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BOOK REVIEW

Муравей грызет кость. Избранные очерки о Китае

[Ants Gnawing at a Bone – Selected Texts about China]

Владимир Яковлевич Портяков Vladimir Portyakov

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The book “Ants Gnawing at a Bone – Selected Texts about China” (*Муравей грызет кость. Избранные очерки о Китае*) is a collection of roughly 30 papers written throughout some 40 years by Vladimir Portyakov, one of Russia’s most accomplished and respected sinologists and the author of more than 300 publications including nine individual monographs in both Russian and English languages. Although it is his latest major work to be published thus far (2018), this collection contains only a small part of Portyakov’s academic contributions presented in chronological order from 1975 to 2017 and mainly dealing with both principal areas of his academic research on China, namely the evolution of its economic and its foreign policies during the reform and opening-up era.

The instructive name of the book derives from a well-known Chinese idiom signifying perseverance to achieve a long term goal “like ants gnawing at a bone” (蚂蚁啃骨头). Portyakov, however, thus defines his principal methodological approach: that the basis of real sinological research is the ascent from the particular to the general, from micro to macro based purely on reflections on Chinese-language sources. Notably, following his own advice to dwell beyond the Russian sinological ‘ivory tower’, the author reveals a close acquaintance with the relevant scholarship and deep understanding of its principal debates not only in China and the Chinese-speaking part of the world, but in the West as well.

The book’s roughly 30 texts can be grouped into those dealing with China specifically, namely its economic development, political system and foreign policies; those analysing Sino-Russian relations, including an informative piece on the evolution of Chinese studies in Russia; and reviews of international conferences attended by the author in different parts of the world, with particular emphasis on research into the Overseas Chinese. The monograph starts with a series of economic essays, reflecting Portyakov’s original academic training and diplomatic work in China. Throughout quite a personal experience of the many twists and turns of the reform era, the author not only demonstrates an impressive knowledge of these complex processes but also hints at the wish for his own country to learn more from the Chinese success story instead of eventually opting for the neo-liberal shock therapy that largely caused much suffering soon after

the collapse of the Soviet Union. The progression of economy-themed contributions highlights the uniqueness of China's breath-taking growth rates.

In the case of domestic politics, a recurring topic is Portyakov's conviction that it is the peasantry that continues to have the largest potential to destabilise China's party-state. His remarkable sinological training is perhaps most visible and fruitful in those informative papers that thoroughly analyse some of the most important concepts of Chinese foreign policy making throughout the reform era. Indeed, Portyakov convincingly reveals how Deng Xiaoping's famous *taoguang yanghui* (韬光养晦) adage has become an important feature of 'China threat' theories due to its fundamental misinterpretation in the West in general and the U.S. in particular as 'biding time/hiding capabilities'. He also dedicates two pieces to the notion of Comprehensive National Power (综合国力), an important Chinese innovation in international relations theory. China's nuanced reactions to famous American calls to become a "responsible stakeholder" are also dealt with in a separate essay.

Naturally, Portyakov addresses quite extensively the complex question of the Sino-Russian relationship. He joins many of his Russian colleagues in acknowledging that the build-up of constructive and friendly relations with China has become one of Moscow's principal successes in the post-Soviet era. This is not to suggest, however, that the author ignores or consciously diminishes important remaining problems and tensions in this multi-dimensional relationship as has increasingly become the case in Russia, particularly its federal centre in Moscow. Quite to the contrary, he is well aware of the intricate Sino-Russian dynamics on their common border in the country's distant Siberian and Far Eastern reaches.

Nevertheless, Portyakov seems to be firm in claiming that Moscow should by all means refrain from simplistic and alarmist 'China threat' narratives and resist the calls to join any ad-hoc balancing coalitions against Beijing. Needless to say, this counsel has apparently become even more timely since Donald Trump's arrival in the White House. According to Portyakov, Russia simply has no sensible alternative to the deepening strategic partnership with China, though it obviously needs constantly to adapt to changing circumstances, including the gradually widening multi-dimensional

asymmetry caused by the rapid rise of its huge partner up to the level of the world's second superpower.

Strictly speaking, this book is not only about China or even Sino-Russian relations. On many occasions Portyakov demonstrates his appreciation for the humanities as opposed to pure social sciences and his willingness to know more about places and topics far beyond those defined by traditional sinology and contemporary China studies. While attending numerous international conferences across the globe he expresses genuine interest in the host and other countries' research on China or the peculiarities of their Chinese diasporic communities, including the so-called 'bananisation' (i.e. Westernisation) of their youth. On the side-lines of the main narrative on things Chinese, his occasional remarks are also dedicated to the rest of the continent (Japan, Korea, India, Southeast Asia) and even beyond.

Portyakov ends his study with a brief but touching conclusion in which he sums up the need to break down the entrenched myth that China's development during the reform era was a straightforward process, without major interruptions except for the 1989 Tiananmen crisis. Although in reality a much more complex phenomenon, as he shows, it should still be considered a remarkable success story at least for now. Portyakov's last point drawn from the Chinese lesson, telling us that in order to ensure its greatness a state has to emphasise development, not vice versa, seems to be covertly addressed primarily to his own country. Surely, the big remaining question for all of us now is whether Xi Jinping's China continues to think likewise. In order to try to answer that, we need more ants to gnaw at that bone.