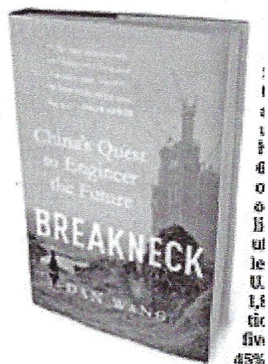


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The United States is a 'lawyerly society' that excels at obstruction. China is an 'engineering state' dedicated to technological supremacy.



Lawyers vs. Technocrats

BOOKSHELF

By Tunku Varadarajan

Breakneck

By Dan Wang

Norton, 288 pages, \$31.99

Writing for these pages recently, Rahm Emanuel, a stalwart of the Democratic Party, asked if China could be the external threat that restores internal cohesion to American politics. It's a good question, but Dan Wang asks an even better one in "Breakneck," his brilliant book—equal parts gripping and depressing—about "China's quest to engineer the future." His question, distilled to its essence, is this: Can the success of China—with its dams and bridges, highways and high-speed rail networks, high-rise cities, world-altering factories and, increasingly, top-notch tech and military prowess—arouse or alarm America into rediscovering its soul and recovering the productive mojo that made the U.S. the most powerful nation in history?

A gloom quickly descends as we read this book. It's hard not to conclude that the battle is already lost and that, in a generation or two, a hard --edged, hypernationalist, ruthlessly mercantilist and relentlessly revanchist China will have the world at its mercy. Mr. Wang hits us with the statistics: China has the capacity to produce 60 million cars a year out of an annual global market of 90 million; it has 100 million people working in manufacturing, as opposed to less than 13 million in the U.S.; in 2022, China had 1,800 ships under construction, compared to America's five; by 2030, China will have 45% of the world's industrial capacity, while the U.S. and all other high-income countries combined will muster only 38%.

Mr. Wang is a research fellow at the Hoover History Lab at Stanford. He was born in China, migrating to Canada with his parents at age 7, thence to the suburbs of Philadelphia some years later. There's no doubt, from reading his book, that his sympathies lie with his adopted land, even as he's unstinting in his admiration—as we all are—for the breathtaking manner in which China has remade itself and lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. The author lived in China from 2017 to 2023—first in Hong Kong, then Beijing and Shanghai—working as a technology analyst. After six years, he writes, "I missed pluralism." He returned to the U.S., where it is "wonderful to be in a society made up of many voices, not only an official register meant to speak over all the rest." In China he had, "most of all," missed "the ability to order books" (even if most of the books we consume today are in fact printed in China).

What makes this account of U.S.-versus-China so compelling is that Mr. Wang is never blind to China's flaws—especially those of its cold-blooded leader, Xi Jinping. The author reminds us that “over the thirty-five years of the onechild era, China performed a total of 321 million abortions . . . and sterilized 108 million women and 26 million men.” Mr. Xi’s “zero-Covid” lockdowns traumatized hundreds of millions. The author, it’s clear, is rooting for America, exhorting it to get its act together because the world needs a strong America to keep a Xi-ite China in check.

Yet even after Mr. Xi departs, as he someday must, there’s no guarantee that China will become a gentle democracy. Mr. Wang describes an online movement in China called the Industrial Party that flourishes unmuzzled in the “heavily censored realm of the Chinese internet.” Its supporters call for “a more confrontational approach with the American-led order” and views the Chinese Communist Party as “the world’s most capable political organization” for the pursuit of science and technology, the Darwinian tools by which, these fervent patriots believe, China will one day rule the world.

Which leads us to the thesis of Mr. Wang’s book: Whereas the American elite is “made up of mostly lawyers, excelling at obstruction,” the Chinese state is run by a “technocratic class, made up mostly of engineers, that excels at construction.” China is “an engineering state,” Mr. Wang observes, “building big at breakneck speed, in contrast to the United States’ lawyerly society, blocking everything it can, good and bad.” (America, Mr. Wang notes, has 400 lawyers for every 100,000 people, three times higher than the European average.) China versus U.S. is therefore “a contest between a literal-minded dragon and lawyerly weenies.”

The author offers a tragicomic illustration to make this point. In 2008, both China and the U.S. initiated the construction of a high-speed rail link of some 800 miles, the former between Beijing and Shanghai, the latter between San Francisco and Los Angeles. China opened its line in 2011 at a cost of \$36 billion. California—paralyzed by Nimby litigation, pork-barrel politics and soaring costs—has so far built only a small stretch of track in the Central Valley, and even that won’t be operational until at least 2030. The latest cost estimate? \$128 billion. The U.S., laments Mr. Wang, “wasn’t always like this.” But Americans “live today in the ruins of an industrial civilization, whose infrastructure is just barely maintained and rarely expanded.” China’s poorest provinces have finer infrastructure than America’s richest states.

The wholesale departure of manufacturing from the U.S.—mostly to China—has created “economic and political ruination” in this country. However hard Donald Trump tries to bring manufacturing back to the U.S., he will run up against the crisis of a loss of “process knowledge”—the ingrained “proficiency gained from practical experience.” We would do well to ask how we can regain an ability to build that we have not had for more than a generation. Amputated limbs do not grow back.

Which is why Mr. Wang’s cri de coeur—that we fight to recover our manufacturing capacity—struggles to rise above the level of a rhetorical exhortation. “What the United States presently lacks,” he tells us, “is the urgency to make the hard choices to build.” But I can’t see us ever making those hard choices again. Can you?

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