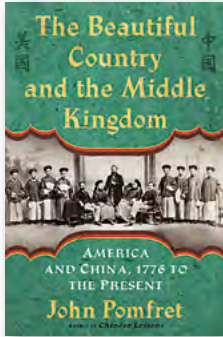


A Never-Ending Cycle of Fascination



The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China, 1776 to the Present

By John Pomfret

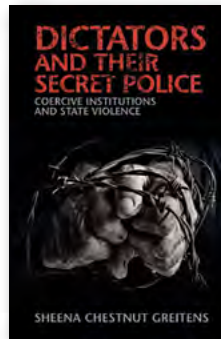
Henry Holt and Co., 2016,
704 pages, \$40 (Hardcover)

With a phone call and four tweets, US President-elect Donald Trump upended the carefully calibrated “One China” policy that undergirded US-China relations for four decades. As Asians scramble to divine the future of the relationship, readers might want to start with the past, and John Pomfret provides a magisterial narrative in his newest book.

Pomfret has spent much of his life studying in, reporting on and writing about China, and manages to remain passionate and dispassionate at the same time. His fascination with the topic leaps off every page of this deeply researched book, and he charts a narrative over centuries by introducing a giant cast of colorful figures. Iconic personages are cast in a fresh light, and overlooked individuals are rescued from obscurity. The book’s great strength lies in these innumerable micronarratives, elegantly and vividly told. In Pomfret’s telling, they form a pattern like “a never-ending Buddhist cycle of reincarnation.” Americans and Chinese alike, he maintains, cycle through “rapturous enchantment begetting hope, followed by disenchantment, repulsion and disgust, only to return to fascination once again.” Signals from the new regime in Washington so far suggest we might be in for another turn of the wheel.

One wonders, after putting Pomfret’s book down, if what is really needed, given the global impact of the US-China relationship, is for the two countries to escape this cycle of Samsara. But that would take enlightenment on both sides of the Pacific.

Reviewed by John Delury, Associate Professor at Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies and book reviews co-editor of Global Asia.



Dictators and their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence

By Sheena Chestnut
Greitens

Cambridge University Press,
2016, 240 pages, \$29.99
(Paperback)

A New Authority on Authoritarianism

All dictatorships are repressive, but they repress in different ways. That is the starting point of Sheena Chestnut Greitens’ treatise on how authoritarian regimes design their “coercive apparatus.”

Her book builds on a wave of scholarship that subjects authoritarianism to analytical scrutiny and does not dismiss all “non-democracies” as artifacts of the 20th century (as Greitens, a University of Missouri political scientist, points out, more than half of the world’s states can be labeled authoritarian). She wants to understand how autocrats wield coercive

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power internally, so she stands in the dictator’s shoes and asks: Who am I more afraid of, my people or my generals? One more afraid of mass revolt will design his internal security institutions to focus on spying deep into people’s private lives to snuff out potential threats.

But one worried more about a *coup d’etat* splits his security services into rival outfits that keep elites in check, while having to rely on brute, indiscriminate violence against large numbers of people to keep social order. Greitens proves this elegant thesis with richly detailed case studies of military dictatorships in South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines.

Combining archival research, interviews and social science theory, Greitens has written the authoritative book on authoritarian coercion, making a major contribution to the history of state power in East Asia.
Reviewed by John Delury.