en by the musical chairs of marital infidelity.

To this plot, Wasserstein brings not only heavy doses of satire and even farce (a benefit dance has a “ghetto fabulous” theme) but, perhaps surprisingly, a degree of literary seriousness. The result is a sort of Manhattan chick-lit for English majors, filled with knowing allusions to writers like Bret Easton Ellis, Tom Wolfe, Woody Allen, Edith Wharton, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Even the title is drawn from a literary source: Strunk & White’s *The Elements of Style*, a classic guidebook to writing English used by generations of students.

Predictably, however, the different tones and purposes pull at one another awkwardly. The characterizations are flat and undercooked, and the background theme of terrorism hardly gets a hearing; how could it, in this shallow crowd? Even a character’s supposedly knowing reference to *The Elements of Style* is handled ineptly when an art dealer by the name of Jil Taillou (né Julius Taittenbaum) speaks of having read the book in his Brooklyn high school and from it absorbed the lesson that “style created content”; in fact, Strunk and White insist that style must be made to serve content (“be clear, brief, and bold,” commands the introduction).

Still, for all its flaws, the novel, like Wasserstein’s plays, manages to be an enjoyable enough diversion, with special appeal, needless to say, for the female contingent. Indeed, Wasserstein may be credited with having started that whole expanse of popular, feminist-inflected entertainments devoted to chronicling the woes of the contemporary woman who has been told she should have it all but somehow always comes up short. Moreover, Wasserstein’s work is in general crisper and more astute than that of her latter-day imitators (compare a typical episode of the TV hit *Desperate Housewives*), and even this novel yields a concise, if modest, insight.

The point of *Elements of Style* is not just the old truism that wealth fails to buy happiness; it is that the exorbitant wealth of recent decades buys even less. Clarice muses on how much happier her life might have been if she had married a man willing to help run the chain of supermarkets built up by her Italian-immigrant father: “the pressure to always be the best might have been less intense.” Most of the characters have similar glimmers, wondering from their chilly pinnacles if human existence might not have been warmer and more accommodating on one of the ridges below.

As in Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*, members of the preceding generation are held out as an altogether finer species. Francesca’s father, Abraham, now far gone into senility, came to America as a child, flew a plane in World War II, achieved success in business, headed a happy family. Samantha’s plastic-surgeon husband Charlie recalls his own father, a hard-working Nebraska doctor who often treated patients without charge. Even Samantha’s crusty forebears come out well, having never been concerned with who had money and who did not. All these salt-of-the-earth types, still recognizably Jewish or Italian or WASP, knew who they were and who they were not, and lived by something more than the photo spreads in *Town and Country*.

Wasserstein once described herself as a “New York playwright liberal,” adding, however, that because “the politics of the theater . . . often involves an attack on the right wing,” the more challenging task lay in puncturing the pretensions of liberals to be “the good guys.” In *Elements of Style*, a post-feminist, post-liberal novel, America’s most privileged denizens are free to invent themselves as they please; what they invent often turns out to be mean, petty, selfish, trivial, unreliable, fraudulent, or downright repulsive, and they know it; and they have no one to blame but themselves. No wonder the world of their fathers is looking good again.

Wendy Wasserstein was onto something interesting, and potentially fruitful. Whether she would have worked it out had she lived is impossible to say, but it is a pity we will not get to see her try.

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### Books in Review

#### The Big Red One

*China Shakes the World: A Titan’s Rise and Troubled Future—And the Challenge for America*

by James Kynge

Houghton Mifflin. 217 pp. $25.00

China’s Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy

by Minxin Pei

Harvard. 294 pp. $45.00

Reviewed by Gordon G. Chang

We know more about China today than ever before, but we may understand less. In late 1949, after grabbing power and establishing the People’s Republic, Mao Zedong quickly moved to exclude outsiders from his domain. Still, although foreigners may not have had the opportunity to roam the new China in its first years, the essential nature of its totalitarian system was well understood. After all, we had seen that same system, albeit with Russian characteristics, at work in the Soviet Union.

Today, foreigners need no longer stand on the outside; they can go to China and even live there. Yet, Gordon G. Chang, a new contributor, is the author of *The Coming Collapse of China* (2001).
whether from the inside or the outside, gazing at China in its present state of turbulent transition can cause a loss of perspective. The People’s Republic is too large and diverse—and changing much too fast—for anyone to comprehend the whole of what, along with the American effort in the Middle East, is undoubtedly the greatest experiment of our time.

Can a guided tour from a distinguished journalist help? James Kynge visited every Chinese province during his two decades of reporting, most recently as Beijing bureau chief for the Financial Times. (He has since left journalism but remains in the Chinese capital as the chief representative of Pearson, the FT’s owner.) Not only did he visit China’s growing metropolises, stay in its backwater towns, and walk through its muddy fields, he also traveled to locales elsewhere in the world, including in the United States and Europe, that have been significantly affected, in most cases for the worse, by China’s rapid industrialization.

“The world,” Kynge writes, “has never had to deal with such a large, cheap, and versatile workforce joining the global economy in such a short period of time.” Inevitably, then, decisions made in Beijing have an impact not only on the Chinese but on the rest of us as well. In places like Rockford, Illinois and Dortmund, Germany, workers have lost their livelihoods, neighborhoods have shriveled, and established businesses have failed. Indonesians, Burmese, Central Africans, and Russians are systematically cutting down rain forests and boreal woodlands to meet the insatiable Chinese demand for timber and pulp. China’s appetite for soy has resulted in the clearing of the Amazon for farmland at an alarming rate. Chinese industry air-mails to us pollutants that hover over New England and mercury that soars. It subsequently emerged that Chen’s father, a Communist-party official in charge of Qi’s village, had purloined Qi’s examination certificate, either bribing or threatening school officials to keep quiet about the theft-and-substitution. Even Chen’s husband may not have known the real identity of the woman he married. When, having learned of the deception, Qi’s parents complained, Chen’s father hired thugs to seek out family members and beat them. Although Qi would eventually receive token compensation, she has remained poor and uneducated to this day.

Kynge believes that a pattern of such arbitrary actions by local officials has contributed to the breakdown of stability across the country. The number of civilian protests—“mass incidents,” in the lingo of the Ministry of Public Security—is soaring. In 2004, the Chinese government acknowledged a total of 74,000, up from about 10,000 a decade earlier, and by 2005 the total had grown to 87,000. China may be shaking the world, but the Chinese people are simultaneously shaking China from within.

Is it possible for us to get along with such an unstable behemoth? This is the critical question with which Kynge ends his book. He gives more than one answer. From the beginnings of the People’s Republic, the Chinese government has gone to great lengths to cultivate, stage-manage, and manipulate its relationships with foreigners. A great show of outward friendliness hides longstanding Chinese feelings of both superiority and acute wariness. At home, as a result of the deliberate inculcation of anti-foreign views, the regime now runs the risk of becoming captive to the ugly nationalism of its young.

To be sure, there are moderating influences. The principal one in Kynge’s view is that the Chinese realize they need the West’s good will and support if their country is going to develop further. From this perspective, he notes, “A key question for the future is not so much how China’s rise will affect the world, but to what extent the world will allow China to continue its ascent.” So long as China keeps this piece of Western leverage in mind, he thinks the worst can be avoided.
. . . that the will to live could trump the Gestapo and their Polish agents.

. . . that Europe is at it again.

. . . that the United States might surrender its birthright.

. . . that Israel and the Jews made common cause with their avowed executioner.
no one would expect Kynge to provide an incisive analysis of the country’s overall trajectory. Yet his ambitions are broader than that. He opens by talking about the rise and fall of great powers, of how their paths “are full of twists and turns, false dawns and deceptive signals.” His travelogue and his collection of anecdotes are aimed at illuminating that proposition. But what do they add up to? After a banquet of images the reader is still left hungry.

Is the modern Chinese state fundamentally strong, or fundamentally weak? The first part of Kynge’s book generally describes a strong state, the second part a weak one. Fair enough, but not only does he leave his two portraits unreconciled, he largely avoids distinguishing true signals from misleading ones. Nor does he give us much of a hint about which of these two directions—mighty giant or sickly ward—he thinks the country is heading in.

Luckily, this is where *China’s Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* comes in. Treatment many of the same topics covered by Kynge, it is the work of Minxin Pei, a scholar born in China and now affiliated with the Carnegie Endowment in Washington.

Pei’s China is unequivocally a stagnating and even fraying giant, one that has progressed just about as far as it can go within the current one-party system. The Chinese Communists, basking in a sense of security and confidence thanks to the country’s economic success, see little need to change. As a consequence, and despite much talk of public reform, the party has lost much of its vitality, becoming essentially incapable of reinvigorating itself.

As Pei sees it, big trouble looms. Continued progress toward a more modern economy will require the establishment of a true rule of law, which in turn will require “institutional curbs” on governmental action. These two limitations on power are incompatible with the party’s insistence on dominating society. So
long as the current political framework remains in place, then, China is effectively, and perhaps fatally, trapped in its state of transition.

A major reason for Pei’s doubts about the future prospects of the Chinese Communist state is the venality that has infected every level of society. Kynge, too, is well aware of this aspect of things, as in its own way his story of Qi Yuling demonstrates. “The most powerful inhibitor of political reform,” he writes summarily at one point, “is corruption itself.” Yet that is where he leaves the topic, while Pei gives us chapter and verse, demonstrating in detail how predatory local elites, by opposing reforms that would jeopardize their ability to exact bribes, engage in illicit business activities, and sell government offices, are not only retarding progress but crippling the ability of central leaders to implement nationwide policies.

In fact, Pei concludes, China is becoming “an incapacitated state,” and the Chinese government may soon become “unable to honor its commitments.” In our globalized system, the spillover effects of such a huge default “would make China’s problems those of the entire international community.” Still worse, the nation’s sheer size could overwhelm the ability of other countries to render assistance. Just like a rising one, a debilitated state can cause the foundations of the world to tremble.

Pei could, of course, be wrong. But at least he has offered an analytical framework by which to assess his explanations of Chinese weakness, and his dryly marshaled facts and dispassionate argumentation present a welcome contrast to Kynge’s vignettes, however tantalizing those may be. The result is a more comprehensive and, I believe, compelling understanding of present-day China.

No nation—not even one as large and as resurgent as China—can exhibit so many afflictions without suffering severe political consequences. Central technocrats still craft their five-year plans, but the Chinese people are lunging into the future without so much as a roadmap or compass. Eventually, their aspirations, unleashed by more than a quarter-century of centrally planned economic reform and social engineering, will overwhelm the weakening party that devised those programs in the first place. It is ironic and instructive that this should be clearer to a think-tank scholar in Washington than to a keenly perceptive journalist in Beijing.

Natural Philosophy

Crunchy Cons: How Birkenstocked Burkeans, gun-loving organic gardeners, evangelical free-range farmers, hip homeschooling mamas, right-wing nature lovers, and their diverse tribe of countercultural conservatives plan to save America (or at least the Republican party)
by Rod Dreher
Crown. 272 pp. $24.00

Reviewed by Jonathan Kay

Conservatism, Edmund Burke wrote, is a philosophy that embraces tradition and experience while shunning radical abstractions. But according to Rod Dreher, a member of the editorial board of the Dallas Morning News, American conservatism has become enraptured by just such an abstraction: laissez-faire capitalism. And it is in the image of this brand of capitalism that our society has been remade since World War II. Working mothers, suburban sprawl, day care, sterile architecture, factory farming, and television culture—all, Dreher argues, are symptoms of an obsessively consumerist society that venerates financial wealth above all else, including the spiritual health of American families.

But as its attention-grabbing title suggests, Crunchy Cons aspires to be more than just an alarm bell, or a call to arms for conservatives in the traditionalist, Burkean mold. Dreher also seeks to claim ownership of ideological real estate that the modern Right has ceded to the bearded Left: environmentalism, pastoralism, and—yes—the organic-food movement. If that puts Dreher at odds with mainstream Republicans, he does not mind. “It is impossible,” he writes, “to be truly conservative nowadays without being consciously countercultural.”

On the surface, crunchy cons, the term Dreher uses to describe himself and others of like mind, seem to resemble garden-variety hippies. Both groups go in for food fads, venerate nature, and cast a suspicious eye at large corporations and modern technology. The major difference lies in the source of their convictions. Crunchy conservatism is grounded in religion, and applies what Dreher calls a “sacramental” approach to constructing the good life. This does not necessarily entail being personally religious; but, at the very least, a crunchy conservative would concur with Jesus that “man cannot live by bread alone.”

To view the world sacramentally—the word appears often in Crunchy Cons—is to regard both objects and human actions as “vessels containing or transmitting ideals.” Once soil, livestock, buildings, and whole communities are treated as mere economic cogs, Dreher asserts, the fabric of life becomes artificial. Victorian homes are razed to make way for McMansions, Main Street dies at the hands of Wal-Mart, and family farms are driven to extinction by agribusi-