

Book Review: China at the Crossroads: Sustainability, Economy, Security and Critical Issues for the 21st Century

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China at the Crossroads reflects on Chinese political reform and asks whether or not its leaders are actively laying the path towards democracy. **Michael O'Regan** finds that although the contributors to this book provide fresh China-based perspectives, the lack of editorial oversight and referencing renders it unfit for academic study.



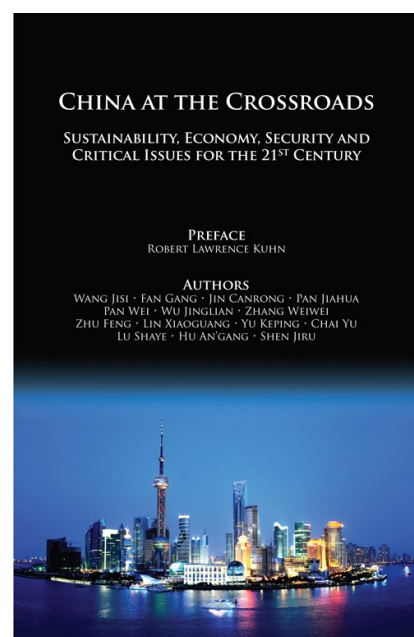
China at the Crossroads: Sustainability, Economy, Security and Critical Issues for the 21st Century. Wang Jisi (ed). Long River Press. 2012.

Find this book

China at the Crossroads argues after three decades of rapid growth, the country now finds itself at an economic, political and foreign policy crossroads. The fourteen contributors address some of the economic, environmental and social fragilities that this prosperity and opening up has created (i.e. income inequality, environmental degradation, excessive trade surpluses), but they maintain their praise for Deng Xiaoping's economic opening which they credit for making China more prosperous as it become more politically stable.

The majority of contributors are academics from prestigious Chinese universities; however, they have mostly failed to write credible, academic pieces. There is a noticeable lack of scholarly sources and extensive bibliographies. In fact, the intended audience does not even appear to be academics, researchers or students in institutions of higher learning, but rather specifically the American general public. While this somewhat damages the books credibility, their contributions do provide 'alternative' perspectives seemingly ungrounded in ideology. One can glimpse commonalities and diversities running through the contributions, and while some fascinating insights emerge loudly and brightly about China through lively writing styles and vivid examples, this is immediately overshadowed by its overall poor construction and poor editing.

The commonalities across the book start with Deng Xiaoping and the overall acceptance that his ageing formula, although immensely successful, has run its course. The contributors argue that economic growth and openness has created a far more complex, demanding and complicated society, as well as created complications with its neighbours and the west. However, all the contributors are very keen to initially address the progress made over the past three decades from revamped tax, banking, pension, legal and regulatory systems, new infrastructure such as high-speed railways systems, jobs, and assisting the world through investment and trade.



The contributors do not shy away from some fragility created by rapid progress such as lack of access to health and education, environmental degradation, corruption and income inequality. While the examples and means by which China has developed and prospered are well made, the contributors largely believe that future progress is blocked by United States led discrimination and political interference, and an inequitable international order which frames China as a threat. This argument attempts to show that western countries are seeking to stem their flailing central positions by containing China politically and economically. It is an interesting assertion, but the lack of referencing and the failure to engage the reader beyond partisan commentary means this assertion often fails to hit its target.

Five of the fourteen chapters draw on China's external relations and address the U.S strategic relationship, international politics, Sino-U.S relations and security in East Asia, China's relationship with Africa and the Diaoyu- Senkaku islands dispute in the East China Sea. The contributors take a very benign view of China's external relation with most focusing on its global contribution (i.e. peacekeeping, trade, loans), which has brought "opportunity and welfare to the rest of the world" (p. 39). Canrong argues that China "always considers the moral implications and takes an idealistic stand" (p. 42). Lu Shaye, Director-general of the Department of African Affairs also addresses what he believes are western double-standards with regard to internal-interference in sovereign states and "false charges against China to discredit China" (p.160). He also offers a well-reasoned defence to what many western commentators believe is Africa's Faustian pact with China, and why China through trade and investment is actually beneficial to the continent. While both Canrong's and Lu Shaye's chapters argue that China is at a strategic crossroads they do not fully address the extraordinarily complex policy challenges in external relations facing China, nor do they offer real insight to where Chinese foreign policy is headed.

Four chapters revolve around China's 'unique economic model' and whether China's economy is at the crossroads. These chapters focus on China's current twelve five-year plan, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, and whether or not the 'China Model' needs retuning. There is too much focus on China's apparent progress, with An'gang in chapter thirteen seeing the models success in its high-speed rail networks and highway China when viewed against countries such as India, with little critical analysis as to whether the stimulus that made this progress possible will lead to problems in the future (non-performing loans, unprofitable state-run companies).

The contributors don't address the social and political fragilities created by propensity and opening up, a crossroads from which inequality and corruption have spread, giving rise to nationalism, separatists and demands for political reform and a safer environment. Social fragilities and tears are becoming apparent and visible. A recent People's Daily editorial details how the [Chinese social confidence index has fallen below sixty points](#). This means that fewer than one in five Chinese people believe the majority of people in their society are trustworthy,

The authors don't push very hard on any one issue, and all seem stuck at the crossroads themselves, as they fail to find common ground on how China should meet its populace's problems. While they successfully argue that a wealthy, strong, socialist market economy is suited to China's unique characteristics, they don't adequately have answers as to what kind of society is emerging, what kind of politics China should progress and what direction China's leaders are taking. Readers may be left unfulfilled as they wonder whether there is danger at the crossroads if China takes the wrong path or whether these crossroads have already been paved by China's leaders in a push to create a coherent blueprint for the second economic revolution and political reform.

Michael O'Regan worked alongside the National Tourism Development Authority of Ireland when he joined Gulliver – Ireland's Information and Reservation Service in 1997. He joined Wicklow County Tourism, as Marketing Executive in 1997 for three years before starting a PhD programme at the School of Sport and Service Management, University of Brighton, UK which he completed in 2011. He joined Dongbei University of Finance and Economics (DUFE), Dalian, China as Assistant Professor at its Global Institute of Management and Economics – Surrey International Institute. [Read reviews by Michael.](#)

