

‘Return of the dragon’ and road to China’s new world order

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Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks during a news conference during the Belt and Road Forum at the International Conference Center in Yanqi Lake, north of Beijing, on May 15, 2017. PHOTO | JASON LEE | AFP

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What you need to know:

China’s rise is challenging the current flawed world history and spurring new imaginations of an inclusive history of human civilisation.

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Attended by 40 heads of State, 5,000 participants from over 150 countries, 90 international organisations and 800 business leaders, the event also marks 70 years since Chairman Mao Zedong led the Communist Party of China (PRC) to victory in 1949 and 40 years since Mao’s successor, Deng Xiaoping, unveiled the ‘reform and opening-up’ in December 1978.

Literally, the 2019 forum reveals a world grappling with the inerasable reality of the “Return of the Dragon” – to invoke the titled of the epic 1972 martial art comedy film by Chinese actor Bruce Lee.

Presciently, the film – which was shown freely in the 1970s to rural Kenyans by the Kenya Factual Films (1974) Limited – depicts an epic battle in the City of Rome, between the West (Mafia’s criminal underworld) and China (“way of the dragon”).

Here, a Mafia crime boss has employed goons to forcefully take over a restaurant owned by the Chinese business lady, Chen Ching-hua, when a young martial artist from China (Hong Kong), Tang Lung (Bruce Lee), enters the scene, tames the goons and saves her business.

CHANGE

From the movie, it becomes clear that China has come a long way in geopolitical and conceptual terms.

Not surprisingly, the American historian, Roger Ebert, exemplified the wisdom of the age when he rubbished the film in his review in the Chicago Sun-Times as “simplistic”, its “conventions unbelievable” and “magnificently silly”.

In subtle ways, the movie had challenged the established Euro-centric thinking, which the Palestinian scholar Edward Said so eloquently discussed in his classic, *Orientalism* (1978).

China symbolised the view of non-Western world (mainly Asiatic and African) as static and undeveloped in contrast to a developed, rational, flexible, and superior Western society. But all this is changing in a rather emphatic, fast and furious fashion.

Last week, I was a speaker at the 2018/2019 Global Investor Week in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, evocatively billed: “China – a Country the World Needs Versus a Country that needs the World”.

CIVILISATION

Organised by Tan Teng Boo, who founded Malaysian investment company Capital Dynamics some 30 years ago, speakers left no doubt that the old world order is dead, and a rising China inevitably engenders a rewriting of human history.

In a sharp and brutal excursion, James Bradley, the author of *The China Mirage: The Hidden History of American Disaster in Asia* (2015), showed how misconceptions about China distorted America’s domestic and foreign policies, leading to the troubled history that defines Sino-American relations, exhorting the world to take to heart hard lessons from the past to avoid unnecessary entanglements in the future.

Two other recent books revealed how China’s rise is challenging the current flawed world history and spurring new imaginations of an inclusive history of human civilisation.

One is a comprehensive and realistic portrayal of human history by Chinese scholar Xinfeng Li in a new book, *China in Africa: In Zheng He's Footsteps* (January 2018). Li argues that the Chinese sailor and diplomat Zheng He, who made numerous voyages to Africa and the world nearly 700 years ago, has become “an important symbol for the Chinese people and the world of peace-loving cultural exchange in general”.

WORLD ORDER

Notably, Zheng himself was walking in the footsteps of the Moroccan scholar Ibn Batuta, and the Somali diplomat Sa'id of Mogadishu, who extensively toured China, leaving behind useful chronicles.

Second is Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (2015). Citing anthropologist Eric Wolf, Frankopan questions “the accepted and lazy history of civilisations” that starts with Ancient Greece (about 1,200 BC to roughly 600 AD) and ends the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) and the emergence of the United States of America as the pinnacle of liberalism (“the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”).

Trapped in this flawed account of human history, Francis Fukuyama of *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) fame could not visualise or anticipate the rise of China.

DEVELOPMENT

However, since late last year, mainstream Western media has portrayed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as China's strategy of reshaping the world order.

Indeed, the concept of “China's new world order” became ubiquitously used after the Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), attended by 53 of Africa's 54 states and international organisations in Beijing, on September 3-4, 2018.

Untypically, the Foreign Affairs journal published an eye-catching article titled: “How China Wants to Reshape the World Order” (December 11, 2018).

CNN carried the event under the headline: “China's new world order”. And the Los Angeles Times ran the article: “Globalisation 2.0: How China's two-day summit aims to shape a new world order”.

But how exactly is BRI reshaping the world order? In a nutshell, the BRI is China's development strategy unveiled by President Xi Jinping in 2013 to enhance inter-civilisational “connectivity of systems and mechanisms and embrace a brighter future” for humanity through trade, investments and people-to-people interactions.

TRADE

Currently, this involves investments in 152 countries at an estimated cost of US\$4–8 trillion. Beijing has signed 173 deals with 125 countries and 29 international organisations.

By 2018, the total trade volume between China and Belt and Road participating countries reached US\$6 trillion.

But Africa's participation is still small. By last year, only three African nations (Djibouti, Egypt and Kenya) were listed as participants in the initiative compared to 24 (36pc from Europe, 26 (39pc) in Asia and 14 (21pc) in Middle East.

Despite a pervading criticism that China's aid is saddling developing countries with unsustainable debt, a giant "debt trap", only 20 percent of Africa's external debt is owed to China. Africa must be at the centre of the Silk Roads shaping global power.

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