

BOOK TALK

Dan Wang on Engineers vs. Lawyers

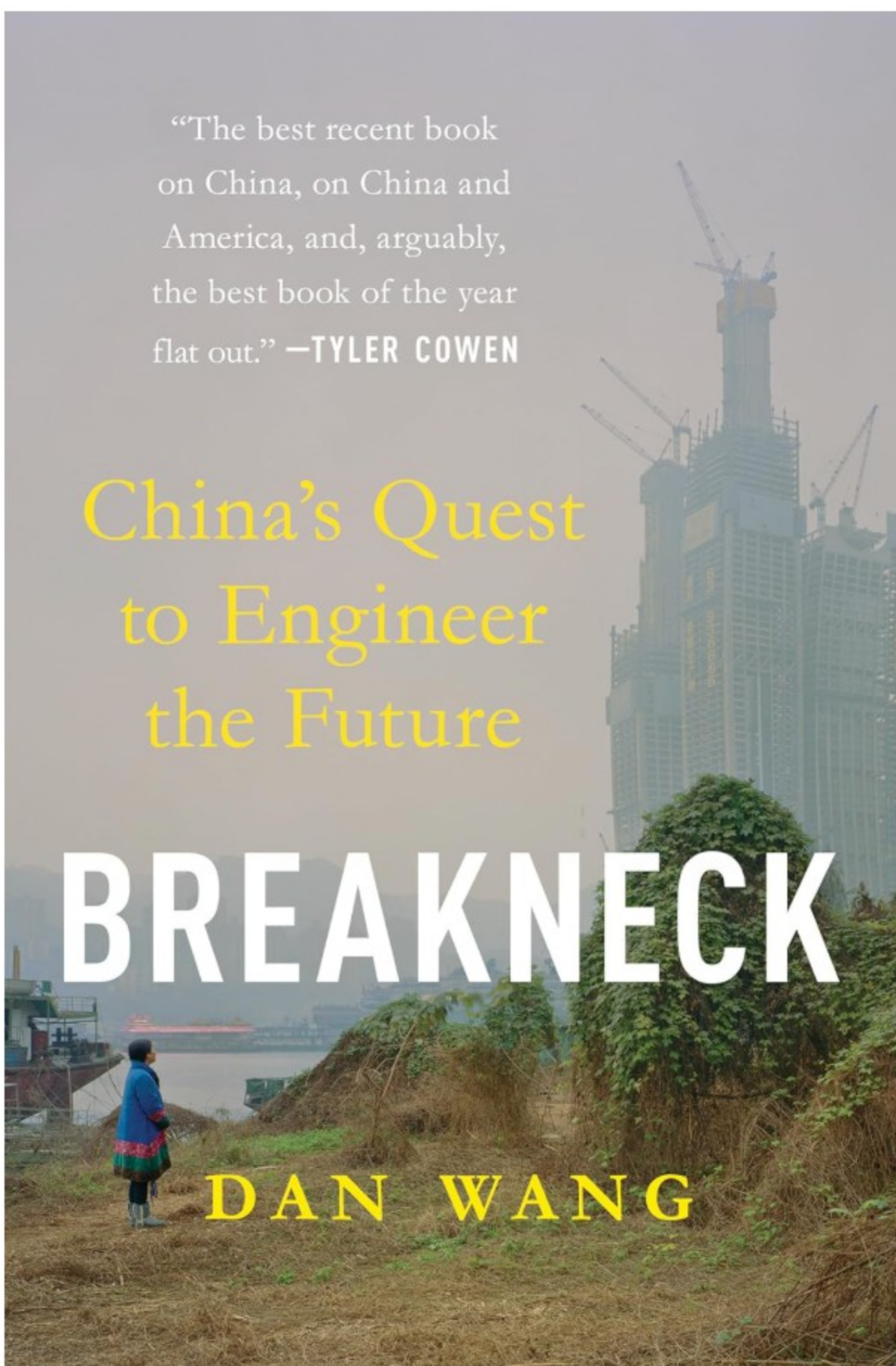
The technology analyst discusses his new book "Breakneck," explaining what America's lawyerly society could learn from China's quest to engineer the future.

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POLITICS



The phrase “developing country” is often pejorative. It conjures images of dust, concrete, corruption and a reckless dash towards modernity. But it also connotes change and the palpable sense of a brighter future. Is China a developing country? Can the United States still develop? These are a few of the questions the writer and analyst Dan Wang probes in his new book *Breakneck: China’s Quest to Engineer the Future* (W. W. Norton, August 2025). In an [excerpt](#) of *Breakneck* published at *China Books Review*, Wang put forward a new paradigm to understand the competition between the People’s Republic and the United States: China is an engineering state, where a sledgehammer is the tool for all jobs; the U.S. is a lawyerly society, where everything is gavelled to a halt. The book takes readers from the rise of China’s tech behemoths to the disasters of its One Child and Zero-Covid policies. Parts reportage, philosophy, memoir and history, *Breakneck* makes a fascinating argument about the future of both nations.



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Last week, we were delighted to host Dan Wang at Asia Society to discuss *Breakneck*. Can an efficient but authoritarian engineering society learn from the pluralism and liberty of a lawyerly one? And can the lawyers in America’s elite make room for more engineers? In conversation with Julian Gewirtz, a former senior official in the Biden administration, Wang answered those questions and more:



“It’s unfortunate that the U.S. is turning into some of the worst aspects of China ... What we have in America is a move towards authoritarianism without the good stuff.”

— *Dan Wang*

Speakers



Dan Wang is a research fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover History Lab. He was formerly a fellow at the Yale Law School’s Paul Tsai China Center and technology analyst at Gavekal Dragonomics. Wang is the author of *Breakneck* (2025) and writes an annual newsletter at his [website](#). He was born in Toronto, lived in Hong Kong, Beijing and Shanghai, and is currently based between Ann Arbor and Palo Alto.



Dr. Julian Gewirtz is a Senior Research Scholar at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. He served in multiple roles over four years in the Biden administration, including Senior Director for China and Taiwan Affairs at the National Security Council and Deputy China Coordinator at the State Department. Gewirtz is the author of *Unlikely Partners* (2017), *Never Turn Back* (2022) and *Your Face My Flag* (2022), a poetry collection.

The video of this talk was also published at [Asia Society](#). ■