

Beyond Sino-American Rivalry: Whose Global Narrative?

Is a chastened West that has lost its positive edge doomed to cede innovative impulses for global affairs to China?

By Tomas Casas i Klett, October 6, 2019



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Takeaways

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The US-China trade dispute might be the initial salvo in this century's first and only Thucydides trap.

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China is the resilient one whose narrative will end up seductive, presenting us all with choice.

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The People's Republic of China's celebration of its 70th anniversary reached its climax in a symbolic parade this past Monday. Not many Communist states have reached such an august age. No wonder then that China's leaders exuded great confidence and people were genuinely happy.

To document the pride, new intercontinental ballistic missiles DF-41 rolled in front of the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, which were later followed by dancing grannies and food delivery drivers on electric scooters.

The latter got some of the most heartfelt ovations on China's social networks, "Here comes my daily savior!"

Behind all the jubilation scenes on October 1, 2019, a narrative with global reach is coming together. At the same time, China is under no illusion that all is well.

Thinking beyond the trap

The U.S.-China trade dispute might be the initial salvo in this century's first and only Thucydides trap. Theorized by realist thinkers like **John Mearsheimer** and **Graham Allison**, that trap sees the incumbent and emerging powers destined for conflict.

We hear about how many points of GDP growth will be shaved off by less trade, and we are treated to sophisticated analyses about the geopolitical maneuvering between the United States and China.

More important, however, is the two major powers' competition for global affection and cognitive bandwidth that is tied to them individually. That is, the contest for the 21st century's grand narrative.

Disappointed with the West

The West always assumed that a rich China will be "like us." Only five years ago, even many Chinese thought so too. Not anymore, but in a different way than Westerners might expect.

As a matter of fact, most Chinese are now disillusioned not with their Communist Party, but with the erratic, leader-less and what many think is the technology-unfriendly, ideology beholden West. There is also a matter of practicality.

In the not so distant past, Chinese exchange students used to enroll in Western universities to attain a degree — and possibly a ticket to a better life — in a more promising country. Many parents must now cajole their children to study abroad for that foreign education advantage.

However, often the kids can't wait to return to digital China where consumer choice is endless and the streets are safe. To many millennials, social credit has its advantages — high levels are a bonus for the Taobao shopping experience, and those with past disruptive behavior will not be in the adjoining seat during ones high-speed train ride.

But it is not just Chinese disillusionment with the West that ought to give the West a reason to reconsider its own act. The challenge about who shapes the global narrative is a fundamental one.

There used to be a time when that global narrative was shaped by the United States. Sometimes it was brilliant strategizing like at Bretton Woods, but often that didn't require a lot of activity as the American dream begot voluntary adoration. Those times are gone.

It would be a cop-out for the rest of the West, especially Europe, not to check its own act and relevance in the global context. There is a sense that Western liberal democracies cannot effectively tackle their own domestic problems. Policy performance, in the sense of solving actual problems that people have, is deemed all but exemplar by those looking at us.

As a result, a valid question has arisen: Whose narrative, style and quality of operations — theirs or ours — will be deemed best-suited to tackle the world's messiest problems like the environment, inequality or security?

Narratives and economic impact

In Nobel Prize winner **Robert Shiller's** narrative, the economics discipline analyzes how stories "go viral" and their worldwide "economic impact."

An extended version of this view sees impact as abstractions converting into effective rules (e.g. for commerce or political competition), and then these into tangible goods (e.g., digital services, welfare).

To date, the most accomplished global narrative ever devised is Western liberalism with its rules-based order, democracy, human-rights, open society and free competitive markets. But since the goods are not being delivered it is clearly under threat right where the **"end of history"** was once pronounced, on home turf.

China, the unwilling contestant

China does not proselytize. There is deep awareness of the extraordinary performance of its pragmatic domestic development narrative, but China's focus is China.

Even the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the "new Silk Road" array of projects, parceling out aid and building incipient institutions, is an experiment whose story line must yet come into its own.

For all the Western nervousness about the Belt and Road Initiative today, it is important to realize that BRI does not aim to challenge, but rather seeks to complement the Western narrative.

Part of the reason for the underlying prudence on the Chinese side is awareness that the road to the top is long and setbacks lurk. **Developments in Hong Kong make that plain.** There also is the yet to be resolved anti-corruption campaign, the dreaded middle-income trap and, of course, geopolitical rivalry.

Faced with these challenges, the Chinese leadership is convinced that China is the resilient one, a country whose future is bright and whose narrative will end up seductive, presenting us all with choice.

China aims to win global hearts and minds with larger markets, fairer e-commerce platforms, cooler fashion, smarter algorithms, more effective recycling.

The onus is on the West

Whatever China's drawbacks, which to many Westerners are self-evident, it looks as if it is only China that presently pursues a vision of any kind.

The West, meanwhile, either engages in acts of meekness, as Europe does, or seems hell-bent on engaging, as President Trump does, in a prolonged period of dismantling the institutions that bind the world to the Western narrative.

As narrative economists would put it, the loss of global affective and cognitive bandwidth has economic, technology and geopolitical consequences.

The open question is whether the West is ready to renew its global grand narrative for the complex 21st century ahead. That would probably require it to pursue elements that contradict its present positions and which do not emanate from its own traditions.

For instance, last month Shanghai implemented a new recycling policy. Cameras and neighborhood volunteers now check on citizens disposing trash in public containers and penalties are levied on those who don't distinguish between the "dry," "toxic," "recyclable" or "wet" — offenses include throwing a "dry" bone in the "wet" container earmarked for organic waste.

Is a surveillance state, with cameras on every trash collection station, tree or production site, the way of effective environmental protection?

Trying that might on the one hand have the interesting consequence of diluting what the West is all about, while on the other hand serving many of the West's interests.

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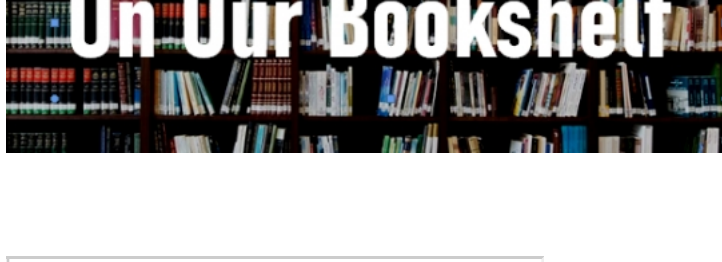
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