

Is America Becoming More Like China

Barbarians at the Gate

Podcast Transcript

Hosts: Jeremiah Jenne (Geneva, Switzerland) and David Moser (Beijing, China)

Guest: Jacob Dreyer (Shanghai, China)

Opening

Jeremiah Jenne (00:02):

Hello and welcome to another edition of Barbarians at the Gate. This is Jeremiah Jenne, broadcasting from the land of cheese and chocolate, Geneva, Switzerland. With me, sweltering in the summer heat that is Beijing, David Moser. You are always cool, but how are even you with all of your coolness keeping comfortable in this heat wave?

David Moser (00:24):

Right. I'm cool now in this heat wave. I used to be hot or so people told me, but I'm always interested in hearing the nicknames that they give President Trump.

I think there are about a half dozen so far, but just a couple days ago, I heard another one, a Chinese friend of mine, we were talking about things and I guess politics came up and he asked me, so what do you think of Shui Mei-Ren, or maybe Shui Mei-Ren, which to me that sounded like Sleeping Beauty. And I hadn't heard this one before, but he explained to me, it's actually a very perfect pun to humiliate Trump.

Shui of course means sleep, but it also means tariff or tax, right? So Shui, Mei Ren is beautiful person, beautiful woman, right? But you know, by no coincidence, the Mei, beautiful is the word for the United States, Mei Guo, right? So it could be translated as the tariffing beauty or the taxing beauty or something like that, right? I thought that was a beautiful pun to add to the many other disparaging puns. My favorite one is Dong Wang. It's someone who has the knowledge of everything. He knows everything. He's never wrong. I love that. Anyway, so just keeping up on how the prestige of the United States is dropping precipitously here in Beijing.

Guest Introduction

Jeremiah Jenne (01:49):

Well, I'm glad you brought that up because in the words of our guest today, Jacob Dreyer for a recent op-ed in the New York Times, it seems that more and more there is a convergence and

that both China is changing in ways that are allowing it to catch up quickly with the rest the world quicker perhaps than anyone could have anticipated. And of course, the US is changing in ways that makes it seem a little bit more like living under the CCP.

Our guest today is of course, Jacob Dreyer, based in Shanghai since 2008. He writes for the New York Times, Nature. I'm gonna try to pronounce this Jacob and I think I'm gonna get it wrong. Noma?

Jacob Dreyer (02:28):

I think it's Noema, but I'm not sure either.

Jeremiah Jenne (02:31):

Okay, NOEMA Jacob's writing is well known for academic rigor, but making it accessible. He's working on a book, Human Nature, about AI automation's societal impact across the US-China divide. Jacob, welcome on the podcast.

Jacob Dreyer (02:47):

Thank you very much, I'm excited to be here.

Jacob's China Story

Jeremiah Jenne (02:50):

So Jacob, tell us a little bit about your China story. You've been in China since 2008. And in that time, this has really been the era when China has, if we will, risen considerably in terms of its global footprint. What does that look like to you from your perspective in Shanghai?

Jacob Dreyer (03:08):

Yeah, I think I'm a bit of an unusual one because unlike you guys in Beijing, I've always been in Shanghai, the like inauthentic, commercial, like lame, not really cool place. But being here is what's given me staying power to not move to Switzerland, which I probably wouldn't be tempted to otherwise.

My trajectory was not at all planned. So I graduated college and I came to China on something between a whim and I just didn't have another plan. So someone was like, Hey, you could spend a year teaching at this international school, the Shanghai Zhongshui. So I was like, okay. And then I moved to London, but then I realized London was like quite expensive and I couldn't really find a job I wanted there. So I came back to China and then I decided to get on with life. And I moved to New York to do a PhD there with Jiang Shidong at NYU.

But that didn't really work out either. So China has just been and still is for me the place that just keeps giving me opportunities. My original ambition was to be a writer. So I've never thought of myself as a China hand or a China watcher. I just think of myself as a person who wants to observe and write about things.

And I'm in China because this has been the place where things are changing. More recently though, I've had a feeling like, you know back in 2008 in Beijing, it felt so chaotic, corrupt, but

also inspirational. Like things were changing. Everything was changing. And if you looked in one direction, you'd like, wow, the sky is black in the middle of the afternoon. Or like, I remember when I was working in Beijing, some guy, a window cleaner fell off the side of the building and died.

So his relatives made funeral wreaths, which they put in the office lobby. And every day I would like hung over, go to the elevator passing these people who was like, you know, wailing, demanding compensations of building management. I think of that as like Weimar era Beijing. And at the same time I was leaving the US, which for me felt boring, predictable. I was like, you know, why would I want to be there? You know, it's not going anywhere, right?

And I was going to China at that time in my early 20s in search of adventure and now I have two young kids of my own. Joseph is almost three years old and Samuel's a little bit more than one and Shanghai is almost become... It's like some weird mix of Manhattan and the gated community in Charlotte, North Carolina of course. I'm speaking as a dad. So maybe there's cool stuff I'm just not invited to but it doesn't feel it has this like crazy kind of corrupt and dangerous, but also sexy allure anymore.

It feels to me like it's safe, dependable, reliable, green, not really polluted anymore, but at the same time, kind of settling to a more middle-aged vibe. Maybe that's just me projecting, right? I guess I feel like now it's the US that's like the exciting, crazy, screwed up place. Now the US reminds me of Beijing in 2008. I don't know if it's going to get an outcome as good, although some people think China now is disappointing to their dream of 2008. I like to think in 2008 in China anything could happen and by now something happened. Some of us can accept it, some of us don't like it, but anyway it feels like, you know, they built it. It's finished.

Technology and Democracy

Jeremiah Jenne (06:11):

Speaking of that trajectory, I was reading an article where you quoted Chen Duxiu, one of the founders of the CCP and a key figure in the new culture era. He had written about... And now well over a century after the new culture era, you point out China is a science superpower, but as late as 2008. There were still people who were thinking that there's no way with the technological development, the economic development, that China could remain an authoritarian government. That in fact, now looking back, that seems quite naive that China has only grown more authoritarian in many ways.

And it's making some observers, I think of James Mann and the China fantasy in particular, look quite prescient that maybe we have to rethink this link between technology and democratization, or I should say technological development and political liberalization.

Jacob Dreyer (07:13):

I think that's right. And I think to take a step back from China for a moment, we as Americans have to look at our own country and say like, forget about China. You know, in say 2011, there was this concept of the Arab Spring is happening all because of social media. Social media is

going to undermine autocracy and give voices to ordinary people. And in every way, it's going to heighten individual rights and freedoms. And I think...

Let's just imagine a planet where China doesn't exist and China is not part of our assessment. Can we say today that we think that because of Google, Meta, et cetera, you know, that it has worked out like that? It seems to me that it's in fact the contrary. And if our idea, the kind of traditional American idea of a democratic republic of educated individuals making choices in their rational self-interest in, you know, elective organizations like political parties and having caucuses, all that sort of stuff.

It seems like that way of individuals relating to each other, to reality, and to the society has been swept away in favor of this kind of mobilization of crowds that's quite scary and frightening, where huge groups of people mobilize in favor of whatever it might be in a way that's certainly not what our founding fathers in America thought should happen or would happen. And also the tendencies of surveillance are widespread outside of China. For example, Shoshana Zuboff of NYU in New York has written about surveillance capitalism.

So there's a sense that the tool that the internet more broadly, but ever accelerating with AI tools and things like that, it's actually the same. It's just in China, the government uses it and in America, the corporations use it. But in fact, mass surveillance and putting people's data into an algorithm in such a way that it makes you question: What is an individual? What is free will? Why do we make the choices that we make? Why do I want a chocolate Dubai labubu today? I never even heard of it yesterday. You know, why do I all of a sudden feel curious about Jeffrey Epstein? Why, you know, do I feel outraged about, you know, this, that, or the other thing? Where do my thoughts actually come from? Are they being almost implanted into my brain from somewhere else?

I guess in a sense, I almost feel that China and the US are both kind of in the avant-garde compared to other parts of the world in their adoption of internet technology and also AI. And that these technologies have a tendency to go in the direction of undermining at least what we've thought of democracy as being.

Re-enchantment of the World

So around the 1920s, Max Weber, the German sociologist wrote this piece, Disenchanted the World. So he was arguing that technology had shown light in so many secret places, things we didn't know, now we know, whether it's like evolution or astronomy or understanding why we need to wash our hands. And in a way that was great, but in another way that was making the world smaller and dingier and like there's less mystery and there's less magic. So all the elves and the fairies and the gods are gone and now we just have to wash our hands instead.

I think that that makes sense at a certain level of technology, maybe the kind that we had in the 1920s. But as Arthur C. Clarke said, at a certain point, technology is the same thing as magic. And I think that we're at that point for many, many people. Like if I ask ChatGPT or Grok... I did yesterday, I was reading about some Russian Vladimir Solovyov who was interested in the antichrist and I asked Grok to imagine a dialogue between Peter Thiel and Solovyov about the

antichrist and it did this amazing job and to me I'm like obviously there's some explanation someone can explain it but it's not me. Someone can tell me why they're building a high-speed train from Beijing to Shanghai for two and a half hours but I certainly cannot.

And then we see stuff happening in biotech, where people are exploring genetics in incredible new ways. And I think that we see both in the US and in China, a tendency where all these seemingly magical abilities that very few people can understand are being deployed at scale. So the world is getting re-enchanted, in other words.

Some crazy guy can grow a human arm in his laboratory. I can look at the box in my pocket and it can tell me anything ever known to man and also connect to Jeremiah in Switzerland. At the same time, societies are becoming more feudalistic in the sense of inherited wealth and entrenched social structures. For me, that kind of economic model is not really the same thing as democracy or compatible with it. And the value of human labor is decreasing because of AI and automation.

So what all this adds up to is in a way that this modern age of the individual, I think, is sort of melting away directly because of these technologies. And the only thing I would say on that is if we are entering a new world of like myths and emperors and all that sort of stuff, I feel that China is more ready for that than the United States. Chinese people, not the ones in Shanghai, but in most of the country, if people will be like, okay, you know, the emperor is in charge of something, all this great stuff is happening, and for me I'm just looking out the window.

I have a feeling, I hope it's not orientalist, but I have a feeling that that will not be that difficult for Chinese people. But I feel that it is manifestly extremely difficult for especially American liberals who have that whole human rights, enlightenment, universalism thing going on to just accept that it says that we're being swept along by fate and these forces beyond our control and understanding, and we should just enjoy the ride. I think that's very hard for Americans, in my observation, to do.

The New York Times Op-Ed

David Moser (12:46):

I'd like to turn to the reason that I actually invited you on the podcast, which is the wonderful op-ed you wrote in the New York Times, which I think captured a lot of a zeitgeist now because your article about how the United States is drawing ever closer to China in many ways is part of sort of mood right now. There were many articles written along the same vein and pointing out some of the same similarities and differences. I wonder if you could just go through the main points of that op-ed and contrast them for us and then just maybe sum up or give some more commentary about why that's happening now.

Jacob Dreyer (13:32):

Well, it started back in February because New York Times articles take a long time to sort of get through the process and there was the DOGE thing was a big deal at that point, right?

And I thought this is so similar to the anti-corruption campaign because there is corruption, there was corruption in China, there still is. So it's a real problem that many people identify. And yet the way that they're addressing it would seem to solidify power on the executive in a way that's kind of above the law and just makes everyone in the government kind of a little bit afraid and knowing that they should just not get on the wrong side of the big guy.

Even at the same time as corruption is a real problem. I was like, yeah, this DOGE stuff, it's just transparently as well we've seen in China already. And I think there's a lot of other parallels as well. That was also a moment when who knows what he's doing now, but it seemed like Mr. Trump was more, had a different view of Russia than is common among liberals and readers of the New York Times. But I think it's more common, at least in the current Chinese leadership where I remember the famous quote of Putin, "whoever mourns the Soviet Union lacks a brain, but whoever doesn't mourn it lacks a heart." There's this kind of sentimental appreciation for empire.

Anyway, that Russia thing was something that they were interested in. I remember for many years we've heard about Wang Huning and his way of kind of confecting nationalism in this very alienated urban, almost postmodern society and just kind of inventing a few myths and legends in a very over the top way, but which a lot of people buy into. And it's felt like the MAGA movement is very similar to that, to me at least, this kind of creation of nationalism to fill some sort of spiritual vacuum as people's traditional roles in a society kind of melt away and they need a new story to tell and a very clever person gives them the story and the educated people in the big cities are like, oh, that story is ridiculous. But if you go to Qiqihar or I guess Trump country, they don't think it's ridiculous. They think it's kind of inspiring.

And, you know, it's just, I'm married to a lady from Dongbei. So for me, I always have these like third tier cities in Heilongjiang as a kind of place to take the temperature. And they are definitely very red. I remember a few years ago during the Biden administration, I have this Shanghai government contact and he was talking about blue states and red states and he joked, well, China of course, it's all a red state. And then he was curious, he couldn't believe that Biden was actually running the US government. This was when Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan. He was like, well, obviously in China, Wang Yi would, or whoever, if he did something like that, it would be a direct command from Xi Jinping, right? So we just can't believe that Nancy Pelosi would just do that without telling Biden, if so, what is going on in the US.

And it seemed like he was like, yeah, you know, in China, there's seven people who run the country and there's number one, number two, number three, number four in descending order. And number one always wins. Sometimes number three plus number four could beat number two, but there's seven guys. So who are yours? Biden is not one of them. It's probably like Jamie Dimon, George Soros, you know, Ray Dalio, et cetera. And I was like, come on, that's ridiculous. We're a democracy. And then after the election...

You guys remember that photo of Trump with the tech guys behind him? And he just sent me that photo on WeChat. And he was like, okay, this is your new Politburo. I was like, maybe it is like that. I'm an American trying to figure out what's going on like everyone else, right? I don't know, but it feels like power is consolidated in a small group of hands. There's a sense that

science and technology is the justification and the frontier and also the enabling mechanism for the power structure.

I mean, of course China has transformed itself so radically in an American direction from where it was in 1979 from like what people eat to the fact that they drink coffee to the skyscrapers in their cities to everything, right? To Disney World in Shanghai, all this stuff.

So China's already done its move to America, but now it feels like the shoe is on the other foot and America is adopting a lot of these Chinese attributes, or rather the Trump movement is adopting a lot of these Chinese attributes and trying to impose them in the United States. And I think that the ultimate reason why they're doing that, again, during the Biden administration, the popular view seemed to be, if you read *The Economist* or whatever, China's failing, the economy is collapsing, so we actually don't really have to worry about it that much because it's a failed state.

And on the other hand, that's certainly not the attitude the Trump people like Bannon, for example, or Tucker Carlson had. For them, it's like our country, America, is a joke and it's collapsing and China is very brutal, but it seems to work. So I feel that the Trump people have adopted a lot of this Chinese stuff without really knowing about it, right? They're not... I should say it's not that the Trump people are more like China. They're more like their imagination of China.

American Exceptionalism and China

Jeremiah Jenne (18:29):

If you talk to sort of rank and file Trump supporters and growing up in the state of New Hampshire, I know a few of them. I think they're sometimes a little surprised when I pull the, but that's just the way they do it in China card. I think that a lot of what the policies that Trump and his team are putting in place are very much like what they do in China, but I don't think they're thinking of China when they're doing it, they just have the same instincts. So for example, we don't want to talk about uncomfortable moments in the past because that might dilute patriotism in the present. And the minute somebody starts talking about patriotic education, the historian in me is like, you know, that's what they do in China.

When I read the op-ed, the two things that struck me was how much fundamentally, China and the US are alike in the sense that they are both big countries. They are both exceptionalist countries. And because of that, they tend to see things not the same way, but how they perceive things. That says the manner by which information is perceived by many people in those countries is strikingly similar. And it kind of goes back to your, what you said about your friend that during the Biden administration, they were somewhat shocked that Nancy Pelosi could just go to Taiwan on their own. That wouldn't happen in China. It must be that Biden's not in control. I've had similar conversations in China and frankly in the United States, but in China that people have a hard time conceiving that other countries would operate differently than they do because Americans and Chinese tend to live surrounded by a huge population that assumes the same things they do.

Jacob Dreyer (20:08):

Well, did you guys see that Bill O'Reilly, the Fox News host, recently visited China?

Jeremiah Jenne (20:13):

I did not. Interesting. What was he doing in China and what was his takeaway?

Jacob Dreyer (20:14):

Well, he said that he was just going as his son is graduating high school and wanted to see the Great Wall. But of course, as one does, as he was planning his trip, he called President Trump to ask for his advice, because I guess President Trump has also been to Beijing. And then when he... he also called Graham Allison of the Kennedy School.

As a consequence when he went to Beijing he met with Eric X Lee the venture capitalist and an acquaintance of mine and about 15 other people who Eric wouldn't tell me who they were and Eric just kind of you know was chatting with Bill O'Reilly about you know all the things we have in common for example both the US and China think Canada is annoying.

Afterwards, Bill O'Reilly, and he said this on his TV show, which you can check on YouTube, he immediately gave a 30-minute call to President Trump to debrief him, and then he also wrote articles and other things saying the US and China should join forces to solve the problems that the world is having. So I guess my sense is neither the guy in New Hampshire nor Qiqihar is necessarily thinking in those terms, but that's not his job. However, I bet Wang Huning is thinking in these terms on some level. I mean, Wang Huning wrote a book about the US and a lot of his observations come from there.

And I think that, you know, we famously Steve Bannon spent some time in China back in 2008, studying how World of Warcraft users would express political views in exchange for like World of Warcraft gear. So I think that the would be Wang Huning's of the MAGA movement are definitely paying close attention. I remember when I published Eric X. Li's book, he was trying to get on the Tucker Carlson show and we came very very close to him doing that but unfortunately Tucker Carlson's show got booted off Fox leading Eric to say see you do have censorship of speech in the US.

So I don't know I think that there's a sort of way we've discussed AI a little bit. AI models are trained on just reading all these texts and kind of reassembling them right. So if the MAGA people have been thinking about China so much, it's perhaps no surprise that they spit out some of its attributes on occasion. My hypothesis would be that the more smart ones of them, and they definitely do exist, have thought about this in more or less specific ways. I remember, for example, Tucker Carlson had an episode about common prosperity, which he said is a great idea, but unfortunately, we can't do it under the Democrats because they hate our country.

Democracy vs. Systems

David Moser (22:48):

Sort of the crux of a lot of arguments that go back and forth and recently in the media too is the notion of the issue of systems, which system is better? You know, democracy is the vaunted

system that has tried and true and has been worked in the past in the United States and other countries have tried to model it. But that the Chinese who are sort of have democracy envy, have come up with a, in fact, democracy is one of the 12 core socialist values, which raises some eyebrows when people see that. But of course, they've come up with this notion of a whole process democracy, the meaning being sort of, we can deliver the fruits of democracy without the one party, without the one person, one vote system, the style of democracy.

I think this is really interesting at this point when we see the US going down and failing in so many ways where China continues to move forward. And I'm sort of wondering if, you know, there's actually a book called by Ezra Klein out right now called Abundance. I think he kind of captures a deep flaw in the American system. But I wonder if you if the problem with our democracy right now is that it's paralyzed because we don't have any continuity because of the two party systems fighting each other. We cannot devise, we cannot initiate anything like a five year plan. So it's just an issue of our democracy cannot achieve any continuous pursuit of development agenda because of this. And this is going to be our downfall despite the past success. Is there more nuance to this? I'm sure I want to see what you think about that.

Jacob Dreyer (24:24):

Well, I don't want to sound like too much of a Bernie bro, but I think that the US democracy is highly questionable. It seems like there's many issues on which there's broad national consensus that we just can't get past because you know the lobbyists for those issues have bought the government so I wonder to what extent the population is able to see their will become realized recently. For example, there was this guy who won the Democratic primary in New York City and for better or worse immediately like tons of big money is coming out to be like no, no, no, not that guy. Do anything you want, but don't like make the bus system free.

So anyway, I think I'm not going to take for granted that this kind of Biden story, China's authoritarian, the US is democracy, pa pa pa. Yeah, I don't buy it. I don't buy it. One important perspective on my article, which many readers may not have gotten is I live in China. I like living in China. I plan to keep living in China. So while I might have some, you know, kind of intellectual issues with the system here, I am totally satisfied with continuing to live here indefinitely. So for me, saying the US could become more like China is not the end of the world. I just regret that it seems like we're taking the crappy part of China, not the good part of China. Like, how great would it be if the US could do the renewable energy like China? Ezra Klein talks about the trains and obviously, you know, wow, that would be amazing if we could have like a train in the SLA corridor alone. But...

I don't think that the US democracy or the US system period is headed for downfall as such, but I do think that it's kind of in need of a regeneration. It seems like there's a lot of really important social issues, technology, how we regulate it, how we use it, how does it impact the way we interact with each other, chief among them.

And our current system, for better or worse, it just can't seem to successfully answer those. And this has happened to the United States before, for example in the 1930s. For example in the 1850s. For example prior to the Revolutionary War, where people just collectively felt like, we love our country and we love each other, but this sucks. And then, you know, to take the 1930s

as a relatively recent example, there's all these changes. The government starts doing new things it didn't do before. They considered changing the structure of the Supreme Court. All this sort of stuff. In fact, US between 1930 and 1950, so much changed, but at both ends it has one president, the Senate, the House of Reps, the Supreme Court, etc. Similarly, you look at the huge changes China has undeniably had, but through it all, the political structure appears to have continuity.

I guess I feel that the US is embarking on an adventure similar to what China had, for better or worse. Anything could happen in the US. And 20 years later, we're all going to say, well, something happened. But in that context where China is maybe not directly influencing, it's not like Chinese operatives are going to California saying vote for the CCP. Maybe they are. I don't know. It's more for me that China has a gravitational force field.

And not only the US, many countries are all like in all across the global South and other places. They're sort of thinking, I want what China has. I think that it's not necessarily the skills of Chinese diplomats so much as just, you know, people come to Shanghai and they're like, wow, cool. How can we do that? I think that in a weird way, the Trump people, because they don't have this "We're a democracy, they're authoritarian" mentality. I, we've seen Rubio recently has been meeting with the Chinese. I personally think that the Trumps are going to be easier to come to terms with the Chinese than the Democrats just because Trump people are nationalist without really being as exceptionalist in a weird way.

As far as I can tell, I don't know what you guys think because at the same time, "I love my country" at the same time, "You know, Vladimir Putin killed all these guys." "Well, we also kill a lot of guys." And I kind of Trumpy comment. There's a sense that, yeah, the US, what makes it special? I'm from there. That's what makes it special. But it seems like countries are on a continuum in the Trump mental landscape. Not "we're the city on a hill and China is like the place where we're shining our light of justice on too."

The Industrial Party

Jeremiah Jenne (28:33):

In one of your articles, you actually talk about a kind of, I guess you would call it transnational ideology, if you will. And if you'll permit me, it's a great section and I'd like to, I'd like to read it and kind of get your thoughts about how you came up with this notion and what this means for China and the world or US and the world going forward. And you called it the industrial party, a generic, ideological structure of techno-nationalism, which can be adjusted for the nation and transpires in. And you argue it's seized control of America, though it's been in charge of China for quite some time. And one of the terms that you use in the article is one that's very common around here in Geneva, particularly the offices of the World Economic Forum. We're in the throes of the fourth industrial revolution, which will bulldoze political and cultural structures at home as well as abroad.

These new politics are certainly not conservative nor are they liberal. And it is technology, as you mentioned, rather than political structures that will bring us to the future. And in the course of this, I guess the takeaway is that very little, as you write, of the society we're used to will be

conserved. And certainly not the political structures that we call liberal democracy. You argue that we might see Trumpism as a political revolution, but in many ways, it's just the expression in political form of a social change that predates it. It makes me think that, you know, our, or at least my somewhat liberal democratic notion, which is all about a West wing episode needs to give way to a very new reality that in the future, as you say, may look a little bit more like China for good or for ill.

Jacob Dreyer (30:16):

I think one thing is a lot of my articles I'm attempting to discuss what I observe and or predict what I think is going to happen, which doesn't necessarily mean I want this to happen. Just for example, without Elon Musk and Twitter, would Trump have been elected again? I mean, who knows, but that would be a fairly concrete example of like, yes, it's tech platforms exactly that are the reason Trump is the president.

I feel that there's a way it's very tangible to me because as I'm raising these two children, I constantly find myself reflecting on my own childhood in a very different place of Charlottesville, Virginia, this liberal college town. And I sometimes think of like, am I denying my children something by not being in a place like that? What kind of compromise am I getting? And on the other hand, it's very clear to me the great things I'm getting by being in China, for example. I'm doing this podcast with you because my kids are being watched by the Ayi.

But it feels like that America that we grew up in is not there anymore, which makes sense. That was 20 or 30 years ago, so things are always changing, right? It seems to me that the... I certainly hear a lot of Chinese government officials talking about it. And at the 20th CPC, Xi Jinping made it very clear that technology is the driver of change. Also, the Central Party School recently updated the theory of Marxism. So originally, Marx says labor, capital, and land are the three factors of production. And now the central party school in Beijing says actually there's four: labor, capital, land, and data. So the whole even like Marxist basic equations is changed, I guess, like how does an economy work? What is important?

And in some ways it can feel like socialism, the welfare state, democracy, these all emerged from the industrial revolution because capital needed labor. So that's why the workers of the world could unite. Because if the workers united and took up all the land, capitalists would just need to make a compromise. And that's sort of what happened in the 1930s. But now if automation and AI make, for example, we have in China these lights out factories, there's not a single worker in them. And they're building them in Europe as well. So maybe capital doesn't need labor anymore.

And in China, where the government and capital are almost synonymous, the party is sort of directing funds in this way or that. It seems to me like the party will want quote unquote social stability. I joke with my friends that if need be, 90% of China's population can be baoan 保安 like those kind of door guards, because China won't tolerate a situation of instability. But in the US, it may be different. It feels like the people controlling capital in the US have a lot more... They're more open to risk and chaos than the government in China might be. But the fundamental technological trend is the same. Technology is just a tool. It just depends on how we choose to use that.

Future of US-China Relations

David Moser (33:03):

You know, a few years ago, there was a joking headline in the Onion news outlet as sort of a parody of a newspaper. It said, "China set to surpass US as world's biggest asshole by 2025."

And it's 2025 now. So I was sort of thinking that, you know, the anniversary of that, of that headline, you know, Xi Jinping talks about this new model of great power relations. And I think China has always said it's, it's happy to be number two. It just wants to be recognized as such. The, I think probably you would agree and we all three could agree that the US right now, at least, you know, in some echelons is not ready for that. It is not ready to be timeshare or power sharing and it's not ready to be number two or even tied for number one. So this is going to be a long process and we're sort of having a lot of, there's a lot of changes along that area now. People are seeing the trajectories going in the wrong direction. What do you think of the future? Do you think China and the US in some way arrive at some new model of great power relationships where they actually either don't worry about what's number one or number two, or the United States can go along with being just another great superpower.

Jacob Dreyer (34:15):

The short answer to that is yes. The more complicated answer is...

Let's look at what's actually happening in reality with another neurotic post-imperial superpower that's kind of in severe decline: Russia. If you go to Kazakhstan, it would appear that the Russians, like there's a coup in Kazakhstan, it's the Russian military that comes, not the Chinese. So it seems like, yeah, Russia is still the operative force, but it's as if the division of labor is Russia has the guns with guns and China has everything else.

I think that the Chinese would be very happy to come to an arrangement with the US where the US pretends to be number one and China pretends to be number two because China doesn't really want to do the things that the US has done. I remember that on the meeting on the visit to Washington DC that I wrote that article that you mentioned, Jeremiah, I met with some New York Times editors at that time USAID was being cut and they were very anxious. They're like, "Is China going to make a China AID to take advantage of this?" But this is exactly the danger you mentioned. In a big country, we tend to project ourselves onto others. And what the US has been, or imagines itself to have been, is not necessarily what China will be.

So the previous, let's say, great empire was the British Empire. And there's this huge continuity between the British Empire and the United States. Lots of differences, of course, but fundamentally, this is like one linguistic group with so many cultural inter-tanglements. I think what China might want, and I've asked various Chinese nationalists like Eric X. Li, was like, what if China had this kind of unipolar moment like the US had in the 90s? What would you guys do? And usually they, even like hardcore Chinese nationalists don't really have any ideas, you know, kind of, of course, maybe expand their stuff in the South China Sea, teach the Japanese what's what, but it's not the case that they want to do this universal project. And sometimes when I speak to them, I have a feeling that they think the China model couldn't really

be spread because it only works for Chinese people. Like other people are too stupid. So you can't really do it unless you have Chinese people.

So I just think China is a very different sort of power than the US. But I think that because of that reason, if both countries sort of come to an agreement to sort of stay in their lane, I'm confident. In fact, when Nancy Pelosi went to Taiwan, I felt a tremor of uncertainty, like, are they really going to do a war? It seemed so crazy. But at the moment, I don't have any of that concern. I feel that the US and China are going to come to maybe an under the table agreement. That doesn't mean that, as we know from reading Orwell, if you want to have an authoritarian power structure, it's great to have an external enemy. So it may be the case that if I watch Fox News, Oceania is at war with East Asia, it's always been at war with East Asia. And that may be the case for the next 30 years, but that doesn't mean the two countries are actually going to have a hot war.

So in short, I feel that a lot of the conflict we see in this so-called New Cold War, it's the appearance of a conflict. In fact, maybe the US power structure needs something like China, and China needs something like the US. Much like a married couple that's arguing all the time, you know, they sort of, they complain about each other all the time, but in a way, they wouldn't know what to do without each other.

Jeremiah Jenne (37:41):

That actually makes me think more of pro wrestling where you have two guys yelling at each other in the ring and threatening each other. And then after the show is over, they go grab beers at the hotel bar.

Jacob Dreyer (37:51):

And pro wrestling is the sport that defines our national life more than any other. Now that we have that lady in the Department of Education, Linda McMahon, maybe we should send her to China as well. I do have to say I was at this 4th of July celebration in Shanghai, which for some reason was like on June 29th, not the 4th of July. And Ambassador Perdue was there. It was his first trip as ambassador to Shanghai. And...

About a week or two before that, there was this big scandal at the AmCham Shanghai's annual dinner. And the head of the consulate in Shanghai, who was a Biden appointee, had made waves by sort of criticizing the Chinese business practices or something like that. In contrast, the Trump appointee, Perdue, seemed so friendly and saying all these nice things about China, which he didn't really have to say.

He pointed out that Shanghai is a city in the world that uses more Coca-Cola syrup than any other outside of the United States, even more than Toronto. And so that is just one of the many similarities we have, our love of Coca-Cola syrup. I really get the vibe that they're maybe similar to pro wrestling. There's going to be a temporary truce before the midterms, and then after the midterms maybe we're going to have another round or two. But this is largely theatrical. That's my... That's my view.

Upcoming Book Project

Jeremiah Jenne (39:06):

Jacob, thank you so much for joining us. The book, you're working on a book now called Human Nature. Quickly tell us just a little bit, what's the book about and when can we expect to see it?

Jacob Dreyer (39:15):

So the book is about how AI and automation will affect the societies where they're coming fastest, which is mostly the US and China, but I've spent a bit of time in the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia and Qatar recently as well. And just, I'm trying to understand how these societies are evolving. On the same website that had the industrial party essay I just had another the other day about the next five-year plan, which is supposedly going to be the AI plus five-year plan. I see all these functions in China like healthcare, education, of course, surveillance, it's called AI plus because whatever the government does, any single department plus AI should do something about AI. So the Chinese government is really quickly on the uptake with AI and they're using it in a very different way than any entrepreneurs in the US are.

But in the US, ironically, because I live in China now, I feel more out of touch with the US. But in the US, AI is clearly a really propellant force as well. So where are these two countries going to go in the next five or 10 years? A lot of AI people and government people will say, yeah, the next five or 10 years is going to be a huge change, just as big as the Industrial Revolution. That's its fourth Industrial Revolution idea. And everything is going to change. This is like a commonplace in Silicon Valley, but also with these Chinese government people.

So what is it going to be like after this big great transformation happens? What is the US going to be like and what is China going to be like? So I'm trying to sort of explore that by talking to interesting people. It will be published by Berggruen Press. So, NOEMA magazine, I often write for them. They have a publisher called Berggruen Press. And I'm hoping for end of 2026.

Closing

Jeremiah Jenne (40:54):

Great, thank you so much for joining us. David, thank you for joining us from Beijing. Stay cool.

David Moser (40:58):

I will. I am cool.

Jeremiah Jenne (41:00):

You're always cool. It comes with the whole jazz musician vibe, I believe.

David Moser (41:01):

I know. Yeah, Miles Davis.

Jeremiah Jenne (41:05):

Yeah, yeah, very jazz. Yeah, yeah.

All right, and thank you all for listening. This has been Barbarians at the Gate. I'm Jeremiah Jenne. And speaking of music, we shall now cue those drums.

