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BOOK REVIEW: SUPERPOWER?. EVERYTHING YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT MODERN CHINA

Róbert Vancel*

KIRONSKÁ K. – TURCSÁNYI R. (Eds.): *Superveľmoc?. Všetko, čo potrebujete vedieť o súčasnej Číne*. [Superpower?. Everything you should know about modern China]. Bratislava: Hadart Publishing, 2020. 415 s. ISBN 978-80-99941-23-7

The book by a team of authors, mostly associated in the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, is a unique publication by Slovak standards. The book is for the "educated layman", but also for people who have a general overview of the issues of contemporary China.

China, not only because of its growth in power, is the subject of interest of experts, politicians, but also the general public around the world. Slovakia lagging in this respect and the public as well as professional discussion about China is just being born. Therefore, the publication of this book could not have come at a more opportune time. The need to communicate issues related to China, its domestic and foreign policies, beyond the often superficial information in the media, is growing with the level of China's activity not only on the global stage, but also in the region of Central Europe.

The book is divided into three parts: History, Society and Culture; Politics and Economics; International relations. These sections are further divided into individual chapters, which are interestingly formulated in the form of questions. The authors respond to them, leaving the final answer to the reader. They offer a sufficient number of facts and quality arguments, but the conclusion should be made by the reader himself. Of course, the authors did not avoid sensitive topics, respectively issues where criticism of China or questioning of China's official

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positions and policies cannot be avoided. The book thus provides a truly comprehensive overview of current, often inflected topics that have the potential to polarize society - Uyghurs, Tibet, Taiwan, or the often-discussed social credit.

Despite the considerable academic background of the authors, the book is closer to the form of scientific popularization. However, the authors refer to scientific book publications or articles in scientific journals that deal with the topic, and therefore the book can also serve as an overview of basic literature on a wide range of topics.

Already in the first part "History, Society and Culture", the authors dealt with the often problematic issue of Chinese civilization and its history. In the first chapter "The Legacy of History: The Humiliated Five Thousand Years of Civilization", **Filip Šebok** demystifies the common notion of China's uninterrupted five thousand years of development. It avoids the trap of Orientalism, but also the factually demanding and exhaustive chronological description of Chinese history. The author focuses on explaining the origin of the claims, which, referring to Chinese history, are still heard today in the context of domestic as well as foreign events in the PRC. On the one hand, the basis of these claims is thus identified, but **Šebok** also provides a critical view. At the end of the chapter, he explains how Chinese history has served the purpose of the Communist Party at various stages in the history of the PRC. The second chapter follows the theme of "eternally alive" leader Mao Zedong. The importance of the person leading the communist revolution is unquestionable, despite the conflicting perception of his personality. Mao's belief in the need for a continuous revolution, for example in the form of the so-called The Great Leap Forward, costing the lives of tens of millions of Chinese, or the Cultural Revolution, which led almost to the civil war, were a negative legacy that the party had to deal with after his death. **Šebok** thus describes not only Mao's work, the way in which they dealt with his legacy, but also what Mao means in today's China. In other chapters, which have a historical or socio-cultural character, the authors **Barbara Kelemen** and Klára **Dubravčíková** deal with the impact of the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, the issue of Chinese religious beliefs, but also the growth of living standards and related social problems.

In the section "Politics and Economics", the authors focus on the political system of the contemporary People's Republic of China. **Šebok** explains the relationship between the center and the provinces and the role of the party and the army in the running of the state, or the involvement of the population in political life. A large part of the chapter is devoted to the party from various

aspects - the membership base, nomenclature, the system of factions in the party, its reform potential. At the end of the chapter, the author deals with the consolidation of power in the party by the current President Xi Jinping. It discusses not only his steps so far, but also the challenges that await the president and the party in the near future. In the seventh chapter, **Šebok** continues by explaining the system of social control and the recently introduced concept of social credit. However, as he points out, it is primarily a matter of centralizing the data that the state already has on citizens. Closely related to social control is propaganda, the operation of which the author explains by informing the public about coronavirus. In the next chapter, **Matej Šimalčík** addresses the question of the existence of justice in China, while at the beginning he provides an excursion to the development of legal thinking in China from the Xia dynasty until 2020, when the historically first civil code was adopted. It also reflects the issue of human rights and their observance. In this regard, it is interesting to point out the inconsistent practice of death sentences across China.

Šimalčík also discusses the differences between the legal systems of special administrative areas - Macao and Hong Kong. At the end of the chapter, he analyses the development of digital law, in which China appears to be a global leader. In economically oriented chapters, **Martin Šebeňa** deals not only with the development of the Chinese economy, which in half a century has moved from the position of a backward country to the second largest economy in the world, but also with challenges for the future. Šebeňa also analyses China's position as a technology leader based on "fragile foundations with a thin layer of innovation," meaning that China is heavily dependent on foreign technology purchases in many major industries. Following the topic of the Chinese economy and technological progress, **Klára Dubravčíková** describes the issue of environmental devastation in the PRC. In addition to a short thematic historical excursion, the author describes the issue of air, soil and water pollution. The situation bordering on the ecological catastrophe has led to the formation of Chinese environmental activism, which, however, is facing the consequences of increasing consumption. The Chinese government, meanwhile, is trying to find a balance between the country's environmental and economic interests. In addition to meeting the needs of the domestic population, the Chinese government is succeeding in building China's image as a global fighter for a green future despite its enormous share of global pollution.

The second part of the book concludes with four chapters devoted to highly - sensitive topics. In her chapter, **Kristína Kironská** deals with the issue of Taiwan

and the future of the Republic of China, which the PRC considers its province. A de facto independent state, which is dependent on US support and security guarantees, is a politically sensitive issue for PRC, which is working hard to unite mainland and island China. **Kironská** maps both the development of the island until 1949, but also the subsequent economic development, the democratization of the island, or its changing position on the international scene. It also describes Taiwan's identity, which will play an important role in eventual unification with mainland China. In Chapter 13, **Barbara Kelemen** answers the question, "Why did China lock more than a million Uyghurs in re-education camps?" Currently, the Uyghur re-education camps are the most prominent subject of criticism from the PRC, and the issue is also shifting to trade, as the Uyghurs in the camps are part of the supply chains for global brands. The publication continues with **Luboš Bělka's** chapter on Tibet, where in addition to the history and explanation of complex Sino-Tibetan relations, the author reflects the expected changes in the post of the Dalai Lama, in which the Communist Party intensively intervenes to ensure obedience to the next Dalai Lama. In the last chapter of the second part of the book, **Martin Šebeňa** deals with the issue of Hong Kong, which in 2019 attracted the attention of the world public with large-scale protests, which began as a protest against the law of extradition. The harsh police crackdown has provoked a wave of solidarity with the protesters, as well as a wave of criticism of the regime, which is seeking to phase out the freedoms that are the heritage of Hong Kong as part of the British Empire. **Šebeňa**, as a resident of the city, describes its development, but also the fundamental problems that the city and its inhabitants are struggling with. In conclusion, he suggests possible scenarios of development, personally leaning towards the more pessimistic and thus that the inhabitants of the city will gradually lose their rights and freedoms, which they had under the system of "one country - two systems".

In the third part, the authors focused on issues of China's foreign policy, its relations with regional and global actors. The authors devoted the last chapter to the relationship between China and Slovakia. In Chapter 16, **Matej Šimalčík** analyses the New Silk Road, or One Belt, One Road (Belt and Road, BRI) initiative in the context of Chinese foreign policy, of which the initiative is an instrument. At the beginning of the chapter, **Šimalčík** summarizes China's foreign policy interests, followed by a critical examination of the perception of China as a Confucian, peaceful actor. However, as he points out, "the preference for a non-military solution should not be confused with benevolence." In the BRI analysis, the author emphasizes not only the economic aspects, but also the security and

political aspects. He illustrates this with the example of Southeast Asia. However, **Šimalčík** also draws attention to projects within the BRI with questionable profitability, or debt traps, by which China is increasing its influence in the participating countries. Especially in East Africa, but also in the Balkans. Related to this is the assessment of China's efforts to become a global player, which, however, still focuses primarily on developing and undemocratic states. This trend is likely to deepen as a result of the pandemic, and China will lose support among Western nations for the BRI. In the next chapter, Denisa **Hilbertová** deals with the issue of territorial disputes that China has with neighbouring countries. The author chose two disputes - with India and a dispute in the South China Sea. Both represent diametrically different cases, but with a high potential for escalation. In the case of the Sino-Indian dispute, the author briefly describes the origin of the problem and its development to the present, including the war in 1962. The author also analyses the current tensions and compares the domestic political situation in China with the 60s, as it considers it an indicator of Chinese willingness to enter into an armed conflict. The second dispute is more complicated only for the number of actors. Along with the PRC, claims in the South China Sea overlap between Taiwan, the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. China's claims based on "historical rights", embodied in the Nine-dash Line, have been arbitrarily challenged by the Philippines, but China is ignoring a decision recognizing the Philippine claims. At the same time, China is building artificial islands in the area with airports and military bases. China is strengthening its position of power in an area that is vital to it. The chapter on territorial disputes is followed by a section on Sino-US relations. **Richard Turcsányi** examines bilateral relations against the background of historical events, from Allied relations, through the 19th century, where the United States participated in the humiliation of China, through World War II and the Cold War, to the events of 1989. **Turcsányi** also discusses current reflections on Sino-American rivalry as the Second Cold War, which could lead to the gaining of a hegemonic position for China. In the next chapter, **Richard Turcsányi** analyses China's relations with Russia and Europe, respectively. EU. It is based on a historical heritage when European powers, including Russia, participated in Chinese humiliation in the 19th century. Paradoxically, the negative sentiment does not apply to Russia, nor to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The reason for that is primarily cooperation within the former bloc of communist states. In this context, **Turcsányi** also describes the Chinese 17 + 1 initiative, through which China is building influence among EU countries. In general, we can speak

of a pro-Chinese bloc of states, but it is necessary to emphasize the significant differences in the perception of China between the individual states of the initiative. Recently, however, there has been a noticeable increase in scepticism among 17 + 1 countries about the real benefits of the initiative. This resulted, for example, in the departure of Lithuania in early 2021. On the issue of relations between Russia and China, the author speaks of ambiguous relations, as under the current leadership of both countries there is not only a value convergence of regimes. And this is exactly what **Turcsányi** sees as a problem, as in the case of a regime change, there will most likely be a qualitative change in relations. At that moment, there would be unresolved problems regarding Russian territories in the Far East, which once belonged to China, or mutual negative sentiment. In the last chapter of the book, **Matej Šimalčík** deals with the issue of Slovak-Chinese relations. It begins with a short historical excursion and goes into the 21st century, in which he characterizes relationships as "mutual disinterest". It stemmed from our efforts to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures and to focus on the West. Interest in China was revived only by Róbert Fico, who sought to build economic relations with non-EU countries. After the visit of the Chinese president in 2009, the public discussion on relations with China did not revive until 2016, after President Kiska's meeting with the Dalai Lama. It is here, as in the case of the meeting between President Čaputová and the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, that the tension in Sino - Slovak relations, which **Šimalčík** is dealing with, can be seen. It is based on a clash between emphasizing (supposed) economic cooperation and value issues. Despite the declared projects and Chinese investment in Slovakia, it must be said that China lags behind other actors in East Asia. This gives Slovakia the opportunity to formulate our policy towards China much more freely than states that are more dependent on mutual trade.

Authors of the book *Superpower? Everything you should know about modern China*, managed to bring to the Slovak, but also the Czech market a quality professional publication that explains the most important issues related to contemporary China. The publication does not follow a chronological sequence, but rather a thematic one, while historical excursions are suitably limited to the necessary minimum necessary for understanding often very complex topics. Thus, the reader remains unencumbered by an excessive amount of facts. Instead, the authors skilfully point out the context of history, social development, politics, economics, foreign policy and security.