

Thunder from the Silent Zone: Rethinking China

Paul Monk

Reviewed by Dr Brian Ridge

Much of Paul Monk's treatise on China is a deep look at the prospects – if any – of true freedom in China. This automatically means that in an almost 'one' China approach, all in an imaginatively challenging way, he draws deeply on the Taiwan experience of its own very special path to its present greater freedoms and democracy: for if this has happened in Taiwan – whom Beijing relentlessly refers to as the 'renegade province' – then why should this not also be the future for China? In so many ways, Monk is arguing that a vibrant, possible long-term promise for China is already manifested in Taiwan. But this conclusion, despite the wide-ranging analytical alternatives that are teased out by Monk, will not please all Beijing watchers, particularly those who have not upgraded their eyewear and still see Taiwan more through Chiang Kai-shek/Guomindang glasses.

One critical constraint still leg-roping the Beijing government is the way it sees itself as the sole provider of correct political tutelage for the ongoing development of Chinese 'democracy'. But when should such tutelage end? All this is not helped by increasing corruption and graft, largely engineered by the Communist Party for the select benefit of the chosen few. And this dilemma bedevils a Chinese society that can tap into a long tradition of scholarly and cultural discourse that has so sharply critiqued excesses, be they emperors or minor officials.

Taiwan in its post-1949 era also worked its way through this bloody dilemma. Chiang Chingkuo, rather than suppressing the movement for greater freedom in 1986, enfranchised a legitimate opposition. Taiwan in 2005 is now no longer the same entity that frames so much of Beijing's rhetoric – and as well, there is a clear realisation by many in Taiwan that they are Taiwanese rather than solely Chinese. It must also be remembered that many ethnic Chinese in Taiwan have been there for many generations, well before the Nationalists arrived in force and uninvited in 1949. Such a reality cannot be fathomed by a Beijing mindset still largely stuck in 1949. Another theme in the Monk analysis is that even from a cultural perspective, China has never been short of renowned social critics and needs no further tutelage on this score.

So how to deal with, or re-create a new relationship between Taiwan and China? Monk urges a new paradigm, but this is not straightforward. He sets out three fixed mindsets that ground much current thinking: Taiwan is an inalienable part of China; China will never accept the independence of Taiwan; China is now a rising strategic competitor of the United States in Eurasia. Monk then works through these assumptions with full clarity – for example, that Taiwan was ceded to Japan by the Qing Empire in 1895, and hence post-World War II, must be seen as part of China. But the



historical perspective here is not so sure, for despite the incessant claim on this basis from Beijing, Taiwan had a Chinese governor for only the ten years prior to the 1895 cession to Japan, and was never really seen as a major part of the Qing Empire anyway. The key factor here, in Monk's view, is to understand the basis for this Beijing mindset and then work to shift such a mindset.

Similarly, when we come to the second assumption that China will never countenance an independent Taiwan, then the issue for policy makers, etc, is to somehow deflect the next step – namely, that in order to maintain face and status, China will go to war to maintain its claim to Taiwan. However, no analysis here can overlook the likely future for China itself, economically, politically, and socially – some aspects of which are relatively unstable, such as its economic progress being uneven and also concentrated in quite distinct areas. As well, there must be a question mark over whether China can provide basic necessities for its population – much less keep pace with the ever-rising expectations of a burgeoning middle class in larger urban areas.

If China opts for force, then it has a lot to lose at present as it cannot really yet match its likely opponents, the US and Taiwan. But at the same time, it cannot really declare that it will not use force over Taiwan. This would risk losing credibility, it risks 'encouraging' Taiwan to declare independence anyway, and the Chinese government might not be able to hold back any internal backlash. Likewise, Taiwan hesitates to declare independence in case China resorts to force: an inscrutable Mexican standoff.

There is of course much more in Monk's volume. For anyone prepared to be challenged over their own and other competing mindsets, this is required reading. Plus, Monk has a delightful command of a rich variety of wider cultural insights – insights that clearly all add their unique piquancy to the ongoing creation of mindsets and paradigms, and with them, pathways to possible solutions. ♦

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