pre-Song era: the First Emperor of Qin, the Wudi Emperor of the Han, and Emperor Li Shimin of the Tang.²⁶

Yet, what China desperately needs in equal measure in his narrative is a vigorous set of values with which to re-vitalise society as a whole. Liu observes that in the US, organised faith tempers heady capitalism and individualism. He seems to be hinting here at his displeasure at the growing inequalities and materialism within Chinese society. To him, that most Chinese are mildly secular leaves a vacuum that needs to be filled, yet he stops short of suggesting more nationalism is the answer. What he does explicitly decry, however, is the paucity of new Chinese works of literature that are translated into other languages, as opposed the plethora of translated material at any Chines bookshop.²⁷

In trying to come up with new sources of societal inspirations, Liu even comes close to hinting at a CCP need to share more power with other parties by way of curbing abuses of power. Yet, more discerning readers aware of the “China Model” discourse can easily tell this is trite, non-committal lip service to CCP “United Front” tactics.²⁸ Prominent Chinese international-relations expert Yan Xuetong, who is also well known for his hawkish views, is on record saying much the same non-committedly:²⁹

Although China supports the one-party leadership of the Communist Party, it still retains the consultative system of having eight democratic parties, so the Chinese government proclaims that China is a multiparty state...China must make the moral principle of democracy one of those it promotes.

Oblivious to the Judeo-Christian equivalent, Liu then cites the Confucian adage “do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto thee” (*Ji suo bu yu wu shi yu ren*) as unique Asian wisdom, which is presumably a guarantee China would not bully weaker countries when it supplants

²⁵ Ibid., 250-260.

²⁶ Ibid., 233-234.

²⁷ Ibid., 88-89.

²⁸ Ibid., 286-287.

²⁹ Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 2011), 212-221.

the US. If anything, it should more proactively come to the rescue of the oppressed (*dabao buping*). Here, Liu perceptively draws on Sun Yat-Sen's more vehement anti-colonial tracts depicting China as a follower of *wangdao* ('enlightened kingly way') as opposed to the Western penchant for *badao* ('hegemonic bullying').³⁰ Yet, Liu's postulation of the PRC as a 20th-century power that never attacked first is otherwise historically problematic; indeed, many in the West would contend this argument is easily belied by PRC intervention in Korea in the early 1950s as well as its flash campaigns against India in 1962 and against Vietnam in 1979.³¹

Liu's efforts in exhorting against PRC complacency and triumphalism come across on balance as fairly genuine even to the Western eye. By far, the least palatable aspect of his narrative to lay Western readership could turn out to be *not* his military bent – after all he is a retired PLA officer – but rather his penchant for conspiracy theories, one he seems to share with a many other best-selling PRC-born authors.³² Citing the influential strategist Nicholas J. Spykman (1893–1943), Liu contends for example, that America had set its sights on pre-emptive containment of China as a future competitor long before the CCP had come to power.³³

Indeed, the conspiracies Liu marshals can be seen as the real culmination of the book rather than its putative chauvinism. Perhaps most thought-provoking of these is the contention that the USA had cunningly foiled Japan's rise in the 1980s as a warm-up for its China showdown this century. By way of warning China of succumbing to US pressure for devaluing the RMB, Liu controversially argues that Japan's "Lost Decade" did not arise in fact from internal weaknesses of the Japanese economy. Rather, it was supposedly a result of the Americans dropping a "financial atomic bomb" on Japan in the image of the 1985 Plaza Accord. In Liu's view, the Accord forced Japan to revalue the Yen, absorb subsequent damage to its exports, pay more in return for US military deployment and enhance its ODA to Western-favored destinations.³⁴

³⁰ Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo meng: ZhongMei shiji duijue, junren yao fayan* [The China Dream: Soldiers Must Speak Out on the Coming Sino-American Showdown] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 98, 129. Elsewhere, Liu is critical of Sun Yat-Sen for naively believing the USSR or Japan would help China rid itself of Western imperialism, e.g., 166–167.

³¹ Ibid., 102.

³² Jin Shengrong, *Shei xiang ganjiao Fengtian: Meiguoshi yinmo fujide zhenxiang* [Kill Toyota] (Beijing: Xin shijie chubanshe, 2010).

³³ Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo meng: ZhongMei shiji duijue, junren yao fayan* [The China Dream: Soldiers Must Speak Out on the Coming Sino-American Showdown] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 169.

³⁴ Ibid., 183–185.

Nevertheless, despite his many incendiary claims, Liu chooses to strike a somewhat more judicious tone at the conclusion of his book. That perorational quality of his work went perhaps unnoticed in the West and is therefore worth highlighting in the teeth of sensationalism.

Toward the end, Liu actually confides in his readers: the US is *neither devil nor angel*. After all, for all its faults, it did fight the Japanese enemy in World War II alongside China. Rather, for Liu the problem is the US itself is prone to Manichean rhetoric, *not* China; the US needs a fearsome, imaginary ideological enemy with which to galvanise its populace and to oil the wheels of its military-industrial complex. Liu therefore predicts China, before long, would be demonized in the US with racial overtones, and that it would one day in the near future find itself in the dock, accused of being a leading member of the 'Axis of Evil.'³⁵ ¶

35 Ibid., 210-224.