China's Quest to Engineer the Future

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Ross Douthat interview with Dan Wang, author of

Breakneck: China's Quest to Engineer the Future

Mr. Douthat is an Opinion columnist and the host of the "Interesting Times" podcast.

A lot of people think that we are already living in a Chinese century — that the American empire is retreating and Chinese power could dominate the future — through technological mastery, military prowess and a Great Leap Forward in artificial intelligence. I tend to be pretty skeptical of this scenario: America has outlasted challengers before and China seems to me to have remarkable strengths, yes, but also serious weaknesses. My guest today makes a compelling case that Chinese power could really be poised to surpass our own.

Dan Wang is a keen observer of contemporary China, and his new book," Breakneck: China's Quest to Engineer the Future," argues that the Trump administration's current trade war is wrongheaded or too late, and that American pre-eminence can be preserved if we imitate the things that China is getting right.

Does the Future Belong to China?

Below is an edited transcript of an episode of "Interesting Times."

Ross Douthat: Dan Wang, welcome to "Interesting Times."

Dan Wang: Thank you for having me.

Douthat: We're going to talk about the Chinese model and how it compares to the American model — strengths, weaknesses, conflict, coexistence. But I want to start by talking about your own experience.

You were in China from 2017 through 2023. You were a technology analyst, you were a writer, you wrote an annual letter about what you saw in China and you traveled a lot.

So I want you to start by telling us a story or giving us an image or a place that you visited or saw or experienced that you looked at and it made you think: The 21st century is going to belong to China.

Wang: Here's a vision from 2021. In the summer of 2021, China's borders were closed because of Covid and I was living in China's richest city, Shanghai.

My life was full of ease and full of beauty. You are never very far away from a subway station. They're constantly expanding their subway stations. Shanghai had about 500 parks in 2020, and by the end of 2025 the city government declared that it will have about a thousand parks.

It has all of the big skyscrapers that are so iconic in China. But below these skyscrapers, you also have a lot of these wonderful noodle shops and dumpling shops that I love to frequent.

So Shanghai is a highly functional city. I would say much more functional than New York City.

But I was feeling a little bit cooped up in Shanghai. I wanted to go see the great countryside and the rest of the country throughout the provinces. So I decided to take two friends and go on a lengthy bike ride in China's southwestern province of Guizhou. This is a land where a local said, "Not three feet of land is flat, not three days go by without rain and not a family has three silver coins."

China's fourth-poorest province, I was surprised to see, had much better levels of infrastructure than one could find in much wealthier places in the United States, like New York State or California.

We saw very tall bridges all around us. We saw a guitar-making hub. We saw a lot of fancy new roads that were a cyclist's dream. And it was only afterward when I realized how bizarre it was that China's fourth-poorest province — about the level of G.D.P. per capita of Botswana, much less than Shanghai or Guangdong — was able to build all of these things.

It is a province with 11 airports, 50 of the highest bridges in the world and brand-new, spiffy highways — and that's because China was just building a lot in its equivalent of a South Dakota or West Virginia.

Douthat: So your experience was basically like being in the New York of China and finding it more pleasant and beautiful and civilized than our New York, and then going out to China's West Virginia and discovering that it had far better infrastructure than the richest American states?

Wang: That's right. The cities in China are, I would say, quite a bit better than the cities in the U.S. Here in New York, we have these subway lines that are screamingly loud. Have you ever heard these metallic screeches once you're in the subway stations?

We're sitting here in the offices of The New York Times, just across from Port Authority Bus Terminal. The governor of New York announced that they're going to refurbish the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Hooray. And it's going to take years.

Douthat: And if you've been in the Port Authority Bus Terminal, it's like Hercules cleaning out the Augean stables to say you're going to refurbish it.

Wang: Let's clean out those stables. And Shanghai is able to clean out those stables, and the Chinese countryside is also superbly built up.

Douthat: So China builds and the U.S. doesn't, and one of your arguments is that this reflects a fundamental difference in our elites and who rules our respective societies. China is a society of engineers: It's ruled by engineers; the Communist Party is filled with engineers. And America is a society of lawyers.

What does rule by engineers mean, and what can it achieve that is harder to achieve in the United States?

Wang: My framing of China is as an engineering state because since the 1980s, then top leader Deng Xiaoping started promoting a lot of engineers into China's leadership, really as a corrective to the mayhem of the Mao years.

Mao was a romantic. He was a poet who inflicted all sorts of strange disasters on the Chinese population.

Deng Xiaoping took a look at what was wrong with China under Mao, and Deng said that what we need is a highly efficient technocracy. Technocrats at the time meant engineers, mostly trained in the Soviet style of heavy industry.

The Chinese were civil engineers. They were mechanical engineers. They were all sorts of electrical engineers that Deng Xiaoping promoted into the highest ranks of the Communist Party. By the year 2002, all nine members of the standing committee of the Politburo had degrees in engineering.

I contrast that with the lawyerly society of the United States. And what's really striking about the U.S. is that the founding documents of the Declaration of Independence read almost like a legal argument. Most of the founding fathers were lawyers. And so that's the kind of contrast that I set up, that China is an engineering state trying to build its way out of every problem.

The U.S. is a lawyerly society that is really good at stopping a lot of things. What that means is that the U.S. doesn't have functional infrastructure almost anywhere, I would say. And it also doesn't have these stupid ideas like the one-child policy either.

Douthat: Talk a little bit more about how engineers see the world.

Wang: Something that engineers do is not only construct a lot of bridges and subway systems and highways and nuclear plants and coal plants in highly rational ways; they are also very intent on treating the economy as if it were a vast hydraulic system made up of a series of valves.

Part of what I have seen living in China was that Xi Jinping in the years 2020 to roughly 2022 decided that the economy was just something that could be pushed around as well.

He engineered a property crackdown to reduce the leverage of state-owned enterprises in terms of housing development. He also very dramatically re-engineered a lot of the online tech sector, as well.

There was a series of thunderclaps that Xi issued against major Chinese companies that included Alibaba, an e-commerce company; Didi, which was a ride-hailing company; the entirety of the online education sector. And Xi and the rest of the Politburo essentially wiped out about a trillion dollars from China's stock market back then.

I think part of that was trying to funnel China's best and brightest — the people graduating from the top universities — away from building cryptocurrencies or consumer tech and hedge funds into building industries that are more critical to strategic needs, something like semiconductors, aviation or chemistry instead.

What Xi Jinping really tried to do was to engineer the economy in a way so that the Communist Party achieves some vision of success.

Douthat: What you just described in terms of the Communist Party's view of what had gone wrong with the tech sector is a view widely shared in the United States, including by people deeply involved, as you know, in Silicon Valley itself.

The idea that at a certain point Silicon Valley just became a machine for generating new apps and ride sharing and getting people's DoorDash deliveries there as fast as possible — but lost any direct connection to building rockets and flying cars and new infrastructure and making other kinds of breakthroughs.

But the American assumption is that when capitalism goes wrong, the solution has to be some kind of deregulation. You can't just have someone sitting in Washington, D.C., say: OK, Silicon Valley, too many ride-share apps. We're going to turn the dial and we're going to develop more self-driving cars and high-speed rail. Or something like that.

Part of the argument you present in the book is that over the last 10 or 15 years, China has actually succeeded in turning its dials in ways that are generating cutting-edge breakthroughs, cutting-edge research and technological mastery.

So talk a little bit about what you see as that achievement.

Wang: I think China has achieved a pretty high level of technological mastery.

I moved to China at the start of 2017, in large part to study a major industrial plan that the state council had announced, called Made in China 2025. This was a grand, ambitious plan, one of a series of plans from the Communist Party, declaring that China really needs to master these industries of the future.

That included clean technologies, electric vehicles, maritime technologies, agricultural equipment, whatever you want to name. It is listed somewhere in these plans — sometimes with exquisite percentagesof exactly how much Chinese industries need to be as a share of the global total.

I think we can clearly see now that China is a leader in electric vehicles. It is a leader in all sorts of industrial robotics. China has a complete chokehold on the solar industry. China owns about 90 percent of this industry. If you take a look at rare earth magnets, which caused a lot of grief to the Trump administration earlier this year when it was trying to prosecute the trade war, China has about 90 percent of the processing for these goods.

And if we take a look at a lot of manufactured goods, segment by segment, we'll see that China owns about 35 percent of global manufacturing value-add. And if we take a look at a couple of these particularly high-end technologies — almost everything aside from semiconductors and aviation, which are big Chinese weaknesses — China is becoming really strong in most advanced technologies.

Now, I wonder to what extent this is the result of government planning. I would certainly not say that this was some genius demonstration of spectacular central planning from Beijing that got China to where it is today.

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Sometimes China is able to produce these successes out of some degree of government policy. But just as often, whenever we can take a look at these examples, we can find other examples in which government policy produced only waste and scams and fraud — and to some degree overcapacity, as well.

I would situate China's success mostly on the level of its fiercely dynamic entrepreneurs.

You can have capitalist competition. I would say far more cutthroat than what we would see in the U.S.

Douthat: Why is that?

Wang: It starts with the scale of the country. I remember visiting a company that had already grown a little bit large. It was called Meituan, which is now one of these big Chinese online platform companies.

And Meituan said that we survived after being one of 5,000 clones of Groupon in China. They simply cloned the Groupon idea and out of this battle royal they managed to brawl it out with everyone else. And they were the only ones left standing.

If we take a look at a lot of these other industries that China completely dominates — solar, for example; China completely owns this industry — the solar industry has collapsed in prices. I think the figure is something like a 94 percent drop in prices since the year 2000.

That is in large part of what Chinese companies have done in making the processes better and making the panels themselves more efficient. But what has been a national strategic success for the government, as well as producing a lot of consumer benefits, has entailed absolutely miserable competition for these companies and absolutely miserable returns for their investors.

In a sense, I think this is what socialism with Chinese characteristics means: The state wins; consumers win. But it is actually pretty rough for any of these companies out there.

One of the things that I did when I was writing this book was to try to confront head-on whether we needed something like free speech and free thinking in order to drive a lot of innovation, as well as dynamism.And I'm not sure that these are terribly important. If we take a look at a lot of highly autocratic regimes — regimes that I would say are more autocratic than China today, namely Stalin's Soviet Union as well as Hitler's Germany — these were also regimes that ended up producing a lot of state-driven innovation.

If we take a look at the record of Soviet science, there were a lot of Nobel Prize winners that barely staggered out of gulags in the Soviet Union before they made their great prizewinning innovations.

A lot of Soviet military scientists, fighter jet scientists, nuclear scientists had all been persecuted by Stalin himself. Also, with Nazi Germany, there were breakthroughs in rocketry and fighter jets in spite of a highly autocratic, fascist, totalitarian regime.

I think what matters a lot for innovation is simply the funding.

Sometimes they really care about free speech. Sometimes they care about creative expression. But for many of them, they're able to make breakthroughs if you just give them a really big lab.

Douthat: But what about the argument that says authoritarian and autocratic models can be really good at driving production and innovation in areas where there is low-hanging fruit? Clearly a lot of what China has done technologically is a catch-up where you are essentially taking a Western product or a Western innovation and perfecting it, figuring out mass production, doing these kinds of things.

But when it comes to discovery, figuring out what the new thing is — the thing that you can't centrally plan — American democratic capitalism tends to be better. Liberal societies tend to be more successful.

By the 1970s, the Soviet Union was not doing anything substantially cutting-edge. The space program was amazing for a while, and then it wasn't. The economy grew quickly, and then it didn't.

So what is the case that China has escaped that kind of trap? That it's not just catching up, but that it is actually going beyond what liberal and democratic societies are achieving technologically?

Wang: I'm not sure that this is a really big trap because I think that the U.S. is really good at making these sorts of discoveries, but the U.S. also is very significantly unable to actually follow through with building industries out of these discoveries.

Bell Labs invented this great new scientific project in the solar industry in 1954. It remained for the most part a scientific project until the Germans developed it into a much bigger industry throughout the 2000s.

And subsequently, all of the Chinese firms were able to copy the German expertise, and they completely overran the industry such that the Germans and the Americans barely have a strong solar industry anymore, even after quite a lot of tariffs and protection.

I think this dichotomy of innovation and production is at best blurry, because I've seen too many examples of the Chinese simply building up an industry accretively, step-by-step trying to perfect an industry such that you get to a whole new industry by the time that they really perfect it. The Chinese are much better at climbing the ladders that the Americans have placed.

Douthat: So let's just drill down for a minute into why that is. Because part of your argument is that it is choices that the state has made.

But you just said that often the state still seems to make bad choices.

Wang: Yes.

Douthat: So it emerges organically from frantic competition in a large market. But then you also said, you used the phrase "socialism with Chinese characteristics," which implies that this frantic competition is still constrained in some way by Marxist or socialist norms.

So what is the actual model? Why are they climbing the ladders faster?

Wang: I think that the first and most important part of China's technological success has to do with something I call process knowledge.

Process knowledge is also known as tacit knowledge, also known as industrial expertise. In a kitchen analogy, it is something like the recipe, and the hardware is something like the stoves and the pots and the pans.

But let's say, Ross, we give someone who's never cooked a day in his life the most well-equipped kitchen, as well as the most exquisitely detailed recipe. Are we sure that this person will be able to do something as simple as frying an egg for breakfast?

I'm not sure if that person will burn the kitchen down in some big way.

Douthat: My children have often given evidence for that hypothesis.

Wang: Yes. And I think the crucial part of technology is actually all of this tacit knowledge, process knowledge that we can't really write down.

That is the core part of what has been driving China's technological advantage. It started when China started making pretty simple things — socks, T-shirts, all these things that we think and know are not terribly important — before they get to slightly more complex things, like shoes.

Then they get to everything that now includes iPhones and electric vehicle batteries, and they are really good at climbing this ladder.

China's hardware capital, Shenzhen, was mostly a backwater — making textiles all the way up until 2008, when Shenzhen started producing Steve Jobs's iPhones.

iPhones started rolling off the line and you had this enormous work force, hundreds of thousands of people making the most sophisticated consumer electronics in the world, making the next consumer drones, more sophisticated electronics. And I think that is really the basis of China's technology advantage: It's just these gigantic investments and work force.

The state sometimes gets in the way; the state sometimes harnesses this work force. You also have a lot of entrepreneurial energy. I'm not sure if I wanted to define it as state capitalism with Chinese characteristics, but I just view it as technological catch-up.

Douthat: Right, but what is the difference, then, between that model and ours? Part of your argument is that America has lost a lot of that knowledge through the process of outsourcing and allowing factories to move overseas and allowing deindustrialization to happen, and becoming an information and financial services and service economy — a very rich one, but not an industrial economy in the way that China is.

I want to understand how much of this is saying there are engineering minds in the Politburo who made these choices that maybe you can only make in an authoritarian society, or maybe we could have made different choices ourselves in the U.S.?

How much of it is that versus some other element of competition or culture in China right now?

Wang: I think the crucial mistake in the U.S. was that it wasn't even a choice that the U.S. made to outsource a lot of manufacturing. Now, there is this line that politicians like to trot out that China stole all the jobs — and sure, that's one framing of it.

But I think a more accurate framing is that since the 1990s, big American manufacturers had been actively moving their production to China, and the U.S. government did almost nothing to restrain them.

I'm not sure whether that was actually a really deliberate choice plotted out by the Council of Economic Advisers advising Bill Clinton. Maybe it was, but I think this was just a process of business lobbying saying: Well, we need to tap into this market and produce at these cheaper places.

And something that the Communist Party actively decided was that they were going to import big American manufacturers in the 1990s and 2000s, Apple, Tesla.

If they want to build their products here, we are going to completely welcome Steve Jobs and Elon Musk to train our workers and make them as good as they can be.

That was a more conscious decision, I think, made by engineers who realized they had to catch up to the global frontier. They couldn't do it with China's existing level of technology, and they were going to have Americans help them.

Douthat: To speak to the views of Bill Clinton's Council of Economic Advisers or any of the other American policymakers who presided over this transfer of industrial might, there was an assumption that has been proved false — which was that economic development would inevitably lead to liberalization in China and would turn China into a democracy. And that would make the world more likely to be at peace and have relations between the U.S. and China get better and better, and so on. At least so far, that has been completely falsified.

But there was also just a basic economic assumption, a free trader's assumption, that said: Well, if China gets really good at building things and sells them to us, and we have an economy that's in a different phase and a different stage and is based more on information and services, as long as we stay rich, that's OK.

And while there obviously are big parts of the U.S. that have suffered from the relationship with China, that were hollowed out, the U.S. has remained very rich. The American economy, despite what some doomsayers would say, is not a disaster area.

So someone could listen to your arguments and read your book and ask: What are the actual stakes here? What is China building and investing for, apart from wealth for its own sake? What kind of power does it want?

Wang: I think you're absolutely right that America is highly dynamic, and I don't want to count out America in this stage of competition. I think at various points the U.S. will look weak. At various points it will look strong.

But what are the stakes here? Because I think there is still a broad view in the U.S. that deindustrialization has been pretty bad — not just for regions like Pennsylvania or Michigan, where the deindustrialization has been felt pretty badly.

There's also a pretty clear loss of manufacturing expertise that is represented in the declining fortunes of American apex manufacturers. Companies like Intel, Boeing, Detroit automakers and now, increasingly, Tesla.

They've had mostly bad news over the last few quarters, last few years. In the case of Detroit, the last few decades. Apex manufacturers are not working very well.

If we take a look at the early days of the Covid pandemic, the U.S. manufacturers were not very good at making simple products either — necessary products, like cotton swabs and cotton masks. And they weren't able to really rejig their supply lines in order to build out critical materials.

If we take a look at the U.S. defense industrial base, after the U.S. shipped a lot of munitions to Ukraine for its self-defense against Russia, the U.S. hasn't really been able to rebuild its munition stockpiles.

If we take a look at naval ships with the U.S. Navy, every class of ships is now behind schedule.

Douthat: Let's pause there, then. You just offered two somewhat different examples of what the U.S. loses. The first one is if China is a manufacturing powerhouse and we are not — even if our per capita G.D.P. looks good now — over time, we will just inevitably get poorer relative to China.

Is that right? If we're making the bullish case for China, would that be your expectation?

Wang: That could be a scenario. I'm not expecting that China will be richer than the U.S.

But I think that what China will do is seize more technological industries of the future the way it already has. And in the apocalyptic scenario in which these two countries meet in the conflagration, you need a material base. You need a defense industrial base in order to meet on the battlefield.

I can see a scenario in which the U.S. can't get its act together to produce drones and ships, ammunitions — and the Chinese are able to. So it's not just about the economy.

Douthat: So that's the second point. I just wanted to think about the economic side of this.

Are we telling a story where even if there isn't a war between the U.S. and China, the average American is just going to be poorer than we otherwise would be over a prolonged period of time?

Wang: Yeah. I wonder whether services are going to be able to absorb even more of the U.S. work force. Right now, about 11 percent of the American work force works in manufacturing; much of the rest is in services.

Can the U.S. be a great power if a lot more people are working in Hollywood, in Silicon Valley, in Wall Street, in health care, in consulting? Is that even a likely scenario? If we have a lot of people in Silicon Valley trying to produce artificial intelligence, that is going to make it much more difficult, I think, for entry-level people to find jobs in a lot of these service-, knowledge-based sectors.

So I'm not very optimistic that very many people will be able to manufacture in the U.S., but I think there are also strong limits on how much services can absorb, and this is where the economics make me nervous.

Douthat: OK. So you have the possibility of U.S. economic decline, but then you have direct great power conflict where it seems like, very straightforwardly, you're saying the U.S. is in increasing danger of losing our position as the world's dominant military power. Being in a position where we would likely lose a war to China.

Do you think we would lose a war to China if we fought a war in the next five years?

Wang: I can't comment on whether the U.S. would lose. I'm not a military analyst. I wonder whether the U.S. would be able to win on the battlefield, because it depends on the battlefield.

If Beijing is intent on dominating this island nation of Taiwan, which hangs just a few hundred miles off its shores, and if it is not intending to do something like seize Guam or seize Hawaii, then I think it is quite possible that China is able to overwhelm Taiwan pretty quickly and the U.S. Navy isn't able to sail so far in order to free and maintain the safety and integrity of Taiwan.

I certainly don't see any scenario in which the U.S. tries to invade and incur into mainland China. And I don't see the Chinese ever trying to seize Los Angeles in California.

So it depends on the battlefield. But certainly, I feel like we can't win a war without drones and munitions. And right now it doesn't look like the U.S. is really able to produce these in quantity.

Douthat: What is China, in terms of that battlefield question? Is China primarily building to become a global superpower as a successor to the U.S., and before that, Britain? Or are they primarily building for an idea of being a self-sufficient East Asian civilization unto themselves, which gathers in Taiwan and can bully Vietnam, et cetera — but is not fundamentally trying to do what the U.S. has done for the last few decades?

Where are you on those two possibilities?

Wang: I think it's a matter of considerable debate among the specialists who are looking at the tea leaves and trying to read the mind of Beijing.

The contrast is with these two big binaries: Does China want to supplant the U.S. wholesale as the global superpower — not only in technology but also financial terms and diplomatic terms and pretty much everything else that the U.S. is good at?

Or does it want to retreat and become the celestial empire once more, as the Qing dynasty once called itself — close the doors against all of the barbarians, seize Taiwan because it must to fulfill the aims of Mao in the Civil War, and mostly dominate its near neighbors?

My view is that China is closer to the latter, closer to being the serene empire that doesn't care about the turmoils of the crazy Americans outside.

But I think that the question then has to become something like: If China is fully able to dominate its near neighbors in East Asia — countries like the Philippines and Vietnam and Malaysia — such that it is able to bring those state leaders out to kowtow for the emperor's pleasure in Beijing, how much does that in particular threaten American interests, and how much should America really feel that it needs to defend these regions against that potential threat?

I don't have a super strong view here. Mostly, what I think is that China is achieving some goal of being very physically strong in terms of manufacturing might. I don't think that it is a great superpower in terms of cultural production. And I think their prowess is mostly constrained in the physical manufacturing world.

Douthat: Do you think the A.I. race changes that, or maybe determines the shape of where Chinese power might go?

Wang: I am skeptical. I spend a lot of time in Silicon Valley because I am part of the Hoover Institution, and I spend some time speaking to nerds who want to build God in a box.

Douthat: I'm familiar with that. Yes.

Wang: Yes. And I think there is this eschaton that they want to bring about in which the world ends in something like 2027. And they don't have a great vision beyond 2027.

My vision of the U.S. and China are that both are giant countries that are increasingly locking horns — although not always — that are not going to fall into the sea and just sink into the Pacific Ocean or something. They are both very strong powers that have a desire to maintain their own prestige and maintain their own power.

They are going to be, I think, staring each other down for decades. And I don't think that there will be any scenario quite like a repeat of the Soviet Union in which one power simply implodes and fails to get back up.

I think the competition is long-lasting, and the sooner that we let go of this idea that it is just going to be one technology that determines everything, it's just going to be one cultural product — it is not one anything. It is a long-term race for decades.

Douthat: OK. Let's talk about a future where the Chinese model seems to fail.

I think we're establishing a scenario for 2050, let's say, of Chinese success and American failure. In your terms, that looks like a China that is dominant in Asia, clearly technologically dominant, above and beyond the U.S. and generating more and more wealth through manufacturing, even if the average Chinese person is still poorer than the average American in a way that makes America feel like a kind of decadent and stagnant backwater — a great power, but a great power in clear and sustained decline.

Is that fair as a kind of scenario?

Wang: As a potential scenario.

Douthat: As a potential scenario for Chinese success. How could China, how could this model fail? What do engineers get wrong?

Wang: Engineers are meddling extensively in the economy. And maybe we will wake up and find one day that central planning is a ginormous failure and the Chinese will not be able to fundamentally overcome these contradictions in the model of state capitalism with Chinese characteristics.

That is a potential scenario in which the extensive meddling that has scared the living daylights out of a lot of venture capital investors in China, as well as a lot of entrepreneurs who would really prefer not to suffer through a lot of the edicts of the Politburo — they decide to not contribute so much to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people.

I think that a lot of people have been pretty extensively burned out by the mistakes and some of the foibles of the Communist Party. A lot of what I have seen is that many young Chinese are willing to take leave of the great rejuvenation that is conducted in their name.

We have a lot of data on Chinese entrepreneurs, a lot of wealthy Chinese people who would much rather live their lives in Chinese communities like Irvine, Calif., by buying some property and just having their businesses be established in Singapore, and still not really quite trusting the Communist Party to respect everything that they want to do.

Young Chinese creative types are interested in smoking dope, just as young California types may be. They are smoking dope in Chiang Mai. I've spent a little bit of time seeing these people who are just as into marijuana, as well as cryptocurrencies, as folks are in Silicon Valley.

We also see a lot of Chinese migrants who are not necessarily rich, who are not necessarily the creative types, dare to fly to Ecuador, which has been visa-free for a period of time to the Chinese, and try to walk across the Darién Gap — a perilous journey to cross to the southwestern border of the United States.

At its peak in 2024, the U.S. was apprehending something like 30,000 to 40,000 Chinese who were trying to cross over into Texas. It still blows my mind that many people would try to do that to escape the regime.

Douthat: And what do you feel like they're most trying to escape?

Is it political repression? Is it the sense that even if you're getting rich, the government can change its engineering plan tomorrow and strip your wealth away? What aspect of China is driving the desire to go somewhere else?

Wang: Well, let's take a look at these three canonical groups, because I think they have three different motivations.

If we take a look at the wealthy, the rich, the politically connected: Still, many Communist Party senior members have their kids in the U.S. or the U.K., somewhere abroad, because they're not quite sure if they're going to be purged.

There is something peculiarly precarious about authoritarian regimes where if you're a rich person, let's say in Beijing, you might be working in the financial industry. And last year the Communist Party declared that there was going to be a salary cap of $400,000 for people working in finance.

And you may have to give some of your money back to the state if you've been earning more than that. Or if you are a part of the party elite or part of the military elite and your patron is purged for corruption, the entire network falls away.

You could be a creative person working as a journalist in China. There are still many creative journalists in China who have their pieces, their essays, their reporting completely censored by the state. And after this happens a few times, a lot of people get quite mad and they move to a place like New York.

A few blocks from here, in October, I went to attend a feminist stand-up comedy show in Mandarin — and there were a lot of creative types from China, all women, telling jokes and sharing stories. It's hard to imagine that something like this may have been necessary perhaps 10 years ago, before Xi consolidated his power.

And then for the lower-skilled migrants who are not necessarily educated very well, who are not necessarily very wealthy, their reasons for crossing are still much more complex. I don't think I have a good handle on this question.

Douthat: Would these be the kind of people who are trying to do the Darién Gap to get to Texas?

Wang: That's right. Get to Texas. And maybe they felt really constrained in the Covid lockdowns. Maybe they felt that their property had lost its value. So they are trying to escape and they've become things like Uber drivers in California. They're just trying to make a living — not necessarily trying to flee the political regime.

Douthat: To me, that seems like a big weakness for a great power.

Wang: Yes. Absolutely.

Douthat: It seems, from an American perspective, just somewhat extraordinary that you could simultaneously say: Look, the 21st century could be the Chinese century. China is going to be dominant and we're going to decline.

And yet the average best and brightest in China would happily accept American citizenship tomorrow, which is probably true for lots and lots of people, right?

I feel like it's hard for me to square those two realities. That as long as lots and lots of talent would rather bet on even chaotic, misgoverned, bad infrastructure — whatever else you dislike about America, from Donald Trump to wokeness to everything in between — as long as so many talented Chinese would choose that over China, that just seems like a really strong American advantage.

Wang: Absolutely. I completely agree. And the only question is: How many? I'm not sure if the average educated elite person in Beijing and Shanghai would still want to move to the U.S.

Douthat: But at least they want a hedge. They would happily accept an offshore bank account, a house in Vancouver or a house in Irvine, and their kid at a U.S. school. They'd accept that?

Wang: Well, I would accept that if you gave me a Swiss bank account and a home in Vancouver, as well. [*Laughs*.] And maybe it just makes sense for many people to hedge.

Douthat: That's fair.

Wang: I think that there are many parts of the Chinese elite that have gone abroad. I think there are complex motivations that vary year by year to what extent people leave. But I think we can certainly point out that many Chinese entrepreneurs have decided that life in Japan, in Singapore, in the U.S. is much easier.

That if you move to the U.S., the state leaves you alone. If you move to Texas and Florida, people aggressively leave you alone. And there is something about that comfort that still attracts a lot of people, for sure.

Douthat: Let's also talk about not just how an engineering society can feel oppressive, but also how it can actively fail.

In your story about Chinese success, you spend a lot of time on the shadow side of these big projects. Some of these projects look like white elephants. They look like airports built when there aren't enough people flying or apartment blocks built that lots of people don't want to live in.

There is a kind of a problem of overbuilding, of building for building's sake. Then you also have the related problem that China has a deeper version of the depopulation problem that every rich, and many nonrich, countries in the world are facing, where birthrates are very, very low. Society is aging rapidly, and in one of the most powerful parts of your book, you have an account of how an engineering mentality cruelly and brutally made this problem worse.

China's engineers looked around in the 1970s and '80s and said: Our population is growing exponentially. We need the one-child policy. We need to impose low birthrates.

And having imposed low birthrates in an incredibly brutal way, it turned out to be very hard to turn higher birthrates back on.

So, looking at those two problems, I feel like you can see a future in China where China in 2050, 2070 — more 2070 maybe than 2050 — isn't this self-sufficient, dynamic, Asia-dominating empire, but it's a society of ghost cities with no children that are monuments to engineering's failure. Talk about those scenarios.

Wang: Yeah. Well, let's consider physical engineering as well as social engineering. I would say that for the most part, physical engineering is still overwhelmingly positive for China, though you have these bridges to nowhere. Guizhou is heavily, heavily indebted. The local government has a problem paying back the bonds to build these bridges. And there's not only a financial cost; there's an environmental cost in which you're pouring a lot of carbon-intensive cement for essentially nothing.

There is also a human displacement cost because a lot of people have been moved out to places that they're not very familiar with, especially for building hydroelectric dams. But I would say that's something that's maybe an 80 percent positive, 20 percent negative. That ratio might change over time.

But I think physical dynamism is a good thing, and I would say that the United States needs a lot more of this.

I would assign completely the opposite ratio on social engineering. Because the fundamental problem of China — the most fundamental problem with the engineering state — is that they cannot restrain themselves from being only physical engineers.

They have to also get into social engineering because they view the population as just another building material, as if it could be remolded and torn down at their pleasure.

Thank you for picking up the one-child-policy chapter of my book. That was unexpectedly my favorite chapter to write. The one-child policy, the peak of it was mostly throughout the 1980s.

This was before I was born; I was born in 1992. My parents were both college-educated urbanites in the southwestern province of Yunnan, where there wasn't very high birthrates in the cities already. Dredging through the history of the brutality of the one-child policy, it sounded quite scientific at the time and sounds quite rational — you know, it's just a number out there.

But it was accomplished with the most brutal means of forced sterilizations, forced abortions that were meted out to mostly people in the countryside in what I described as a campaign of rural terror against overwhelmingly female bodies.

This was something that was prosecuted like a military campaign. Women were sent into hog cages, into clinics.

It was a really difficult thing to read these accounts of the terrible traumas that people suffered, which somehow also washed up on the shores of the United States. We have a lot of overwhelmingly girls of Chinese heritage that grew up with American families here throughout the one-child policy.

I think that the Chinese government is now realizing that it cannot turn the dial back up. It is trying to engineer the population again to try to encourage people to have children. So far, it's finding that it's much easier to prevent births with sterilizations and abortions rather than to coerce copulation.

Douthat: Do you think there's any scenario where discontent with that mode — social engineering, authoritarian means and so on — actually someday leads to a political revolution in China? Because this conversation has been taken for granted, as a lot of people do know that the Chinese regime is stable, that the idea of liberalization and democratization was sort of a fantasy.

Is there any future where that's wrong, and where China in 2050 or 2060 has experienced some kind of democratic revolution?

Wang: My view is that the regime is still broadly stable in spite of these traumas that it has inflicted on the population.

The one-child policy is not even discussed much these days. I think a lot of this trauma has faded for a lot of people.

Douthat: But there was — not at the same scale — but there was trauma under the "zero Covid" policy, too. And that's fresh in people's memories.

You had incredible restrictions. People locked into apartment buildings. You had some kind of protest culture emerging out of that. So even though things fade into the past, the regime generates new forms of engineered suffering as new crises arise.

Wang: Yes. You're absolutely right that "zero Covid" produced a lot of trauma. I was living in Shanghai, and Shanghai is the city that suffered probably the greatest lockdown ever attempted in the history of humanity — 25 million people were unable to step foot outside of their apartment compounds for about eight to 10 weeks in the spring of 2022.

Shanghai is a little bit like New York in that the people hold themselves to be quite a bit more sophisticated than country bumpkins in Washington, D.C., or Beijing. They're more cosmopolitan. They're wealthier in some ways.

And Shanghai suffered this really brutal reminder that, actually, it is Beijing that after all runs them and rolls them. Throughout the Shanghai lockdown experience, a lot of my friends had to go without food so that they could save the food for their children, because Shanghai had no way to organize logistical deliveries of food to 25 million people when most of the city should have been in lockdown and they didn't want to spread the virus.

So this was a very traumatic time. And I think it is no surprise that Shanghai had this sort of protest culture that you mentioned. I have been to one day of the Shanghai protests where people had gathered on Ürümqi Road. This is the bar district for a lot of young people in China.

There were police everywhere, as well as a lot of people milling about, waiting for something to happen. The night before, people were — we have videos of this — chanting, "Down with the Communist Party, down with Xi Jinping," which was completely absurd. I would not have been able to believe something like this could have happened.

But after the collapse of "zero Covid," if you go to Shanghai right now — the last time I went was in December of 2024 — people have drunk away a lot of their sorrows. If we take a look at Ürümqi Road today, it is still full of cocktail bars. People would rather forget about this terrible experience and see no profit in dredging it back up again.

They walk through Shanghai, the beautiful streets of the French Concession, and they feel that their life is still often pretty good. If you're also subject to quite a lot of the propaganda in China — which is pretty negative about Trump and pretty negative about disorder and everything else that is wrong with the U.S., as well as the West — it may not feel too bad.

Douthat: Something we were talking about earlier is the propensity of discontented Chinese to seek means of escape. Maybe that is itself stabilizing to the regime. That if you are deeply dissatisfied with life under socialist, state capitalist, whatever you want to call it, there are means of exit that take the people who might otherwise be leaders of a resistance out of the country.

Wang: My parents were not much older than the student protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Throughout the 1990s, mostly for economic reasons, they decided that being in Yunnan — then a peripheral province, which was an economic backwater then and remains an economic backwater today — was less preferable to moving to Toronto, which is what we did when I was 7 years old — first time I saw real snow.

I think there is still an element of a lot of creative Chinese who desperately want a better life abroad. They are trying to come to the United States or elsewhere where they still seek that, yes.

Douthat: Let's end with advice for the United States. What are the actual implications of your analysis — and especially the bull's case that we started with, the Chinese century case for what the U.S. should do right now? What should we be doing differently if China is poised to be as powerful as you think it might be?

Wang: I think that the U.S. should first and foremost rebuild its manufacturing base. That follows quite naturally from a lot of my analysis of China's greatest strength, which is that China is a manufacturing superpower and China is poised to further deindustrialize Europe and it is poised to further deindustrialize the United States as well.

I am skeptical that President Trump's efforts to reindustrialize America through the tariffs have been very effective. I am more positive about the Biden administration's policies on efforts to reshore through industrial policy. But we can still see a lot of flaws with that approach as well.

Douthat: Do you think tariffs — essentially trade war — can't work, in your view, because China has become too strong and resilient?

Wang: I think that the trade war, as prosecuted right now through the tariffs, is not going to be very effective. If we just take a look at the manufacturing employment data since Liberation Day in April — with the next jobs release, I'm not sure if we'll get that data probity back — the U.S. has lost about 40,000 manufacturing workers.

It is not a natural fit if the U.S. is to become a technological, scientific superpower to advance its science by denying a lot of funding to scientific agencies like the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health.

I think that universities, flawed as they are, are still driving a lot of American innovation and scientific advancements, and it also doesn't make a lot of sense to attack universities in order to save the scientific base.

And it really doesn't make sense to try to deport a lot of workers who may be working in the construction industry or the manufacturing industry, or to frighten away a lot of high-skilled researchers who may want to be in the U.S. from Europe or Asia to do a lot of their work here. So I think that as prosecuted, the trade war is not making a lot of sense.

The industrial push in the U.S. is not making a lot of sense. Maybe there's something positive to be said about Trump's energy agenda in terms of building more nuclear power, in terms of building more facilities online. Maybe there's something positive about the deregulatory agenda. I can certainly see that case, but I certainly see more headwinds than tailwinds.

Douthat: And you don't think, though, that China fears being cut off from U.S. markets the way it would have 15 or 20 years ago?

Wang: Well, Donald Trump seesaws this way and that. He was the initiator of the tech war when I was living in Beijing in 2018, when he designated scores of China's technology companies onto highly obscure blacklists maintained by the Department of Commerce.

But here we are in his second term, and he's saying: Well, maybe China should have Nvidia chips. So Trump is pretty erratic on this. When a journalist asked him whether Chinese students should still be coming to America, Trump said, "It's our honor to have them."

That is potentially the right approach, but that is also butting up against a lot of other folks in his administration. It seems kind of weird to me that Donald Trump is the most pro-China member of the White House right now.

Douthat: But do you think that just reflects Trump being mercurial and wanting to make deals? And if Beijing says, "Let's make a deal," he is excited to make a deal.

Or does it reflect a rational calculation that China is now too strong to isolate in the way that some China hawks would want? And so you have to make deals with them.

It's just an economic imperative that you can't disentangle China and America.

Wang: I don't have a good sense of what the Trump administration is thinking, but there is a potential world in which they have made that decision because after Trump raised tariffs on China up to 150 percent — which was completely extraordinary — China retaliated by suspending exports of rare earth magnets, which is one of these other things that China really has and the U.S. doesn't.

Subsequently, automakers everywhere panicked. Ford had to stop production in a couple of its factories, and it is possible that Trump and everyone else around him have decided that we really need all of these Chinese goods because the Chinese are not only very dominant in rare earth magnets; they also have a lot of pharmaceutical ingredients.

All sorts of battery materials, all sorts of electronics are almost exclusively a Chinese product now. I don't know if the Trump administration has simply thrown in the towel, or if they are simply in dealmaker mode. Do you have a view?

Douthat: What I see, which is similar to what you described, is that the Trump administration has been maybe surprisingly successful in forcing all kinds of countries and economies to basically make unilateral concessions to the U.S. and much, much less successful when it comes to China itself.

China just seems too strong to run a trade war or protectionist conflict against, but I don't have special insight on that. I do think that it is striking that it seems like the Chinese American relationship at the moment seems too big and too high-risk for even Trump to fundamentally reframe.

Wang: I was living in Copenhagen this summer, having cardamom buns and enjoying everything wonderful that Denmark has to offer, when I read one of your columns that I thought was really right about how the European Union completely became submissive to the Trump administration in these tariff negotiations — that what Europe has shown is that it is fundamentally just really weak, that they cannot get consensus in order to retaliate against the U.S.

Europe right now is adrift — caught between the Chinese, who have waged a far more successful trade war against German automakers, as well as the Americans, with their much stronger service industries.

I feel very much that a lot of regions and countries are going to be caught adrift by these two big powers, that Europe is going to be deindustrialized. It's going to have much more competition in the services.

Right-wing populist parties in Europe are outpolling their incumbents' ruling parties pretty much everywhere, and as the economics get worse, I don't think that the politics will get better.

So I fear this for the United States as well — as the economics get worse in some ways, as you mentioned, the U.S. might actually be poor in some meaningful way. This is what I'm really nervous about for the West.

Douthat: I'll accept the compliment for my column's analysis, but use it to ask a geopolitical question, which is to what extent, in terms of how the U.S. approaches other countries and the rest of the world, should we be trying to make an ideological argument against China? Should we say: Look, we represent the free world. We represent liberal democracy. We should be on the same side as other liberal democracies. We should be rallying the Europeans to a kind of conflict against autocracy?

That's one framework for how to think about a new cold war with China, where the model is the old Cold War versus what you certainly see from the Trump administration, but also see from other voices, as well — a kind of realist view that says: Look, China doesn't want to revolutionize the world the way the old Soviet Union did. It doesn't have this global ideological agenda.

Its advantage in geopolitics is cynical dealmaking, right? And so the U.S. needs to be a cynical dealmaker too. Where do you come down on that kind of choice?

Wang: I'm not sure if I would sign on to either framing, because I'm not sure if the U.S. and China are going to outcompete each other in cynical dealmaking. Where are all these deals going to be coming from?

I think the view that I would propose to you, Ross, is that this is not so much about the dealmaking; it's not about democracy. Part of why I wrote this book was to get us beyond these 19th-century political science terms.

I'm really allergic to political science terms, like "democratic" or "capitalist," "socialist," "autocratic." Let's try to be fun and inventive in how we make a new framework to think about these two big countries.

I think what is ultimately going to be most important is delivering well for its people. That the country that is going to be able to meet the needs of its own people is going to be the more triumphant power.

It’s not really to cripple the other side. It is to make sure that people feel good about the cities and the homes that they live in. They feel like they have some degree of affordability. They don’t fear shortages and inflation; they feel some sense of an economic future that is still clear and bright, glimmering before them.

And right now we think both countries have done a lot to erode their own advantages.

China believes that its autocratic system is going to be able to deal with these buffeting technological headwinds, especially driven by A.I., and that the Americans are not really going to be able to deal with that.

Social media is obviously driving all of us insane. Elon is trolling all of us to insanity with his crazy tweets and that somehow the West will be rived by some mixture of economic distress, political mistakes, social media and the phones, as well as the artificial intelligence.

The game goes to he who outlasts the adversary. But what the Chinese want to do is to just keep things really, really stable and just wait for the Western countries to collapse.

And as we’ve established, there’s a lot of Chinese who are willing to take leave of the Chinese dream and the great rejuvenation.

So I think the first step for these two countries is to stop delivering these humiliating self-beatings and really try to understand and do better. What do you think?

Douthat: The humiliating self-beatings will continue until morale improves.

Wang: I’m afraid that’s the case.

Douthat: Dan Wang, thank you so much for joining me.

Wang: Thank you very much, Ross.