



Book Review

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Keith, Ronald Colin, *China Change and Confucian “Benevolence”: Human Values, Truth and Policy, Series on Contemporary China* – Vol. 50, World Scientific, Singapore, 2023.



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Book Review

It is well known that China’s image in the West and more broadly is not very good and appears to be getting worse. Even the economy, which not so long ago was considered bordering on the miraculous, is now seen as in danger, with huge deficiencies, especially in terms of the property market. The U.S. government, itself deeply divided, seems to share only one view, namely that China should be opposed, and its rise prevented at all costs. In particular, the Western press attacks China’s human rights records mercilessly, accusing it of genocide in Xinjiang and attacks on freedoms of all sorts, speech, religion, press and others.

In this book, Ronald Keith takes a very different view. Below I take up a few of the large number of issues Keith tackles in this book.

First, however, I’d like to comment on the mode of presentation. Keith represents personalities espousing particular points of view through named people who can become familiar to the reader. The best example of this is a non-Chinese who represents Westerners sympathetic to China and its points of view. Keith introduces him as follows (p. xvii): “The West’s designated interlocutor, Sir Edward Hayter, is named in posthumous homage to a British diplomat, Sir William Hayter who advanced the cause of Asian Studies in the UK. Sir Edward Hayter is the inquiring reader’s inadvertent proxy.” Named simply as Sir Edward, he is cited hundreds of times during the course of the book. He becomes a familiar figure whom the readers is guided to like, trust and believe. He may be Australian, since he lives in Sydney, but he is definitely influenced by, but also critical of, the British law system.

I take Sir Edward as one example only. There are many on the Chinese side. An example is Ma Xiwu, Vice-President of the Supreme People’s Court. He is not mentioned nearly as often as Sir Edward, but figures prominently as expressing Chinese views on the law. However, like Sir Edward, he becomes a familiar, trustworthy and likeable figure.

For this reader, it is a good technique to attribute views of a particular kind to a representative. What this does is add interest by setting up figures who will be quoted repeatedly throughout the book. Through their familiarity, the figures become more expressive than if views were cited simply in the abstract.

Keith shows an astounding knowledge both of Chinese and Western ethics, philosophy, foreign relations and history. He mentions and cites both Western and Chinese moralists and philosophers, as well as artists and musicians. He and his interlocutors clearly know what they are talking about.

As a specialist writer on China’s foreign relations, Keith firmly rejects the “China threat”, which he calls “misconceived” (p. 449). This “threat” notion recurs many times but both Keith and his interlocutor Sir Edward are insistent that it is not a part of China’s policy and irrational. Australia also comes in for some criticism for its adoption of the “China threat” theory.

Sir Edward criticizes public opinion for “running so strongly against initiative to improve relations with China” and suggests that this is the reason for the anxiety over “the threat of Chinese subversion of Australia’s democracy” (p. 321).

My own comment is that Australian media and public opinion are currently hostile to China. However, it has improved slightly in recent times due to a slightly less overtly hostile government policy. Unfortunately, we have to be careful not to exaggerate the change. The current Labor Albanese government still maintains treaty arrangements with the U.S. and even Britain that are overtly aimed against China. My own opinion is that “the China threat” is quite unfair, given that the last time China sent troops outside its own country was in 1979, when it fought a short border war with Vietnam. China made no attempt to seize the Vietnamese capital or to change its government.

We know that a standard Western approach to dealing with China is to cooperate “where we can” and disagree “where we must”. Such an approach has been adopted, for example, by Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong. However, Keith much prefers an idea first put forward by Zhou Enlai: “seek common ground while reserving differences”. The two seem similar, but in fact China’s one is more conciliatory, because it does not demand that disagreements will be aired, leading to antagonisms.

As I read this book, the essence of what Keith wants to tell the reader through his interlocuter Sir Edward is that much of what matters most in Chinese culture, especially Confucius’s emphasis on benevolence, has survived into the modern world, and in particular into the values of Xi Jinping. This is very clearly a positive message, given the bad image pinned on China currently. Keith clearly does not agree with the negative stereotypes, such as the Chinese threat, China’s wretched human rights record, and constantly presenting China as an unjust and cruel society with no legal system worth mentioning.

As it happens the present writer agrees with the overall burden of Keith’s views. As I see it, several centuries of Western world dominance has made the small portion of humanity we can describe as “Westerners” see themselves as so much “number 1” that it is difficult for them to imagine the world as anything other than dominated by the West. This includes not only system of government but also science and technology and human values. Human rights must be seen as covering individuals and the idea that dragging hundreds of millions out of absolute poverty and thus improving their lives significantly can be seen as advancing human rights seems quaint if not downright silly.

And I may add that Keith and his interlocuters also show great knowledge of the arts, including music. As a passionate music-lover myself (both of Western and Chinese music), I was struck by a reference to Gustav Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth), which is a series of six songs based on Tang-dynasty Chinese poetry. Keith observes:

Sir Edward was especially gratified that *Das Lied von der Erde* had been recently translated into Chinese and re-scored for distinctive Chinese orchestration. It was heartening that, in this “new age”, nostalgia for the “red” songs of the Cultural Revolution coexisted with a growing Chinese interest in Western classical music. (p. 483)

My own comment is heartily to endorse Sir Edward’s view. As a frequent resident of Beijing and other parts of China, I have attended numerous concerts and operas in recently built Western-style opera houses. I’m impressed with the efforts and money China spends on training Chinese singers and other musicians and on building large-scale Western-style opera houses. This applies to visits I made in China as recently as 2023, when I saw good performances of Puccini’s *Tosca* and Verdi’s *Rigoletto* at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing. What I draw from this is that, while Xi Jinping is pushing Chinese traditional music and theatre (and why should he not do so?) he is still pushing Western classical music.

I make two minor criticisms here. One is that Li Bai is described as a poet of the seventh century. Born in 701 and dying in 762, he in fact lived in the eighth century. Keith claims that the last (and longest) song of *Das Lied*, named *Der Abschied* (The Farewell) was based on words by Li Bai. In fact, there are two parts of the song, based on poems by two eighth-century poets, Meng Haoran and Wang Wei. It is true that four of the six songs are based on poems by Li Bai.

Keith has a distinguished publication list in the field of contemporary Chinese law and foreign policy. He was professor of China studies at Griffith University in Queensland but also worked in Canada. He is a very suitable person to write this book. With a very wide understanding of relevant issues, coupled with great sensitivity on his subject, he has written a very important book that most certainly contributes significantly on its subject, itself of enormous contemporary importance. I recommend it strongly to specialists and ordinary readers alike.



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