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## **BOOK REVIEW ESSAY**

### **The decline of the West? The authoritarian challenges from China, Russia, and North Korea**

**China after Mao: the rise of a superpower**, by Frank Dikötter, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney, 2022, 390 pp., £20.00 (hardback), ISBN: 97815266342839; £11.69 (paperback), ISBN: 9781526634306; £12.25 (Epub & Mobi), ISBN: 9781526634337

**The world according to China**, by Elizabeth C. Economy, Cambridge, UK, and Medford, MA, A Council on Foreign Relations Book, Polity, 2022, 292 pp., £25.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781509537495; \$24.00 (eBook), ISBN 9781509537518

**Russia resurrected: its power and purpose in a new global order**, by Kathryn E. Stoner, New York, N.Y., Oxford University Press, 2021, 317 pp., \$29.95 (hardback), ISBN 97801190860714; (eBook) ISBN: 9780190860738. Also available in Oxford Scholarship Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190860714.001.0001>  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190860714.001.0001>

**Dancing on bones: history and power in China, Russia, and North Korea**, by Katie Stallard, New York, N.Y., Oxford University Press, 2022, 304 pp., \$29.95 (hardback), ISBN: 9780197575352. Also available in Oxford Scholarship Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197575352.001.0001>  
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**W. John Morgan**

Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West)<sup>1</sup>, despite much scholarly criticism, was popular in the two decades following publication in 1918. It is now a book that many people know about, but that few have read. Perhaps it was always so. This is not the place to reconsider in detail Spengler's massive work and its influence, but it did identify a challenging theme and concepts that are seen again in our contemporary geopolitics. The first is that of a cohesive West, described by Spengler, acknowledging Goethe and Nietzsche, as a Faustian civilization, with its cultural, economic, and political dominance in steady decline. It is the central argument of Spengler's concept of civilization and civilization-states; how decline and change to new world order are managed; and the emergence of Caesarism or autocracy. Weberian and Marxist accounts should also be noted. These also consider the transition from traditional authority systems such as feudalism, aristocracy, and kingship to the rational-legal authority of modern capitalist democracies. There are also failed challenges from fascist, national-socialist, and soviet-communist versions of Caesarism.

Authoritarianism, kleptocracy, and clientelism are aspects of this process. The first implies a political regime based on a strong state that exercises strict control over the population to ensure conformity. This comprises propaganda in support of the state's justificatory ideology, restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression, especially through the mass media, control of the content and conduct of education, including indoctrination, the

control and perversion of the legal system in the state's interests, the reduction of interventions by the people to token political representation and acclamation by plebiscite, and readiness to intimidate and coerce opposition psychologically and physically through the surveillance of a police state. The head of state is declared to be responsible for the safety and welfare of the people but is not accountable to them in any meaningful way but to a ruling and increasingly self-renewing elite. The people live in an authoritarian state that claims to function in their interest. It includes a wider kleptocracy encouraging clientelism and patronage. There is hostility toward a civil society that is independent and challenges the ruling hegemony. There is a readiness to appeal to a siege mentality and autarchy in foreign relations, political, cultural, and economic.

The theoretical distinctions between democratic and authoritarian political systems are clear but blurred in practice. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Türkiye and Viktor Orbán's Hungary are contemporary examples. This is also true of distinctions between authoritarian and totalitarian systems, as Peter F. Drucker, Hannah Arendt, and others pointed out before and after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> Authoritarianism can take an increasingly heavy step on a slippery slope to totalitarianism. This is most likely if an initially conservative motive is supplanted by one that is fundamentally revolutionary with a totalising aspiration to control and thus modify human nature and behaviour. The slide from the Weimar Republic to National Socialist Germany is a modern historical example.

The books reviewed focus on prominent contemporary examples of authoritarian states challenging a West that, together with the rules-based international order it promoted after the Second World War, they claim is in decline. Such challenges, although not yet fully coordinated, are regarded by many as a renewed hybrid Cold War that exploits global

concerns about energy resources and food security; uses advanced communication technologies to propagandize, acquire political assets, influence, penetrate, and disrupt democratic systems. Russia's wars in Chechnya, Georgia, and Syria, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and China's intimidation of Taiwan show how a hybrid war may become an open conflict, so dangerous between nuclear-armed opponents. The essay pays the greatest attention to Russia and China, but North Korea, a state that fits the totalitarian model closely, is also mentioned.

First, two important books on China: Frank Dikötter, Professor of Humanities, University of Hong Kong, and a Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution, Stanford, California, is widely regarded as the leading contemporary historian of modern China. Notable among his many publications are the volumes in the award-winning *People's Trilogy: Mao's Great Famine, The Tragedy of Liberation, and The Cultural Revolution* (2019), Bloomsbury Paperbacks, London. This documented in harrowing detail the lives of ordinary Chinese during the Mao Zedong era. Frank Dikötter's current book is a sequel to that outstanding work, assessing the history and politics of post-Mao China and its rise as an authoritarian international superpower. It is developed chronologically from the death of Mao Zedong on 9 September 1976, and in Dikötter's characteristic detail, in a Preface, ten detailed chapters and an Epilogue.

Limitations of space preclude an assessment of each chapter here. However, the Preface and Epilogue provide the reader with the basic themes and conclusions of the book as a whole. In the former, Dikötter reaffirms his commitment wherever and whenever possible to archival research, difficult though this is in a closed authoritarian state like China. He says: "Every good researcher has the Socratic paradox in mind: I know that I don't know. But where China is concerned, we don't even know what we don't know." (ix). The book is based on some six hundred documents from local archives, newspaper reports, and unpublished

memoirs, notably those of the prominent Communist Party official Li Rui whose career included being Mao's secretary, twenty years in prison for mentioning the famine in 1959, returning to the Central Committee after Mao's death, and becoming vice-director of the Party's Organisation Department. Dikötter says: "He became a true democrat, having seen the system from the inside out, but in 2004 was banned from writing for publication. His diaries go up to 2012 and report his conversations with senior party members in great detail," (x). Thereafter "...Xi Jinping steps to the fore." (xi).

The book tests "...some common assumptions about the era of 'Reform and Opening Up.' Many commentators outside China believed that: "Political reform would succeed economic reform as the cart follows the ox. But at no point has any leader said anything in support of the separation of powers. On the contrary, maintaining a monopoly has been repeatedly defined as the overwhelming goal of economic reform." (xi). This fundamental policy was reinforced by Xi Jinping who warned in 2018 that "' China must never copy other countries'" especially not the systems of judicial independence and separation of powers of the West. (xi).

The book also questions those who still believe in the "...past existence of real economic reform with a concerted move from the plan to the market, from public ownership to private enterprise." (xi). It is pointed out that: "In classic Marxist parlance, the 'means of production' remain in the hands of the party. An economy in which the means of production are controlled by the state is usually described as a socialist economy." (xii) Moreover, in China "...capital has remained a political good, distributed by state banks to enterprises controlled directly or indirectly by the state in pursuit of political goals." (xii). In short, state capitalism with its accompanying kleptocracy, corruption, and nepotism.

Dikötter quotes the Chinese saying: “‘ The state is rich, the people are poor.’” (xiv).

He says: “But if this book proves anything, it is that without political reform market reform cannot exist.” (xii). Politics, he continues, is about power and whether it should be distributed: among different institutions, including those of civil society, and with an independent media or in the hands of an individual or single political party. “The former is termed a democracy, the latter a dictatorship.” (xii). Which is what China has been, still is, and likely will continue to be. Yet, we are reminded, decisions made by dictators have immense unintended consequences, with the one-child policy, with men now greatly outnumbering women and a declining labour force, a prominent example.

The handling of the outbreak of coronavirus in Wuhan in 2020 and its effect on China’s image internationally is dealt with briefly in the Epilogue. One assumes a fuller discussion was precluded by the book’s publication date. However, the draconian policy of locking down the population to achieve zero-covid-19 has led to open public protests, followed by harsh repression. Such protest has been described recently as an emancipatory class populism that challenges the privileged elite of the Chinese party-state. This differs from the student-led 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, which Dikötter considers in an appropriately lengthy section. There is also, of course, the continuing general repression of human rights, notoriously of the Uighurs in Xinjiang Province.

The most potentially consequential are those decisions that have led to a Chinese economy based on speculation and debt, with expenditure on grandiose projects regardless of capital return, rather than on improving and sustaining general living standards; an economy of “...boom and an endlessly postponed bust.” (xv). In a vivid image, Dikötter compares China with an ocean tanker that looks “.... impressively shipshape from a distance, with the

captain and his lieutenants standing proudly on the bridge, while below sailors are desperately pumping water and plugging holes to keep the vessel afloat.” (xvi). In his final paragraph, he says that the challenge for the Communist Party is how to solve the many structural problems “...of its own making without giving up its monopoly of power and its control over the means of production. ‘ (295). This, he says. “...seemed very much like a dead end.” (295). Such a narrowing of domestic options is a factor in raising the volume of national patriotic rhetoric over Taiwan and the representation of certain other countries, especially the United States, as ‘foreign enemies.’ Xi Jinping and the Communist Party are anxious to be seen by the Chinese people as the leaders of an international superpower, respected and even feared by others.

Frank Dikötter has published another important book and a valuable corrective to widely-held assumptions about China’s power and place in world politics. It draws upon the author’s profound scholarship and is written in a clear and accessible style. It is essential reading both for the academic specialist and for the general reader wishing to understand contemporary China.

Elizabeth C. Economy is another eminent scholar of contemporary China, especially its political economy and international relations. A Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford, California, a Senior Adviser (China) to the United States Department of Commerce, she has also been C.V.Starr Senior Fellow and Director for Asian Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Notable among her many publications is *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (2019), Council on Foreign Relations and Polity, New York, N.Y. Her current book with its intriguing title focuses on China’s



ambitious, but confident agenda for changing the international world order so that it reflects China's status as an authoritarian superpower.

In contrast with Frank Dikötter, Elizabeth Economy focuses on China's international relations and aspirations to replace the United States as the world's leading superpower. Indeed, in many respects, the book is about the China-United States rivalry and was written primarily to guide American readers. This is not to say that it is not of great value to others, both academic and well-informed general readers. There are seven chapters, comprehensive notes, and an index, but no separate bibliography.

Economy is significantly less sceptical than Dikötter of China's fundamental political and economic strength but is still aware of its several limitations and weaknesses. Again, lack of space precludes detailed consideration of each chapter. However, the first, 'Politics and the Plague,' considers Xi Jinping's rebuttal of international criticism of the country's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and is a succinct introduction to how China perceives how the world is and should be, which is the book's central concern. This is summed up by Xi Jinping's call for "...the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (2) requiring a central global role, recovery of what is regarded as sovereign territory i.e., Taiwan, pre-eminence in the Asia-Pacific, the domination of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's global technological infrastructure, and, of fundamental importance, embedding "...its norms, values, and standards in international laws and institutions." (2). As Economy points out: "The path to achieving this vision is a difficult one. It means challenging both the position of the United States as the world's dominant power and the international understandings and

institutions that have been in place since the end of World War II.” (2-3). The book provides a systematic and detailed assessment of this foreign policy agenda.

Her book skilfully analyses how Xi Jinping uses the various elements of China’s foreign policy to realise its geopolitical vision. The question is will China succeed? Xi Jinping and the Communist Party, says Economy, are confident the answer is yes, Pax Americana is no more, and: “The dominant narrative in China is that the shift in the balance of power is already well underway, and that the outcome is inevitable.” (3). Yet such confidence may be misplaced. Several broad conclusions are offered about policy under Xi Jinping’s leadership. First, sovereignty and social stability have both short-term and longer-term dimensions. Secondly, China is projecting elsewhere elements of its authoritarian political model. For example, limiting the ability of others to speak critically about China, let alone be in contact with dissidents. Thirdly, while Xi has made significant progress towards his geopolitical objectives, further success is far from certain. For example, China’s state-capitalist model has limited the attraction that its initiatives have for others. Fourthly, China’s readiness to use sharp and hard power in the Asia-Pacific has strengthened rather than weakened United States-led alliances and partnerships in the region. Fifthly, China looks to bring the values and policies of international institutions into line with its domestic interests, rather than to replace the United States as the sole superpower with its obligations. Finally, China is usually represented as a rising power that threatens the status quo maintained by the United States. Xi reinforces this with an aggressive “wolf-warrior diplomacy” and rhetoric that claims “...the East is rising and the West is declining.” (27). However, “...the fundamental challenge presented by China is to the broader values, norms,

and institutions that underpin the current rules-based order.” As Economy says: “And framed this way, the rest of the world also has a much clearer stake in the outcome.” (28). Her new book is another that is essential reading for academics, policy-makers, and general readers interested in China’s place in contemporary geopolitics. Indeed, Elizabeth C. Economy’s book and that of Frank Dikötter, although written independently and from somewhat different perspectives, complement each other very well.

And Russia? Kathryn E. Stoner’s book is an excellent work of scholarly analysis. Based in research institutes at Stanford University, *Resisting the State: Reform and Retrenchment in Post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) is a notable example of Stoner’s earlier publications. Her current book challenges the widely-held perception that Russia is no longer a leading power internationally, given its poor ratings comparatively judged by standard indices of performance, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), demography, health, welfare, and military strength.

Stoner argues that Vladimir Putin’s hand is not inherently weak, but holds a few strong cards that he has played skilfully to return Russia to international prominence, with domestic political needs shaping the agenda. When the book was published, Russia’s debt was low and fiscal policy was well-managed, with the international sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 having only a limited effect. Russia’s vast natural resources, especially gas and oil, and the demand for these, notably from the countries of the European Union underpinned this. Sustained political opposition and civil society were suppressed by what is now an autocratic police state. Putin also manipulated the Russian Constitution, to enable him to be Head of State, potentially until 2036. Russia’s potential for democracy was eroded by using the media for state propaganda and marginalising

independent voices. There was also the increasing use of what has become known as a hybrid war to project internationally Putin's image of Russia as a great power 'resurrected.'

Putin's early objectives were to bring order and stability and to consolidate his popular domestic support internally. He appealed to patriotism and the cultural values of the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World), intending to restore the respect Russians felt their country had lost. There is ample evidence of ruthlessness towards what Putin regards as Russia's historical sphere of interest: in Chechnya, Georgia, and Syria, fomenting ethnic division in Donbas, and Crimea. This distracts from Russia's domestic problems: its demographic decline, over-reliance on commodities as exports, kleptocracy, corruption, nepotism, regional and ethnic disparities, and other economic and social inequalities. Kathryn Stoner considers these and other issues in four substantial sections, each supported by empirical data. These are Section I: Russia and the Dimensions of State Power; Section II: The Geographic Domain and Policy Scope of Russian Power; Section III: The Means of Russian Power; and Section IV: The Purposes Behind Russian Power Projection Abroad.

The first asks the key question: Is Russia resurrected? It is argued that even though lacking the traditional metrics of power i.e., the three Ms of 'Men, Military, and Money,' under Putin: "Russia has managed, rather unexpectedly, to be one of the most disruptive influences in contemporary international relations.' (27). The argument is that Russia has a few "...very strong cards, depending on the game that is being played." (27). The book aims to demonstrate this. It might have been added that it helps if the decisive voice in state policy i.e., Putin, is convinced that such disruption is in Russia's interest and holds international norms in contempt. The second assesses the components of Russian power, both

in the former Soviet republics and concerning those powers, named as the United States, China, and the European Union, which Putin believes Russia should match.

In the third, using a variety of empirical and other sources, Stoner explains the *means* by which the Russian state has sought to project its power and influence abroad: economic, and human capital development, including health, education, and productive capacity, and hard military and soft propaganda power.

The fourth deals with both the ideological and the pragmatic purposes of Putin's international or, as I would have described it, neo-imperial project. It is argued that "...state and society relations within Russia play a key role in determining how Putin's patronal autocracy uses power resources abroad." (27). The ideology provides a persuasive justification for the patriotic citizens of the Russian Federation. The pragmatism is found in the need for such a patronal autocracy, and those who benefit from it, to maintain a passive domestic *status quo*. The final section considers the implications of Russia's 'resurrection' as an actor on the international relations stage. Stoner argues that Russian policy "...might have some root in a misperceived sense of danger to national security" but essentially it is intended to provide a narrative "... of regime legitimacy designed for internal consumption by Russian society and elites." (266).

She concludes that Putin's patronal autocracy is vulnerable "...but not because it is threatened from abroad" (266) and certainly not by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Others outside Russia, as we know, have argued otherwise with the unfortunate effect of feeding Putin's domestic narrative. Stoner concludes that when not if, "...willingness to challenge the patronal system takes permanent root ...a different form of government will alter how Russia projects its power abroad." (267). Only then "...will Russia truly be resurrected." (267). Such optimism does not consider sufficiently the weight

of political repression imposed by Putin's police state, with an articulate opposition, and those who might be part of it, dispersed increasingly outside Russia.

It is an important book, researched meticulously, and written clearly and cogently by someone with extensive knowledge of Russia's history and contemporary politics. The author's assessments are objective and sound, drawing upon the evidence she has gathered. Published in 2022, these qualities have not been superseded by Putin's so-called 'special military operation' in February 2022, with its many enormities. The supine response of Western politicians to Putin's increasingly brazen actions and rhetoric led him to succumb to hubris, the fate of many autocrats historically, with disastrous consequences for Ukraine, the world, and also for Russia. A second edition of the book is needed in which Kathryn Stoner can provide us with a post-script assessing this; with a question mark in the title.

The final book reviewed is by Katie Stallard, an experienced journalist, and senior editor for China and global affairs at *The New Statesman* magazine in London. She has also been a foreign correspondent for Sky News in Russia, Ukraine, China, and North Korea. This is seen in the book's fluent and readable style, accompanied by a professional reporter's presentation of evidence and its assessment. Unlike the three books reviewed above, it is a book intended for the intelligent, already reasonably well-informed, general reader, rather than for academic specialists on the countries considered, especially historians and historiographers.<sup>3</sup> The book succeeds admirably in meeting the expectations of such a readership.

Although the main title, *Dancing on Bones*, perhaps dictated by dubious marketing advice, does have an air of the sensational, the sub-title *History and Power in China, Russia,*

*and North Korea* is clear enough. The book is essentially about how the current regimes, each with origins in Marxist-Leninist systems, use control over information and the media to construct an ideological, propagandist account of history to legitimate their politics, actions, and aspirations. This is illustrated by an epigraph taken from George Orwell's *1984*: 'Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.' The book comprises a generous set of Acknowledgements, an Introduction, and ten chapters, each with gnomic single-word titles such as "Myth," "Victory," "Truth" and "Lies," and a Conclusion subtitled: "Power." There are also comprehensive Notes and an Index. I would have preferred more explicit titles, but each chapter does follow a similar structure chronologically and comparatively, and in a popular reporting style with many concrete examples. Space precludes comments on each chapter, but the Introduction and the Conclusion both make clear the author's intentions and method.

The former has three important caveats. First: "These regimes are more than just the man at the top, and staying in power means managing multiple resources and constituencies." (7). This includes generating popular support, or at least the appearance of it, which is where historical narratives come in. Secondly: "Dissenting and diverse views can and do endure even under the most severe social controls." (7). Thirdly, "...the manipulation of history for political purposes is not a uniquely authoritarian trait." (7). The slogans "Make America Great Again" and "Take Back Control" come to mind. The purpose of the book, we are reminded, is "... to understand the popular narratives these regimes promote and how they enforce the boundaries of acceptable discourse, historical research, and education to advance their political goals." (7). This is a worthwhile objective for a general

readership that the author succeeds in achieving.

The latter sums up the process as the consolidation of “Power.” It argues that: “All nations tell themselves stories about the past and draw selectively from their history, but in Russia, China, and North Korea, these narratives are becoming increasingly entrenched.” (215). This matters because they provide “...the lens through which future rivalries and territorial disputes will be framed, as domestic audiences are told they must stand firm in the face of foreign bullying and aggression, build up their military strength, and never concede an inch.” (216). Those who deny this are enemies of the People and the State that ‘protects’ them. This is reminiscent for those who know the political and cultural history of Fascism, Stalinism, and Japanese militarism between the world wars. Katie Stallard describes the revival of a political method that challenges the contemporary West.

Is the West in decline? It is a cultural, economic, and political concept rather than simply a geographical expression. The term is thus a broad one and there are many substantial differences among countries that might be said to be included in it. It is not declining by measures of scientific and technical leadership and progress nor, despite many fluctuations in performance and persisting inequalities, in the economic and social welfare opportunities, it offers its citizens. This is why so many others wish to be part of it. The argument for spreading such opportunities globally requires participation and cooperation in a rules-based international system. This must be defended if it is to be of universal value. Yet, the West is often seen as incoherent in defining and practising its values. This is illustrated by the so-called ‘culture wars’ and the selfish pursuit of often meretricious consumption. This



has both moral and ecological consequences. These flaws affect the West's image and relations with others negatively and it is and is frequently accused of hypocrisy.

The political systems described in the books reviewed are similar in that they describe an alternative militarised authoritarianism that considers the individual to be an instrument of the state and its collective objectives as determined by a power elite. It promises its people economic, and social benefits, and security against perceived external enemies in return for political passivity and 'patriotic' obedience. China presents the greater threat in the longer term, although it has internal flaws that may yet undermine it. Russia is increasingly debilitated by its hubristic war in Ukraine and without democratic political change could slip into the status of China's vassal, as Belarus under Lukashenko is now of Russia. North Korea is a rogue state, but liable to restraint from China. Other states such as Iran, Afghanistan and, in different ways, Saudi Arabia and other oil states also challenge the countries of the democratic West with their liberal and diverse cultures, but from the perspective of versions of fundamentalist Islam. The adjective "Orwellian" is an appropriate and familiar one, but so is the remark of the English historian, late Victorian, and Catholic, Lord Acton. In a letter on 5 April 1887 to Mandell Creighton, an Anglican Bishop, Acton wrote: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." <sup>4</sup> This is again well-known, but Acton also said: "And remember, where you have a concentration of power in a few hands, all too frequently men with the mentality of gangsters get control. History has proven that." <sup>5</sup> It is still doing so.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Published as Volume 1: *Form and Actuality* and Volume 2: *Perspectives of world history*. There have been several editions and translations. Oxford University Press published an abridged edition (1991) with an introduction by H. Stuart Hughes.

<sup>2</sup> See Drucker's *The end of economic man: the origins of totalitarianism*, (1939/2017), Routledge, U.K. and Arendt's *The origins of totalitarianism* (1951/2017), Penguin Modern Classics, Penguin Random House, U.K.

<sup>3</sup> Those interested in historiography in general should read Richard J. Evans' *In Defence of History* (2000), Granta Publications, London.

<sup>4</sup> See: [https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/acton-acton-creighton-correspondence#f1524\\_label\\_010](https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/acton-acton-creighton-correspondence#f1524_label_010)

<sup>5</sup> See: Lord Acton Quotes." Quoteslyfe.com, 2022. Sun. 11 Dec. 2022. <https://www.quoteslyfe.com/quote/And-remember-where-you-have-a-concentration-303940>