Who’s Cartoonish About China?

A Letter from Stein Ringen

Dear Sir,

In William Overholt’s review of my book The Perfect Dictatorship in the Spring 2017 issue of Global Asia, we get a clash between two views of how to make sense of China’s political system. My book is a warning to the world that with the current Beijing regime we are up against the biggest, strongest and most effective dictatorship ever known. Overholt lists various benefits that have come the population’s way and takes that as the basis for judging the regime. Most people in China are probably better off materially than they have ever been, but my view is that the regime is still a dictatorship and that it is on that basis it should be judged morally.

Overholt thinks that I go out of my way to make China look bad. I do no such thing. My book is not about China but about the political regime. I do not pronounce on China, and am careful to say that I do not. Even the regime, I do not denigrate. I describe it as successful on its own terms. Overholt’s benevolent view gets him too close to the regime and prevents him from keeping a proper distance. Hence, he does not notice that he writes as if China and its political regime are one and the same and that his review becomes the academic equivalent of the Chinese leaders’ complaint against critics that they offend the feelings of the Chinese people.

The way I make China look bad, according to Overholt’s review, is by one-sided use of numbers. But numbers are not prominent in my book. It does not have a single table or chart and the analysis is not statistically driven. When I do use numbers, I go out of my way about how uncertain they are. I discuss gross domestic product and find the official story to be a fairy-tale. When the book was published, it was still pretty much accepted that the Chinese economy was overtaking or had overtaken the US economy in size. That was nonsense then, which anyone who applied a bit of skepticism would have seen, and is something we do not hear much now. I do some tax estimates and find the tax burden to be extremely heavy but do not put a number on it except as a guessestimate within a margin of error of at least 10 percentage points. I say something about public services and find them to be minimal relative to the level of tax extraction. I consider poverty rates and find that there are no official or otherwise very robust statistics to lean on and that poverty remains widespread. I see no reason to revise any of these things now.

Overholt’s failure to keep distance is visible throughout.

He uncritically takes the benefits that have come people’s way to have been delivered by the state. In the book, I discuss both the meaning of “delivery” and just what the state may be considered to have delivered (less than it claims).

He writes: “China started its rapid development a generation later than South Korea and Japan.” But it did not. The People’s Republic of China was established in 1949 and the first 10 years saw strong economic growth. Then, the regime plunged the country into death and destruction. It is not acceptable to thus wipe the Maoist disasters off the record of the PRC.

He even, remarkably, relativizes the events of 1989 because “South Korea’s Kwangju (1980) was proportionally worse.” That, firstly, is wrong. But what does it matter? In 1989, a popular uprising throughout the country was crushed with military means at the cost of we do not know how many thousands of lives. That’s a fact of the PRC irrespective of what may or may not have happened elsewhere.

In my book, I do not (with a couple of exceptions) engage in polemics against other writers. But there is an implicit criticism of some writings within China studies for edging too uncritically up to the regime. That bias is all over Overholt’s scurrilous review. The Chinese leaders tell their people that they can have better standards of living but not lives of autonomy. We can do nothing about it but we do not have to accept and parrot the dictators’ version of history and destiny.

Stein Ringen