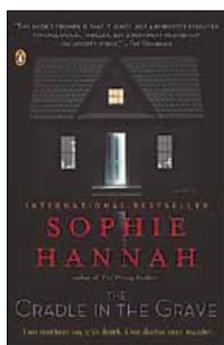


Telling it like it is

Analyst and TV personality Robert Lawrence Kuhn is supportive of China but insists he's only speaking the truth 'wherever it falls'. **Chitralkha Basu** reports.



Sophie Hannah's latest crime thriller.

A promising premise that falls flat

By MICHELLE WIENER
NEW YORK TIMES

There is no denying that Sophie Hannah is a gifted storyteller. Her sharp, smart prose is refreshingly crisp, an unadorned narrative that complements her often far-left-of-center plots and characters.

The premise of her latest novel, *The Cradle in the Grave* (Penguin), involves three mothers accused of murdering their infants. They are now the subject of a documentary produced by an egomaniacal man bent on destroying the career of the medical expert who gave testimony at each woman's trial that led to their conviction.

The producer's assistant, Fliss Benson, receives a mysterious card with 16 numbers on it just as she learns she's about to take over the film's production. And then one of the mothers is murdered, and on her body is a card with the same 16 numbers on it.

Throw into the mix Simon Waterhouse, Charlie Zailer and Detective Inspector Proust — characters from Hannah's other crime thrillers — and it's already almost too much to keep track of. Anyone unfamiliar with these characters is bound to feel unmoored, as Hannah seems to be relying on readers' knowledge of previous books rather than pushing their development. Proust continues to be cartoonishly boorish, and the animosity Waterhouse bears toward him is one of the more stale aspects of this novel.

Fliss, from whose perspective half the book is told, is too whiny to be a sympathetic character, and bears a secret that she repeatedly mentions only to flit away from divulging it. It feels like this was an attempt to add depth to a character who lacks it otherwise, and it fails — the secret is finally revealed far past the point of caring, and it's not nearly as dark or deep — or even technically a secret — as her reluctance to mention it implied.

The pieces of the mystery come together in a way that defies logic and requires implausible leaps of intuition to solve. This is very much a book in which characters serve the plot, but there's nothing evident to suggest that they possess the mental agility and quickness to start from point A, leap over points B and C, and arrive at D.

I've enjoyed Hannah's other Waterhouse-Zailer novels, though I was always aware that I was reading them somewhat compulsively, as though I couldn't help it. I could overlook the sometimes inexplicable plot twists because her writing was so strong and she was uncannily able to plumb the darkest corners of human psychology. This time, however, it's not enough, and her talent is wasted on flat characters and unrealistic situations with artificial resolutions.

The 90th anniversary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in July coincided with a spate of commentary in the Western press — most notably Fareed Zakaria (CNN), Ian Bremmer (Wall Street Journal) — reiterating that China was unlikely to be the next superpower.

Typically, these writers took a cynical view of the projections that China might push past US economic hegemony in the next five years or so and build the political capacity to assume a position of global leadership.

"China is already an economic and political superpower in the perception of many people," says Robert Lawrence Kuhn, international corporate strategist, media personality and adviser to international and Chinese companies on capital markets for more than 20 years. "In today's world, where media makes news more than reports it, perceptions are realities."

"China will only grow in its relative power," he says, hastening to add that for China's leaders, this growth might turn out to be "more of a burden than a blessing."

Kuhn is probably at an advantage over fellow China watchers from the Western media to comment on how Chinese leaders might handle this exponential growth and its inevitable side effects, having interviewed more than 100 Chinese officials holding key positions in the government.

A new, expanded edition of his last book, *How China's Leaders Think: The Inside Story of China's Past, Current and Future Leaders* (John Wiley and Sons), launched recently, busts a few myths about the so-called "China Threat" by allowing its readers access to those entrusted with building the nation and shaping its future.

The first edition, published in December 2009, sold out, which is not surprising given Kuhn's previous China book, *The Man Who Changed China: The Life and Legacy of Jiang Zemin*, the first biography of a living Chinese leader written by a foreigner to be published on the mainland in 2005, was a bestseller.

So how did he manage to get Chinese leaders to share their opinions about governance and strategy freely with him?

"For over 20 years, I have been bringing the true story of China, as I see it, to the world. My long track record, both public media and private activities, are well known," Kuhn says.

Indeed, Kuhn, who has a PhD in anatomy and brain research from the University of California at Los Angeles and is an MIT Sloan School of Management alumnus, is better known as a media personality — a contributor to CNBC, Euronews, BBC, Bloomberg, BusinessWeek and Forbes and the producer-host of the popular TV series *Closer To Truth*, and the award-winning documentary *In Search of China*.

What marks out his writing from the glut of books on the Chinese establishment from a foreigner's perspective is the combination of empirical evidence and a rare sensitivity.

Some of his ideas may at first seem somewhat radical, but Kuhn also provides the perspective and the insight of an old China hand to make sense of these.

For instance, he suggests that China in the last few years has acquired democratic characteristics and nuances that are just as good as some of the world's functioning democracies. This could at first sight seem odd, given that China is often perceived by the rest of the world not to be democratic.

"The freedom of the Chinese people in their personal lives and social structures has expanded enormously. I see continuing progress as the CPC encourages intra-party democracy and the Chinese people increasingly participate in the process of governance, such as through new media."

The Party is "also committed to bringing about democracy, transparency, rule of law and human rights". What is the magic touch that China's leaders possess that can make these factors coexist, given that similar experiments by other left-leaning governments in the world have failed?

"I would say that China's leaders have



PAN ENZHAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Robert Lawrence Kuhn has been dedicated to bringing the true story of China to the world over the past 20 years.

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ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN
AUTHOR OF HOW CHINA'S LEADERS
THINK

a visionary goal, but China's democracy is a unique experiment still early in its developmental progress, the outcome of which we may not know for decades," Kuhn says. Rejecting the "left/right" tag, Kuhn prefers to call the Chinese government an "optimization government", as epitomized by Deng Xiaoping's black cat/white cat aphorism: As long as the cat's able to catch mice, it doesn't matter what color its coat is.

David O'Brien, who is partner in charge of communications and marketing at Ernst & Young in New York, one of the world's noted accounting firms, feels what marks Kuhn apart from fellow China-watchers is the "subtlety in his commentary on the societal differences between China and the West to help build a bridge of understanding."

On the one hand, says O'Brien, Kuhn traces the evolution of Chinese leadership from its founding fathers to the present generation, and in doing so "reflects both the progress and growing complexity of China's government and business institutions taking their role on the global stage."

On the other hand, he "outlines the breadth of reform and applies his analysis to the critical topics of culture, banking reform, healthcare, education, media, foreign policy and political reform. The breadth of analysis is very bold."

For instance, Deng Xiaoping's notion of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" — the maxim defining the onset of reforms in 1978 that still forms the cornerstone of economic policies — Kuhn contends, has taken on yet more color and dimensions since its inception.

"What this now means is fostering equality and fairness, and posing a utopia of abundant material goods in the far future — not a rigid economic system of collective ownership and central planning," writes Kuhn, clarifying that "the Party's role in leading

China is more fundamental than any specific socialist or communist precept it espouses."

Not surprisingly, Kuhn's optimism about China's future and his faith in the Chinese leadership ("first-rate in comparison to their international peers") is often perceived to be propaganda on behalf of the Chinese government.

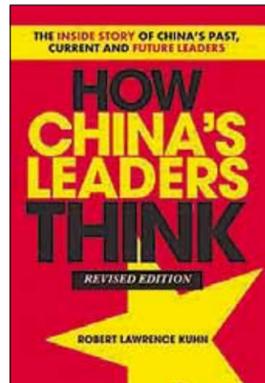
Kuhn says he would normally welcome such criticism as at the end of the day these "focus attention on China and its complexities". But recently, after a journalist, Paul Gregory, attacked him on Forbes.com, calling him "a paid advisor to the Chinese government", Kuhn has drafted a rejoinder, which he allowed China Daily to see before its publication.

He writes: "I am indeed an advisor to the Chinese government, and have been for over 22 years, but Gregory trumpets that I am paid when I am not. I am not being paid by the Chinese government; I have never been paid by the Chinese government. (I joke that when I needed the money, China didn't have any, and now that they have money, I luckily don't need any.) Full disclosure: I am paid by foreign companies that do business in China."

"In fact, my critique of China is directed at China and its leaders, to help China improve, not to fool foreigners. A true friend tells the truth. And this truth is in plain sight and not hiding: I assert that for the CPC to maintain its ruling position it must expose its own errors with candor and completeness."

Indeed, reading Kuhn's book, one finds that China's failings in certain areas — an inability to maintain a squeaky-clean image in the international arena when it comes to pollution management, for example — is not swept under the carpet.

"I do not seek to beautify China or be balanced in my approach. To the best of my always-limited capacities, I seek truth, wherever it falls," Kuhn says.



Revised edition of Kuhn's bestseller.

“what they say

The author has interviewed more than 100 Chinese leaders and shared his views on the thinking of the Chinese leaders of the next generation. This book deserves a wide readership.

I would agree with Kuhn's contention that China today is run by those who are best prepared and most dedicated. China draws on its long tradition of meritocracy and has largely established a system of selecting competent and dedicated leaders, especially at the provincial and ministerial level and above.

ZHANG WEIWEI, professor,
Geneva School of Diplomacy and
International Relations

I absolutely agree with Kuhn's assessment that China needs to be viewed by the rest of the world as "an opportunity". The progress toward a better and more pervasive sense of "opportunity" will only be furthered through greater understanding, honest dialogue and respect of differences.

Leaders on both sides (China and the West) need to set the tone of public dialogue and focus on the possibilities of partnership. There are a multitude of examples where constructive dialogue has yielded massive increases in societal progress, not only in China's relations with the West, but also with the developing world.

Focusing on opportunity will cause impediments of progress to be more quickly ferreted out. In so doing, the best attributes of each society can be brought forward for constructive change and progress.

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