

Intelligence in Public Media

The World According to China

By Elizabeth C. Economy (Polity Books, 2022), 292 pages, bibliography, notes, index.

Reviewed by Jeffrey W.

Elizabeth Economy, author of *The Third Revolution* (2018), has delivered a valuable update for intelligence practitioners seeking to understand how Beijing sees the world. In *The World According to China*, Economy surveys the wrenching changes to Chinese foreign and domestic policy wrought primarily by the COVID-19 pandemic, while also accounting for the dramatic downturn in relations with the United States that accompanied it. In so doing she has contributed an excellent and concise guidebook to Beijing's impact on the world across the political, economic, security, and technology domains.

In an era when public discourse about China has become increasingly heated, Economy is one of the more balanced and clear-eyed observers. She has consistently approached the myriad, complex issues surrounding China's economy, domestic policy, and foreign relations with an understanding of the issues facing the central leadership and a recognition of the challenges Beijing's ambitions pose for the United States. Economy deftly draws together these many threads to provide a valuable overview of the dynamics most central to what has become possibly the most important place on earth.

Economy details a China at once proud and unsure of what to do with its rising international prominence. As she writes, Beijing has emerged from the pandemic determined to prove the superiority of its political system, assess the effectiveness of its efforts to combat COVID-19 (notwithstanding its poor transparency, lagging vaccination efforts, and continued reliance on city-wide lockdowns), and take its place as a more central global player.

Economy draws on President Xi Jinping's speeches to the UN World Health Assembly (WHA) and National Peoples Congress to make her case. (1, 5) From Beijing's pressure campaigns against US and other foreign businesses (29–34) to a fascinating discussion of China's efforts to influence Hollywood and the global entertainment industry (34–36), Economy sees a China whose presence and position have expanded exponentially from a decade ago, but also one that is often hindered by its

own ham-fistedness and blurred lines between government and private industry (42, 46).

From an intelligence perspective, Economy's discussions of such issues as China's gray-zone political influence activities, her account of the United Front Work Department, for example, provide useful background on some of the less obvious methods Beijing uses to accomplish its objectives abroad. (37–38) Economy provides a compelling case regarding the extent to which the Chinese Communist Party sees this foreign outreach tying back into its priorities on domestic issues such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. She deftly outlines the centrality of Beijing's views of sovereignty to its overall strategic outlook. (69–71)

Economy is arguably at her best when discussing the more technical and economic elements of Beijing's international outreach. Having made her reputation covering China's environmental policy, she brings a keen eye for data and economic detail to her discussion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in chapter four. Eschewing the usual characterization of "debt trap diplomacy," Economy instead provides a balanced picture of the drivers behind BRI and what makes it most compelling to many recipient countries.

Her discussion of China's investment in the Greek port of Piraeus demonstrates a sensitivity to both Chinese policy and domestic politics in Greece that is made all the more convincing in light of her firsthand interviews with Greek officials. (88–92, 121–25) Similarly, her discussion of BRI's uneven progress in Pakistan reflects an understanding of both the intent and on-the-ground realities that influence the success or failure of BRI projects. (104–16) She explores China's technology sector and the ways that it underpins not only the leadership's global ambitions, but also its strategy to manage the vexing economic challenges China will face in the coming decade. (142–45)

The World According to China is largely successful in laying out the many issues facing both China and any

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observer following it. Where it suffers mostly acutely is in the sheer volume of publications covering China that have exploded over the last several years. Professional China watchers may find the book somewhat repetitive with other recent publications such as Peter Martin's *China's Civilian Army* in many respects. These same issues are also covered in detail on a daily basis on both social media and in other journals.

Like many observers, Economy is also held back by her lack of access to China itself. Most of her first-hand interviews with Chinese nationals are either dated or centered on well-known personalities whose views have been well covered elsewhere. This is not a unique problem, however, as access to Chinese counterparts has become harder to come by as relations with Washington have deteriorated and the breadth of political discourse in China has narrowed. The book also suffers slightly from

timing, having been published only a month before Russia invaded in Ukraine and therefore not reflecting any of the significant changes that have occurred since.

Nonetheless, Economy more than makes up for these shortcomings with her ability to juggle both the big picture and the details of a complex and vital subject. Intelligence readers new to China will find *The World According to China* to be an informative and engaging introduction that covers the waterfront of developments both inside and outside the country. Readers with a background in China will find new and useful information drawn from Economy's research and interviews with government and private-sector contacts who have worked directly on some of the most prominent issues related to China today. Overall, Economy provides a worthy reexamination of assumptions about China from which readers of all stripes can benefit.



The reviewer: Jeffrey W. is a longtime China analyst.