

Book Review: China or Japan: Which Will Lead Asia?

by Blog Admin

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*This stimulating book aims to open a debate on the question of leadership in Asia for which China and Japan are competing. **Claude Meyer** assesses the two rivals' strengths and weaknesses as well as the major challenges which they will face in that battle for supremacy. **Luke McDonagh** is impressed by this book's balance and historical insight, and recommends the book for those interested in the economic future of the region.*



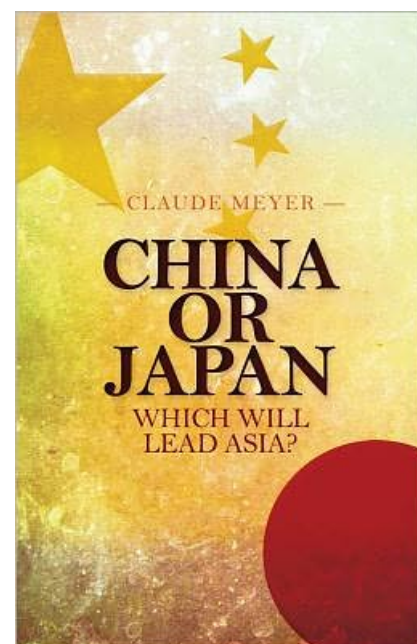
China or Japan: Which Will Lead Asia? Claude Meyer. Hurst. September 2012.

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This book poses a significant and timely question – ‘Who will lead Asia?’. In light of China's extraordinary economic growth over the last decade, and Japan's relative stagnation, many would say that the answer is obvious – China. This view, however, may prove to be mistaken in the coming decades since it overlooks some of Japan's comparative advantages over its larger rival. Over the course of this book [Claude Meyer](#) does an excellent job of highlighting Japan's strengths and weaknesses, while also examining the case for and against China becoming the de facto regional power.

The first chapter examines the economic trajectory of both countries during the past 50-60 years. For Japan, Meyer details the steady economic growth of the country post-WWII, including its meteoric rise during the 1980s, when it emerged as a genuine economic rival to the United States. Of course, the author also explores Japan's calamitous fall during the early 1990s and its continuing struggle to re-ignite its sluggish economy – the recent advent of ‘[Abenomics](#)’ is merely the latest attempt at this, and the jury is still out on whether it will prove to be a success in the long term. With respect to China, Meyer discusses the state's transition from central planning to market socialism, as well as its dramatic entry into the global marketplace and the WTO over the past two decades.

In chapter two, Meyer gives an assessment of what makes each state ‘mighty but vulnerable’. One major advantage for Japan is that it is a fully functioning democracy, whereas China remains an authoritarian state. Moreover, unlike Japan, large-scale corruption is a normal daily course of practice in China and there is a corresponding chronic lack of accountability with regard to the functioning of the ruling Chinese Communist Party. Japan is a highly stable and homogenous society; China, on the other hand, is highly diverse, featuring an array of different religious and ethnic groups. Japan is also a highly developed country, with an extremely long life-expectancy and a very high standard of living; much of China's population by contrast remains mired in abject poverty. Further to this, although Japan suffers from the demographic problem of an aging population, so too does China, largely due to the historical legacy of its one child policy.





China's comparative advantages over Japan include its size – it is more than ten times the size of Japan with regard to population, and it covers a much larger land mass. Furthermore, one thing that China currently has in abundance is confidence – something that Japan has lacked since the heady 'bubble economy' of the roaring 1980s. One particularly interesting thing that Meyer highlights is the fact that although Japan's economy has stagnated, it remains the world's third biggest after the US and China (though the EU is still the largest overall when measured by GDP). In addition, unemployment has remained low in Japan, even during recent decades. With regard to China's economy, there is no doubt that growth is slowing, and economic history has proven that all rapidly developing economies experience a slump at some point. Some have even suggested that China will inevitably face a major economic crash. On this point, it seems unlikely that the Chinese would weather a sustained slump as well as the Japanese have – the massive inequalities that have arisen over the past three decades of development, coupled with the lack of representative democracy, could well provoke civil unrest, particularly if there is a major spike in unemployment. If this were to happen, the Chinese government may well react, as it did in 1989, with brutal repression.

Indeed, while it cannot be said that democracy is an inevitability in any country, one thing that is inevitable is conflict, which is endemic in all societies. In this regard, democracy has thus far proven to be the best way of mitigating societal conflict ; for instance, there is little doubt Japan is one of the post-WWII democratic success stories. However, many have speculated that China is so ethnically and religiously fragmented that if societal conflicts, such as those arising from the spiralling inequality in the country, come to a head, the state will not be able to democratise peacefully – in this sense, the 2009 clashes between the Uyghurs and the Han ethnic groups in China could be a sign of things to come.

On the other hand, Meyer does not shy away from the fact that Japan faces its own unique challenges. The Japanese state still has work to do when it comes to atonement for WWII-era atrocities which occurred in neighbouring countries, including China. For example, the fact that many controversial WWII-era generals are interred at the war memorial in Tokyo rankles with both China and South Korea, and harms diplomatic relations between the three countries. But it must be remembered that China also has difficulties with its neighbours – part of the reason for Burma and Vietnam's recent rapprochements with the US is down to their fear of being dominated by China.

In his concluding chapter, Meyer notes that a China-dominated Asia remains a distinct possibility, and that this may indeed occur within the next 20-30 years. As Meyer recounts, China has historically been the world's biggest economy, and it is only in the last 200 years that it has been displaced by the US; in this sense, China may simply be re-claiming its historic place at the top of the economic tree. Nonetheless, though its strengths are many and wide-ranging, the existence of China's weaknesses (large-scale corruption, ethnic tensions, lack of democracy) mean that there is a distinct chance that it will not be able to dominate the region entirely on its own terms. As Meyer states, this leaves open the possibility that there will in the future be a system of regional co-operation between China and Japan, perhaps also accommodating other Asia powers such as India.

Luke McDonagh is a Fellow in the LSE Department of Law. holds a PhD from Queen Mary, University of London (2011), an LLM from the London School of Economics (2006-7) and a BCL degree from NUI, Galway (2002-05). He has previously taught in the areas of Public Law, Administrative Law and EU Law at Queen Mary as well as Constitutional Law and Tort Law at NUI Galway. [Read reviews by Luke.](#)