

Q &amp; A

## David Shambaugh on Why U.S. Engagement With China is Already Dead in Spirit

The scholar talks about the difficulty of advising young people to go into the China field, the internal Chinese narrative about U.S. decline, and how Xi Jinping is a “modern emperor.”

BY DAVID BARBOZA — NOVEMBER 7, 2021

*David Shambaugh is an authority on China's political system and Beijing's international affairs. At George Washington University, he is the Gaston Sigur Professor of Asian Studies, Political Science and International Affairs, and also the founding Director of the China Policy Program in the Elliott School of International Affairs. Shambaugh, who once worked in the U.S. Department of State and the National Security Council, has been a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He has published more than 30 books on China, including [China Goes Global: The Partial Power](#) and, most recently, [China's Leaders: From Mao to Now](#). What follows is a lightly edited Q&A.*<sup>1</sup>



David Shambaugh.


Illustration by Kate Copeland

**Q: You began studying China in the 1970s and 1980s. What was the field like then, and can you tell us something about your pathway in China studies in those years? Who were the influential figures in the China field that have most impacted you and your approaches to understanding China?**

A: I started seriously studying China as an undergraduate at George Washington University's Institute of Sino-Soviet Studies, where I earned my degree in East Asian Studies in 1977. In those days, of course, American students could not yet go to study in China. Perhaps because we couldn't go to China, and because I was studying in Washington D.C., the focus was very much on “elite politics,” and this orientation has stuck with me throughout my career. I'm one of these old-school “inside the Zhongnanhai and ring road” political scientists, who studies leaders and central level institutions — the party, government and military — rather than

politics outside Beijing.

After graduating from GW, I worked for about two years in the U.S. Government — first as an intelligence analyst in the State Department and then as a staff assistant to [Michel Oksenberg](#) at the National Security Council. Oksenberg was a famous China specialist on leave from the University of Michigan, recruited by NSC Advisor [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#). I had not previously known him, but met him in government, and he invited me to move from State to the NSC to work for him — which, needless to say, was a fabulous experience, especially as it was in the year during the run-up to the normalization of U.S.-China diplomatic relations. I got to work on several aspects of U.S. policy in preparation for that

event. After leaving the NSC at the end of 1978 I went to Johns Hopkins SAIS for my M.A. in international affairs. Then I moved out to Ann Arbor, Michigan to pursue my PhD in political science, principally with Oksenberg and [Allen Whiting](#) . Michigan was really the center of the Sinological universe in those days, and I wound up writing my doctoral dissertation on China's America Watchers and their perceptions of America, which is the opposite of American China Watchers.

**You also were in the first generation of American students to study, live, and conduct research in China. What was the atmosphere there like then?**

My first visit to China was in 1979 as part of a faculty-student delegation from SAIS, soon after the normalization of diplomatic relations. I also studied and lived in China three times: during the summers of 1980 and 1983 at Nankai University and Fudan University, and then for two full academic years between 1983 and 1985 at Peking University. These were incredible experiences, as China was just beginning to “open up.” I had the opportunity to travel all over the country, including to Tibet and Xinjiang, mainly by rail.

What I experienced was a society really beginning to awaken from a long socialist slumber and the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution. I encountered a lot of traumatized people in the cities — mainly intellectuals — and curious people who had never seen foreigners in the countryside. I also did some consulting work for the Ford Foundation, which gave me a window into China’s then emerging think tank community. Conducting research was not easy though. Many libraries and archives were still closed after the Cultural Revolution, and interviewing experts or officials was very difficult to arrange. Still, to simply live in and travel around China in those years was an amazing experience — one had the sense that vast parts of the countryside hadn’t changed in centuries, while the cities were just grasping the new opportunities afforded by Deng Xiaoping’s reforms.



Shambaugh playing on the Peking University basketball team, circa. 1983-1985. Credit: Courtesy of David Shambaugh

**How would you assess the atmosphere and conditions today for young people entering the China field as academics as compared with past years?**

For most of my career China has been steadily “reforming and opening.” There has been a general optimism in the China field, and in my experience there has always been strong student demand for studying and going to China, and opportunities to conduct research in China — while never easy — have been generally available. As a professor, one could easily advise students to go into the China field. And yet, over the past decade, these opportunities have been steadily restricted and even closed off by the Chinese authorities. This actually began before Xi Jinping came to power. I first noticed it in 2009 and 2010, when I was a visiting Senior Fulbright Scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, trying to research my book, *China Goes Global*.

As a result, it is much more difficult to advise young people to go into the China field. Many subject areas are completely off-limits to research and can actually endanger foreigners with the real risk of being detained or arrested. Verboten topics include studying national minorities, particularly Tibet and Xinjiang, religion, the

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BIRTHPLACE	Chicago, IL
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Chinese Communist Party itself, the military, domestic security, state-owned enterprises, the propaganda system, the higher educational system, nationalism, and other subjects now deemed sensitive. Of course, COVID-19 has also contributed to the closing of China for foreign visits, but the repressive atmosphere under Xi Jinping has been stultifying. This is, of course, not good — as foreigners now have a decreased “feel” for China. This lends itself to oversimplified caricatures and a more “distant” sense of what is taking place there.

**Some argue that the era of U.S.-China “engagement is dead.” Do you agree? If so, when did it “die” and why? Can it be resurrected, and how do you view the current China policy landscape in Washington these days?**

American engagement with China is dying in practice, but it is already dead in spirit — at least in Washington, D.C., where I live and work. There remain a handful of China specialists in the think tank community and a handful of Congresspeople who still cling to the engagement paradigm — but the vast majority of foreign policy practitioners and China scholars have become deeply critical of China during the Xi Jinping era, and thus the positive arguments for continuing to “engage” with Chinese counterparts — no matter what the field — have reduced significantly.

So, as a practical matter, engagement has broken down. And as a guiding paradigm for U.S. policy, it has gradually eroded. Kurt Campbell famously proclaimed it “dead.” That raises the questions: when did it die, why did it die, and who killed it? If anyone is responsible for “killing” engagement, it is Xi Jinping — and, in many areas, it is the Chinese side that has disengaged from the outside world. I would also argue that its death as a guiding strategy for U.S. policy began during the second Obama term, when a whole variety of things began to go wrong in the relationship and the normal bureaucratic channels for dialogue failed to resolve them — indeed these dialogue channels, like the Strategic & Economic Dialogue and nearly 100 others, themselves began to be a major problem. Americans like to solve problems through such discussions — whereas the Chinese view dialogues as an end in themselves and use them as a temporizing measure. The Trump administration cancelled these dialogues, and with them a major mechanism of engagement. The Biden administration has not resurrected them.

**“The other reason engagement lost its efficacy was the implicit premise... that by engaging with the U.S. and other Western liberal democracies, that China itself would politically liberalize — not democratize, but liberalize. There are some China scholars and former officials who dispute this was ever an operative premise, but I disagree.”**

The other reason engagement lost its efficacy was the implicit premise that had guided the strategy since the Carter administration — namely that by engaging with the U.S. and other Western liberal democracies, that China itself would politically liberalize — not democratize, but liberalize. There are some China scholars and former officials who dispute this was ever an operative premise, but I disagree. Perhaps it was naïve wishful thinking all along — another example par excellence of America’s longstanding “missionary impulse” to transform China in its image — but as long as China seemed to be moving in a generally linear direction towards “liberalism with Chinese characteristics” then the U.S. and other Western states were happy to continue with engagement.

**How have you seen Chinese views of the U.S. evolve over time, and what do you make of the new “wolf warrior” critique?**



Shambaugh meets with elderly residents of Yangzhou, 1987. Credit: Courtesy of David Shambaugh

Indeed, as I mentioned at the outset, I wrote my PhD dissertation on Chinese perceptions of America. The first, and perhaps most important, thing I would note is that Chinese internal discourse about the United States has always been critical and negative. It has never stopped — the intensity of the criticism has only modulated in intensity. Relatedly, the internal Chinese narrative about the U.S. has long predicted, and implicitly advocated for, our demise and the end of American “hegemony.” This was even true during the 1980s, a time when many ordinary Chinese seemed infatuated with the United

States, which was precisely the period I examined in my dissertation. So, if Americans have thought that Chinese, at least most officials and many intellectuals, have held positive views of the United States, they have deluded themselves in my opinion. It has recently surfaced more publicly, but the negative narratives have always been there. Their emergence in Chinese public “wolf warrior” diplomacy is indicative of the new nationalistic hubris one sees in multiple arenas of Chinese approaches to the outside world.

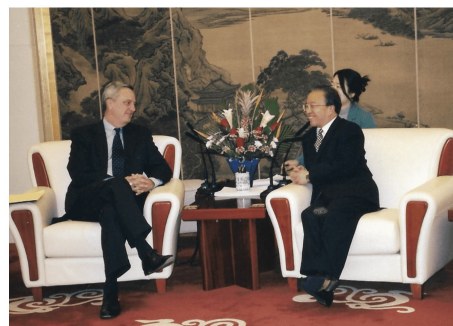
**You have also written about the Chinese Communist Party, including the lessons it drew from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Can you tell us something about how your views of the CCP have evolved over the past 20 years or so? You also published a [very controversial essay](#) in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2015 — how did that impact your career?**

I think it was John Maynard Keynes who famously said: “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, Sir?” Well, the CCP has certainly changed during the decades I have been closely studying it — and my views have changed accordingly. Many people, especially in China, were shocked when in 2015 I published *The Wall Street Journal* [article](#) that you note — and they asked why Shen Dawei [沈大为] has all of a sudden become negative and critical about the CCP, when he used to be more positive? It is true that my previous book *China's Communist Party: Atrophy & Adaptation*, which was published in 2013 and closely analyzed the inner-party reforms that the CCP had been undertaking in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR during the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao periods, was more positive about what was taking place inside the CCP.

Based on their extremely careful, detailed, and multi-year post-mortem assessment of the Soviet-East European collapses, I found that the CCP cleaved into two schools of thought. The first, which held sway during the Jiang Zemin and most of the Hu Jintao periods — and was forged by Politburo member Zeng Qinghong — concluded that “reform and opening” was vital to the Party’s longevity and it thus had to be carefully managed from above. This group concluded that the Soviet and East European regimes collapsed because they had resisted reform and opening, and by the time Gorbachev attempted it, the system was too sclerotic and atrophied, and it thus collapsed. But there was a second, more conservative, school of thought that percolated inside the CCP, which argued that managed opening and incremental liberalization was a slippery slope, that it would inevitably cascade out of control and then the Party would fall from power or be overthrown. So, this conservative school argued for maintaining tight controls over all spheres — including media, society, the party, the military, internal security services, even the economy. Xi Jinping is a leader of the second school, though he is by no means alone.



I began to notice the shift internally in China when I lived there 2009–2010, but particularly after Xi came to power in 2012. So I wrote about it in *The Wall Street Journal*. I thought of it simply as a piece of scholarly analysis — but, naively, I did not anticipate the fierce and very negative reaction to it in China. This, I was told, had a lot to do with the unfortunate headline chosen by the WSJ: “[The Coming Chinese Crackup](#).” In Chinese “crackup” is 崩溃 [*bēng kuī*], the exact same term they use for the Soviet collapse. Thus, I had really hit a nerve with the Chinese, as they thought I was arguing for a Chinese collapse — when all I was doing was analyzing what I saw as being multiple maladies and progressive forms of Party atrophy at the time. Anyway, not only was I severely criticized in China — after several decades of going there, enjoying very good access and interacting with very high levels of party, government, and military officials — I have been effectively banned ever since. It is a soft ban — an “invitation ban” — but without an official invitation one cannot get an official visa, and I do not wish to risk visiting on a tourist visa. There are a couple of universities outside of Beijing that apparently did not “get the memo” and have invited me since 2015, and I have had two very productive visits, but, overall, my access to China has frozen up and I have not been back to Beijing since. Let that be a lesson to others.



Shambaugh meets with State Councilor Dai Bingguo, 2012. Credit: Courtesy of David Shambaugh

**There was talk in 2015, after the WSJ article, that Professor Shambaugh had somehow lost his access to Party elites, and a suggestion that Zeng Qinghong’s group was fond of you. Is there any truth to that playing some role in your turn?**

I never met Zeng Qinghong, although I would have loved to interview him. But I can tell you that my analysis of what the CCP was doing during his time in power was based entirely on my own independent reading of CCP materials and interviews with Party officials and scholars. I never had the sense that I was being “used” by one faction or another. But it is also true that the CCP, and the Hu Jintao regime, were pleased with my book on *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy & Adaptation*. It was, in fact, translated verbatim into Chinese by a Central Committee publishing house and assigned for reading to the entire Politburo! They obviously liked the book because it argued that the Party was making a variety of adjustments to “adapt” following the post-Tiananmen reaction and the Soviet collapse, in order to strengthen itself and regain its ruling legitimacy.

**One of your books looked at how China has gone global. How do you view China’s international footprint today? What are its strengths and what are its weaknesses?**

China is truly a global actor, if not power, today. It has broadened and deepened its international footprint both geographically and functionally since I published my previous book *China Goes Global* in 2013. That book was subtitled *The Partial Power*, if you recall — because, I argued at the time, that China’s global footprint was “economic heavy” but light in terms of diplomacy, military, technology and innovation, culture and soft power, education, and other dimensions. I also argued that to be a power a country had to exercise *influence* — defined as getting others to do things that China desired, either by coercion or co-optation. I did not see China as being influential by this definition.

“ Beijing’s hyper-nationalism, hubris, and I would say overconfidence is actually harming China. I also see China as overreaching and overstepping in Asia. My previous book was on Southeast Asia, and it

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Actually, when I look at China on the world stage today, I still think it is a partial power. Clearly, its capacity for technology and innovation has surged, and its military prowess is now substantial, although it still lacks conventional power projection beyond the Asian region. But is China influencing the international diplomatic agenda? To some extent, yes, as Xi Jinping has really upped China's game in global governance — something I give him real credit for — but one still does not see Beijing taking the lead in addressing global problems, setting the international diplomatic agenda, and you don't find other countries echoing its exhortations. If anything, Xi Jinping has adopted an “assertiveness” that is troubling to many around the world and China's global public opinion ratings have plummeted to all-time lows under Xi. Beijing's hyper-nationalism, hubris, and I would say overconfidence is actually harming China. I also see China as overreaching and overstepping in Asia. My previous book was on Southeast Asia, and it was very apparent that there remains deep residual ambivalence and suspicion about China throughout the region. Recent public opinion polls in the region also confirm this. So, I guess that, for all of its strengths, and China is a world power today, I still see it as having many weaknesses and partial influence. After all, world powers lead and shape the international landscape — and I do not see Beijing doing that.

**You have just published another new book, [\*China's Leaders: From Mao to Now\*](#). Which of the five leaders you examine (Mao, Deng, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping) have been the most impactful for China, and which ones are over- or underrated? In particular, how do you see Xi Jinping's style of leadership?**

Of course, each of these leaders have been impactful during their time in power. So, that is a difficult metric to use. Mao had an outsized impact on the country during his 27 years as the Great Helmsman. He truly changed China — or sought to — first by adopting the Soviet model for everything, then through his many campaigns that sought to remold different sectors of society, the disastrous Great Leap Forward, then through his all-out assault on the party-state bureaucracy during the Cultural Revolution.

Mao was also a tyrant on a world-class scale. He did far more harm to the country than good, in my opinion.

Deng, as we all know, set about to transform China in fundamentally different ways — the antithesis of Mao. Deng launched China on the path to material wealth and the global power that it has become today. He also rebuilt the party-state following the catharsis of the Cultural Revolution. I describe him as a “pragmatic Leninist” in my book.

I think Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao are both underappreciated leaders. Much was accomplished on both of their watches. They were very different types of personalities — Jiang was gregarious, Hu was insular and aloof — but both got things done in many policy realms. With the passage of time I think that both will be viewed as more impactful than when they left office.



Shambaugh (left) meets with then-President Hu Jintao (right), and Politburo Member Wang Huning (center) in 2011. Credit: Courtesy of David Shambaugh

## MISCELLANEA

BOOK REC	<a href="#"><i>Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World</i></a> by Margaret McMillan
FAVORITE MUSIC	Bluegrass music
FAVORITE FILM	<i>Dr. Strangelove</i>
PERSONAL HERO	Zbigniew Brzezinski

Xi Jinping is, of course, a very impactful leader — the most since Mao. His impact has been even more pronounced than Deng's, I would say. In my book I describe Xi Jinping as a “modern emperor”: he rules China during modern times in ways reminiscent of some of China's historical emperors: all-powerful; regal; fairly aloof; respected; feared; sycophantically revered;

in singular control of all organs of state and military power; a believer in China's greatness and promoter of its imperial past; intolerable of insubordination and dissent; a proponent of ethical and virtuous behavior, the setter of official ideological doctrine and interpreter of the past, and visionary of the future.

Notwithstanding Xi's goals and accomplishments, I would still judge him as a divisive figure in China — as many urbanites, intellectuals, ethnic groups, and party members deeply resent the strict controls and draconian repression he has unleashed on the country. He has seemingly steamrolled any opposition in the leadership, the party, the bureaucracies, the military and internal security services, and has decimated dissent in the country at large. He is also very divisive abroad, as many countries around the world have grown very uncomfortable with China's new assertiveness in foreign affairs, its “influence operations” abroad, the export of censorship, its coercive economic diplomacy, its military modernization, its island-building and militarization in the South China Sea, its hyper-nationalistic “wolf warrior” public diplomacy, and other steps that are causing rising anxieties around the world.

**You're an expert on China's elite politics. Can you say anything about how Xi Jinping was able to wrestle power away from the old guard, something that has stunned everyone?**

I am afraid that anything I say on this would be very speculative and not empirically grounded; so it's always better to stay away from such speculation. But I can say that Xi's “red pedigree” certainly had something to do with the respect that other elites — active and retired — have given him, which provided him a free hand to clean house. I would also note that there was a sense of drift, nervousness, and even crisis inside the party a decade ago, and I assume that Xi made the arguments inside the CCP elite that stern action had to be taken — or else the Party was in real danger.



David Barboza is the co-founder and a staff writer at *The Wire*. Previously, he was a longtime business reporter and foreign correspondent at *The New York Times*.  
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## COVER STORY



### Pole Position

BY EYCK FREYMAN

In public, Chinese diplomats and climate negotiators deny that they see any link between climate change and geopolitics. But there is a deeply cynical consensus within China's academic and policy communities that climate change creates geopolitical opportunities that China can exploit — and must exploit before its rivals do. Greenland was the proof of concept for this strategy. And it caught the U.S. flat-footed.

## THE BIG PICTURE



### Transsion's Triumph

BY GARRETT O'BRIEN

A look at Transsion's monumental growth, unique marketing strategies and future growth potential.

## Q & A



### Jörg Wuttke on China's Self-Destruction

BY ANDREW PEAPLE

The EU Chamber of Commerce in China president talks about China's self-inflicted problems; how he gets away with being so outspoken; and why he believes in China's comeback gene.



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