

María del Mar Hidalgo García
Senior Analyst, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies

Email: mhidgaI@oc.mde.es

REVIEW

Observar el arroz crecer: como habitar un mundo liderado por China (watching rice grow: how to inhabit a world led by China)

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China's development in recent decades —to the West's surprise— has led to a new reality where the Asian power will play a fundamental role in establishing a new world order. This raises the question of whether the West is ready for this process or not.

We can no longer live on the sidelines of China's rise in the 21st century given that will influence all areas of our lives. Therefore, it is necessary to understand and approach this country in an objective manner, to comprehend how the Chinese think, how they view the world, and what their customs are. After all, they know more about the West than we know about them.

This is precisely the purpose of this book by Julio Ceballos. After seventeen years of experience living in China as a business consultant, Ceballos' story brings us closer to this country in a pleasant, empathetic and friendly way. Based on experience, the humour of comparisons and the awareness that, in certain aspects, the West is going to shrink, the author sets out his vision of the aspects that the Western population should at least know about China, ones that are both removed and yet so close to our lives.

The book's title is worth discussing. Rice is the staple food of the Chinese. Although now largely mechanised, rice cultivation is a tough process where both planting and harvesting involves maintaining a stooped posture with feet sunk into the insect and leech-infested mud. Through this agricultural practice, the Chinese have not only succeeded in alleviating hunger but have also acquired a philosophy of life in which they have also learned to cultivate patience.

In 88 chapters with attractive titles, Ceballos entertainingly and fluidly introduces the reader to the complex world of China. Based on the author's vision that "China is as it is and not as we would like it to be", the book contains personal anecdotes and numerous examples of very different cultural aspects that can cause great perplexity in Westerners, such as the practice of traditional fishing, tea, the metaphysical dimension of food, festivities, funerary curiosities, greetings, language, family celebrations, the non-verbal language of the Chinese at negotiation tables where they appear to say yes but are saying no, the willingness to change the rules of the game established in a negotiation, or the justification that copying is not copying, it is adapting. This is the very least that anyone interested in approaching the Asian giant should consider.

The book also describes what Chinese society is like today and how the Communist Party of China (CPC) is determined to ensure that its people have the resources they need to achieve development and stability. China's growing population of 1.4 billion people is increasingly urban, increasingly competitive and increasingly monitored by a system of cameras that have been integrated into every aspect of daily life. This method, although difficult to conceive from the perspective of our Western freedoms, is nevertheless an effective system for managing these growing cities. At least this is how the Chinese see it and how they assume it, according to Ceballos.

From a technological standpoint, the author defines China as "the global laboratory from which the trends of the future emerge". And the figures corroborate this

assertion. China ranks second in the list of countries investing in R&D, and the leader in registering new technology patents. In this sense, from a Western point of view, it is striking to explore how a country deprived of the freedom to express a different opinion can still develop all this potential for creativity. But this is where the highly competitive nature of the Chinese population, whose public offices are chosen through a system of meritocracy, comes into play. To get ahead in life or to study at university, the Chinese people have a tough road ahead of them where it is not enough to be good, they must be better than the rest. If, as the author assumes, China will lead the world, Western professionals will have to see how to coexist with Chinese professionals who have the competitive gene in their DNA. Once again, this highlights the importance of understanding the reality of China, which is the goal of this book.

According to the author, China regards the hegemony of the West —specifically the US— as a historical anomaly. Deeply rooted in its traditions, China claims its place as the power it once was thousands of years ago. From a geopolitical point of view, Ceballos believes that the best thing that can happen to the world is a powerful China in balance with the US. Although considered a threat by US policymakers, if China were to collapse, so would the entire planet. The bonds between them are so strong that it will be difficult to completely decouple the two powers. Perhaps the right strategy to avoid provoking a global catastrophe with unforeseeable consequences should focus not so much on derailing China as on finding a formula to coexist with it, the author argues.

China's long-term strategic vision clashes squarely with the electoral short-termism of established Western democracies. While the US and the EU are undergoing one of the critical periods of social conflict, polarisation and internal crisis, Ceballos argues that China's future is tied to the survival of the CCP. To this end, the long-term strategy is based on nation-building, sustained economic progress, security and social peace. This vision serves to explain the implementation of any CCP policy, be it domestic, foreign, defence, education, demographic, industrial or environmental. All of these efforts are headed in the same direction, which is why China has slowly and patiently brought about its great change over the past decades.

In such a disruptive time as the 21st century, China has a useful pliability, flexibility and resilience to deal with new threats. These qualities—which the author equates with traditional bamboo—represent a great advantage over the West. According to Ceballos, China is calling for progress with the awareness of its past strength and of an available future, as it continues with the long-term implementation of its plans. Within this future, Ceballos also mentions China's plans for the conquest of space, defence policy, monetary decoupling, and artificial intelligence. All of these trends have been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The work also discusses the issue of Taiwan. Any discussion of China must include a reference to the reunification process with the island. World peace depends on it. The Indo-Pacific region is the most populous and has the highest growth potential in

the world, but its economic and geopolitical stability will depend on how the Taiwan situation is resolved.

For Ceballos, China is a work in progress, capable of adapting economic systems such as capitalism or communism as well as religions such as Buddhism, to its own way of seeing the world. With this capacity for adaptation, we are facing a challenge that has never been faced before: the interdependence and rivalry between East and West. Two world views that clash but are not incompatible, and which cannot turn their backs on each other, as the author points out. In a highly stressed global system, the Chinese model of governance, coexistence and survival based on collectives emerges as an alternative to the US model of democratic values and may be very attractive to other developing countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a test to see which system is more competent to face an uncertain future where the only constant is change, as stated in the philosophy of the *I Ching* or the *Book of Changes*.

The future is highly complex, and China seeks to re-establish its historic position at the centre of the geopolitical chessboard. According to Ceballos, we shall all recede sooner or later, in one way or another, and for this reason, we require considerable cultural intelligence as regards China. The solution does not lie in waiting for China's decline, but rather in valuing and claiming how competitive, innovative and valid the West continues to be despite its smaller population and despite possibly losing its leading position in the world economy in the coming years.

This book helps us to objectively explore this panorama, with the aim of helping to understand without justifying the Chinese reality, using a pleasant language that brings a smile to the reader's face. All of the above without the audacity to pretend to offer in-depth knowledge because, as Ceballos points out, not even China, for all its magnitude, knows itself completely.

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