The New Chinese Empire

JOHN KEANE is Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney and at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin (WZB), and Distinguished Professor at Peking University. Renowned globally for his creative thinking about democracy, he is the Director and co-founder of the Sydney Democracy Network and has contributed to *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera*, the *Times Literary Supplement, The Guardian, Harper's, the South China Morning Post* and *The Huffington Post*. Among his best-known books is the highly acclaimed *The Life and Death of Democracy* (Simon & Schuster 2009). One of his most recent works is *When Trees Fall, Monkeys Scatter: Rethinking Democracy in China* (WSPC 2017).

We live in Shakespearean times marked by a strange but striking fact: despite mounting evidence of waning American global power and the birth of a strident global China, few people dare openly use the word empire. It is as if things cannot be called by their proper name.

In China, public talk of empire (*dìguó*) is frowned upon. It is a pejorative term directed at others; the word is almost never applied to China itself. State officials and media platforms instead emphasise past victimhood ('the century of humiliation') at the hands of Western imperialism. They claim as well that China today respects the 'sovereign independence' of all countries. It is anti-imperialist. In a case of unexpected symmetry, in the United States, the word empire also triggers robust silence. Americans regard themselves as a benign global power, as a democratic force for good. Former defence secretary under George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, said it clearly: 'We don't seek empires, we're not imperialistic. We never have been.' His words could just as easily have come from the mouths of Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders.

But if by empire we mean a jumbo-sized state that exercises political, economic and symbolic power over millions of people, at great distances from its own heartlands, without much regard or respect for the niceties of sovereignty, then technically both the United States and China are empires. Our planet is falling under the sway of two global empires. Measured in GDP terms, for instance, the American economy currently yields a third of world output. In such fields as telecommunications, pharmaceuticals and aerospace, its global corporations set the pace. McDonald's, Google, Apple and Facebook are globally influential cultural brands. The United States is commander-in-chief of the global war on terror. It has military bases and installations in 130 countries. Even though it has tasted few victories against non-Western forces during the past half-century, some 15% of its federal budget and roughly half of discretionary spending is dedicated to its armed forces. The United States currently spends more on weapons systems than China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, India, France, United Kingdom and Japan combined.

China's global reach is, meanwhile, spreading fast. Unusually, the new Chinese empire is deeply entangled with the US and its partners. Beijing-financed mega-projects are reordering the lives of many millions of people, from South Africa, Nigeria and Sri Lanka to Cambodia, Chile and Hungary. The Communist Party-state economy has outflanked the US as the world's largest trading nation. It is now Africa's biggest trading partner and rivals the US in Latin America, where Chinese investment, extraction of resources and trade jumped tenfold in the first decade of this century.

Global military and diplomatic operations are under way. A new naval base has been built in Djibouti, and there are rescue missions (in Libya and Yemen) and extensive military involvement with global organisations such as the United Nations, plus first-time policing experiments in cities such as Dubrovnik. Military expenditure is mushrooming (the People's Liberation Army has enjoyed two decades of double-digit budget growth). China is meanwhile actively supporting cross-border institutions like the African Continental Free Trade Agreement and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). During the past two decades, it has helped build and now leads more than

20 new multilateral institutions, most of them founded on pragmatic agreement, not formal treaty alliances. There are freakish moments, as when the Chinese government, the enemy of general elections, outshined the European Union and the United States by providing Cambodia with computers, printers, voting booths, ballot boxes and election monitors in support of its corrupted mid-2018 general election.

A New Cold War?

These various overlapping trends should remind us that empires with a genuinely global footprint are rare. Whatever their visions of world conquest, the territorial reach of the Mongols, Muslims, Ottomans, Ming dynasty and British and other European empires was geographically limited. For the first time, during the years of bi-polarity (1945–1989), two relatively detached global empires vied for world dominance. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States tried to do something no empire had ever done: to exercise hegemony over the whole planet alone. It failed. So now it has to deal with the realities of spreading Chinese power. The upshot is that our planet, for the first time in human history, is shadowed by two globally entangled empires marked by different political styles, practices and aims.

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For many observers, the novelty is perplexing, which is why so many pundits and politicians within the American *imperium* are now peddling warnings of an imminent Chinese takeover of the world. Some are sharpening their swords. 'If China continues its impressive economic growth over the next few decades,' says John J. Mearsheimer, a leading American scholar, 'the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war'. He adds: 'the ultimate goal of every great power is to maximise its share of world power and eventually dominate the system'.[1] Such language encourages those who want a new Cold War to sort out which empire is in charge. Their first move is to stir up public sentiments against what they call the 'authoritarianism' or 'totalitarianism' of the existing Party-led regime. Beyond the borders of China, they see acts of silent

espionage and systematic takeovers of businesses, governments, universities, newspapers, churches and various civil society bodies. They warn of threats to 'sovereignty' and the coming end of 'liberal democracy'.

There is some validity in these warnings. They remind us that empires are never angels on Earth because their mission is always to change the balance of power in their own favour. Just like the United States, China has its fellow traveller intellectuals, propaganda media, front organisations, lobbyists and dark money peddlers. It is in the business of establishing imperial concessions (in Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Sihanoukville in Cambodia, for instance) and meddling in overseas media platforms. The critics of Chinese expansion are also helpfully burying the hubristic 'end of history' presumption that the strategy of containment and engagement with China would ultimately ensure that it became just like America: a capitalist 'liberal democracy'.

In these new circumstances, when many things seem both strange and out of joint, an urgent priority is the opening of minds: a new willingness among political thinkers, journalists, citizens and politicians to dissect their own ignorance about China; to craft fresh ways of thinking that enable all of us to see that the realities of the new Chinese empire are far more confusing, complicated and contradictory than many of its critics have so far supposed.

The new cold war rhetoric nevertheless has definite downsides. It understates the irreversible entanglement and cooperation of the two empires. It prematurely turns its back on the need for dynamically re-balancing the US-China power relationship, especially in the Asia Pacific region, along with the need for continuing positive cooperation in such fields as scientific research, higher education and renewable energy. The point is there is no Thucydides trap – the idea that conflict is almost inevitable when a rising power challenges the established one, à la Athens and Sparta – except in the heads of the new Cold War Warriors. Their grasp of the history of empires, and China's role in rethinking the whole subject, masterfully analysed in John Darwin's *After Tamerlane* (2007), is feeble. Get-tough-with-China talk attracts racists and Orientalists; in effect, it functions as a cry of pain from within 'the West' and a call to stay on top of the world. The rhetoric relies too heavily on stock phrases such as 'liberal democracy' and 'authoritarianism'. Seemingly unaware that it might well reinforce the emperor trends in today's China and the United States, the rhetoric is strikingly silent about the current disfiguring of power-sharing democracy within its heartlands. The less palatable side of the American empire (repeated military invasions in the name of democracy, repeated failures) is typically ignored. Worst of all, simplification and wilful ignorance about the daily life and complex and kaleidoscopic political dynamics of China are commonplace.

Phantom Democracy

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As China rapidly moves to the centre of the international order, the pertinent question is what kind of political system is this new global power? In the booming business of China-watching, the standard answer is that it is an 'authoritarian' regime, with qualifiers such as 'soft authoritarianism', 'hard authoritarianism' and 'authoritarian capitalism' commonplace. All accounts seem to agree that China is reckoned the antithesis of a 'liberal democracy' defined by open competition among freely formed political parties.

Some Chinese analysts celebrate the advantages of this 'authoritarianism' and welcome the triumph of a 'post-democracy' (Eric Li), freed from the curse of free and fair elections and 'showbiz democracy' (Weiwei Zhang). Outsiders find this inference alarming. They warn of the rise of a globally menacing 'authoritarian' or 'totalitarian' China. Still others announce the onset of 'dictatorship' or 'autocacy' as the party leadership concentrates titles and decision-making in the hands of one man, Xi Jinping.

They may prove to be right about the dangers. But what is wrong with their prediction, and their grand interpretation of China's authoritarianism, is not just its liberal bias; or its reductionist view of democracy as synonymous with free and fair elections; or its silence about the political need to clean the Augean stables of actually existing democracies, more than a few of which (Brazil, India, Britain, the United States) are in a parlous condition. The most serious weakness of the new Cold War Warriors is their failure to understand the striking paradox of Chinese domestic politics today – its vaguely democratic sensibility, strange as it may sound.

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From Xi downwards and sideways, state officials understand well the old Chinese proverb that when trees fall monkeys scatter (*shu dao husun san*), which is why they have no love for the open public scrutiny and restraint of their arbitrary powers. Public monitoring of power, or monitory democracy (*jian du shi min zhu*), is not their thing. That is why the slightest whiff of a challenge to their power can bring down the hammer, as evidenced in mass detention camps in Xinjiang, crackdowns on universities and underground churches, and the attempts to silence dissent in Hong Kong.

Yet the strange thing is that the rulers of China know that powerful people should fear too much power, just as pigs may fear growing fat. The anxiety about unrestrained power and the fear of power-sharing, power-chastening democracy explain why China is better described as a 'phantom democracy' – where the fear of democracy forces a style of political management that in many ways mirrors and mimics electoral democracies, where the fear of elections puts leaders in constant campaign mode.

The leadership knows by instinct that full rice bowls, skyscrapers, shopping malls and holidays abroad aren't enough. And that is why, for some time, it has been trumpeting China as a "people's democracy" (*ren min min zhu*) that conducts experiments with a wide range of locally crafted democratic tools designed to win public support, to deal productively with what the leadership labels mass incidents (an estimated 100,000 annually) and, primarily, to avoid the fate of its Soviet counterpart by becoming what some Chinese scholars call a 'learning party'.

But what exactly are these locally made, so-named democratic tools? The examples are numerous. Most obvious are the election of village committees by villagers themselves, and (less obvious) the spread of a culture of elections into social media, city administration and experiments of business houses with 'consultative democracy' among their staff. Democracy made in China also includes efforts to apply the rule of law selectively, in the shape of contract law, integrity and compliance units (within the newly established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, for instance), and local mobile courts. Nearly a million mediation committees assisted by 'people's mediators' now handle most conflicts (perhaps 90 per cent) inside and outside courts, at no cost to the litigants, in such areas as economic and labour disputes, divorce and minor criminal matters and civil disputes at the township level.

There are public forums, neighbourhood assemblies, democratic hearings and participatory budgeting experiments. Accountability and competition mechanisms are built into state bureaucracy. Chinese democracy makes room for independent public opinion leaders (*yu lun ling xiu*), figures such as the online satirist Papi Jiang and former Chinese army officer turned transgender dance star and choreographer Jin Xing, known affectionately as 'poison tongue' (*du she*), who use Sina Weibo and WeChat as public amplifiers to say things that grate on official ears. Democracy made in China thrives on the clever utilisation of public opinion polls and democratic campaign styles by party officials, and the use of digitally networked media as early warning devices and as sophisticated tools of public opinion formation and policymaking.

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Media Storms

These and other locally-made democracy experiments are typically ignored by those who beat the drum against the Chinese empire. That is unfortunate, if only because the conflict-producing and loyalty-inducing effects of these experiments are not to be underestimated, even if they fall far short of the standards of power-sharing democracy. Take the recent public scandal surrounding bogus vaccines supplied by Changsheng Biotechnology Company, a great rumpus that was initially stifled by the local and national drug administrations.

State media and local authorities sprang into action when all hell broke loose on social media. The *People's Daily* called on local regulators to 'rapidly take action, do a complete investigation and announce authoritative information in a timely manner to pacify public anxiety'. Premier Li Keqiang chimed in with talk of 'illegal and criminal acts that endanger the safety of people's lives'. Xi interrupted his state visit to Rwanda to order severe punishments 'to safeguard the public interest and social security'.

Media storms like these are chronic in China. They are allegories of the skittishness of the powerful. They also reveal the Achilles' heel of the whole system: its failure to deal with the systematic misuse of power through independent, sharp-tooth monitory mechanisms. But this weakness equally helps explain why talk of democracy in China is not oxymoronic. Locally made forms of democracy enjoy a measure of public acceptance. Despite their phantom qualities, they have real effects on the ground. They reinforce the sense that those who rule are less powerful than they might suppose. Hence, whereas governing China used to be like hammering nails into wood, it now much more closely resembles the art of balancing on slippery eggs.

Democratic Style

China's rulers have drawn anew the conclusion that shepherding the people means winning their hearts and minds through the use of democratic style. Supposing the existence of an unwritten contract (*mo xu*) between themselves and the people, party leaders have come for the first time to mount the public catwalk, and to pay meticulous attention to body-language, diction and decor, manners and charm. In the name of serving the people, as if they were up for election, they embrace the aesthetics of the permanent campaign. They step out from behind closed doors and go walking among the people. Seemingly unscripted, they appear in unusual locales. There they pause to breathe the local atmosphere, to establish themselves as the guardians of the political order, to measure the loyalty of their supporters, to charm cynics or win over those who fear they are being devoured by the jaws of power. In the hallowed name of the

people, the party showboats. It practises the common touch, as when Xi springs a well-crafted 'surprise' appearance and presses the flesh in a Beijing bun shop, rides on a bicycle with his daughter, embarks on a poverty tour in western China, and kicks a Gaelic football during an official visit to Ireland; or when his partner, the former singer and opera star Peng Liyuan, the first-ever First Lady, brings high heels and proto-democratic style for the first time into the field of high-level diplomacy and foreign policy.

None of this may seem new. For centuries, popular and elite discourse on the arts of government in China has rested on the understanding that rulers ought to be the expression of the will of the people. In many classic texts, rulers are seen as the sons of heaven and fathers of the people, upon whom heaven has bestowed the right to rule. In effect, the will of heaven is equivalent to the will of the people. The implication is that rulers shouldn't indulge their own interests at the expense of the needs of the people. If they do, for example by failing to govern benevolently and stirring up disorder, poverty and war, then they lose their "mandate of heaven" (*tian ming*).

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The new anxiety-fuelled efforts of the current rulers to experiment with democratic mechanisms may be thought to be mere extensions of these old ways of thinking. In fact, they are truly without historical precedent. The official embrace of organised market research and opinion polling techniques is an example. Since the early 1980s, the regime has built a giant information gathering apparatus. The contraption has many parts, comprising different types of information gathering, including hundreds of registered polling firms.

Some of them are classified as unofficial (private, for-profit, not directly part of state structures). Others are semi-official (for-profit, operating at some distance from state ministries); still others are controlled directly by the state, as happens at the People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Centre, which uses data-harvesting algorithms to send summaries of internet chatter trends in real time to officials, often with advice about which language to use and avoid in handling hot topics. Some polling agencies

are joint ventures with foreign firms and agencies such as A.C. Nielsen, Gallup, Tailor Nelsen and Pew Research Centre.

Practically every institution of higher education hosts a public opinion research unit, chartered to analyse trends and hotspots with the help of social scientists who have swapped their former 'redness' for the mantle of 'expert' functionaries in a booming public opinion polling and survey research industry. Elsewhere in the polity, the data harvesting machine includes local party branches, which function as listening posts, as do the party schools where up-and-coming cadres are sent periodically for 'study'.

The information harvesting machine extends far beyond the territorial borders of China. China's surging foreign press corps is an example: stationed around the world, its journalists are more than reporters filing stories from abroad; they double as providers of regular intelligence to a state that is increasingly reliant on, yet resistant to, open flows of information.

Higher up within the imperial polity, the network of People's Political Consultative Congresses and other consultative organs are all designed to win the support and collect the opinions of businesspeople, intellectuals and various party and non-party people. The information harvesting machine extends far beyond the territorial borders of China. China's surging foreign press corps is an example: stationed around the world, its journalists are more than reporters filing stories from abroad; they double as providers of regular intelligence to a state that is increasingly reliant on, yet resistant to, open flows of information.

Data gathering techniques and opinion polling machinery function as early warning detectors, protecting governing structures from political resistance and social disorder. Polls are also cleverly used to calibrate proposed policy changes considered potentially controversial, such as measures to increase public transport fares. A case in point is the role played by the Canton Public Opinion Research Centre (C-por), the largest independent public opinion research agency in China, in dampening and managing the public rumpus triggered in early 2014 by local government plans to reduce traffic congestion by increasing parking fees in Guangzhou.

It all sounds familiar, yet the Changsheng Biotechnology Company vaccine scandal shows that the really remarkable thing is that those who govern China simultaneously honour and do everything to crush the formation of publics with independent views about matters of public concern. The authorities know the old rule that every form of government rests upon opinion (*min yi*). But when they say that the survival or extinction of the regime depends on 'winning or losing public support' (Xi Jinping) they give the old rule a new twist: if opinion is the foundation of stable government, the government itself must create stable opinion. It follows that the imperative is to watch, to keep an ear to the ground, so that the goal of harmoniously 'guiding public opinion' becomes a reality. The party-state must work constantly to stay closely in touch with the people, to ensure that 'separation from the masses' (*tuo li qun zhong*) never grows dangerously wide. The rulers thus acknowledge that power doesn't flow ultimately from the barrels of guns, or from Xinjiang-style arrests and internments. They understand that very little props up the political order except people's belief in it.

The Changsheng scandal also shows that much the same proto-democratic dynamic is operative in the world of online media. Everybody knows the authorities firewall, censor and crack down on subversive messaging and 'inappropriate discussions'. Early-morning swoops by plain-clothes police, disappearances, illegal detentions and violent beatings by unidentified thugs happen. Total cyber-surveillance of citizens is slowly becoming a reality. Equally striking but less obvious is the way the authorities use digital media as a listening post, as a medium through which internet users are

urged to chat and vent their grievances, to move closer to the state authorities, even to fight against the abuse of power. Hence the recent calls by officials, for instance in Shandong province, for journalists to do their job of in-depth investigation; the proliferation of sophisticated digital strategies such as the Blue Map App designed to inform citizens in real-time about water quality, local sources of pollution, and to scrutinise emissions from polluting companies; e-consultations and online Q&A sessions; virtual petition sites and online webcasts of public forums that come packaged in official assurances about the need to encourage transparency.

Among the biggest possible surprises is that the powerful rulers of the People's Republic of China, driven by skittishness, succeed in harnessing locally made democratic mechanisms to win the loyalty of their subjects and, thus, legitimate and strengthen their one-party rule in support of their global imperial ambitions.

China's Future

The idea of China as a phantom democracy, rather than a straightforward case of authoritarianism, naturally prompts basic questions about the efficacy and durability of all these practices, and where they are steering the imperial political order. The short answer is, nobody knows. In politics, as in life, surprise is the most powerful player in defining what comes next. Among the biggest possible surprises is that the powerful rulers of the People's Republic of China, driven by skittishness, succeed in harnessing locally made democratic mechanisms to win the loyalty of their subjects and, thus, legitimate and strengthen their one-party rule in support of their global imperial ambitions.

Suppose the present political order, with the help of political wisdom, calculated cunning and good luck, managed to display great resilience. Then imagine that the rich and powerful men who run this polity mastered the art of paying homage to their subjects, to better rule them, at home and abroad, on the basis of a surprising degree of self-scrutiny and experimentation. Let's further imagine that the convergence of such trends as steady economic growth, improved social policy provision, cyber-surveillance and political repression served to stabilise the homelands of the polity, helped along by a loyal middle class hooked on dreams of restoring China to greatness, and by the imperial foolishness of those who currently govern America in the name of making it great again. If all this came to pass, in defiance of political science handbooks, wouldn't China celebrate its return to the global stage armed with a strange new soft power weapon? A distinctively 21st-century one-party polity grounded in the voluntary servitude of its people, an ultra-modern despotism with a strangely democratic feel? Not a 'thoroughgoing return to totalitarian politics' as Chinese legal scholar Xu Zhangrun warned last year in a widely circulated essay (and for which he has since been sacked), but a tremendous phantom-democratic political order triumphantly beating a path towards a future world well beyond power-sharing constitutional democracy? A new global empire that slowly but surely brings to an end democracy as it was known, practised and enjoyed by millions of people on our planet during times that now seem rapidly to be fading into the distant past?

NOTE

1 Mearsheimer, J. 'China's Unpeaceful Rise', *Current History* (April 2006), pp. 160-162

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