

# How China Builds

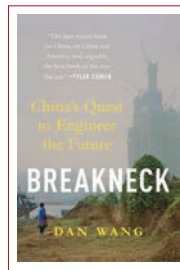
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**IN 1973**, Andrew W. “Andy” Marshall, an economist trained at the University of Chicago and little known outside a small circle of defense intellectuals, was appointed to lead an unconventional office inside the Pentagon: the Office of Net Assessment. At a moment when the Department of Defense was preoccupied with near-term military balances and annual budget battles, Marshall advanced a different way of thinking about strategy. Net assessment would ask how long-term competition actually unfolds—how the United States and its adversaries compare not just in numbers and types of weapons, but in national adaptability, institutional strengths and weaknesses, technological trajectories, and strategic culture.

Hoover History Lab research fellow Dan Wang’s very enjoyable first book, *Breakneck: China’s Quest to Engineer the Future*, fits neatly—if unexpectedly—into Marshall’s intellectual tradition. Advertised as a book about “China’s engineering mindset,” what Wang has actually produced is a blend of autobiography, travelogue, and sociopolitical observation interspersed with comparisons between China and the US. The effect is tantalizing. Wang walks (and sometimes bikes) readers through well-depicted landscapes and cityscapes; pauses to appreciate cultural scenes and to savor culinary delights; and offers statistics, bits of history, and personal anecdotes along the way.

Wang, who was born in China but raised in Canada, is equally evocative in his contemplation of attempts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to use engineering principles to maintain what it defines as a healthy civil society. Here he brings a humanist’s eye to his exploration of the CCP’s efforts to manage the national economy; control population growth and then arrest its decline; accelerate technological innovation; and limit the damaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Wang’s willingness to share personal details throughout makes his analysis warm and affecting. And he is unsparing but not ungenerous in his assessment of the successes and failures, benefits and harms, and comparative advantages of these engineered projects relative to those undertaken by what he characterizes as the “lawyerly” US.

Here, Wang hints at—but stops short of—a deeper analysis. He frequently notes the fundamental difference between



**BREAKNECK**  
China’s Quest  
to Engineer the  
Future

Dan Wang

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*“Wang invites consideration of how governing philosophies lead China to engineer and the US to litigate.”*

the two systems, observing that the US prioritizes pluralism and the protection of individual rights, while China views its citizens in the aggregate. Yet he does not connect these governing philosophies to their logical consequences. Wang thus invites, but does not guide, consideration of how these orientations lead China to engineer and America to litigate, and why they direct the state’s gaze toward certain projects and away from others. As a result, his net assessment is implicit: a portrait of long-term competition between the CCP’s vision of national greatness as something citizens must be directed to sacrifice and strive for, and America’s vision of national greatness as the inevitable outcome of unleashing citizens to pursue individual achievement.

Wang finishes the book hopefully, wishing for both countries to adopt select attributes from the other. He is more optimistic that the US will do so, believing its citizens will embrace the tangible results the engineering mindset can produce but that the CCP will not tolerate the volatile energies of pluralism and individual rights the lawyerly mindset protects. If *Breakneck* is a study in anything, however, it is in the limited control that governments—whether composed of engineers or lawyers—ultimately can exercise over the unruly currents of large, complex, globally interconnected societies. **F&D**

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