A Never-Ending Cycle of Fascination

With a phone call and four tweets, US President-elect Donald Trump upended the carefully calibrated “One China” policy that undergirded US-China relations for four decades. As Asians scramble to divine the future of the relationship, readers might want to start with the past, and John Pomfret provides a magisterial narrative in his newest book.

Pomfret has spent much of his life studying in, reporting on and writing about China, and manages to remain passionate and dispassionate at the same time. His fascination with the topic leaps off every page of this deeply researched book, and he charts a narrative over centuries by introducing a giant cast of colorful figures. Iconic personages are cast in a fresh light, and overlooked individuals are rescued from obscurity. The book’s great strength lies in these innumerable micornarratives, elegantly and vividly told. In Pomfret’s telling, they form a pattern like “a never-ending Buddhist cycle of reincarnation.” Americans and Chinese alike, he maintains, cycle through “rapturous enchantment begetting hope, followed by disenchantment, repulsion and disgust, only to return to fascination once again.” Signals from the new regime in Washington so far suggest we might be in for another turn of the wheel.

One wonders, after putting Pomfret’s book down, if what is really needed, given the global impact of the US-China relationship, is for the two countries to escape this cycle of Samsara. But that would take enlightenment on both sides of the Pacific.

Reviewed by John Delury, Associate Professor at Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies and book reviews co-editor of Global Asia.

Dictators and their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence

By Sheena Chestnut Greitens

With a phone call and four tweets, US President-elect Donald Trump upended the carefully calibrated “One China” policy that undergirded US-China relations for four decades. As Asians scramble to divine the future of the relationship, readers might want to start with the past, and John Pomfret provides a magisterial narrative in his newest book.

Pomfret has spent much of his life studying in, reporting on and writing about China, and manages to remain passionate and dispassionate at the same time. His fascination with the topic leaps off every page of this deeply researched book, and he charts a narrative over centuries by introducing a giant cast of colorful figures. Iconic personages are cast in a fresh light, and overlooked individuals are rescued from obscurity. The book’s great strength lies in these innumerable micornarratives, elegantly and vividly told. In Pomfret’s telling, they form a pattern like “a never-ending Buddhist cycle of reincarnation.” Americans and Chinese alike, he maintains, cycle through “rapturous enchantment begetting hope, followed by disenchantment, repulsion and disgust, only to return to fascination once again.” Signals from the new regime in Washington so far suggest we might be in for another turn of the wheel.

One wonders, after putting Pomfret’s book down, if what is really needed, given the global impact of the US-China relationship, is for the two countries to escape this cycle of Samsara. But that would take enlightenment on both sides of the Pacific.

Reviewed by John Delury, Associate Professor at Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies and book reviews co-editor of Global Asia.

A New Authority on Authoritarianism

All dictatorships are repressive, but they repress in different ways. That is the starting point of Sheena Chestnut Greitens’ treatise on how authoritarian regimes design their “coercive apparatus.”

Her book builds on a wave of scholarship that subjects authoritarianism to analytical scrutiny and does not dismiss all “non-democracies” as artifacts of the 20th century (as Greitens, a University of Missouri political scientist, points out, more than half of the world’s states can be labeled authoritarian). She wants to understand how autocrats wield coercive power internally, so she stands in the dictator’s shoes and asks: Who am I more afraid of, my people or my generals? One more afraid of mass revolt will design his internal security institutions to focus on spying deep into people’s private lives to snuff out potential threats.

But one worried more about a coup d’etat splits his security services into rival outfits that keep elites in check, while having to rely on brute, indiscriminate violence against large numbers of people to keep social order. Greitens proves this elegant thesis with richly detailed case studies of military dictatorships in South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines.

Combining archival research, interviews and social science theory, Greitens has written the authoritative book on authoritarian coercion, making a major contribution to the history of state power in East Asia.

Reviewed by John Delury.
In China, All Falls Into the Center

By Jae Ho Chung
Columbia University Press, 2016, 232 pages, $60 (Hardcover)

“China is no Monaco or Singapore,” writes Chung Jae-ho. So why would leaders of China, with almost 1.4 billion people, look to Singapore (population 5.6 million) as a model? Why does China, for all its reforms, stick with a “unitary” form, spurning the “federal” models offered by the US, India and Russia? Chung’s ambitious new book draws on decades of research to explain the anomaly of China as a colossal unitary state.

He uses Chinese rulers’ “perennial preoccupation with effective control over localities” to explain the evolution of China from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. Mao was able to centralize state power and thrust it deep into local administration — for the first time in centuries, if not millennia, the party center penetrated into the village market. Deng Xiaoping rejected Maoism’s ideological and economic totalitarianism, and launched a bold decentralization process that liberated villagers to make their own economic decisions. Deng and his successor also let the provinces compete for foreign investment, but always guarded against even the whiff of ethnic groups along the borders. Deng’s reforms allowed experimentation with village and township “economic decisions. Deng and his successor also let the provinces compete for foreign investment, but always guarded against even the whiff of local officials, facilitated collusive corruption.

Chung reveals how fear of loss of control to the centrifugal forces latent in China’s underlying “empire” is Beijing’s central preoccupation and a key to understanding how China holds together, the costs of the effort and the risks that the glue might one day fail to hold.

Reviewed by John Delury.

Detective O on the Dumpling Trail

The Gentleman from Japan: An Inspector O Novel
By James Church
Minotaur Books, 2016, 288 pages, $25.99 (Hardcover)

Every good detective novel starts with a corpse. The Gentleman from Japan opens with seven (or is it eight?) dead bodies that turn up at noodle restaurants scattered throughout the Chinese city of Yanji, not far from the North Korean border. But James Church’s sixth installment in the Inspector O series isn’t about noodles. It’s about dumplings. Dumpling machines, rather. To tell you anything more than that would spoil all the fun — and this book is about as much fun as a reader interested in North Korea could possibly hope to have. A detective from Pyongyang, living in Manchurian exile with his Chinese-Korean nephew (who works for state security), bumps into an old friend from Macau and suddenly finds himself on a plane bound for Lisbon — can’t get much more Global Asia than that.

James Church’s prose keeps its Raymond Chandler cool, while this time adding a hint of Saramago, rather. To tell you anything more than that would spoil all the fun — and this book is about as much fun as a reader interested in North Korea could possibly hope to have. A detective from Pyongyang, living in Manchurian exile with his Chinese-Korean nephew (who works for state security), bumps into an old friend from Macau and suddenly finds himself on a plane bound for Lisbon — can’t get much more Global Asia than that.

The world is still shocked to see Donald Trump as the next US president — not simply because the election went against most polls and media expectations, but more so at the uncertainty ahead for US foreign policy. What is certain, however, is that Trump’s election reflects the fact that many Americans yearn for change — a political phenomenon that goes well beyond an individual politician’s electoral victory.

It is too early to tell how the Trump phenomenon will unfold, but this book offers insights into the foreign policy side. Mills and Rosefeld, both economists, argue that “democratic nationalism” is a tenet embodied in the phenomenon, which sets it apart from the “internationalist cosmopolitanism” that they contend has prevailed in US foreign policy for the last 70 years but that has become corrupted by private interests, both financial and political. The authors adopt a clear metaphor to depict the alternative, “sane” foreign policy advocated by Trump nationalism: “When dogs quarrel, the lion need not care.” As many forms of policy lie between cosmopolitanism and isolationism, however, they probe the middle ground by offering 11 key elements of US foreign policy strategy and 12 principles, which include policies toward the “triumvirate of challengers to America” — Russia, China and Iran.

This book is not founded on in-depth, thorough research. Its arguments are often coarse, inconclusive and unclear. Yet it reveals some crucial rudiments to assess in advance the Trumpian foreign policy side.

Taehwan Kim is Associate Professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and book reviews co-editor for Global Asia.

Reviewed by John Delury.

What Will Trump Do? A First Guess

The Trump Phenomenon and the Future of US Foreign Policy
By Daniel Quinn Mills and Steven Rosefeld
World Scientific Publishing, 2016, 212 pages, $49.00 (Hardcover)

A public crackdown by President Xi Jinping has revealed China’s rampant corruption. The case of former Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang was extreme but unexceptional, exposing a web of corruption involving family, relatives, criminals, bureaucrats, even personal fortune-tellers. In a theoretical approach Minxin Pei, a professor at Claremont McKenna College, analyzes 260 cases of corruption in China. Curious about the emergence since the 1990s of “collusive corruption,” a particular type of Chinese crony capitalism involving “a group of public officials in acts of collusion with the explicit purpose of reaping private material gains,” Pei points to institutional causes. Some critical changes in political and economic institutions in the post-Tiananmen era, particularly incomplete property rights reforms, provided incentives for collusion, while administrative decentralization, including powers of appointment of local officials, facilitated collusive corruption.

The author finds the critical, ultimate determinant of Chinese crony capitalism. In the nature of the “Leninist regime’s” monopolization of political power. Pei accordingly projects a gloomy outlook for Chinese political and economic reforms: The ruling elites will be less inclined to introduce either political or genuine market-oriented reforms, as this would eliminate the source of rents for the ruling autocratic elites to share.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

What Lets Chinese Corruption Thrive?

China’s Crony Capitalism: The Dynamics of Regime Decay
By Minxin Pei
Harvard University Press, 2016, 376 pages, $35.00 (Hardcover)

Taehwan Kim is Associate Professor at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy and book reviews co-editor for Global Asia.
Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age, 2nd ed.
By Manuel Castells
Polity, 2015, 328 pages, $74.95 (Hardcover)

How are perceptions of the world, and world politics in particular, shaped in the minds of peoples and policy-makers? In the classical geopolitical tradition, it is not uncommon to see Manichean division of the world into contending areas, regions, blocs and even civilizations. Critical geopolitics, an academic discipline combining political geography and international relations, says otherwise, seeing such an approach as a constructed view of the world.

Within this tradition of critical geopolitics, Robert Saunders, professor at Farmingdale State College, explores the portrayal of the post-Soviet countries in Western popular culture and how they have fought back through efforts at nation-branding and public diplomacy. This book illuminates how Western media and popular cultural products such as TV series, video games, comic books and motion pictures produce geographical imagination, representing post-Soviet citizens as “beigemen” — gangsters, mercenaries, revanchists, terrorists and mad scientists — and post-Soviet space as a frozen, crime-ridden, laughable, gray and/or irradiated wasteland.

Why does all this matter? Saunders contends that these mediated representations of post-Soviet space and people have, on many levels, ineluctably besmirched the image of the post-Soviet “East,” creating a powerful feedback loop that seeps into quotidian geopolitics and colors the political perceptions of Western elites of former Soviet-bloc countries. In sum, mediated social construction influences power relations in world politics, although this book leaves the direct linkage unexplained. Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

A lesser known side of China’s rise, at least until a crop of books like Leslie T. Chang’s Factory Girls hit the shelves, were the grimmer sides of life underpinning the glitter. And since her 2009 book, China’s migrant labor force has more than doubled to 270 million. The American-born Chinese, then a Wall Street Journal reporter, positioned herself in China’s busiest industrial export hub, the southern city Dongguang, blending with thousands of young women who streamed in looking for jobs in the mushrooming factories. While male workers gravitated towards construction and heavier manual labor, young village girls were absorbed in the maw of humongous factories producing everything that filled Western supermarket shelves. Chang’s interviews with dozens of these girls opened up a view to a whole new world of meaning in people’s minds through mechanisms of symbolic manipulation. Castells sees in the latter “counterpower” that challenges the coercive power embedded in the institutions of society in order to claim representation for their own values and interests. He further argues that social movements in the digital age, triggered by outrage against blatant injustice and by hope of a possible change, exercise this counterpower from within an autonomous space provided by the Internet and wireless networks.

Castells sees in the networked social movements a new form of democracy. Technological innovation exerts great influence on our daily lives, social movements included. Manuel Castells, a prolific Spanish sociologist known for his life-long research on information, communication and networks, traces in this updated volume social movements taking on a new form and pattern, powered by the Internet and wireless communications. Distinguishing two types of power, one exercised by means of coercion and one by the construction of meaning in people’s minds through mechanisms of symbolic manipulation, Castells sees the latter “counterpower” that challenges the coercive power embedded in the institutions of society in order to claim representation for their own values and interests. He further argues that social movements in the digital age, triggered by outrage against blatant injustice and by hope of a possible change, exercise this counterpower from within an autonomous space provided by the Internet and wireless networks. Castells navigates an array of empirical cases including Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring and the Syrian quagmire, the Iranian Green Revolution, Iceland’s Kitchenware revolution and Indignadas in Spain. He sees in the networked social movements a new form of democracy combining assembly-based decision-making with a new public sphere built on the interplay of local places and online networks. Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

As the frustration and anger of the middle class in Western economies keep exploding, producing political upheavals — Brexit, Donald Trump’s rise, Matteo Renzi’s fall — analyzing why has emerged as a new industry. World Bank economist Branko Milanovic, who has devoted his career to analyzing the causes of economic inequality, is ahead of the pack. Global data for the past 25 years now allows reasonable predictions about the future. In this slim volume, rich with illuminating data, Milanovic reveals the zeitgeist of today’s discontent and ponders coming decades. He shows how economic growth shrank income inequality in the West through much of the 20th century, while widening the gap between advanced and developing countries. But the course has reversed in the past two decades: the gap between the middle-income group and the rich has widened while the middle class in Asia has risen dramatically. Globalization has also gradually reduced the gap between resurgent Asia and the West. The uneven effect of globalization revealed by Milanovic’s long-term data helps explain the explosive anger behind the Brexit vote and the rise of Trump. Milanovic ends by wondering how rich countries would manage several decades of stagnation among their middle classes. Will inequality disappear as globalization continues? No, he says. Expect a turbulent world. Reviewed by Nayan Chanda.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.

Portraits of Change Remains Instructive

Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China
By Leslie T. Chang
Spiegel & Grau, 2009, 437 pages, $17.00 (Paperback)

Of Power and Counterpower

Why the Anger Will Keep Building

Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization
By Branko Milanovic
Belknap Press, 2016, 320 pages, $18.50 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda, founding editor of YaleGlobal Online and a Global Asia Editorial Board member.
Traders Open Doors to Hermit Kingdom

North Korea’s Hidden Revolution
By Jieun Baek
Yale University Press, 2016, 312 pages $21.00 (Hardcover)

Newspapers may still call North Korea a “hermit kingdom,” but in the past decade, thanks to ever more aggressive traders and smugglers, its walls have grown increasingly porous. American-born Korean writer Jieun Baek’s research and extensive interviews with defectors, smugglers and NGOs show the extent of information flow into North Korea and the awareness of its citizens of the world outside. Work with Google and dissertation research have brought Baek into contact with a small but dedicated band of Koreans who, for business or political-ideological reasons, have opened the nation to news, audio and video entertainment from South Korea and the wider world. Famine in the mid-1990s forced North Korea to relax state control and introduce private markets. When the crisis eased, these continued and expanded, spawning a new breed of traders who, with Chinese and South Korean traders, have emerged as unwitting agents of an information revolution. Smuggled smart phones, MP-4 players and pen drives holding news and movies have exposed many citizens, especially the young, to the outside world is a necessary component if North Koreans want to create change for themselves. Reviewed by Nayan Chanda.

The Democratic Party of Japan in Power: Challenges and Failures
Edited by Yoichi Funabashi and Koichi Nakano
Routledge, 2017, 205 pages, $97.29 (Hardcover)

Winning elections is often much easier than governing, as the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) found. In dramatically defeating Japan’s dominant governing conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2009, it seemed to have reshaped the political landscape. Barely three years later, the DPJ suffered a sweeping reversal, seeing its 308-seat dominance of the lower house of parliament cut to a mere 57. Based on interviews with 30 leading DPJ politicians, this detailed study examines why and offers lessons for opposition recovery in Japan. A mix of factors led to the DPJ’s failure, including overly ambitious campaign promises whose costs were never properly calculated; poor party management; internal party factional tensions, exacerbated by personal jealousies and arrogance; and an overly confrontational relationship between novice politicians and career civil servants. The DPJ record, while poor, was not uniformly negative, and in areas of both social and defense policy the government chalked up some lasting successes. While the current prospects for political recovery are dismal, this volume offers some salutary lessons and insights. Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright, Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia, Chatham House, and Senior Lecturer in Modern Japanese Politics and the International Relations of East Asia at the University of Cambridge.

How to Win, and How Not to Govern

Respect Can Calm Asia’s History Wars

In the wake of US President Barack Obama’s visit to Hiroshima in May 2016, and the anticipated visit to Pearl Harbor of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, historical memory and its role in shaping contemporary geopolitics is again a topical issue. This book breaks new ground in trying to make sense of the complex interplay of past and present in understanding the international relations of Northeast Asia. Shin and Sneader astutely accept that hopes for reconciliation by building a consensus about the Pacific War are unrealistic. Historical interpretation is too contested both between and, importantly, within countries. More realistic is to present the kaleidoscope of contrasting historical interpretations that exist in Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea and the US in the hope that opinion-shapers and decision-makers can reflect on this diversity and accept the legitimacy of alternative views, not pursue a model of narrow, nationalistic identity politics rooted in absolutist interpretations of the past. The authors combine portraits of academics, journalists, activists, film-makers, officials, polemists, many who lived through the contentious historical periods. They also explore contested historical issues relating to forced labor, sexual slavery, the origins and end of the Pacific War, and the post-war US settlement in the region. Sensibly, they acknowledge that the mix of democratic and authoritarian regimes in the region and the rise of new nationalist pressures make reconciliation anything but guaranteed, while acknowledging the critical mediating role that can (and arguably should) be played by the US. Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.

A Wake-Up Call for Chinese Politics

With so much speculation on China’s role as a rising economic power or a threat to regional security, it is easy to overlook its internal political debate. Wang Hui, a noted progressive historian at Tsinghua University, offers a detailed, nuanced interpretation of China’s intellectual discourse from before the Chinese Revolution of 1911 through to the present day, seeking along the way to revive (but not uncritically) the legacy of Mao Zedong’s thought. Wang questions considerations of political integration, the interaction between culture and politics, and the role of “people’s war,” addressing in part China’s experience in the Korean War. Innovatively blending Western social and political theory with Chinese intellectual discourse, he argues for a new, universal re-politicization of political life that addresses the shortcomings of Western capitalism and of Chinese state-centric socialism. He is most compelling in analyzing failings in contemporary Chinese politics. Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright.

China’s Twentieth Century: Revolution, Retreat and the Road to Equality
By Wang Hui
Verso, 2016, 361 pages, $20.36 (Paperback)

Divergent Memories: Opinion Leaders and the Asia-Pacific War
By Gi-wook Shin and Daniel Sneader
Stanford University Press, 2016, 371 pages, $24.95 (Paperback)