



“Dreaming Dragons or Meddlesome Mandarins: A Journey Together to Uncover China’s Soul” is a reflective, highly personal exploration of China by Harvey Dzdin, drawing on several decades of direct engagement with the country as a media executive, presidential appointee, and commentator on global affairs.

Published by Springer and framed by a foreword from Professor Jeffrey Sachs, the book positions China as the most consequential country of the twenty-first century and invites readers to reassess many of the assumptions that shape Western views of the “Middle Kingdom.” It positions the author as a bridge between America, Europe, and China at a moment of intense geopolitical tension. In his foreword, Sachs writes that:

“The US and China today should partner in supporting global economic development, environmental sustainability, and the end of poverty in the places still mired in very low incomes. Instead, the US political class views China as an adversary, a view that is both dangerous and unjustified. Readers of this book will learn better. With Harvey as their guide, they will come to appreciate the riches of a great civilization that is keen to recover from the mishaps of 19th and 20th centuries, and notably from the violence unleashed on China by Western powers and the later by Japan. They will come to appreciate China’s great civilizational wisdom, and like Harvey and myself, root for China’s continued successes, confident that China’s successes will indeed benefit the world.”

The book weaves together historical overview, eyewitness reportage, and anecdotal storytelling to illuminate what Dzdin calls China’s “soul”: the complex interplay of its ancient civilization, revolutionary ruptures, and reform-era transformations.

Early chapters survey “old China,” condensing millennia of dynastic history and cultural tradition that are often a “black hole” in Western historical consciousness, while highlighting continuities that still shape contemporary governance and social norms.

Subsequent sections trace the traumas of the twentieth century, including the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, emphasizing both the immense human suffering they entailed and the ways these experiences continue to inform Chinese political psychology and policy choices.

Dzodin’s treatment is nuanced: he neither romanticizes nor demonizes. He stresses that, like all countries, China is a blend of good, bad and ugly in varying proportions at any given point in time and that any notion of a utopia anywhere only exists only in our dreams. That said, he points out that China is the only country in human history that has lifted 800 million people out of extreme poverty. A central theme of the book is China’s staggering transformation since the launch of reform and opening up. Dzodin recounts the shift from a landscape dominated exclusively by state-owned enterprises in 1980 to today’s mixed public–private economy, using vivid examples such as the re-emergence of the first private restaurant and the rise of national champions that now compete globally. He situates China’s reform and opening up led by Deng Xiaoping and its crown jewel, accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, as the pivotal inflection points that accelerated China’s integration into global markets, while also exposing frictions with established powers over trade, technology, and rules-setting. Throughout, he pays close attention to how ordinary Chinese experienced these changes, emphasizing aspirations for a “moderately prosperous society in all respects,” an ancient goal that China finally achieved in recent years under Xi Jinping.

The book also looks outward, examining how foreign governments have struggled—and sometimes failed—to “get” China. Drawing on episodes such as British diplomacy in the 1990s, Dzodin highlights recurring Western misreadings of Chinese priorities and political culture, from the Opium Wars through negotiations over Hong Kong and beyond. He revisits iconic moments in Sino–American relations, including the 1972 Nixon visit and the Shanghai Communiqué, to show how small, often overlooked gestures, such as a protocol-breaking handshake on a Beijing tarmac, helped lay the groundwork for rapprochement. At the same time, he examines China’s stated opposition to hegemony and “power politics,” and its efforts to position itself as a different kind of great power, even as its economic and strategic weight triggers concern in Washington, Brussels and other capitals.

Stylistically, Dzodin writes in an accessible, essayistic form intended for both seasoned “China hands” and readers with only a cursory familiarity with the country. His narrative is “raw” and sometimes impassioned, reflecting an author who has lived in and reported on China rather than observing it from afar. The book blends analytic passages on policy and global governance with human stories and personal encounters, encouraging readers to arrive at their own judgments rather than accepting ideological caricatures from any side.

In the concluding chapters, Dzodin returns to a core message: engaging with China requires historical awareness, and a willingness to acknowledge complexity. He invites readers to decide for themselves if China is 1.4 billion dreaming dragons or meddling mandarins.

Dreaming Dragons or Meddlesome Mandarins

A Journey Together to Uncover China's Soul

Harvey Dzodin

<https://link.springer.com/book/9789819515523#accessibility-information>

Overview

- Offers insights that are unique to the author's experiences in media, government, education, and global governance
- Features a comprehensive, balanced, and even-handed perspective on the topic of China's place in the world
- Gives readers a breath of fresh air and relaxed reading experience on China and China relations

About this book

Even before he became a teenager, Harvey Dzodin was fascinated listening to his shortwave radio in Detroit, and was especially captivated by far-off China. This book is the culmination of the decades of interactions and experiences that Dr. Harvey Dzodin, former ABC executive, presidential appointee and avid commentator on everything global, has had with China and its people. His raw, personal, and sometimes impassioned insights into China's history, its people, culture and even its current rise on the global stage, give a fresh perspective on perhaps the most consequential country of the twenty-first century. Suitable for both the experienced China hand as well as those with only a cursory knowledge of the Middle Kingdom, Harvey encourages the reader to make their own judgements on China and come to their own conclusion. It is his hope that this book will contribute, in some part, to the sharing of knowledge and the furthering of communication, thus helping to overcome barriers to mutual understanding and informed decision making that plague the world today.

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About the author

Dr. Harvey Dzodin is a Senior Fellow of the Center for China and Globalization, and was Advisor in Global Communications to the National Image Communication Research Center of Tsinghua University. Dr. Dzodin is a Beijing and Vienna based freelance columnist and commentator for global media including China Daily, China Global TV and Radio, and Türkiye's TRT World.

Dr. Dzodin was a political appointee of the 39th US President Jimmy Carter as his lawyer on a presidential committee. After being nominated by the White House and the U.S. Department of State, he served at the United Nations Office in Vienna. He was a director and vice president of the ABC TV Network in New York for more than 20 years

during which time he avidly participated in the activities of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs.

He has published over 400 columns, focusing on international affairs, Sino-US relations, the Belt and Road Initiative, and arts and culture. He's a sought after speaker and consultant in China and abroad. The American Biography Institute (ABI) has named Dr. Dzodin one of the "Great Thinkers of the 21st Century."

Along with his wife, Lisa Zhang, Dr. Dzodin recently established the Austrian NGO HCD Earthcare Culture Association. He is also an active member of the Austrian Journalists Club.