

## **Uwe Behrens: Feindbild China. Was wir alles nicht über die Volksrepublik wissen**

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### **Review by Felix Brender**

Not least since Xi Jinping's ascendancy, analyses of the "real China" have been selling like hotcakes. Behrens — one of the more recent iterations — grounds his text in the premise that media in the ever-so-elusive West grossly misrepresent China, painting a negative image of the country and failing to capture the positive development China has undergone. The stage set, Behrens ventures out to provide a different narrative of China, if not a more nuanced one, over a mere 200 pages. A logistics expert by training and profession, his findings rely on his experience as an entrepreneur in China spanning three decades: This is about the "real China", not an academic treatise.

This book is helpful in that it offers those with limited grasp of the Chinese language an insight into the central tenets and narratives of PRC governmental propaganda. Behrens' text is an unfiltered tour de force of Communist Party clichés and common places: China values harmony over hegemony (174 ff.); China's authoritarian governance is benign in contrast to the US prison system — as if one should be content with either (81); tracking in China is no worse than in Europe ("You will be surprised by who approaches you if you win the lottery", 71); Mao was a misunderstood but-he-meant-well manqué and 70 % good and 30 % bad (37); censorship is a non-issue since it serves societal harmony (75); China is developing — civilizing, even — Tibet and the locals better be grateful (193 ff.); the Uyghurs enjoy privileges the Han can only dream of and should reconsider their "chauvinist" (181) attitude towards Han Chinese migration to Xinjiang. Few of these will be new to researchers working on China; anyone engaging with China will inevitably have been confronted with these tropes.

Frequent exposure to these narratives can however not erase the countless factual inaccuracies and half-truths in this text, at times blurring into the conspiratorial: A single Japan Times article is cited as evidence that the People's Liberation Army did not open fire on demonstrators on Tiananmen Square in '89, trying to disprove any diverging reports (35 f.). On pp. 58 f., the author suggests that German Green Party's politician Reinhard Bütikofer's criticism of China's human rights record is connected to his being on the board of the Aspen Institute's Berlin outlet. Historical determinism sees Behrens argue that the makeup of China as a civilization state has not changed since Qin Shi Huang (98 ff.). This lack of contextualisation against the bigger picture is evident throughout the piece: China's Confucianist system was indeed relatively meritocratic, but the fact that family background did matter in enabling students to focus on study rather than work then and now — particularly now, in the age of the "princelings" — remains

undiscussed and unrecognised. Cases such as Bo Xilai's are dealt with in one paragraph: justified and indicative of China's drive to stamp out corruption. Sources are selected and quoted eclectically whenever deemed salient. On pp. 66 ff., for instance, Behrens cites Christian Göbel's (Vienna) work on the social security system to whitewash it, in the process greatly distorting Göbel's findings through strategic omission.

Beyond this, Behrens unfortunately contributes very little genuinely novel to the debate, and certainly does not offer a nuanced view of China — at best, it is a perspective less commonly heard in the West. It is no less ideologically tainted than the publications Behrens deplures as — arguably — biased, simply adopting a different ideological prism. Somewhat ironically, he himself debunks his main premise on p. 58, quoting broadcasts of Germany's equivalent of the six o'clock news, the *Tagesschau*, which on the whole, he notes, are rather appreciative of China. The book also serves as a timely reminder that academic practice, i.e. level-headed long-term, focused engagement does have its merits. Behrens' pick-and-choose attempt to reinvent the wheel might ultimately be more informed by the reverse culture shock he has experienced back in Germany (157 ff.): "It was all about material wealth" (158), finds Behrens, leaving the informed reader wondering how that might differ from materialist, socialist-in-name-only mainstream China today.

Overall, it is highly unfortunate that Behrens missed this opportunity to provide a more nuanced analysis accessible to a wider — or different — readership outside traditional academia by either regurgitating government narratives or selecting those readings with the greatest shock value to a Western reader. It is indeed correct that too often, China is viewed through a Western lens, and understanding China on its own terms is certainly beneficial. China's breakneck-speed economic development does warrant fair appraisal, as do first-hand accounts of how historical and policy shifts play out in daily life *on the ground*. Behrens, having lived in the country during the PRC's most seismic shifts could document these tumultuous times. Treating both China and the West as monoliths that they quite simply are not, Behrens does however not achieve a true contribution to the field. If anything, Behrens merely further widens the gap by essentialising, arguing for instance that the Chinese prioritised the community and public provision over individual rights, as if people in the West generally did not care about their communities and did not expect to have access to electricity and water. Finally, Behrens aims to cover a lot of ground, which sees this piece neglect depth over breadth, ultimately but scratching the surface.

Felix Brender  
PhD Candidate, London School of Economics,  
f.brender@lse.ac.uk, ORCID: 0000-0002-4613-7665