Two Contrasting Views of Hegemony From America and China
by Kyo Cho

The differences in values between China and the United States, and China's efforts to "challenge" the United States, are frequent subjects of debate the world over. Kyo Cho, a comparative literature and culture researcher and a professor at the School of Global Japanese Studies at Meiji University, points out however that China is exactly like the United States in terms of its ambitions to become a superpower. Cho examines two books published in the United States and China, one by Joseph Nye and one by Liu Mingfu, and argues that they are like two peas in a pod.

With civil rights coming on leaps and bounds in recent years, there is no real need to go into a detailed explanation of Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power." Whilst still basing his work on soft power, Nye recently set out a theory on "smart power" in The Future of Power (2011), adding the notion of "cyber power" into the equation alongside hard and soft power. While examining the nature of smart power itself may be fascinating, Cho claims that the most interesting parts of Nye's book are those that discuss future visions for the United States as a superpower. It's no great surprise, but Nye doesn't regard Japan or any of the countries in
Europe as a threat to the United States. Although problems start to present themselves with the BRICs countries, especially China, he is optimistic in that respect too. China has by far the greatest potential of all the BRICs countries, but it is still difficult to imagine it ever being on an equal footing with the United States. In spite of China's rapid economic growth, distributing that wealth throughout the country is no easy matter. There are undoubtedly question marks hanging over the future of the United States economy, but investment in new business is still going strong and levels of economic vitality remain as high as ever. According to Nye, there will be no serious challenge to U.S. hegemony during the twenty-first century.

Cho points out that Nye's optimism regarding the United States' status as a superpower is almost exactly paralleled by Liu Mingfu's optimism regarding China's future as a superpower. A serving member of the military (Senior Colonel), Liu published The China Dream in 2010 and was clearly influenced by Nye's notion of soft power. The title (The China Dream!) may be heavily laden with meaning, focused squarely on the United States, but what about the content? Liu starts with an inspirational section on "China’s dream of becoming world leader in 100 years," in which he encourages China to be "ambitious" in order to achieve that long-cherished goal. According to Liu, what modern-day China needs is not heavy-handed "hegemony" (exporting revolution is completely out of the question), but "innocuousness," based on a community of interests as in Europe and the United States. There is no chance of China triggering a world war like Germany, far less attacking Pearl Harbor like Japan or overthrowing the existing order as in Russia. Whereas the Cold War was like a boxing match between the United States and Soviet Union, the relationship between the United States and China is more like an athletics event. Liu describes it in terms of a marathon, as a contest based on endurance.

In complete contrast however, Liu also says that this is "China's time - the age of yellow benevolence." Parodying the term "yellow peril," Liu claims that, if China does become world leader in the future, it will usher in an "age of yellow benevolence." If China were to become world leader, it would presumably have to accept democracy in all its forms. Democracy, says Liu somewhat haughtily,
also entails intervening in other countries, both vocally and physically, and setting standards for democracy.

Becoming increasingly agitated, Liu claims that China "has no illusions about the United States." He argues that the United States has gone to extreme lengths to force rivals such as the Soviet Union, Japan and China onto the sidelines. That is why, even if China has no intention of going to war with the United States, it still needs to be prepared to do so. To ensure that China’s ascendency remains peaceful, Liu believes that military might is key and advocates establishing such a strong military presence that the United States would actively avoid any form of conflict with China. At the same time, he warns the United States against harboring "three illusions about China." The first of these is that China will introduce American-style political systems. The second is that China will back down over Taiwan out of fear of the United States. The third is that China could potentially suffer a Soviet or Eastern European-style collapse. Liu warns that all of these are illusions.

One area in which Liu is less antagonistic is his somewhat masochistic willingness to "let China collapse." On the basis that the decline of any great nation usually starts from within, he regards Chinese pride and the country's numerous social issues as problems that need to be addressed. If China is ever going to be world leader, then it needs to run simulations to ensure that it is able to retain its self-respect and creditability, as Japan has done, once rapid economic growth subsides and it is left with an aging population. In other words, Liu is encouraging China to take into account domestic issues and think about what things will be like in the future, "after" it has become world leader.

The level of media exposure amongst members of the Chinese military has continued to increase in recent years. Cho feels that The China Dream in particular is "a controlled, sensible book overall," especially for one written by a serving military man. It is indeed true that it concedes the overall superiority of the United States at present and avoids being unduly antagonistic. It is still an undeniable show of fierce pride in China as a superpower, as typified by the provocative catch copy emblazoned over the front cover, including phrases such
as "a military man eager to speak out" and "the world is too important - we can't just leave it to America!" This is never more evident than in the fact that the book openly embraces Deng Xiaoping's "hide capacity, bide time" strategy (deliberately maintaining a low profile within the international community). Liu goes on to suggest that there may be a difference in outlook between China's current military and political leaders.

Cho is keen to point out the implication in both Nye and Liu's books that "powerful countries should play a leading role in the world." The prospect of China becoming world leader one day in the future may be stalled at the "dream" stages at the moment, but "Liu Mingfu's logic essentially mirrors the United States' mindset." So how does Cho, as a commentator born in China himself, feel about the future direction of China and the United States? "It is doubtful that China will ever take the place of the United States," he argues. "Given the effectiveness and sustainability of political systems in China, and levels of public support, perhaps "impossible" would be a better way of putting it." At the same time however, he also feels that U.S. hegemony is unlikely to last indefinitely.

Cho concludes his review essay by posing a question. "Can we break the chain of events whereby the transfer of power leads to a change in hegemony?" As a cultural researcher, Cho's perspective on this issue is unlikely to be replicated by international political scientists, who regard the transfer of power as inevitable. If nothing else, that is a thought worth considering.

--synopsis by Seiichi Hayashi