



Alternative futures of China: A macrohistorical approach



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 8 January 2014

Keywords:

China
Macrohistory
Alternative futures
Sima Qian
Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar
Pitirim Sorokin
Oswald Spengler

ABSTRACT

This paper is an heuristic application in understanding China's alternative futures by looking at the deeper patterns of history and social change developed by four macrohistorians: Sima Qian, Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, Pitirim Sorokin and Oswald Spengler. It questions the dominant perspective on the future that the Western liberal and consumerist system will endlessly rise. By using macrohistorical perspectives, distance is created from short-term economic and political projections allowing a view of the stages of history, the broader shape of the future through space and time, which provides another way to think about China's alternative futures. Four alternative futures are developed. In the first future, there is a regime change, with moves towards democracy and greater human rights. In the second future, there is a Golden Age for China and the world with major scientific, political and cultural achievements. In the third future, change is material and shallow, and in the fourth future there is collapse, not just of China's rise, but also of the world capitalist system.

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1. Introduction

The Global Language Monitor which tracks the top 50,000 print and electronic media sites around the world found that the phrase “the Rise of China” to be the Top News Story of the Decade followed by “the Iraq War”, the “9/11 Terrorist Attacks” and “the War on Terror” [1]. Some claim that not only is China rising economically and politically but, as world power shifts from the West to the East, that the 21st century will be known as the “Chinese Century” similar to the 20th century being known as the “American Century” and the 19th as the “British Century” [2–5]. The financial crisis in 2008, which also triggered the European sovereign debt crisis, as well as long running wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the volatility and uncertainty caused by the U.S. debt crisis all appear to be evidence of this change, like a pendulum swinging in a new direction. Regardless of the merits of this view, the shape of China's future remains uncertain and challenges remain.

To question this image of the future, namely that the United States is in decline and we are entering into the “Chinese Century”, this article will examine the larger patterns of structural social change in which actors find themselves living. The theoretical approach borrows from Galtung and Inayatullah and focuses on the systemic, overall patterns of change rather than the study of some region at some point in time, as would be the case with history [6]. It is different from other offerings on China futures because it takes a longer-term view, informed by macrohistorical theories that are not guided by narrow time and space limits of modern day international relations theories, the short-termism of economic and financial models, or by shallow opinion polls.

In this context, this article will describe the work of four macrohistorians: Sima Qian, Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, Pitirim Sorokin and Oswald Spengler and develop four possible futures scenarios, one for each macrohistorian. Why these four?

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Their theories of historical social and political change are coherent enough to make them useful for forecasting possible futures, providing a path from idea to image, thus making them valuable to question current 'real life' conditions. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses the importance of macrohistorical theories in defining alternative futures and gives a broad overview of each macrohistorian. Section 3 presents some of the factors driving political and social change in China. Sections 4–7 present the macrohistorical theories of Sima Qian, Sarkar, Sorokin and Spengler in detail with a heuristic analysis of their alternative future scenarios.

2. Macrohistory and macrohistorians

A key concept in the theory of macrohistory is that the future is structured through time and space, allowing historians to find occurrences and reoccurrences of historical and social themes in order to make pivotal insights. This suggests that not only can we learn from the past, but we can also use it to look for visions to use in creating new futures. Macrohistorians offer patterns of history that are linear or cyclical or some combination of both to provide understanding of which stage of history we may be in and where we may be going (endless rise, downward spiral or move to a new era, for example). This does not make one macrohistorian's view of the future better or more 'accurate' than another's, nor does it allow us to predict exactly where we are headed, but it does allow remarkable insights into changing domestic and global power structures, including the dynamics and shape of change – the causes of change, the patterns of change and the metaphysics of change, the metaphors of change, and who will lead this change [7].

The first macrohistorian presented, Sima Qian, was one of the great recorders of dynastic change in the history of the Chinese people. His theory of macrohistory was concerned with "the power and potency of human agency in shaping history" and is perhaps the most widely read of all Chinese historical works [8, p. 66; 9]. The first scenario, developed from Sima Qian's theory, is of a future that will see a new sage arise to lead China into democratic change. The works of Sarkar and Sorokin are considered to be foundational in the use of history to theorise about civilisational possibilities [10]. Sarkar provides a predictive and interpretive theory of the future through his use of a universal social structure with four structures and four epochs, each exhibiting a certain mentality [11]. The second scenario, based on Sarkar, sees China enter a new Golden Age of prosperity and achievement. Sorokin gives us three cultural orientations in which all societies alternate. He also provides us with the principle of imminent change which tells us that societies change because it is in their nature to change, not because of some external force. The third future is established by Sorokin's principle of limits and will see the status quo of material growth continue until or unless there is political or spiritual change. Spengler too offers a foundational concept in the form of the "civilisational lifecycle" into which we can then place a civilisation according to its developmental stage. The fourth possible future, borrowed from Spengler, is of collapse, not just of China, but of the entire capitalist world order. Taken together, these scenarios are able to provide a broad view of macrohistorical theories leading us to see change through grand theories rather than day-to-day events. This article is not meant to be a critical examination of their theories, but a heuristic application intended to gain insight into a number of possible futures constructed from their macrohistorical visions.

3. Driving forces of social and political change in China

3.1. Political reform

The benefits of China's economic reforms since Deng Xiaoping set China on a path, which favoured economic growth over political and social stability in 1978, are well known. They have taken China from being one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per capita GDP one-fortieth that of the U.S., to being the second largest economy in the world with a current per capita GDP about one-fifth that of the U.S. and on par with Brazil [12]. Despite all of the benefits to the millions lifted out of poverty, there has been a dark side, exemplified by rising inequality, corruption and environmental damage.

Hu Shuli, the Editor-in Chief of Caixin Media, argues that economic reform is the flip side of political reform and that if the relationship between either of these two aspects is ignored China will not be able to move forward [13]. Former Premier Wen Jiabao warned at a press conference on March 14, 2012, after the closing meeting of the Fifth Session of the 11th National People's Congress (NPC), that China must implement successful political reform or "the gains we have made in these areas [economic reforms] may be lost, and new problems that popped up in the Chinese society will not be fundamentally resolved, and such historical tragedies as the Cultural Revolution may happen again in China" [14]. There are a number of political activists who agree including Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo who drafted Charter 08, a manifesto signed by 303 Chinese intellectuals calling for reform of China's human rights, democratic elections based on the principle of "one person, one vote", protection of private property, separation of powers, and freedom of the press, among a number of other elements of systemic reform.

Political and economic marginalisation is increasing and is becoming a major source of disruption. Deng Yuwen an editor with the journal *Study Times* has published an article on 'The Ten Grave Problems Facing China' listing the most pressing social, economic, regional, political and ideological problems facing the Xi government, including the need for new guiding principles for society, economic restructuring, declining fertility and ageing, environmental pollution and insufficient efforts towards political reform and the promotion of democracy [15]. In Wukan, an anti-land grab protest in September 2011 resulted in a negotiated settlement where villagers and provincial officials agreed to village elections to resolve the conflict.

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