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## A Seventh Take on Jacques

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## [A Seventh Take on Jacques](#)

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Since Jeff Wasserstrom posted a round-up of reviews of Martin Jacques' *When China Rules the World*, pieces that reference the book have continued to be published, including a column by Robert Samuelson at the Wall Street Journal that calls Jacques' book "masterful." Jacques, meanwhile, published another op-ed on China and the US last week titled "*Crouching Dragon, Weakened Eagle*" in the International Herald Tribune. Below, Harald Bockman raises his concerns about the on-going attention Jacques' book is receiving, and points out—despite that attention—the weakness in the book that most reviewers are still missing.

By Harald Bockman

In a recent post at *China Beat*, [Jeff Wasserstrom summarized reviews](#) of Martin Jacques' *When China Rules the World* from six scholars and journalists. Having followed how the book has been received, I found it quite surprising that hardly any of the reviewers have confronted the author with the undergirding of the books' central argument: historical evidence that is mobilized to prove that China will be the dominant world power within a generation. (In *London Review of Books* [Perry Anderson did present](#) a pointed criticism of claims of historical uniqueness, and in *The Spectator* [Jonathan Mirsky presented](#) a piecemeal historical criticism, but neither of them provide a thorough critique of Jacques' interpretation of Chinese history as such.) This is surprising as Jacques' book is the first ambitious attempt to apply an historical approach to this subject.

This blind spot of the reviewers is particularly worrying in light of the absence of historians engaging in a critical assessment of Jacques' book. It seems like historians are still to a large degree concerned with different texts. This is further exacerbated by Beijing's persistent recent offering of a rehashed version of Chinese history, a new type of genealogy which may seem rather enticing to the uninitiated writer (like the state-sponsored myth of 5000 years of history, which Jacques swallows).

I have hardly read a work on China which is dependent to such a degree on other sources as *When China Rules the World*. The arguments largely become a function of the selected sources, and reveals that Jacques is unable to establish a critical and knowledgeable approach to his sources. The publishers have summoned Eric Hobsbawm to appear on the dust cover (at least for the British edition) to state that this is a work "... full of historical understanding and realism ..." Hobsbawm's history *bona fides* thus just seem like window dressing for the book's failing historical insights.

The historical part of the book starts and ends with Lucian Pye and his notion of "civilization-state", with Huntington applauding from the bibliography. The term passes mostly without resistance from the reviewers, except for Anderson. From there on, we are led on a guided tour through historical aspects of issues like nation-building, perceptions of race (a section which would have collapsed without Frank Dikötter's *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*), Tibet, overseas Chinese, the tributary system, Confucianism, politics, democracy, and soft power. The silliest claim of all must be Jacques' use of Mengzi's notion of caring for the old to explain why there is not a single gray hair to be seen in the Central Committee (CC)! The vain use of hair dye in the present CC outdoes any of the former CCs. (If you are looking for gray hair, the chances are better in the National People's Congress, but by far best in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress.)

Jacques makes use of cultural determinism to explain economic determinism. Above all, Jacques' alarmist presentation of Chinese history will not ring positively in the ears of the average Westerner. The Yellow Peril may be just around the corner, and Jacques' book should be taken as a warning, even if this is not the intention of the author. To sum up: Jacques' arguments *in favor of* a new Chinese world order may just as well be used to argue *against* the prospects of a new Chinese world order.

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