As China Grows,
Words Matter

In 2003, as China, a fresh WTO member, was scorching its way up the world economy and quietly building its military muscles, one term gained currency: the China threat. In a speech in 2003, Zheng Bijian, China’s eminence grise, tried to dispel that fear by launching the concept of China’s “peaceful rise” to great-power status. Criticized from various quarters, China soon swapped “rise” to “development.” Peaceful or not, the formulation offers a useful focus to explore the implications of its emergence as a major power.

In this volume, edited by Asle Toje, are essays by 16 American, European and Asian political scientists and historians, and offers a stimulating and neatly arranged smorgasbord of ideas and arguments. Unlike many essay collections, this is well structured, with many voices and perspectives seeking to answer five questions posed by the editor: Is China seeking global or regional hegemony? Given its domestic constraints, what kind of military power will it wield? Will its rise pose a threat to the liberal international order? How would other powers react? What will be a more reliable guide in driving China’s future: lessons of history or international relations theories?

The authors provide reasonable and well documented answers but vary in their shades of confidence and concern about China’s development strategy. Overall, I detected a cautious optimism among most that conflict is not inevitable; the US should play it cool, as China’s domestic difficulties and the “profound skepticism” of its neighbors (in Odd Arne Westad’s words) constrain it.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda, founder of YaleGlobal Online and a Global Asia Editorial Board member.
China’s Money Is a Party Matter

Gaining Currency: The Rise of the Renminbi
By Eswar S. Prasad
Oxford University Press, 2017, 344 pages, $29.95 (Hardcover)

Donald Trump sees China as “a currency manipulator” and has accused it of ripping off the US by dumping its low-priced goods there. Fear has also grown as the Chinese currency has strengthened and become more internationalized. Nobody is perhaps better placed to explain the renminbi’s role than Cornell economist Eswar Prasad, formerly head of the International Monetary Fund’s China Division. In this timely volume, he traces the struggles of the People’s Republic of China to modernize and reform the country’s economy while maintaining control of a one-party state. Why is China reluctant to allow full capital account convertibility as it seeks a seat at the high table of global finance? Why is it so keen to internationalize its currency and use it instead of the dollar, euro or yen? Why does it seek reserve currency status for the renminbi?

Prasad, ever the professor, offers a primer on macroeconomics relating to China. He also shows how financial issues are intimately related to the Chinese Communist Party’s mission to rise to the top of the world of international finance and shape the rules of the game, with party reformers using the cudgel of internationalization to force reform of the financial and banking sectors, just as by joining the WTO, China forced its sclerotic state-owned enterprises to reform. But Prasad is cautious about its chances for success, noting, “a deep internal conflict between its stated objective of letting markets operate freely and its desire to maintain stability and control above all else.” That, Prasad argues, is leading a “one-step forward, two-steps sideways trajectory.”

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

Chinese Encounters in Southeast Asia: How People, Money, and Ideas from China Are Changing a Region
Edited by Pál Nyíri & Danielle Tan
University of Washington Press, 2017, 312 pages, $30.00 (Paperback)

Books on China’s rise mostly focus on trade, diplomacy and military might. But how is its ascent affecting relations with its neighbors at non-state levels? What impact are Chinese migrants and peripheral peoples having? Such issues tend to be neglected. This volume has 11 chapters from different perspectives — history, sociology, anthropology, geography, environmental science and political science. Together, they fill an important gap. As the editors note, “Understanding the diversity of actors and institutions tells us more about China’s impact on the ground than a mere analysis of military strategies or recourse to the concepts of Chinese diaspora/capitalism, which have nourished the fear of the ‘yellow peril’ or served to celebrate a shared civilization.”

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Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

Of Marginal and Migrant Chinese

Books on China’s rise mostly focus on trade, diplomacy and military might. But how is its ascent affecting relations with its neighbors at non-state levels? What impact are Chinese migrants and peripheral peoples having? Such issues tend to be neglected. This volume has 11 chapters from different perspectives — history, sociology, anthropology, geography, environmental science and political science. Together, they fill an important gap. As the editors note, “Understanding the diversity of actors and institutions tells us more about China’s impact on the ground than a mere analysis of military strategies or recourse to the concepts of Chinese diaspora/capitalism, which have nourished the fear of the ‘yellow peril’ or served to celebrate a shared civilization.”

Presented are a colorful set of actors and their actions, not always in China’s interest, and help dispel the notion of regional steamroller. Interactions of traders, farmers, tourists, students, consumers and bureaucrats along the land borders, as well as millions of emigrant Chinese (perhaps 2.7 million to Southeast Asia alone since 1949) offers a nuanced picture. The foreword by Wang Gungwu, doyen of Southeast Asia historians, notes the historic irony of the current importance of migrant Chinese in the region. China’s Ming and Qing dynasties once denounced those who left without approval as outlaws, bandits and pirates.

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda
Where Listening Is Better Than Talking

Talking to North Korea: Ending the Nuclear Standoff
By Glyn Ford
Pluto Press, 2018, 240 pages, $21.00 (Paperback)

A former European Parliament legislator, Glyn Ford has made 50 visits to North Korea and has been talking to senior officials there for decades. This volume is the fruit of that long effort offered as food for thought in this moment of potential transformation. The title is a misnomer — Ford’s strength is his ability to listen and put North Korean positions in context for outsiders. Nearly half of this book is thus a historical tale, going back to the late 19th century’s great power struggles — explaining that North Korea is still trying to wake from the nightmare of history.

Ford’s empathetic (yet still critically informed) retelling of the story from the Korean War to the Six-Party Talks goes a long way to explaining Pyongyang’s mindset going into the current, renewed bout of diplomacy with Seoul and Washington. He argues that Trump is “misreading” Kim by offering the vague promise of “condos on the beach,” when what Kim wants is serious security guarantees and room to grow his nation’s economy.

The lurking danger, Ford fears, is the two sides’ profound mutual ignorance: “Unknowing and unaware of the art of the attainable, they will ask the impossible, demand the undeliverable, and seek the unfindable.” While dedicated to dialogue and negotiated settlement, there is nothing Pollyannaish in Ford’s analysis—quite the contrary, the book concludes with a grim reminder of the fate of Iraq and Libya.

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

The Modernisation of the Republic of Korea Navy: Seapower, Strategy and Politics
By Ian Bowers
Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 239 pages, $79.99 (Hardcover)

What Naval Power Means to Seoul

John Mearsheimer’s theory of the “stopping power of water” isn’t much help on the Korean Peninsula, where armed ships and subs of North and South Korea have fought a string of bloody sea battles along their disputed border in the Yellow Sea. The two Koreas, in fact, have more experience in littoral combat, surface and subsurface, than many navies in the Asia Pacific. And yet, despite all the attention to maritime conflict in the region, surprisingly little has been written on South Korea as a seapower.

Ian Bowers of the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies fills the gap with this comprehensive and illuminating treatise. Anyone following the tensions in maritime East Asia will want to read his book for the light it sheds on the shifting capabilities and ambitions of a key player, South Korea.

Reviewed by John Delury, Associate Professor at Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies and book reviews co-editor of Global Asia.
How close did the world come to a nuclear catastrophe in 2017? By the peak of tensions between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump late in the year, some informed observers warned the probability of coming to blows was as high as 50:50 — a toss of a coin. Even in retrospect, it is impossible to know for sure, but Van Jackson’s meticulous reconstruction of events in On the Brink is likely to stand as an essential “first draft” for historians in the future.

Having served in the US government during the Barack Obama administration and now teaching at Victoria University of Wellington, Jackson combines the virtues of an insider’s practical sense of “how the sausage is made” with an academic’s appreciation of underlying drivers behind policy statements and political rhetoric. Perhaps the most interesting argument he develops is a counterfactual thought experiment of a Hillary Clinton presidency, which serves to show how Trump’s colorful rhetoric only “accelerated” a crisis that was coming anyway — in part due to the strategic failure and “policy inertia” of the Obama administration’s approach to North Korea.

To critique Obama is not to let Trump off the hook. Given Pyongyang’s expectations of US aggression and need to maintain asymmetric deterrence, Trump’s menacing and undisciplined language unwittingly ran catastrophic risks of a conflict breaking out, and escalating rapidly. Like Graham Allison’s classic deconstruction of the Cuban missile crisis in Essence of Decision, Jackson’s book reveals how close two hostile, nuclear-armed states came to fighting a “war of choice” that neither really wanted.

Reviewed by John Delury

In a richly detailed history of Tibet’s largely forgotten Muslim community, the Khache, David Atwill spirits the reader to a cosmopolitan Himalayan plateau. Deconstructing the standard images of premodern Tibet as a “closed kingdom” and modern Tibet as bifurcated between Buddhist natives and Han settlers, Atwill documents a diverse and interconnected world radiating out from the central Tibetan city of Lhasa.

The Khache were well established in Lhasa by the 17th century and made up a tenth of the city when Mao Zedong established the People’s Republic of China in 1949. But the Dalai Lama’s flight to India in 1959 caused leading Khache, who had long felt Tibetan and been treated as such, to now “reclaim” Indian citizenship. Initially arrested, 1,000 Khaches eventually received exit visas from Beijing to “return” to India. Keeping allegiance to the Dalai Lama and speaking Tibetan, the Khache exile community settled in Kashmir and tried to embrace Indian citizenship — yet they remain outside the categories of Indian, Chinese and even Tibetan, as conventionally understood.

Atwill, a historian at Penn State University, traces the lost history of this marginalized community to challenge state-centric narratives and monolithic images, and replace them with an appreciation of the interconnected nature of inter-Asian relations that links our world with the early modern one.

Reviewed by John Delury
Explaining Russia’s Money-Go-Round

In the decade to the 2008 global financial crisis, Russia’s economy grew at almost 8 percent a year — due in large part to high oil prices. Stagnation followed, but Russia didn’t suffer a disastrous meltdown. How has it avoided, at least so far, the so-called curse of a resource-dependent economy in spite of economic crises and Western sanctions?

Chris Miller, a professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, finds an answer in Putinomics, defined as a three-pronged economic strategy built on stable state finances, a stable social contract and efficient private business. Learning from a chaotic 1990s, the Kremlin stowed hundreds of billions of dollars of its 2000s oil windfall in reserve funds. Conservative financial and monetary policies safeguarded the social contract with wage earners, state employees and pensioners. While oligarchs and state-owned firms continued to prevail in the economy, in industries not closely linked to politics — such as the retail and iron and steel sectors — market incentives tended to dominate decision-making, enhancing economic efficiency.

But by the 2010s, Miller observes, Russia faces new set challenges: reducing bureaucracy, increasing investment in health and education, improving the rule of law and increasing regulatory transparency. Russia is now at a crossroads of prolonged stagnation and growth, and without fundamental changes in Putinomics, Miller expects, its economy will find it hard to escape the stagnation trap in the coming years.

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

The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity

By Kwame Anthony Appiah
Liveright, 2018, 256 pages
$19.00 (Hardcover)

It would be no exaggeration to say that the post-Cold War era has brought identity politics to the fore of global politics. Numerous collective identities provide sources of conflict and confrontation in both domestic and international arenas, as they bind people together to engage in exclusionary collective action. But are those binding identities real?

Kwame Anthony Appiah, a professor of philosophy and law at New York University, explores five forms of identity — religion, nation, race, class and culture — to reveal their false figment. His theory builds on three conceptual features that collective identities share — a set of labels and the rules for ascribing them to people, norms that shape the behavior and feelings of the bearers of those labels, and their treatment by others. Appiah posits that humans aren’t just prone to “essentialism” — the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or a true nature that one cannot observe directly, but that gives an object its identity — we also have clannish tendencies. Appiah posits that humans aren’t just prone to "essentialism" — the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or a true nature that one cannot observe directly, but that gives an object its identity — we also have clannish tendencies, and we each have a habitus, or a set of dispositions, to respond to the world in particular ways, shaped by our identities.

Revealing the pitfalls of habitus and tribalism premised on essentialism in each social identity, the author warns us of the way false identities set us against one another and suggests a comprehensive human identity binding us all should replace them.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim.
“We should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative and better communicate China’s messages to the world.” Thus exhorted President Xi Jinping in 2014, underscoring international discourse as an important type of communicative soft power. China’s “media going out” initiative started after the Beijing Olympics, with six state-run media outlets to the fore: the Xinhua news agency, China Central Television (renamed in 2016 as China Global Television Network), China Radio International, People’s Daily, China Daily, and the Chinese News Service.

Chinese media’s unprecedented recent global expansion is a relatively less known and researched part of China’s rise. These essays by 27 scholars and experts fill the gap by casting a collective analytical light on a range of subjects, from its domestic context and its instrumental utility as the face of Beijing’s soft power and public diplomacy to its role and impact on the global media landscape and key Chinese media players abroad. The aim of Chinese media globalization is twofold: countering negative and biased portrayals of China in the US-dominated international media and promoting its views and vision to the wider world.

Some authors still expect a rocky road ahead. CCTV Africa is certainly less of an alternative than Al Jazeera, but less argumentative than Russia’s RT. They observe that Chinese globalizing media still need to address issues of cross-cultural differences in terms of discourse rivalry and cultural frames of reference, as well as challenges mounted by state-run media’s dual identity as news commodity and voice of an ideology.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim

30 years after declaring the end of history amid the triumph of liberalism, Francis Fukuyama now focuses on identity politics, as contemporary liberal democracies haven’t fully solved the problem of thymos, the third part of the human soul (with reason and desire), which craves recognition of one’s dignity. He sees two streams of identity politics unleashed by the French Revolution: the individualistic, demanding the recognition of the dignity of individuals, and the collective, based both on nationalism and religion. He sees the rise of identity politics this century as driven by the quest for equal recognition by marginalized groups. Nationalist or religious conservative groups are more appealing to many people than traditional left-wing ones based on economic class, as they can translate loss of relative economic position and sociocultural status into loss of identity. Fukuyama finds here the political driving force for the eruption of populist nationalism.

Reviewed by Taehwan Kim
Competition Visions of History in Japan

On the Persistence of the Japanese “History Problem”: Historicism and the International Politics of History

By Hitomi Koyama
Routledge, 2018, 157 pages, $97.85 (Hardcover)

How Japanese PMs Got So Powerful

Shinzo Abe’s recent re-election as head of Japan’s governing LDP opens up the possibility, should he last to 2021, that he will become the country’s longest-serving prime minister. Abe’s success reflects the weakness of Japan’s opposition parties, his own tactical astuteness, and, importantly, increased institutional power of the prime minister’s office.

Aurelia George Mulgan, of the University of New South Wales, provides one of the most exhaustive studies to date in English of this. Using a wealth of Japanese sources, she traces the gradual centralization of prime ministerial power from Yasuhiro Nakasone in the 1980s through Ryutaro Hashimoto and Junichiro Koizumi to the present.

The growth in a prime ministerial executive has been shaped by the decline in factional politics (due to changes to the Lower House’s electoral system), the weakening of party policy-making in the LDP, the increased role of specialist advisers, and the prime minister’s use of modern media to go directly to the public. For some leaders, such as Koizumi, this reflected a distinctly presidential style; for others, such as Abe, it involves reliance on party and cabinet.

Centralization and institutional change have strengthened Japan’s political executive and arguably enhanced decision-making, but also raised legitimate questions of accountability and transparency.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright, Senior Lecturer, University of Cambridge, Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia, Chatham House, and a regional editor for Global Asia.
A marked advance in EU-Japanese relations followed their recent Economic Partnership Agreement and Strategic Partnership Agreement (EPA and SPA) to bolster bilateral political and security co-operation. This edited volume collects European and Japanese academics to consider the historical and contemporary relationship in a variety of functional areas, including political and security co-operation, economic engagement and the influence of external actors in shaping the current relationship.

Some change is driven by an emerging activism in Japanese foreign policy, in particular by Abe’s administration; some by the more transactional, unilateral approach of US President Donald Trump’s administration. The EPA reflects a major step in trade multilateralism, but the SPA (at least in one contributor’s view) is more aspirational than substantive and seeks to codify existing forms of collaboration while advancing a wider, yet to be realized, agenda for co-operation across broadly defined security areas.

The “EU and Japan have tremendous potential,” the editors note, and capacity to offset the worrying trend towards illiberalism in global politics. Success in this will require personal leadership, vision and a confident ability to forcefully defend multilateralism and a willingness to work jointly with both soft and hard power to resolve a number of global conflicts.

Reviewed by John Nilsson-Wright