The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State

Author: Elizabeth Economy
Oxford University Press, 2018
ISBN 9780190866075

Reviewed by Yalın Akçevin
16 December 2019

In this book, Elizabeth Economy focuses on understanding and explaining the development of the People’s Republic of China (from here on, China) under the continuing rule of Xi Jinping. The main contribution of the author is to make sense of the swaths of information accessible to the readers today, regarding China’s rise and development under Xi Jinping. Economy brings in her expertise as senior fellow and director of Asia studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, in producing what can be called an expert account on the politics and reality of Xi Jinping’s China.

Economy discusses a number of important topics that rest in China’s agenda today, which is tied to and informs the core interests, and are defining the policy and relations of China both at the internal and global scale. The first seven chapters – including the introduction – approach China from the domestic side, focusing on political authoritarianism, economic sustainability, internet and freedom of speech, combatting pollution, and foreign policy assertiveness. Economy discusses the changes that have been proposed, planned, enacted, and to be expected from the domestic party-state structures of China as it confronts problems within and without on the path of its rise. The eighth chapter approaches China from an international point, focusing on the ways in which China’s interaction will be shaped by its rise in the future.

The book is a great source, in that it provides a wealth of necessary historical background information regarding Chinese history and politics. As such, the book grounds its discussion firmly in historical perceptions and factors, which adds depth to the discussion in the book by
introducing the underlying currents that inform contemporary Chinese political thinking and actions. As such, the book itself can be praised as being a well-rounded and accessible source, whose discussion remains accessible to both the broader novice and specific expert readers.

A major problem for the book appears that despite giving very valuable current and historical information, insight, and overview of the Chinese situation - in many places it shies away from a greater discussion to connect these with the power and authority of Xi. To be certain, the China that is being described is that of Xi and is shaped and led under his leadership, but his presence at times appears to be only minimally – and at that contextually – related to the discussion. In fact, at certain places, the reader finds the name of Premier Li Keqiang mentioned more than anyone else. As such, at times the discussion becomes too detached from Xi’s position in the entirety of what it discusses, which is puzzling given that the title and the subtitle points the reader in the direction that one should expect the discussion to ultimately lead back to Xi. Thus, what emerges is a situation in which Economy seems to be discussing a series of changes and developments in China that might have occurred under a different leadership, owing to being part of the zeitgeist.

Focusing more closely on several chapters, the “Chinanet” chapter seems more to be concerned with giving background information and focuses on the point of view and actions of actors and institutions of China that are beside Xi. It feels as if the presence of Xi is a time-based coincidence, rather than an integral part of the drive to achieve internet sovereignty – which given the drive for authoritarian control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) appears as a development that was sure to happen regardless. Xi’s position in the pursuit of internet sovereignty is of course mentioned, as well as his actions, and he is tied to whatever decision has
been taken under his rule, but still the way the chapter develops does not put him at the center of things as expected.

The chapter on economic development, titled “The-Not-So-New-Normal” also appears to be dealing with Xi as an incidental character or as someone that happened to be the leader who has happened to kickstart and reside over developments in China. Structures and events untied to Xi, and others working on the issue of economic development seem to be highlighted more than Xi is and connections between his authority and their actions are not entirely clear. When Xi is mentioned it is only as a nod to say that things are developing in a way he had mentioned once in a speech, or to affirm that he is having his way, which is not enough to show that this is the new reality of the Chinese state led by the vision of its leader. The larger discussion can be remade by substituting the name of Xi with any other name, and thus lacks a clear discussion of the links between leader and policy.

The chapter “Innovation Nation” repeats a similar structure, found in these previous chapters where Xi only emerges in a couple of solitary quotations, and as a background figure. To be more specific, he plays the role of the leader under whom one has an outlook for the world and the future, and under whom developments and events take place, but his role is not reflected upon or brought to the fore. The chapter “War on Pollution” only repeats the pattern that is well-established by this point.

However, in the chapters “Heart of Darkness” and “The Lion Awakens” it is easy to see that connections being drawn back to Xi’s power and authority from developments happening in China’s domestic politics and political structures, and foreign policy and relations. However, this is not something novel, given that Xi’s primary position of power allows him explicit control over the party-state of China before anything else in the nation, and that as the “core” leader and
the international face of China it is a given that Xi’s direct connections to developments in these headings will exist.

It is important to note that the final chapter, titled “The Road Forward”, could be used as a short handbook of proposals on how to deal with and counter Xi's China in a changing world – and in fact, could be published as a pamphlet of its own on the subject – for the United States of America (US). The chapter provides the insight of an expert in how the relations between China and the US might develop and goes deeper into understanding how the American side can influence the development of the relations and to protect its interests in the long run.

In conclusion, one cannot help but feel that there is a disconnect between what the book appears to offer given the way it is presented. There is a clear lack of connections and ties being drawn between Xi Jinping’s power and control over and within the party-state of China and those developments taking place within the context of China’s rise and development found within the book. However, with the insight, analysis, and information that Economy provides throughout the book, her work emerges as a great source on understanding the dynamics that underpin the actions and policies of China.