

David Shambaugh, *China's Future*. Cambridge & Malden, MA:
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LOOKING BACK OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS OF POLITICAL CHANGE in China, this book meticulously addresses the most prominent question debated by China watchers: what is China's future? David Shambaugh skilfully negotiates the tightrope between speculation and quantitative evidence and, in doing so, offers a valuable insight into the social contexts at play in postulating the probable future pathways that China may pursue.

In Shambaugh presents four possible pathways China's leaders may pursue in the coming decades: neo-totalitarianism, hard authoritarianism, soft authoritarianism and semi-democracy. He argues that if China's political leaders continue to pursue their current path of hard authoritarianism, China will be restricted in its capacity to make the reforms necessary to enable sustainable progress towards a fully developed modern economy (p. 2). The author identifies three variables—economy, society and polity—as the major determinants of China's future, and discusses each in turn in the book's subsequent three chapters (Chapters 2-4).

The second chapter provides a contextual overview of China's projected economic future. Shambaugh assesses the government's implementation of 'the blueprint set forth in the Third Plenum documents of November 2013 (p. 23) in its attempt to respond to the demand for new economic regulations, questioning its effectiveness both in the vagueness of terms and the Chinese government's (in)ability to accomplish the sizeable economic expansion necessary to modernize its economy. The author proposes that innovation will be the key determinant of China's ability to 'become a fully modern society and economy' (p. 44), and argues that China's capacity to innovate can only be achieved through a combination of wider educational and political reforms. Shambaugh highlights the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) critical dilemma, which challenges the capacity of its hard authoritarian approach to nurture an innovative economy: 'there has never been a single case of a country having an innovative economy absent democracy or soft authoritarianism' (p. 49). He calculates that China's economic future will be directly linked to its political development and argues that by failing to move towards a 'soft authoritarian' or 'semi-democratic' style of governance, the CCP leadership risks future decades of economic atrophy and declining political influence.

In his illustration of the scale of the 'many societal challenges in China today' (p. 57), Shambaugh provides a detailed narrative of the region's transformation throughout his decades' worth of experience traveling across the country. In Chapter 3, the book interprets the current state-society relationship in China as comparable to 'a social tinderbox waiting to ignite' (p. 61): a consequence, in part, of the CCP's response to the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising and Eastern Europe's synchronistic political distancing from communism during the late 1980s. Chapter 3 provides a valuable and detailed analysis of the confluence of burgeoning social affluence and the correlating transformations in China's demographic class composition, in which Shambaugh identifies inequality as the endemic problem facing China presently, particularly in relation to its 'increasingly unstable border regions of Hong Kong and Taiwan' (p. 64). He proposes that the Chinese government's ability 'to deliver an ever-improving standard of living and public goods' (p. 57) in areas such as education, healthcare and national security will challenge the CCP's capacity for political longevity, as China experiences what Shambaugh terms 'the revolution of rising expectations' (p. 56) in response to both its extraordinary demographic transformations and as a consequence of the region's

underlying societal ‘tinderbox’ scenarios, exemplified by the 2014 ‘Occupy Central’ movement in Hong Kong. The book proposes that the systemic political stagnation resulting from the CCP’s continued hard authoritarian approach ‘will only exacerbate the multiple existing social problems’ (p. 95) that China’s state-society relations will face in subsequent decades.

Building on this background, Chapter 4 warns that the economic and social developments within the book’s previous two chapters (Chapters 2-3) will be decided predominantly ‘by whether China’s ruling Communist Party ... maintains its current controls over various elements in the polity, economy, and society’ (p.98). Reflecting on China’s political evolution since the 1980s, Shambaugh cites the events of 1989 as the axis upon which Beijing’s political trajectory turned from ‘liberal neo-authoritarianism’ to ‘neo-totalitarianism’—the latter enduring as the CCP’s primary political methodology until Xi Jinping’s ascension to power in 2012. Under Xi, Shambaugh claims: ‘China today is more repressive than at any time since the post-Tiananmen 1989-1992 period’ (p. 118). At the risk of labelling himself a biased commentator—which Shambaugh acknowledges in his opening preface—the book misses an opportunity to reflect on the contribution of the wider artistic and literary trends in China, which suggest that, despite its repressive leadership, Chinese society is becoming increasingly liberal. This is but a minor caveat in a book that can otherwise benefit and invograte the reader’s understanding of the underlying socio-political vicissitudes of China over the past quarter century.

In its concluding chapter, the book recalibrates its inquiry of China in the context of its foreign relations, taking into account its growing military capabilities and the global impact of its future trajectory. Overall, Shambaugh delves underneath the façade of the world’s second-largest economy and illuminates the underlying political developments that he has studied throughout his career. There is no way to know definitively what will occur in China’s future, but in this book, Shambaugh has given us an important and insightful projection of China’s probable trajectories from this point onwards.

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