

REVIEW

Beijing's Power Brokers Wouldn't Surprise Robert Moses

An American classic offers fresh insights into China.

By **Bob Davis**, a reporter who covered U.S.-China economic relations for decades for the *Wall Street Journal*.



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 **China**

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I bought a paperback version of Robert Caro's *The Power Broker* nearly 50 years ago when I was a young law school dropout sick of living in the traffic-wracked New York

City that Robert Moses, the subject of the book, created. Like many others, I placed the book prominently on my bookshelf and left it unread. But new to retirement and full of vows, I decided this fall to finally read all 1,246 pages.

Yet the story that Caro told wound up reminding me as much of Beijing as it did of New York. I spent more than 20 years covering U.S.-China economic relations for the *Wall Street Journal*, including a stint living in Beijing from 2011 to 2014.

For the uninitiated, Robert Moses was the most powerful man in New York City for 40 years, though he never won an election. He ran 12 different city and state authorities—at the same time—through which he built highways, bridges, beaches, stadiums, power plants, housing projects, the Lincoln Center, the United Nations, and on and on. These constructions have come to define New York, for good and bad. *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* examines how he did it, how he “Got Things Done,” as Caro says, always using capital letters.

Caro crafted a morality tale. The young poetry-writing reformer who vowed that patronage was “the worst form of briber” became the patronage boss of bosses who bent politicians to his will, trampled opponents, and built the projects of his dreams. Eventually, though, he is brought down by hubris and becomes an object of derision for burying New York in concrete, traffic jams, and shattered neighborhoods.

Caro meant to demolish Moses's standing but wound up immortalizing him instead. *The Power Broker* has won publishing's highest accolade, sold more than 500,000 copies and, according to Caro's publicist, Paul Bogaards, continues to sell 10,000 annually. *Straight Line Crazy*, a play about Moses, opened in New York in October after a run in London. No one is producing plays about one of the forgotten heroes of Caro's book, former New York Gov. Al Smith, who seemed to genuinely try to help the city's poor.

But the book is also an exploration of how to accumulate and preserve power in a thoroughly corrupt political system. Here the lessons are as relevant for China as they are for the United States. Of course, there are many differences between the totalitarian wannabees in Beijing and the politicians running the United States' damaged

democracy. But Caro is mainly writing about a U.S. system that was dominated by Tammany Hall's Carmine DeSapio, the Bronx's Charles Buckley, and other local political bosses, and here the comparisons between the United States and China are striking.

Moses's main insight: In a system where corruption is rampant, everyone is vulnerable, either because they offer bribes, receive them, or know that bribes were taking place even if they didn't play along. According to Caro's book, Moses was uninterested in personal wealth and was supported for years by his wealthy mother. But he knew how to use money to get what he wanted—power—which he accumulated by awarding construction, insurance, and legal contracts, often without competitive bids, to those seeking riches. He counted on the recipients to back his projects and turned on them viciously if they disobeyed. He kept dossiers and leaked the contents when it served his purpose, a practice familiar to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) operatives.

Moses thrived through an unspoken social contract similar to one

made by the leaders of China following the death of Mao Zedong in the 1970s. In exchange for political power, Moses promised to improve the living standards of ordinary people. He did this through what was then called public works and what we now call infrastructure. Before Moses, New York's infrastructure was in such a shambles that the main link between Manhattan and Long Island, the 59th Street Bridge, didn't even have marked lanes.

Extraordinarily competent and determined, Moses tied together the New York metropolitan area with bridges and highways. He created and ran independent governing authorities that gave him a big source of funding through bridge and tunnel tolls. He often didn't need approval or money from elected officials for his projects, although he was a master at obtaining federal transportation and housing funds. Moses saw himself as improving the lives of middle-class New Yorkers who, thanks to him, could drive on new highways across new bridges from Manhattan and the Bronx to the beaches he created in Long Island, and they could enjoy family time in the dozens of parks he developed in the region.

China's leaders had a similar arrangement. They deepened their power by focusing on improving the living standards of ordinary Chinese citizens and used construction to do so. Moses expanded New York City outward toward rural areas; Chinese leaders did the opposite. They built highways, trains, and buses to transport peasants from villages across China to new cities and export factories in southern China. Through infrastructure spending, they created an industrial working class and helped China prosper.

Moses created wealth by pouring concrete. The scale of China's construction surely would have impressed him. In the words of short-story writer Te-Ping Chen, China is the "land of big numbers." China used more cement between 2011 and 2013 than the U.S. used in the entire 20th century. It built enough subsidized apartments in the 2010s to house the entire population of Germany—even if they were more likely to go to the well-connected than the actual poor. At the beginning of the 21st century, China had no high-speed railways; now it has the world's largest network, replacing many of the achingly slow trains that earlier crisscrossed the country.

In some ways, though, Moses's accomplishments are even more remarkable. In a democracy, opposition can often stall projects. In my Washington, D.C., neighborhood, for instance, a plan to build apartment houses on the site of a shuttered supermarket has been blocked for a decade. Twenty miles away, a subway from Dulles Airport to downtown finally opened this month, 60 years after planners proposed the link. Moses managed to derail or bulldoze opposition and build his highways and bridges ahead of schedule.

"It was no accident that most of the world's great roads—ancient and modern alike—had been associated with totalitarian regimes, that it took a great Khan to build the great roads of Asia ... and a Hitler and a Mussolini to build the Autobahn and autostrade of Europe," Caro wrote.

But the downsides of rapid development and unwillingness to listen to dissenting voices are also evident under Moses and in China. In both places, the

resulting structures were often ugly, repetitive, and anti-human. Moses built hundreds of New York City playgrounds that had the same charmless asphalt design. He replaced tenements with low-income housing projects so ugly that people living there, wrote novelist James Baldwin, hated them “almost as much as the policemen, and this is saying a great deal.”

As Caro made clear, Moses was disdainful of Black people. Had Caro written the book today, I imagine he would have branded Moses a racist. He built few schoolyards or parks in Black neighborhoods, granted few permits to Black groups that wanted to charter buses to Jones Beach, and effectively segregated the beach by assigning the buses and Black lifeguards to remote areas. Black people evicted from poor neighborhoods were moved to other slums, deepening the overcrowding. Similarly, disdain and outright racism toward minorities plays an important part in the Chinese government's decision to herd Uyghurs into so-called reeducation camps in Xinjiang, and to place the region under extraordinary surveillance.

Baldwin would have recognized almost any Chinese city with its endless blocks of soulless apartment houses and few green spaces. Even the party now recognizes the failures. “‘Ugly buildings’ can often be seen during 30 years of rapid urbanization in China, highlighting the backwardness and blind imitation of some designers,” *People's Daily*, the party mouthpiece, wrote in 2012. Last year, China's economic planning agency tried, ineffectively, to ban further construction of them through regulation.

The highways that Moses built, supposedly to free the middle class to move to the suburbs or relax on the beaches, became tied up in endless traffic jams. Although it was evident early on that new highways created new demand for cars, which clogged the roads further and turned highways into the bane of New Yorkers' commuting existence, Moses couldn't be stopped from building additional ones.

China didn't learn any of the lessons. Beijing had five ring roads (confusingly numbered from the second onward) when I left in 2014 and was building its sixth. It also has nightmarish traffic. The 15-mile trip from the Beijing airport to the second ring road

where I worked could easily take 90 minutes. Every so often, the Chinese press would run stories of traffic jams around the country that stretched for days. I was stuck in one once where my cabdriver weaved in and out of breakdown lanes until we reached a truck that was engulfed in flames so intense it seemed like it was part of an action movie. There was no fire engine in sight.

Moses's development model also led to the destruction of neighborhoods and settled ways. Caro details any number of Moses follies, including the mass evictions in the Bronx's East Tremont neighborhood to build the Cross-Bronx Expressway in the 1940s and '50s. Residents of the lower-middle-class Jewish neighborhood were given 90 days to move out, although Moses offered little help in finding new housing. When they hired an engineer to come up with an alternative route and begged him to move the planned expressway by just two blocks, he refused. If he compromised once on this project, he would be pressed to compromise again.

"This route will be the backbone for traffic for centuries after a few objecting tenants have disappeared from the scene," Moses told the press, which at the time largely idealized him as New York's great builder. Would any CCP official have phrased it differently when they were busy evicting peasants from their homes to clear the land and sell it for a profit to developers building housing projects?

Moses moved quickly to start work on projects before opposition could form, in the same way that Chinese officials bulldoze neighborhoods overnight to make room for new construction. He monopolized power by holding so many different positions and doling out so many contracts. If a mayor had the temerity to threaten to fire him from his city posts—and none did for decades—he still had power over parks, highways, and other projects conferred by his state jobs and by his control of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority.

His employees and former employees—"Moses men," Caro called them—also staffed agencies throughout the region and carried out his projects. In the same way, Chinese President Xi Jinping used the recent National Party Congress to pack the party's senior

ranks with allies from his days in Zhejiang province and elsewhere, dubbed by the international press as the “New Zhejiang Army.”

Eventually, the huge difference between the United States and China ultimately did Moses in. In a democracy—even a corrupt one—public opinion matters enormously.

For years, the New York press lionized Moses as the incorruptible civil servant who worked tirelessly to build a new New York. He spent many hours courting reporters and their bosses and was especially close to the owners of the *New York Times*, which regularly editorialized in his favor.

When public opinion turned against Moses, his power was clipped. The change began with fights involving Central Park, including one in which West Side mothers rallied to prevent him from turning a play area into a parking lot for the Tavern on the Green restaurant, which had a sweetheart deal with Moses. As reporters finally started looking into how Moses did business, they turned up the sole-source contracts awarded to politicians and even some mobsters. Labeling the Central Park protesters—wealthy, politically sophisticated women—“childless women howling about their non-existent children” was too much even for Moses’s political pals.

In the early 1960s, after Moses turned 70, he finally met his match in New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, whose family bankrolled the state Republican Party and whose ambitions to build parks, transportation, and universities equaled that of Moses. Rockefeller eased him out of his most important jobs and started Moses’s descent. When Moses’s leadership of the 1964 World’s Fair produced one disaster after another and a load of red ink, his image was shattered, along with his power.

Moses had a 40-year run, but even a man of his enormous energy was mortal. (He died at 92.) The CCP is now 101 years old, with no end in sight. Unlike Moses, the CCP also has no domestic opposition to correct the errors it makes.

Moses went on much longer than he should have. He built highway after highway when it made no sense to do so. He destroyed neighborhood after neighborhood without creating better housing for the people he displaced. But public criticism and opposition finally reined him in. *The Power Broker* is a tale of New York, not China. But the checks and balances lacking in China's system become clear from reading about Moses's reign in New York.

It's not that public opinion doesn't count in China, but it plays a much less important and diminishing role. When two high-speed trains collided near Wenzhou in 2011, killing 40 people, for instance, local authorities buried parts of the trains—literally covering them up. At that time, Chinese Internet users took photos and publicized the efforts, one of a number of missteps that led to the dissolution of the Railways Ministry two years later. But the space for public dissent on the Internet and elsewhere has vastly diminished under Xi.

These days, China's zero-COVID policy has been widely criticized internationally. But it has had almost no impact. Any domestic criticism is quickly squashed. Surveillance cameras and scanning stations keep track of the population.

The Power Broker isn't an easy read. It's long, dense, and filled with the names of city officials who were never household names and are now largely forgotten. The writing is also often florid. "Shanahan's nostrils twisted to a single aroma: the smell of money," isn't an atypical sentence. But it is a journalistic masterpiece. Caro's reporting detail and energy is bound to make any journalist who isn't Bob Woodward feel lazy. The book also made me long for the time when the worst thing U.S. politicians did was steal, and newspaper stories could regularly bring them down. Moses was a lot of things, but he wasn't the threat to the survival of U.S. democracy we see now.

One tip, though, for new readers. If you, like me, have had your copy of *The Power Broker* for decades, be very careful when opening it to read. The glue in the binding of mine had long ago dried up. The book fell apart in my hands. I had to use thick Scotch

storage tape in a dozen places to hold it together. Now, though, when anyone sees my copy of *The Power Broker* on a Zoom call, they will know I have read it.

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Bob Davis is a reporter who covered U.S.-China economic relations for decades for the *Wall Street Journal*. He is the co-author of *Superpower Showdown: How the Battle Between Trump and Xi Threatens a New Cold War*.
X: [@bobdavis187](https://twitter.com/bobdavis187)