
The Devil is in the Footnotes: On Reading Michael Pillsbury's *The Hundred-Year Marathon*

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Given the long and illustrious career that Michael Pillsbury has had as an advisor on China policy to the highest reaches of the US government, the many errors of his new book, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, are all the more baffling.

The book puts forth a bold thesis: China has a plan to supplant the United States as the leader of the global order. Once ensconced in its new position of power, “China will set up a world order that will be fair to China, a world without American global supremacy, and revise the U.S.-dominated economic and geopolitical world order founded at Bretton Woods and San Francisco at the end of World War II.” These “frightening plans” have been concealed from a gullible United States, which in its misreading of the PRC’s intentions, has aided its drive for global control through technology transfers, technical assistance, and economic aid.

To prove his thesis, Pillsbury primarily relies on his access to US intelligence, his continuing and close contact with members of China’s defense establishment, and his ability to read Chinese language material. He tells us “I have arguably had more access to China’s military and intelligence establishment than any other Westerner.” Unfortunately, many of these claims, by definition unverifiable, stretch even the most lenient of reader’s patience.

To give a few examples, in discussing the Chinese military program known as “Assassin’s Mace,” Pillsbury writes “One American expert has concluded that there is a formal program in Beijing tasked with [developing the program].” Yet he offers no indication of who this expert is or where he/she made this conclusion. There’s no footnote, and no source.

On a visit the author made to the translation center at the CIA, he discovers that they do not translate “anti-American tirades” by the Chinese leaders. Why? One of the translators tells him “I have instructions not to translate nationalistic stuff,” because “The China division at headquarters told me that it would just inflame both the conservatives and left-wing human rights advocates here in Washington and hurt relations with China.” Like me, you may be wondering how “left-wing human rights advocates” get their hands on internal CIA translations. But also like me, you will have to take Pillsbury at his word that the CIA refuses to convey vital intelligence about the political outlook of China’s leaders for fear of this information making its way to Code Pink.

Oddly, there are moments when Pillsbury makes it seem as though information that is already public is still secret. For example, he speaks of a “long-valued FBI clandestine asset, a woman

whom I will call Ms. Green” who provided information to the US government on China until she was arrested in 2003 for spying for China. Bizarrely, Pillsbury refers to her throughout the book as “Ms. Green” even though it will be immediately obvious to many that he’s referring to Katrina Leung. One of Pillsbury’s footnotes even references her name. So why the feigned-cloak and dagger?

Chinese-language books that bolster Pillsbury’s thesis that China is more hawkish than we in the West admit or know are “gaining increasing currency in mainland Chinese thought today.” Yet we are not told how he knows this. Are they best sellers? Was Xi Jinping photographed reading one of them? Likewise, the *Global Times*, a highly nationalist CCP-controlled newspaper is “the second or third most popular source of news” among “the inner circle of China’s new president, Xi Jinping.” His proof? He footnotes an article in the *South China Morning Post* that makes no reference to the reading habits of China’s leaders.

Sticking with Pillsbury’s footnotes for a moment, they are filled with errors, misdirection, and puzzling omissions. Pillsbury writes of the 2010 Chinese-language book the *China Dream: The Great Power Thinking and Strategic Positioning of China in the Post-American Age* (which he incorrectly states was published in 2009) by the PLA Colonel Liu Mingfu. “It was [in Liu’s book] that I first spotted a specific written reference to ‘the Hundred-Year Marathon,’” writes Pillsbury. If you were thinking that the footnote to this sentence would lead you to the section in Liu’s book where the “marathon” is mentioned, you’d be wrong. Instead, it directs you to a 2013 *Wall Street Journal* article by Jeremy Page that makes exactly one lone reference to Liu’s marathon, and even here states only that Liu “[argues] that China should aim to surpass the U.S. as the world’s top military power and predicting a marathon contest for global dominion.”

This leaves the reader wondering: did Pillsbury first learn of the “marathon strategy” in the book by Liu, as he clearly indicates in the text, or through the *Wall Street Journal* article? If it’s the former, why not directly cite the page in Liu’s book where the marathon is mentioned?

Similarly, Pillsbury quotes from Liu’s book, but not directly from the Chinese-language version, as one would expect given his excoriation of the West for ignoring the original source material. Instead, he borrows from a 2010 ABC news article, which itself does not provide a citation for the quotes. This is especially odd given that just a few sentences later, Pillsbury writes of “those of us able to read [Liu’s] book in the original Mandarin.” Given the seeming importance of the book to Pillsbury, it is baffling that he nowhere references the original Chinese version, either in main text or in the footnotes, and all quotes from the book come from secondary English sources.

Sometimes Pillsbury cites secondary literature that doesn’t say what he thinks it does. In a discussion of the influence of Darwinism in early 20th century China, Pillsbury writes “But Yan [Fu] made a key error— translating the phrase natural selection as tao tai, or ‘elimination,’ which would come to dominate the Chinese understanding of Darwin’s thought.” Pillsbury’s own footnote immediately tells us that the first half of his sentence is wrong, for it quotes the 1983 book by James Reeves Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin*, as stating that “Just who was responsible [for the translation error] remains unclear.” But the problem with Pillsbury’s sentence doesn’t end

here. In reading the relevant section of Pusey's book that Pillsbury cites to prove the above assertion, it's immediately clear that it was not the mistranslation of "elimination" that Pusey found problematic, but rather "The great mistake," writes Pusey "was to take 'if it vary' to mean 'must change its form.'"

In the very next paragraph, Pillsbury writes:

"Mao's writings were filled with Darwinian ideas. One of the two translators who most inspired Mao concluded that only two races, the yellow and the white, formed the future struggle in which the whites 'had the upper hand' unless the yellow could change its strategy. Even before they discovered the writings of Karl Marx, Mao and his comrades believed that China's survival would depend on a long-term, radical strategy that highlighted the unique traits of the Chinese people." The one footnote for this section comes at the very end, thus leading the reader to believe that the source of the "had the upper hand" quote can be found there, and furthermore, that the quote comes from "one of the two translators who most inspired Mao." Yet the reader would be mistaken on both counts. Instead, the footnote directs us to page 208 of the above-mentioned James Reeves Pusey book, where the author writes, "before he discovered Marx, by his own admission [Mao's] head was filled with the Darwinian ideas of Liang Ch'i-ch'ao." So what of the "upper hand" quote? That can be found on page 196 and is not, as Pillsbury leads us to believe, a direct quote from the still mysterious "translator," but is rather James Reeves Pusey's own summary of one of Liang Ch'i-ch'ao's articles.

Some of the footnotes have no apparent function whatsoever.

Pillsbury writes, "Indeed, written into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China is language that prohibits the nation from becoming a hegemon." The footnote will obviously point the reader to the chapter and verse of the Constitution where this stipulation is made, right? No. Instead it sends you to an article in the *People's Daily* (the official mouthpiece of the CCP) and an article by the Chinese diplomat Dai Bingguo that tells us "To oppose hegemony has been written into China's Constitution and the Constitution of the Communist Party of China," but still fails to indicate exactly where in the Constitution one should look. (Incidentally, the Constitution merely states in its preamble "...China consistently opposes imperialism, hegemonism and colonialism...")

And then there are claims in the main body text which are not supported, or even contradicted, by the footnotes.

Pillsbury writes "When the Chinese engineers designed the [space station], they may have deliberately built it so that it could not interface with its American counterparts. They wanted no cooperation between the United States and China in space." He footnotes a 2011 article on Space.com by Leonard David, where one would naturally expect to find reference to Chinese intransigence on interstellar cooperation. Yet the piece says no such thing. Rather, it notes that Yang Liwei, China's first astronaut "emphasized that China's space station standards and the ISS docking standards do not agree. The unification of standards is the first problem to solve in the effort to carry out future space station cooperation, Yang said, according to China's Xinhua news

agency.” How did Pillsbury reach a conclusion that the Chinese “wanted no cooperation between the United States and China in space” based upon the Space.com article?

On page 125, Pillsbury writes “As *People’s Daily* boasted in 2011, ‘Why is China receiving so much attention now? It is because of its ever-increasing power....Today we have a different relationship with the world and the West: we are no longer left to their tender mercies. Instead we have slowly risen and are becoming their equal.” Again, one would expect the footnote to take the reader to the article in question, but instead Pillsbury points us to post on a website called www.chinascope.org which offers a very brief summary of the piece and offers four translated sentences, three of which Pillsbury quotes. A link to the original piece on the China Scope website is now dead, but I was able to find it after searching for only a few moments.¹ It’s odd that Pillsbury didn’t seek out the original piece, and if he had, he would have found one that is slightly less menacing in tone.

The section China Scope partially translates reads in full:

中国为什么受到世界的重视？因为不断提升的实力。“弱国无外交”，贫弱无地位。1840年，当中国的大门被西方借鸦片战争之机闯入之际，我们哪有机会跟西方谈论平等关系？有的只是仰人鼻息。一块“东亚病夫”牌匾的影子成为中国人的集体记忆。有人把当时的中国称为“睡狮”，这背后，更多表达的是一种无奈的叹息。

如今，我们跟世界、跟西方是另外一种关系：我们不再仰人鼻息，而是慢慢站起，开始跟西方平视。

I would translate this as:

Why does the world pay attention to China? It is because our increasing strength. 'A weak nation can have no diplomacy, a poor and feeble one can have no standing.' In 1840 when the Western powers used the Opium war to thrust open the door to China, where was our opportunity to speak of equal relations [with the West]? We had to rely on others for the air we breathed (仰人鼻息). The shadow of the slogan "sick man of Asia" was to become the collective memory of the Chinese people. Some spoke of China as a "sleeping lion," yet what many of them meant by this was a sigh of helplessness.

But today we have a new type of relations with the world and with the west: we no longer rely on others for the air we breath, but rather we are slowly standing up and have started to be looked upon as equal with the West (开始跟西方平视).

Translation is a obviously a subjective and subtle art, and ten different people might have ten different renderings of a given passage, but the sentences above does do not strike me as particularly offensive, and it seems that the translators at China Scope (listed only as “TGS and

¹评论：中国已拥有和平崛起的实力 is available at <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2011/02-08/2828427.shtml>

AEF”) have attempted to give the piece as aggressive a translation as possible. This of course is why someone of Pillsbury’s reputed Chinese level should always endeavor to find the original source material whenever possible. And considering that Pillsbury’s argument rests heavily on the unwillingness or inability of “experts” in the West to grapple with the Chinese-language debate on these issues, it’s puzzling why he himself relies on so many translations. Indeed, he writes that it is the lack of Chinese language proficiency that “makes it easier for the supposed China ‘experts’ to interpret Chinese messages subjectively in ways that conform to their own beliefs.” That this is precisely that Pillsbury has done with the above passage.

A main thrust of Pillsbury’s argument is that it is the truth of the Chinese machinations have been hidden in plain sight, obscured only by inability of Western China “experts” to decode their writings due to their lack of fluency in Mandarin Chinese. “Unfortunately, the vast majority of so-called China experts in the United States do not speak Chinese beyond a few words – enough to feign competence in the presence of those who do not speak the language fluently.”²

But Pillsbury apparently does speak Chinese, as he reminds us repeatedly throughout the book, and he even offers a primer for his monoglot readers.

In Chinese, “There is no alphabet, and Chinese words aren’t formed by letters. Rather, words are formed by combining smaller words.” If, after reading this, you’re wondering how to extract yourself from the paradox of words being formed by words, and what forms the smaller words that can in turn form other words, you’re not alone. I believe what Pillsbury means is that Chinese words are formed by characters, either in the singular (such as 马, which means horse) or in compound form (for example 电话, which means telephone, and is a combination of the characters for “electricity and “speech”).

And as many know, Chinese is a tonal language, meaning that depending on your inflection, one sound can take on several different meanings. Pillsbury states, “The effect of tones is to give a single word four possible meanings.” Except, of course, when there are more than four possible meanings. Take for example the sound “cheng.” Depending on the tone (and context), it can mean a city, to name something, honesty, to ladle, a rule or a procedure, to multiply, to prop up or support, an orange tree, to purify, to punish, and a deep shade of red, among many other things.³

Pillsbury makes the claim that “The Chinese must talk loudly to make the tonal differences audible,” thus leading the reader to believe that the Chinese are incapable of whispering.

Lastly, Pillsbury casually re-interprets the well established meanings of the Confucian concept of the *da tong* (大同) to give it a meaning that is more menacing. In describing how the Chinese

² He leaves unsaid how one who cannot speak more than a few words can “feign competence” in the presence of someone else that speaks, but not fluently.

³ The Chinese characters mentioned are, in order: 城, 称, 诚, 盛, 程, 乘, 撑, 橙, 澄, 惩, 赫

actually seek “a new global hierarchy in which China is alone at the top,” he writes that *da tong*, which is typically rendered as the “great harmony” and is used to describe a utopian vision of world peace, is “better translated as ‘an era of unipolar dominance.’” Why is it better translated in a way that will overthrow a common translation that has been agreed upon since at least the end of the 19th century? Because “Since 2005, Chinese leaders have spoken at the United Nations and other public forums of their supposed vision of this kind of harmonious world.” Needless to say he offers no footnote for either the radical re-definition of *da tong*, nor for the instances of Chinese leaders articulating “their supposed vision.”

Books that challenge the prevailing view on China are greatly needed. More so when they are written by scholars who have had a deep level of interaction with members of China’s defense establishment. One can hope that such a book will come along in the near future, as it’s clear that *The Hundred-Year Marathon* is too replete with errors to inform.

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