Ties Dams – Ingrid d'Hooghe – Lily Sprangers (Eds.)

Undercurrents

Essays below the surface of China's geopolitics

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EDITED BY

Ties Dams

Ingrid d'Hooghe

Lily Sprangers

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Leen Vervaeke

Vincent K.L. Chang

Jeroen de Kloet

Heleen Mees

Roel Sterckx

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On the cover image

Zheng Lu (郑路) (born 1978 in Inner Mongolia, China) is an artist based in Beijing. Zheng Lu studied at Lu Xun Fine art Academy from 1998 to 2003 before continuing to Beijing's prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts from 2004 until 2007. While still in school Zheng won the LVMH Prize which provided the artist with three months training at The École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, ENSBA, Paris. Zheng has mainly produced sculpture and installation work with steel structure, and also two-dimensional, multimedia, stage and public art. In 2017 he presented his exposition called "Undercurrent" at Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York. For the works in this series, Zheng culled text from *Appreciation of Still Water* by Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi.

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The Clingendael Institute
P.O. Box 93080
2509 AB The Hague
The Netherlands

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Contributing authors

In order of appearance

Leen Vervaeke is a journalist for various media outlets in the Netherlands and Belgium. She has been based in Beijing as a correspondent since 2018. In 2019, she reported on the protests in Hongkong. In early 2020, she was one of the very few Western journalists in Wuhan at the start of the Covid-pandemic. Unable to return to her home in Beijing, she was evacuated by the French military, to return to China in March of the same year. In 2012, she published *De Jasmijnrevolutie* (Meulenhoff), her first-hand account of the beginnings of the Arab Spring in Tunisia.

Dr Vincent K.L. Chang is an historian and assistant professor of the history and international relations of modern China at the Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS) and a senior fellow of the LeidenAsiaCentre. His teaching and research focus on the history of China's international relations, nation-building and national identity, and contemporary Chinese diplomacy in East Asia and Europe. He is based in Leiden, the Netherlands.

Prof. Jeroen de Kloet is a cultural theorist and Professor in Globalisation Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Since 2019, he is also affiliated to the State Key Lab of Media Convergence and Communication of the Communication University of China in Beijing under the 1000 talent scheme. Since 2015 he is a regular visiting scholar at the Beijing Film Academy. His work focuses on the cultural implications of globalization, with a special interest in contemporary China. He is based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Dr Heleen Mees is an economist, laywer, opinion writer and author of *The Chinese Birdcage: How China's Rise Almost Toppled the West* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). She's a columnist for de Volkskrant and Project Syndicate. Mees' work has appeared in newspapers and magazines including Foreign Policy, The New York Times, The Financial Times and Le Monde. She is based in New York, US.

Prof. Roel Sterckx FBA is a sinologist and anthropologist. He is the Joseph Needham Professor of Chinese History, Science, and Civilization at Cambridge University, and a fellow of Clare College. In Chinese publications he is known as Hu Side 胡司德. He is the author of *Chinese Thought. From Confucius to Cook Ding* (Pelican Books, 2020). He is based in Cambridge, UK.

Editors

Ties Dams is Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute.

Lily Sprangers is former Managing Director of the Leiden Asia Centre.

Dr Ingrid d'Hooghe is Senior Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute and coordinator of the Clingendael China Centre.

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How to Cross a River

Introducing Undercurrents

Ties Dams

Three men crossing rivers

We know of undercurrents as the streams below the surface that drag you astray when you try to cross a river. Enveloped in the literal lies the metaphorical definition: according to the Cambridge Dictionary, 'an emotion, belief, or characteristic of a situation that is hidden and usually negative or dangerous but that has some effect'.

It is undeniable that rivers are being crossed in the present geopolitical landscape. Russia's President Putin crossed his Rubicon when he sent his men into Ukraine's Donbas. His campaign to traverse and control the river Donets in May 2022 failed to follow the straight line that he and his strategists laid out, as did this entire war. Putin forgot that crossing a river is almost never so easy. There are always undercurrents that lead one astray.

China's President Xi is crossing rivers too, if not yet his Rubicon. Xi is testing the waters of the Taiwan Strait, with the world watching if or when he will go into the deep end. US President Biden has done his part to clear up the muddy waters of cross-strait relations in his various off-the-cuff, then retracted, then repeated statements of military support for Taiwan if Xi does take the plunge.

Unlike Putin, however, Xi and Biden seem to know that crossing a river today is not as clear-cut as it once was for Julius Caesar. Caesar's decision to violate the Rubicon red line showed a clear point of no return: *alea iacta est*. Putin has cast his die. Xi and Biden are still trying to feel the undercurrents that determine their fate.

This introduction deigns not to speculate on the secret thoughts of Xi and Biden, but rather attempts to distil some of the undercurrents that flow through the essays that follow. Because, we, too, European observers and interpreters of China's evolving role on the world stage, want to know what underlying emotions,

beliefs or characteristics run the show. We want to know the river in all its depths before anyone crosses a Rubicon.

But how to make sense of those undercurrents? How to see what is hidden?

One paradox of understanding

When it comes to China, that question is becoming harder to answer. Mind you, it was never easy. China-watching has been an esoteric European occupation since at least the Jesuit missions. Yet in the current geopolitical climate, researchers, diplomats and politicians find themselves struggling increasingly with what we may call a paradox of understanding.

The paradox follows a logic thus: when tensions between states rise, the need to understand their underlying motivations becomes greater, but the channels through which to gain that understanding often break down.

Channels of understanding between Beijing and Washington have all but completely dried up. The recent balloon incident caused the Biden administration to cancel US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's trip to Beijing—a long-awaited, high-level meeting after Biden and Xi agreed during the G20 summit in Bali in 2022 to ease bilateral tensions and reopen diplomatic channels. The balloon incident reminded us of a time when the paradox was absolute: the Cold War, when US and Russian strategists had little choice but to interpret one another's intentions from afar. If the Cold War taught us anything, it is that the paradox inevitably leads to dangerous mistakes.

The paradox is at work in Sino-European relations too. We saw it happening in the exchange of sanctions between the EU and China in March 2021, when China not only targeted government bodies and officials, but also independent researchers. China sanctioned those who were helping the world to understand it.

The essays collected in this volume were composed by the authors without knowledge of one another. The point was to invite independent minds to address what they saw as the underlying, often unseen changes in China's relationship to the world. The editors neither demanded nor expected coherence, let alone agreement, among the journalist, historian, economist, cultural theorist or philosopher. The intention was, and is, to celebrate diversity of thought.

And yet all the essays strike me as answering to that paradox of understanding: when tensions rise, and direct exchanges become more difficult, we need to dig deeper and persevere in our attempt to understand what is increasingly obscured. All the essays in their own way advocate for or display a belief in the importance of broadly embedded, context-heavy and deeply grounded knowledge of China as the foundation of more applied research, or indeed political and diplomatic practice.

From wherever we begin to look, we should not just observe from afar how these exalted and fearsome men cross rivers, but also attempt to feel the undercurrents that will in the end determine their fate.

Five responses to the paradox

Journalist Leen Vervaeke lived through the paradox of understanding perhaps most viscerally of all the contributors. She was one of a small contingent of foreign correspondents in Wuhan at the outbreak of the pandemic, and was one of the few left in China during the twelve days of protest in November 2022. Her *petite histoire* relates the challenge of reporting from China in the current climate—no mean feat under the general circumstances of censorship and political control of information, but a tremendous task during lockdown. In her essay, she introduces us to her response to the paradox: the 'whisper circuit' of local gossip that helps her interpret the value of political events beneath the surface of propaganda and spin.

Vervaeke raises a difficult question for diplomats and researchers alike: in post-Covid China, can we still access that whisper circuit, and can we rely on it for analysis? For researchers, especially young researchers like me, it is becoming harder to establish such a network of informal contacts in China that can help interpret the realities behind policy documents, leadership speeches and news events.

Can government and research collaborate to cultivate these informal channels of understanding? Or is the more fundamental issue at play here that we are losing trust in our objective interpretative abilities of informal, contextual knowledge in the face of growing worries about Chinese influence campaigns? Can we trust the whisper circuit, or are we merely listening to a hushed echo chamber?

Vervaeke's sober look at the drama of Covid in China reminds us of her great Sinologist countryman, Simon Leys, who said:

> Whenever people wonder 'What is the truth?' usually it is because the truth is just under their noses—but it would be very inconvenient to acknowledge it.[1]

Historian Vincent K.L. Chang asks to what extent history helps us overcome the paradox. He weaves both the personal and the political into his narrative: tracing back his family's history in Chongqing during the Second World War, he discovers how strongly the official records on that part of Chinese history have been altered along with changes in China's politics. If Vervaeke reports on writing the 'first draft of history', Chang reflects on the many drafts that follow. Chang shows how, in spite of Xi's repeated denunciation of what he calls 'historical nihilism' and his insistence on the 'correct' view of history, the Chinese state as a 'memory monopolist' is keenly aware of the power of history as an agile narrative.

To paraphrase Faulkner, the past is never dead: it is not even past yet.[2] To Xi, the past is very much in present play. When it comes to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and even in his Silk Road narratives, history is live ammo to Xi. Moreover, we ought not to forget that Europe features in Xi's histories. When competing for influence among African and Latin American countries with his global development, security and indeed civilisation initiatives, Xi is positioning China as the gatekeeper for a post-Western world order, drawing on the latent grievances that many an audience holds *vis-à-vis* the history of European colonialism.

Trying to rectify Xi's 'correct' view of history—we can see this logic behind the burgeoning field of European counter-disinformation policies, diplomatic back-and-forth and many a scathing think tank analysis of Chinese Communist Party rhetoric—may be missing the point. The point is rather that Xi's 'correct' histories are shaping our world, because his power is. His interpretation of China's narrative, his longing for Great Unity, is not just a literary exercise. It is a story composed with the force of fighter jets over the Taiwan Strait and nerve gas in the streets of Central Kowloon. If we are to compete with Xi's histories, the

1 S. Leys, *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays* (New York, NY: New York Review Books Classics, 2011).

2 From *Requiem for a Nun*.

challenge is not to rebuke his narrative, but to project an alternative, and lend it power.

Cultural theorist Jeroen de Kloet touches upon a similar contradiction as Chang: between the inherently ambiguous and diverse nature of Chinese identities on the one hand and the pressure—from inside and out—to reduce Chinese identity to a singular unit on the other. For de Kloet, overcoming the paradox seems to equal resisting reductive reasoning. There simply is no 'China'—however eagerly Xi, or indeed his Western counterparts, may want there to be so. How often do we not talk of 'what China aims to do' in debates on the meaning of Chinese foreign policy?

De Kloet's point of departure is not geopolitics, but instead cinema, pitting the singularly minded Chinese blockbusters and the ambiguities of contemporary Chinese art-house cinema against one another. De Kloet's story is one of irony. It is the *Wolf Warrior* movie franchise that inspires anti-Western rhetoric by so-called *Wolf Warrior* diplomats; the franchise itself, however, is an unapologetic exhibition of American Hollywood aesthetics. In fact, according to de Kloet, we may wonder whether Xi's China Dream is rather a move in the competition against, or a simulacrum of, the American Dream?

The ironic quality of Sino-American relations resonates in the essay by economist Heleen Mees. Mees argues that when it comes to international economic relations, China and the United States have come full circle. After championing the integration of China into the global economic order in 2001, the US now aims to decouple China from the world.

Mees observes that this change of heart is not just a result of China catching up with the US too quickly for comfort, but really the West projecting its own failure to protect its part of society that sustained losses from globalisation, leading to populist revolts. Mees is a structuralist: her answer to the paradox involves looking at economic dynamics that underlie the more easily observable political and cultural events.

In my reading, Mees's account of China's economic ascent shows that China confronts the West with our own contradictions; China is not the fundamental cause of our woes. In the increasingly heated political debate on China across Europe, this is a nuance all too often lost. It may not be China's rise per se, but rather the inability of the European socio-economic model to share equitably the

profits and losses of that rise that is causing the backlash against it. Competing with China, then, may involve more than confronting China's ascent: it should point policymakers towards dealing with structural inequality and the loss of trust in democratic institutions at home.

We may want to reduce our dependencies on China when it comes to rare-earth metals, investments and high-tech, but who should bear the costs of decoupling? Decoupling, after all, is synonymous with inflation. If we are to reopen mines in Europe to dig for lithium, will the social unrest that ensues make Europe more or less competitive as a social model with China? Can we define a shared narrative of progress for Europe beyond derisking and decoupling? And if we cannot, is it not a homegrown narrative of decay that we should be fighting, rather than China's rise?

This collection of essays ends with a contribution by philosopher Roel Sterckx. We end with Sterckx because his piece feels like the keystone of our undercurrent arc: his essay digs deep into the history of Chinese political thought and directly relates it to China's current geopolitical strategies, without reverting to the tired stereotypes de Kloet warns us about, and without forgetting the naked pragmatism that has clothed Chinese emperors since eternity.

In so doing, Sterckx reminds us of a superficially simple, but all too vital, realisation: namely, that with the ascent of China to superpower status, the world in which we live is profoundly shaped by a Moloch of distinct making. Chinese interests, Chinese traditionalism and the centuries-old, never-ending story of striving for a Great Chinese Unity are not just driving Chinese geopolitics; no, these undercurrents are a driving force in the world at large.

Below the surface: four undercurrents

Our authors have all answered the paradox of understanding in their own way. Can we find undercurrents that flow through the contributions? In answering this question, an editor is inevitably cheating, imposing order on what was to be an organised chaos. The richness of the essays, moreover, makes a definitive interpretation of their shared insights impossible. All an editor can do is share personal insights—so far, the disclaimer.

An undercurrent, for our present intents and purposes, would have to be a belief, emotion or characteristic that has a profound effect on the current situation of China in the world, but one that usually remains hidden, or neglected in diplomatic practice or research into the geopolitics of China. Defining an undercurrent, then, implies reflecting on the kind of picture that diplomats and researchers paint of China, and calling out what is all too often missing. With this view in mind, at least four undercurrents come to the surface.

First, I see an undercurrent of *irony*—in particular between China and the United States. These two superpowers are increasingly prone to shaping a bipolar world in which they narrate one another as Manichean opposites. Ironically, in so doing, they mimic one another's strategies. To wit: Decoupling and Dual Circulation; China's Belt and Road versus the G7's Build Back Better World initiatives; Xi's Global Civilisation Initiative versus the US-hosted Summit for Democracy; not to mention the flurry of industrial policies that have come back into vogue in order to compete with 'Made in China 2025'.

Henry Kissinger once prophesied that the United States and China would engage in a process of 'co-evolution',[3] a term he borrowed from biology, implying a process where two interdependent species develop shared characteristics. Kissinger, the arch-Realist, ironically foretold a co-evolution of bees and flowers, a world order where the US and China as the last two superpowers would evolve to greater synergy based on mutual interest.

It is safe to say that Kissinger's is not the world in which we live. American and Chinese leadership prioritise breaking down structures of mutual interest, more and more define themselves against the image of the other, and are increasingly prone to talking about geopolitics in ideological, absolute terms. A particularly cruel kind of irony thus surfaces: the co-evolution of predator and prey, where strife leads two competing species to adopt one another's tactics.

Yet the irony reaches one level deeper: not only do the United States and China mimic one another in an attempt to show their differences, but in so doing they shape a world that reflects their interests rather than the interests of the rest. Decoupling is a perfect example: within a superpower logic, the most cunning

3 H. Kissinger, *On China* (London : Allen Lane, 2011).

decoupler wins; from the perspective of the world at large, it creates a zero-sum game that stifles innovation and pushes inflation.

In reacting to China's growing assertiveness on the world stage, European policymakers should keep this undercurrent of irony in mind, by asking the question: is our counter-move not only effective in relation to China's initial move, but is it also effective in protecting the rules of the game? And if not, are we comfortable with that?

Second, I see an undercurrent of *history*. All the essays in this volume point to the weight of history on current developments. Almost all display historical analyses, albeit on very different timelines: from Vervaeke's twelve days, to Mees's two decades since 2001 and Sterckx's dialogue between the ancient and the contemporary in Chinese political thought. History—writ large—is king in this collection.

In geopolitics, we talk all too often of interests as timeless units, of states as actors responding to current events, and of values as universal and, thus, eternal. How do we factor in time, and its accumulation, history? All of the authors in their own way reflect on the problems associated with historicising geopolitics in absolute terms, but all display a shared understanding of the incomparable weight of history on current events. The undercurrent of history begs the question, where do we leave the future? China's futures—its possible roles in the world in ten, 20 or 30 years' time—are strikingly absent in this volume. Kissinger's prophesy, clearly, was wrong, but have we stopped looking forward entirely?

China's strategic documents famously define a grand deadline for everything: 'Made in China 2025', 'China Standards 2035', the 'Great Rejuvenation of 2049' and even 'Carbon Neutrality in 2060', to name a few. With the weight of history pressing on the dramatic present, can European policymakers strategise for long-term trends in China's role in the world, such as demographic decline or adaption to climate change? Can we envisage a China beyond Sino–US reordering? It seems that at least two futures are competing for the dominant role in Chinese geopolitical strategy: a near future of anti-Western competition, and the horizon a little farther ahead of a Post-Western world order. These two futures were long strategically compatible, but anti-Western competition may be shaping a bipolar world in which the multipolar post-Western order is subsumed under great power rivalry.

Third, there is an undercurrent of *psychology*. This may be the most uncomfortable. Scholars of international relations prefer to stay away from feelings, and for good reasons. These undercurrents of emotions and beliefs make unreliable variables in our geopolitical predictions. This was not always the case. The history of Realist thought, from Thucydides through to E.H. Carr, took human nature—not rational interest—as its defining principle. It was the Cold War that changed this.

Since the Neorealist revolt of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, the image of the state as a 'black box'—an actor that primarily responds to external structural stimuli and not internal 'emotions, beliefs or dynamics'—has become dominant in international political thought and, indeed, in diplomatic practice. It suited the Cold War context, where the paradox of understanding found an extreme, leaving strategists on both sides of the Iron Curtain with very little to go on but the material interests of the other in the wider world. In this utterly mystifying and dangerous world, it seemed perhaps comforting to view power as a Newtonian variable.

But the Cold War is over. In fact, reductive strategising of the Neorealist sort makes the return of a new-fangled Cold War more likely: there is a self-fulfilling element to the prophecy that China and the West are bound to fight because 'the balance of power' demands it.

We need to re-evaluate the role of psychology in the practice and research of international relations. As our essays show, China makes this issue all the more pressing, as the historical identities driving its narratives stem from a distinct geopolitical psychology. We cannot but acknowledge that, like history, psychology is a vital factor for understanding what China's changing role in the world means, albeit one prone to exaggeration and simplification, and thus very hard to get right. Moreover, we should acknowledge that China's rise impacts not just European interests, but our self-image, and, as a consequence, we react emotionally.

The Fourth undercurrent, logically following the third, is *Europe*: not the territory, nor the EU, but rather the 'narrative identity'[4] we call Europe – and, crucially, its long transition into a geopolitical actor. Compiled by European editors, written by

4 P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, volumes 1, 2 and 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

European authors, this collection exists by the grace of a widespread but uneasy belief that Chinese global power and China's confrontation with the United States demand of European intellectual and political life a reflection on what exactly the purpose of our role in the world is.

If not competition for geopolitical dominance, what should be the purpose of Europe's geopolitics, given China's profound way of shaping it? If the essays in this volume show in myriad ways how distinct cultural and political undercurrents flow from history through to contemporary Chinese geopolitics, it begs the question how the flows of European culture inform its *réveil géopolitique*.[5] If China's narratives are tilting the world order, should European narratives aim to do the same?

Indubitably, many other undercurrents are to be felt in the depths of China's evolving role in the world—and, indeed, in the depths of these essays. None of what follows helps us to cross the river; none aids the vainglorious attempt to cross a Rubicon wholeheartedly. To quote George Kennan:

> It is an undeniable privilege of every man to prove himself right in the thesis that the world is his enemy; for if he reiterates it frequently enough and makes it the background of his conduct he is bound eventually to be right.[6]

If anything, *Undercurrents* helps to dispel such privilege. Not to solve the problem of great-power rivalry, but to complicate talking about the world and China's role in it. To reach below the surface...

5 L. van Middelaar, *Le réveil géopolitique de l'Europe* (Paris : Collège de France, 2022).

6 G.F. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," Foreign Affairs (1947).

Correspondent Zero

Reflections on Reporting Covid from Wuhan

Leen Vervaeke

Twelve endless days

It was twelve days in which the news in China never seemed to stop. Twelve days in which decades of accumulated knowledge of China was called into question. The country that only ever saw local protests was engulfed by a national wave of popular resistance. The government that never bowed to demonstrators yielded to their demands in just a week. And the political system that identified itself with a low Covid-19 death toll sent its population unprepared into a massive outbreak.

It was twelve days—from 26 November to 7 December 2022—in which China seemed to metamorphose, and China watchers were faced with a host of questions, such as how did the Chinese Communist Party view the protests and did it really see them as a threat? Had the Party been planning to ditch the zero-Covid policy for some time, and were the protests just a handy excuse? How serious and deadly would the Covid outbreak be, and might it cause problems for the Party?

At the time of writing—shortly after those twelve turbulent days—these questions remain largely unanswered. Some may remain so permanently. Yet one thing is clear: to get closer to the answers, gain more insight into the events and fully understand the impact of those twelve days, you have to be in China.

Why is it important to be in China in order to understand the country? What will you miss if you are not there? The answers to these questions, which form the basis of this essay, seem obvious at first sight. A stay in any country enables you to speak to locals, see the situation on the ground with your own eyes, test theory against practice and develop a deeper understanding of the country. That is important in every country, but particularly in China, where censorship, a lack of independent local media, indoctrination and government propaganda obscure the view of reality.

China is one of the hardest countries in the world to fathom. That is not because of oriental secretiveness but the political system, which maintains strict control of information and conceals reality. Trying to understand China is like having a jigsaw puzzle of a thousand pieces, half of which are missing, warped or blurred. The overall picture is always incomplete and uncertain. The best solution is to gather as many pieces as possible: information from state media, government documents, academic studies, expert analyses, as well as day-to-day conversations, experiences and observations. The latter are only available in the country itself.

But gathering puzzle pieces in China is an increasingly difficult process that demands ever greater effort for a diminishing amount of information. As a result, people sometimes question whether presence in China remains worthwhile. But at a time of fundamental changes in the country and tense relations with the West, greater insight is sorely needed. Those twelve tumultuous days, which took many China watchers by surprise, show that the puzzle is moving and extra pieces are urgently needed. Presence in China is hence more crucial than ever.

75 days in quarantine

For most China watchers, presence in the country was impossible for nearly three years, from the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Wuhan in January 2020 until the beginning of 2023. After an initial fiasco in Wuhan, the Chinese government regained control of the virus (and the narrative) in March 2020 by means of lockdowns and digital methods of source-and-contact tracing. In order to prevent the virus being reintroduced from abroad, Beijing cancelled all international flights, declared all visas invalid and closed China's borders. It was the start of the zero-Covid policy that was to last for nearly three years.

China's closedness was not solely because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even before 2019, political restrictions in China and tense relations with the West had led to a decrease in scientific exchanges and cooperation. The Canadian researcher Michael Kovrig was a victim of hostage diplomacy at the end of 2018, and scientists in politically sensitive fields were reluctant to go to China. The introduction of the zero-Covid policy completed China's isolation, leading to a strange situation in which China experts around the world were unable to visit the country of their expertise.

Precise numbers of researchers and students affected by China's zero-Covid policy are difficult to come by. According to the National Immigration Administration, China issued 1.1 million visas to foreigners in the first half of 2018, while only 276,000 residence permits were granted in the first half of 2022. Since visas are also issued to business people and tourists, these figures are not entirely comparable. A better comparison is offered by a US government official who told the *Financial Times* that at the end of 2022, there were 300 American students in the whole of China, compared to 11,000 at the peak in 2018.

I had the opportunity to stay in China as part of a dwindling contingent of foreign correspondents. Compared to many people who were not allowed into China, it was a privilege, but also a trial. For the first eighteen months after the Covid outbreak, I could not leave China—or at any rate, I was allowed to leave but not re-enter, which amounts to the same—and I was separated from my family and friends in Europe. After that, international travel became possible again, but only at the expense of long hotel quarantines. I spent a total of 75 days in quarantine during the three years of the zero-Covid policy, the low point being three weeks of uninterrupted confinement in a hotel bedroom.

Even within China, freedom of movement was steadily reduced over those three years. The restrictions were ramped up particularly in 2022, when the zero-Covid policy was derailed by the highly infectious omicron variant, with curbs on domestic travel, constant testing requirements and a permanent threat of lockdown. The digital control systems that led to residents with a minimal risk of infection ending up in quarantine made domestic travel a daring venture. In 2022 as a whole, I was only able to make three major reporting trips. My living environment in China was steadily shrinking, and with it my access to information.

Whisper circuit

At the same time, censorship and propaganda were growing, and it became increasingly difficult to speak to useful sources. Chinese academics give hardly any interviews, government officials seldom answer questions and business people say nothing that could harm their business interests. The many obstacles sometimes raised doubts in my mind: if I am unable to leave Beijing for months on end, do practically all my interviews by telephone and mainly consult experts from abroad, perhaps I could cover China just as well from outside, without the zero-Covid policy impacting my own life?

But even amid all the restrictions and obstacles, I was still convinced of the added value of a presence in China, of those additional puzzle pieces that you can only get by being on the spot. It is not easy to get a clear picture of China from inside the country, but it is much harder from outside.

The biggest advantage of a presence in China is that you are plugged into a 'whisper circuit'—a network of friends, acquaintances, neighbours and chance passers-by in which personal experiences are exchanged. In the absence of reliable information channels, the whisper circuit is a key way for people in China to get a handle on reality. Which districts are in lockdown, how are the travel restrictions applied in practice and how accurate are the digital control systems? Chinese people swap information constantly and use it to work out their own reality together.

The information in the whisper circuit is not always dependable. It is fragmented, sometimes contradictory and confusing. The individual facts cannot always be journalistically verified, so they do not usually make it into the newspaper. Yet taken together, they help to make connections and identify trends, to puncture propaganda and weigh official information. They are small but valuable pieces that help solve the large and complex China puzzle.

In the months before the protests, I increasingly heard stories in my whisper circuit pointing to the unsustainability of the zero-Covid policy. A lawyer said his work had dried up because the court staff had been requisitioned to carry out PCR tests. An acquaintance who was admitted to hospital described how doctors and nurses were practically unable to provide care because of the Kafkaesque Covid rules. Friends in business spoke increasingly of bankruptcies and redundancies.

Pessimism shot up. It was now almost impossible to have conversations with Chinese friends and acquaintances without them asking me for tips about leaving China, because they no longer see any future in their own country. Others were looking for ways to send their children abroad. I heard second-hand that many business owners were trying to get their assets out of China. The puzzle pieces pointed to a country collapsing under the weight of the zero-Covid policy.

Officially, there was nothing unusual about the situation during those months. The number of infections increased and the zero-Covid policy sprang into action, just like during spring 2022. Yet this time the response in my whisper circuit was

different. I increasingly heard people voicing dissatisfaction publicly, which is unusual in China. My hairdresser complained about the quarantine centres, my greengrocer moaned about the impact on the economy, my neighbours grumbled when the district went into lockdown for three days. I heard stories of civil disobedience: people using secret routes to escape from closed districts and local authorities turning a blind eye.

Source of pressure or welcome excuse

When protests broke out nationwide at the end of November, I found it surprising, because it was something long viewed as impossible in China, but at the same time unsurprising, as dissatisfaction was palpably rising. It also soon became clear that the protests had wide support. When I looked at my contacts' WeChat timelines late in the evening—live, because posts soon disappear as a result of censorship—they were full of complaints about the political system, as a kind of digital extension of the street protests. My whisper circuit was buzzing with stories of local revolts against lockdowns, both in working-class districts full of migrant workers and in chic middle-class compounds.

Over a few days, protests took place on 162 university campuses, according to a count by the Singapore-based news outlet *Initium*, and demonstrators came onto the streets in ten cities. Many protesters cited a fatal fire in Urumqi and carried a common resistance symbol: a blank sheet of paper. It was a national movement of mutually inspired protests. In the closed Chinese media climate, it is impossible to judge how widely the protests were supported, but it was clear from my whisper circuit that many people were aware of them and shared their concerns.

To many people's surprise, the Chinese government said one week later that it would yield to all the demonstrators' demands and abandon the zero-Covid policy. Officially, only ten relaxations were announced, but the experiences shared in my whisper circuit confirmed that practically all the measures were lifted—the zero-Covid policy was over. A trickle of reports of Covid infections started on the following day, which quickly turned into a flood. In just under two weeks, everyone around me seemed to be infected. Shops closed and delivery services shut down because of lack of staff. The streets of Beijing were empty.

Although at first it seemed that this Covid wave was because the zero-Covid policy had been abandoned, the meteoric rise of the virus calls that timeline into

question. It seems more likely that the number of infections was already rising fast before the policy change, partly because lockdowns had been undermined for a long time by local protests and civil disobedience. Abandonment of the zero-Covid policy was possibly the only way to prevent a total implosion of the system. From that perspective, the protests were possibly not a source of pressure on the Chinese government, but a welcome excuse.

In a complete reversal of its narrative, the Chinese government also suddenly claimed that the omicron variant was not dangerous and that the harm to public health—despite inadequate vaccination of vulnerable elderly people—would remain limited. Again, presence in China proved its added value. I could see with my own eyes the chaos in hospitals and crematoria, gauge the severity of symptoms in my own area and hear in my personal whisper circuit that many people were puncturing government propaganda but at the same time remained confused, not knowing how to handle the new Covid situation.

Control of information

How many additional Covid deaths ultimately occurred because of the abrupt exit from the zero-Covid policy may never be known with certainty, and it is impossible to predict what the long term consequences of this chaotic policy reversal will be. But the Chinese Communist Party has clearly suffered a huge dent to its credibility. While the government seems to have been successful in extinguishing wider movements of resistance by means of repression and control, it is still facing broad distrust and dissatisfaction within society.

Naturally, much of this information could also be gathered outside China. Countless messages, photographs and videos from Chinese sources are posted on social media, while communication apps help people to stay in touch with contacts in China. Yet the reliability of social media posts is difficult to verify and many things are not mentioned on the telephone or social media because of China's limited freedom of expression. Stories emerge in private, in a confidential or informal context. It is also almost impossible to establish new contacts and build up trust remotely.

Moreover, surveillance technology in China is becoming increasingly sophisticated and many people are no longer able to communicate securely with the outside world. A VPN connection, which is needed to access foreign apps

and websites, is increasingly difficult to obtain in China and, since the protests, merely having a telephone with foreign communication apps may be sufficient to cause problems. In these circumstances, it is even more important to maintain live contact with people.

The Chinese government's control of information, and hence of all the blind spots in the Chinese puzzle, is increasing steadily. The additional pieces from the whisper circuit may not be enough to make the whole picture clear—the Party leadership's internal deliberations, for example, remain largely unknown—but they can provide some clarification. They make it possible to check official information against the lived reality, to develop a mindset for interpreting propaganda and to enrich and refine a person's understanding of China.

Those personal observations provide added value in many areas. Official information on the economic situation becomes comprehensible as a result of visits to industrial areas, real-estate projects or shopping centres, or through conversations with consumers, workers or business people. The direction of foreign policy is clearly indicated by the room for manoeuvre afforded to nationalistic opinion-leaders, or by the treatment of foreigners in China, which often differs depending on the nationality. In addition, business people and diplomats are fed impressions from their own whisper circuits.

A presence in China thus represents clear added value, but this will be limited if it remains just an individual presence. As a correspondent, I rely on a community of other China watchers: journalists, diplomats and researchers in various fields, all of whom have their own expertise, conduct their own conversations and contribute their own perspectives. Everyone gathers their own pieces of the puzzle and thus builds up their own picture of what is going on in China. It is precisely the comparison of different perspectives that leads to a better understanding.

Reopening

This was something I noticed, for example, during the visit by Scott Kennedy, a senior adviser and Trustee Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, who in September 2022 was one of the first foreign researchers allowed back into China. It took him a wait of more than five months, two cancelled flights and ten days of hotel quarantine to enter China. 'My colleagues in Washington

said I was crazy to put myself through it, but it was totally worth it', he said during a meeting with foreign journalists in Beijing.

The meeting with Kennedy felt like a breath of fresh air after almost three years without a single foreign expert coming to China. Many correspondents have been able to keep in touch with daily reality through their presence in China, but lack of travel possibilities mean they have lost the outsider's perspective that is useful in keeping a long view of major developments. It was refreshing to hear Kennedy's take on China's zero-Covid policy, based on his experience of the US approach to Covid. He even sees similarities between the United States and China: in both countries there is great mistrust of the government.

Kennedy advocates for a milder China policy in the United States, and the Chinese government thus rolled out the red carpet for him, probably hoping he would return to the United States with positive stories to tell. He was granted access to senior Chinese government officials—beyond the reach of most foreign journalists—who told him privately that they no longer believed in the zero-Covid policy. He thus added an important piece to the puzzle, showing that—even in government circles—support for the zero-Covid policy was waning for some time and that, for some people in the Chinese leadership, the protests may not have been so inconvenient after all.

At the time of writing, the Chinese government has just announced the lifting of international travel restrictions and the reopening of borders. Travel to China is likely to remain difficult for some time, however, and previous suspicions about exchanges and cooperation will not disappear. Yet lifting restrictions raises the hope that more foreign researchers and experts will soon be able to stay in China and enrich their picture of the country from the ground.

After those turbulent twelve days that shook established ideas of China and marked the culmination of three years of radical changes, it is more important than ever to be back in China, despite the difficulties and obstacles—to hold conversations, gain impressions and refine ideas on the ground, and to gather the pieces of the puzzle that help to paint a picture of this new post-zero-Covid China.

Dictating the Past

What A ‘Correct’ View of History Teaches Us

Dr Vincent K.L. Chang

The burdensome past?

It is often claimed that knowledge of Chinese history is essential for an understanding of Chinese policy thinking. The basic reasoning is this: the past informs the present, and by shaping present-day worldviews, values and identities, the nation’s historical experience delineates policy space and thereby conditions political outcomes. In China’s case, it is the traumatic 20th-century experience of national victimisation and suffering at the hands of foreign imperialists, and the end of Chinese celestial greatness this heralded, that is said to weigh on contemporary politics and explain why Beijing is so sensitive to any hints of foreign interference in its domestic affairs and is bent on restoring its former greatness. Yet the reality might not be so straightforward. Why should we assume that the past continues to burden the present, in China or elsewhere? As a scholar of the history and international relations of modern China, I am not about to question the importance of historical study. Yet this does not entail accepting that the past dictates the present, and it is not immediately clear what would mark China as an exception.

A Chongqing quest

My quest through China’s modern history began in 2008 when I went searching for traces of family history in Chongqing, a provincial-level municipality of 32 million people in south-west China. This mountainous inland city served as China’s provisional national capital during the Second World War while Japanese occupation forces and Chinese collaborationist groups controlled the country’s coastal regions. As the temporary seat of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government from 1938 to 1946, Chongqing became the main stage of the tenuous wartime alliance between Chiang’s ruling Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT)

and the rival Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of Mao Zedong. When the Allies established their regional command in Chongqing following the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941, the city gained global fame as the East Asian bulwark of resistance against fascism and one of the four great wartime capitals alongside London, Moscow and Washington. After the war, as hostilities between the KMT and the CCP resumed, Chongqing became the site of failed peace talks and political executions.

During a visit to the Chongqing Municipal Archives in 2010, I stumbled upon the records of a training programme held in the summer of 1942 for government and KMT officials, which my great-uncle had attended.[25] The flyleaves of the programme booklet contained solemn portraits of the founder of the Chinese Republic and 'Father of the Nation' (國父), Sun Yat-sen, and of Generalissimo Chiang. Interestingly, the image of Sun Yat-sen, who is revered in the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the 'Forerunner of the Great Revolution' (伟大的革命先行者), was perfectly intact, whereas Chiang's portrait had been disfigured and provisionally repaired afterwards: first defaced with a giant cross and illegible hand-written characters, it had subsequently been wrinkled and torn into pieces, and finally glued back together with white painters' tape. This image has since been imprinted in my mind as epitomising the volatile nature of official memory in the PRC of the Chinese Nationalists: initial preservation, followed by deformation and attempted elimination, and then by partial restoration; with each transformation occurring in response to political imperatives.

As the former stronghold of Chiang's 'bandit regime', Chongqing suffered a similar fate. Demoted to a provincial-level city and turned into a restricted military–industrial zone after the war, the city initially entered a period of obscurity. In the 1960s, Chongqing gradually re-emerged in the public 'memoryscape', although not as a monument of the Second World War—let alone of wartime KMT–CCP cooperation—but as a major 'Red' site glorifying the

25 Chongqing Municipal Archives, Central Training Corps files 0092-2-27 (中央训练团党政训练班第二十期职员通讯录); 0093-2-13 (中训团党政班职教学员总名册); and 0093-3-23 (外交部使领人员研究班第一期训练实纪).

Chinese people's revolutionary struggle under the CCP's leadership.[26] This began with the construction of a martyrs' cemetery and an Exhibition Hall on Crimes by US Imperialism and Chiang Kai-shek, memorialising the political executions of the 1940s. Official government and party records abandoned by Chiang's fleeing Nationalists in late 1949, meanwhile, were stored by PRC archivists in folders imprinted in red characters with the directive 'Never Forget Class Struggle!' (千万不要忘记阶级斗争). During a visit to the archive in 2008, I found my grandfather's records in one of those 'enemy and puppet political files' (敌伪政治档案案卷) of the 'bandit Kuomintang' (匪国民党).[27] Branded as enemies of the people, KMT veterans and their families for years suffered political stigmatisation and social discrimination.[28]

This changed in the 1980s, when Maoist socialism was substituted by nationalism as the de facto legitimising political ideology. This new direction taken at the central level opened up space at the grassroots level for war victims and veterans—including surviving KMT veterans—to revisit and release their long-suppressed traumas, and gradually prompted a makeover of Chongqing's urban identity. It set in motion a large-scale restoration of public memory of the brutal aerial bombings that the Japanese armed forces unleashed on the city between 1938 and 1943, which had been forcibly erased from public memory during the Mao years.[29] An annual remembrance day was established in 1987 and work began on restoring air-raid shelters across the city and turning them into public spaces, a process that continues to this day.[30] Existing Red sites such

26 Vincent K L. Chang, 'Exemplifying National Unity and Victory in Local State Museums: Chongqing and the New Paradigm of World War II Memory in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 138 (2022), pp. 977–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2031004. See also Rana Mitter, *China's Good War: How World War II is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap 2020).

27 Chongqing Municipal Archives, KMT Chongqing Party Headquarters files 0051-2-163 (国民党重庆市党部).

28 Jacqueline Zhenru Lin, 'Remembering Forgotten Heroes and the Idealisation of True Love: Veteran Memorial Activism in Contemporary China', *Memory Studies* 14, no. 5 (2021), pp. 1081–1105, https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211017952.

29 Yong Zhou, Vincent K.L. Chang and Xiaohui Gong, 'Recalling the War in China: The Dahoufang Project in Chongqing and the Restoration of a Legacy', *Frontiers of History in China* 9, no. 4 (2014), pp. 611–27, https://doi.org/10.3868/s020-003-014-0040-0.

30 See, for example, Tan Yingzi and Deng Rui, 'Chongqing War-Era Bomb Shelter Gets a New Lease on Life', *China Daily*, 4 November 2022, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202211/04/WS63645433a310fd2b29e8036a.html.

as the above-mentioned Exhibition Hall were renamed and revamped, while new exhibitions were opened in the restored residences of former KMT officials, including the wartime headquarters and residences of Chiang Kai-shek, his closest confidants and even a US general.[31]

The past two decades have seen Chongqing reinvent itself as a historic rallying point of national unity, greatness and victory for the Chinese people. Its reinvention exemplifies the more self-confident and triumphant rhetorical line of Second World War commemoration that has emerged at the central level under China's President Xi Jinping. The war exhibition in the municipality's main museum—a massive edifice at the former site of the KMT government that attracts two million visitors annually—today portrays Chongqing as the country's 'City of Victory', a place where the KMT and CCP joined hands to resist external aggression and a united nation showed its resolve to achieve final victory. At the martyrs' cemetery mentioned above, patriotic KMT generals are now commemorated alongside CCP heroes. In Chiang's former command centre and mountaintop villa, the one-time arch-enemy of the Chinese people has been enshrined as an important historical figure 'worth knowing and studying'.[32] Meanwhile, Chiang's rehabilitation on the mainland coincided with efforts by the Democratic Progressive Party administration in Taiwan to remove his image from public spaces.[33]

Foes and friends: emergence of a 'memory alliance'

The past thus continues to serve rather than constrain present-day political agendas on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, even if in diametrically different ways than before. This is just one of many examples of how China's momentous past, rather than forming a static legacy that dictates present-day policies, is actively utilised by political actors as a malleable tool serving their agendas.

31 See, for example, 'More People Visit World War II Allied Forces Headquarters in China, *China Daily*, 6 July 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-07/06/content_30018281.htm; and Chang, 'Exemplifying National Unity and Victory in Local State Museums', pp. 986–89.

32 Chang, 'Exemplifying National Unity and Victory in Local State Museums', p. 987.

33 See, for example, Chen Yu-fu and Kayleigh Madjar, 'Removal of Chiang Statue Prioritized', *Taipei Times*, 9 September 2021, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2021/09/09/2003764058.

As I have analysed elsewhere, the recent resurgence of Second World War II memory in the PRC serves multiple political goals, targeting various audiences.[34] To 'the Chinese people' at home and overseas, the forward-looking, more inclusive new narrative imparts that only under the inspiring leadership of the CCP can the Chinese nation demonstrate the unity, patriotism and greatness that are necessary for rejuvenation and revival. To the rest of the world, particularly the West, the narrative signals that China, as a former ally and co-founder of the present world order, stood on the 'right side' of history then and has no interest today in unmaking the order it helped to build, provided its legitimate interests as a resurging global power are respected.

Seen from Beijing, the principal threats to both national rejuvenation and the current international system are the hegemonic and unilateralist practices of the United States. When current strongman leader Xi Jinping proclaims that 'no force can ever undermine China's status or stop the Chinese people and nation from marching forward' and that any 'foreign force' attempting to do so would run into a 'great wall of steel' forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people, there is no doubt that the US is at the front of his mind. Put differently, Washington's containment of China and its 'undemocratic' international conduct constitute today's principal threat that the united, great and inevitably victorious Chinese people must resist with the same indomitable spirit that delivered it final victory in the Second World War.[35] As the United States has dethroned Japan as the primary discursive 'Other' threatening national rejuvenation, Tokyo has switched roles to become Washington's key regional 'vassal', assisting the US in containing China and provoking it on Taiwan and other strategic issues.[36]

In a similar vein, Russia has emerged in official Chinese discourse as China's 'friendly Other' on account of shared strategic goals. Whereas Mao Zedong once made a public show of his contempt for Stalin's successor Khrushchev,

34 Vincent K.L. Chang, 'Recalling Victory, Recounting Greatness: Second World War Remembrance in Xi Jinping's China', *China Quarterly* 248, no. 1 (2022), pp. 1152–73, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000497.

35 Vincent K.L. Chang, 'China's New Historical Statecraft: Reviving the Second World War for National Rejuvenation', *International Affairs* 98, no. 3 (2022), pp. 1053–69, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac021.

36 See, for example, 'Japanese Politicians' Worship of Yasukuni Shrine Angers Neighboring Countries; Reflects Tokyo's Right-Leaning Tendency, More Twisted Historical View', *Global Times*, 16 August 2022, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1273060.shtml.

Xi Jinping used his first two terms to hail Russia's President Vladimir Putin as his 'best friend'. On his first visit to Moscow as China's president in 2013, Xi vowed that China and Russia would 'forever be good neighbours, good friends and good partners', while emphasising the importance of 'cementing the friendship between the two peoples'.[37] Glossing over the numerous conflicts and enduring grievances in the fraught history of this bilateral relationship, Xi related a story of a Russian air-force pilot who perished in China during the Second World War and whom he claimed the Chinese people would 'never forget', even though generations of Chinese citizens have grown up under state patriotism campaigns inculcating vivid 'memories' of Russia's imperialist intrusions in China.

The year 2015 displayed the clearest manifestation thus far of what I call the emerging Sino-Russian 'memory alliance'.[38] In May 2015, Xi Jinping visited Moscow to join Putin for Russia's Victory Day celebrations and to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Four months later, to mark the 70th anniversary of Victory over Japan (VJ) Day, his 'best friend' reciprocated by joining the Chinese leader at the rostrum of Beijing's Heavenly Gate to watch over a contingent of Russian guards of honour marching in a national military parade of unprecedented scale.[39] Building on this rediscovered shared past, the Chinese and Russian ambassadors to Washington DC in September 2020 jointly called for the United States to honour the history of the Second World War and the 'spirit' of fairness and justice fostered in that war and to move away from Cold War-like 'zero-sum' thinking.[40] In contrast, Xi frequently praises the Sino-

37 Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), p. 303.

38 Vincent K.L. Chang, 'Shifting World War II Memory in East Asia Signals Newly Emerging Global Alliances', *The Diplomat*, 2 September 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/shifting-world-war-ii-memory-in-east-asia-signals-newly-emerging-global-alliances.

39 'Xi Attends Russia's V-Day Parade, Marking Shared Victory with Putin', *China Daily*, 9 May 2015, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015xiattendwwii/2015-05/09/content_20670224.htm; and Andrea Chen, 'Putin the Great: Russian Leader Shows His 'Emperor' Form at Beijing's Grand Military Parade', 3 September 2015, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1855036/putin-great-russian-leader-shows-his-emperor-form.

40 Anatoly Antonov and Cui Tiankai, 'Honor World War II with a Better, Shared Future', *Defense One*, 2 September 2020, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/09/honor-world-war-ii-better-shared-future/168191.

Russian partnership as a 'new type' of international relations promoting 'true multilateralism and international fairness and justice'.[41]

Most recently, following the China–US trade war, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, Beijing's official remembrance appears to have shifted from past conflict to present-day peace-building efforts. The commemoration in 2020 of the 75th anniversary of victory in the Second World War was much less spectacular than the 70th anniversary extravaganza, and 2022's events were even more subdued. Instead, Martyrs' Day took centre stage that year, allowing Beijing to dissociate its patriotic statecraft from Putin's aggression in Europe. On 30 September 2022, Xi Jinping led senior CCP leaders to pay tribute at the Monument to the People's Heroes in Tiananmen Square to those martyrs who devoted their lives to the 'liberation' of the Chinese people, telling them that a nation needs heroes and martyrs also in times of peace, as they are 'the coordinates that guide the nation'. The commentary provided by the state-run news channel praised those modern-day heroes 'from all walks of life' in 'peace-time China' who had sacrificed their lives in serving the pressing needs of the people and helping maintain stability and peace.[42]

Always correct: the memory monopolist

Yet if the past is a resource that can be strategically mined and deployed to unify and mobilise the nation, it is equally a potential threat if used by others for the wrong purposes. In one of his first closed-door speeches as China's paramount leader, Xi revealed this concern by quoting a Chinese adage: 'the first way to destroy a nation is to destroy its history' (灭人之国，必先去其史).[43]

Since his ascension to power, Xi has repeatedly warned against the dangers of 'historical nihilism' (历史虚无主义)—a euphemism for any derogation of state-endorsed myths glorifying the Party, country or military—which he has identified as the primary cause of the Soviet Union's collapse and the biggest threat

41 See, for example, 'Xi Jinping Holds a Video Meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin', 28 June 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/kjgzbdfyyq/202106/t20210629_9171091.html.

42 See *CGTN*'s YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4YwZkmHIJ4.

43 '习近平：历史不可虚无' [History cannot be empty], *China Daily*, 20 October 2016, https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2016-10/20/content_27123201.htm.

presently facing the CCP.[44] Mirroring similar trends in Russia, Beijing has recently promulgated various formal laws aimed at criminalising 'historical nihilism' and codifying a 'correct' view of history reflecting its own selective reading of the past. These so-called memory laws have so far been invoked to rectify 'false rumours' concerning historical figures and events, arrest historians for questioning history textbooks and to delete millions of 'historically nihilist' social media posts.[45]

The image that these examples evoke is that of a resourceful and creative yet coercive memory monopolist. Resourceful and creative, because historical memory in China presents itself not as a static encumbrance but as a dynamic variable that is constantly sanitised and mobilised according to prevailing political imperatives. Coercive and monopolistic, because the party-state dictates, guards and enforces what parts of history the Chinese people encounter and can 'remember'. But the gravity of presentist impulses in commemorating the past is by no means unique to the Chinese context. One needs only to look at the recurring debates surrounding, for example, the commemoration of war, colonialism and slavery across Europe to see how contemporary concerns about apologies and reparations, veteran and victim identities, and discrimination and inclusiveness are constantly stretching and redefining the parameters of public history. Many such examples at home and nearby underline that present-day political agendas, preferences and concerns drive public remembrance and affect historical interpretations as much as the reverse.

There is one crucial difference marking the Chinese case, however, and that is the role of the state. The dominance of the Chinese party-state as producer, modifier and mobiliser of selective readings of the past to serve its own ends sets the Chinese 'memoryscape' apart from those elsewhere, and particularly in the West. Whereas in liberal democratic societies a range of societal actors utilise remembrance for their own sake to affirm and articulate their identities, seeking

44 '举报网上历史虚无主义错误言论请到'12377'——举报中心 '涉历史虚无主义有害信息举报专区'上线' [To report erroneous historical nihilism on the internet, please go to 12377—'Historical nihilism harmful information reporting area' report centre now online], Reporting Centre of the Cyberspace Administration of China, 9 April 2021, https://www.12377.cn/wxxx/2021/fc6eb910_web.html.

45 Jun Mai, 'China Deletes 2 Million Online Posts for 'Historical Nihilism' as Communist Party Centenary Nears', *South China Morning Post*, 11 May 2021, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3132957/china-deletes-2-million-online-posts-historical-nihilism.

a place in the sun in a multicultural and inclusive society, in China it is exclusively the party-state that seeks recognition. Local or popular narratives can be tolerated or even stimulated, such as in the case of Chongqing, but ultimately are controlled by the party-state in its ongoing struggle for self-legitimisation and for securing a place in a multipolar world that it hopes will recognise its past and present achievements. In my view, studying Chinese history and historiography thus serves not only the goal of understanding specific episodes of the past and their enduring impacts, but also that of illuminating how present-day actors express their evolving world images, self-images and basic values through highly selective and malleable historical narratives.

Democratising history

If history offers any lessons, it should perhaps be that there is no such thing as a single, objectively 'correct' history. The causes and consequences of the Second World War and other key historical events are and will continue to be hotly debated among historians. An example relevant also in the Chinese context is the debate over whether the dropping of atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was necessary or even decisive in bringing Imperial Japan to its knees. The conventional wisdom in the West that this was indeed the case partially reflects the persistent legacy of dominant US-favoured and Western-centric discourses of the time. These are susceptible to charges of victor's justice and in fact increasingly contested by leading Asian and Western historians alike, who cite other critical factors for Tokyo's capitulation.[46] Similar questions can be raised, for example, about the 'decisiveness' of D-Day in Europe or the causes of the war. I do not intend to delve into these debates here, but simply underscore that the way 'history' is told varies across places and over time, and that writing and rewriting history takes places everywhere and always.

I therefore see history as an amalgamation of constantly evolving and competing stories about the past, narrated and tailored for consumption by specific contemporary audiences. Each of these stories will inevitably be incomplete, fragmented and hence selective and 'subjective', based on the conscious and unconscious choices that reflect the narrator's values, preferences and

46 For a recent example, see Richard Overy, *Blood and Ruins: The Great Imperial War, 1931–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), p. 370.

goals. While this view is hardly remarkable, it has policy implications that are often overlooked. One such implication is that major historical debates do not lend themselves to being settled in political resolutions or reduced to true-or-false fact-checking exercises by administrators of online portals combating 'disinformation'. Yet this is exactly what EU institutions have attempted in response to Russia's historical revisionism, for example, through the European Parliament's 2019 resolution on the causes of the Second World War and through disinformation 'disproof' entries on the EUvsDisinfo portal, the flagship project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force.[47]

Attempting to prescribe a 'correct' history is dictatorial, deceptive and arguably self-defeating. One would expect European institutions to avoid mirroring the Russian and Chinese examples and falling into the trap of engaging in memory monopoly or memory wars, which are not only devoid of intellectual merit but also politically counter-productive, as they fan the flames of nationalism, set in motion escalatory dynamics and ultimately may help to legitimise the regimes in Moscow and Beijing to their home audiences. Rather than contesting self-serving historiographical diktats by promulgating alternative ones, a more effective response to the opportunistic or aggressive historical statecraft employed by Beijing or Moscow would be to emphasise the coercive and monopolistic practices that these governments adopt to produce 'correct history' and to shine a spotlight on those historical episodes that they choose to ignore—just as they assert that 'history should never be forgotten'. Debating history can then be left to historians and the wider public.

47 See European Parliament resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe (2019/2819(RSP)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html; and, for example, 'Disinfo: Nazi–Soviet Pact was Not the Cause of WWII', EUvsDisinfo, 8 February 2020, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nazi-soviet-pact-was-not-the-cause-of-wwii..

From Wolf Warriors to Still-Sitting Elephants

Chinese Identities on the Move

Prof. Jeroen de Kloet

> ‘Why is there a foreigner in your unit?’
> ‘Who is a foreigner? My father is from Beijing, I am an authentic Chinese!’
> *The Wandering Earth*, 2019

Unto the minefield

Granted, the main argument of this essay feels a bit worn out: there is no such thing as a Chinese identity. Instead, Chinese identity is a field of contestation, always in flux, always becoming, always multiple, and media—in this essay, cinema—play a crucial role in this struggle over and for Chineseness. Yet it seems imperative to keep on making this point; perhaps even more so today, as we are witnessing a rise rather than decline of nationalisms worldwide.

Writing about Chinese identity feels a bit like walking over a minefield. Anyone travelling or living in China will be confronted with the phrase ‘we Chinese’, often to be followed by an alleged difference with that other and equally opaque signifier, ‘the West’. Decades of academic critique and deconstruction of the problematic East versus West binary have proven incapable of its erasure—on the contrary, with Xi Jinping’s recent policies for the rejuvenation of Chinese culture, they remain in full swing.

Almost American? China’s cruel optimism

The China versus West binary has a specific history in which the so-called ‘century of humiliation’ plays a key role. ‘The Opium War, whereby the British Navy pried open the Chinese empire to Western capitalism in 1840, is usually seen as the beginning of the century of national humiliation, and the communist

revolution in 1949 as the ends', writes political scientist William Callahan.[7] He shows that National Humiliation Day is not just a top–down propagandistic initiative from the state to perform nationalism through such days. Increasingly, he writes, 'identity and public memory are negotiated in popular culture where nationalism is not imposed by elites so much as it resonates with people's feelings as it is circulated in the market'.[8] Nationalism is also eagerly consumed by citizens, in their role as media publics, rather than simply being imposed from above—the production and consumption of nationalism are thus entangled.

In tandem with the discourse of national humiliation, in which the 'Othering' of the West plays a pivotal role, Xi Jinping's proclamation of the Chinese Dream of Great Rejuvenation presents the more upbeat, cheerful articulation of Chinese nationalism. Xi Jinping articulated his policies in the following speech:

> The Congress holds that statements on our people-centred philosophy of development; on innovative, coordinated, green, and open development that is for everyone; on coordinated efforts to finish building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, comprehensively deepen reform, fully advance law-based governance, and strengthen Party self-governance in every respect; and on all-out efforts to build a great modern socialist country, represent the ultimate purpose, vision, overall strategy, and overarching goal of the Party in upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics.[9]

Cultural confidence is assumed to emerge in the slipstream of the Chinese dream. This dream is partly realised, in discourse, through rejuvenation of the modern Chinese nation, a trope used by many Chinese leaders in the past. In an article discussing Xi's policies, Michael Peters notes a resonance with the American dream. Following the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, he argues that in both dreams the 'accent is on the transcendental force of "chosenness" that elevates the dream to talk in the name of humanity itself'.[10]

7 William A. Callahan, 'History, Identity, and Security: Producing and Consuming Nationalism in China', *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2006), p. 180.

8 Callahan, 'History, Identity, and Security', p. 202.

9 Quoted in Michael A. Peters, 'The Chinese Dream: Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 14, (2017), p. 1300.

10 Peters, 'The Chinese Dream', p. 1303.

This, in turn, inspires me to add one more notion to the conceptual mix: that of cruel optimism. In the work of the late critic Lauren Berlant, this notion is mobilised to interrogate the harm done by the often celebrated American Dream. 'A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing', she writes,[11] and 'cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object'.[12]

Just as the American dream manoeuvres people in a perpetual desire for a better life, without ever achieving it, so may the Chinese dream in the end be harmful. Not only because in the wake of the rejuvenation of Chinese culture, one can witness an amplification of nationalism, but also of a quite conservative Confucianism that, for example, insists on clear gender roles and that inspires policies against feminist and LGBTQ+ movements. What is more, the prosperity promised by the notion of 'dream' has become out of reach for younger generations and the working class. More young people become jobless, travel is more difficult, to buy a house is nearly impossible, rents are skyrocketing—indeed, in the 2020s it may become more, rather than less, difficult to be Chinese, let alone to achieve a Chinese dream.

Who needs identity? The question of Chineseness

Identity is often perceived as something innate, fixed and essential, for an individual rooted in one's personality and for a country rooted in culture and history. While he acknowledges the importance of history, a shared heritage and the idea of a collective self, cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues for the urgency to add a second model of identity, one in which identity belongs as much to the past as it does to the future, one focusing on becoming rather than being. In his words, 'identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past'.[13]

One can easily position the narrative of China's century of humiliation under Hall's first rubric of Chinese identity; it helps create an alleged fixed sense of Chineseness that is firmly grounded in the past, both recent and far away.

11 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 1.

12 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 24.

13 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 225.

The glorious future of the nation is also performed through spectacles such as the 2008 summer and 2022 winter Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo, just as the Belt and Road Initiative gestures towards a Chinese future.

Yet this sense of Chineseness already becomes fraught with ambivalences when we start wondering who is, or better put, *feels* included and excluded in this narrative. How invested do citizens from Hong Kong feel in this narrative, or those living in Urumqi, or those from the Bai minority, or the indigenous people from Taiwan? And what about the diasporic Chinese living in the Netherlands, or the Chinese population in Singapore? And what and who is being forgotten in the narration of China's allegedly 5,000 years of history? A look at contemporary Chinese blockbuster cinema sheds a fascinating light on these questions.

Blockbusters: the Wolf Warrior image

In 2018, China's box office increased by 9 per cent to USD 8.9 billion in receipts—second only to North America's USD 11.38 billion.[14] Take, for example, *Wolf Warrior 2*, an action movie directed by Wu Jing and set in a failed state, located somewhere, it seems, in the Horn of Africa. As Chris Berry writes, 'Given the setting and China's own anxiety about its Central Asian province of Xinjiang, it is not surprising to discover that the main villains are Islamic extremist insurgents. Less predictably, the insurgents are also employing American and European mercenaries'.[15]

Many observers have rightly pointed to the Hollywood aesthetics of the movie—that it resembles the Rambo series. Yet as Berry points out, by the same token it also borrows clearly from a Chinese masculinity, displaying the same martial arts skills as the Monkey King. On a par with the genre's conventions, *Wolf Warrior 2* thrives on problematic and racialised stereotypes between the barbarian, uncivilised, evil other, and the civilised and virtuous heroes. The movie may break with the pervasive stereotype of Asian men as effeminate or invisible, but it positions the African characters as in need of protection and Caucasians as amoral.

14 Leung Wing-Fai and Sangjoon Lee, 'The Chinese Film Industry: Emerging Debates', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 13, no. 3 (2019), p. 199.

15 Chris Berry, '*Wolf Warrior 2*: Imagining the Chinese Century', *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2018), p. 38.

Slightly tongue in cheek, Michael Berry refers to movies such as *Wolf Warrior 1* as Chinese cinema with Hollywood characteristics.[16] This aesthetic of borrowing already renders any claim to a unique Chinese identity impossible. Yet ironically, it is also this successful adaptation that has fed into a narrative of pride: 'Because everything in the "formula" of Hollywood movies is included, and the hero is Chinese, the film evoked the positive feeling of national pride'.[17] What the movie does, then, is to imagine China's superior position in the world, helps to legitimise the Chinese dream and predicts a future with China as a global power. However, its dependency on Hollywood aesthetics renders this highly ambivalent, as does the involvement of Hong Kong directors and actors.

In a context of increased tension between China and in particular the United States, we witness ever stronger articulations of assumed cultural characteristics and differences. Jonathan Sullivan and Wang Weixiang show how the term 'Wolf Warrior' has gained currency in Chinese social media to ridicule excessive nationalistic expressions. The term has also been used in Western discourse with pejorative connotations towards China, whereas in China, 'the same set of behaviours is reported, received, and often celebrated as an appropriate demonstration of the fighting spirit needed to stand up for China's interests against outside criticism and interference'.[18] Thus, departing from its initial critical undertone in Chinese social media, the term 'Wolf Warrior' has come to stand for portraying a robust and strong foreign policy posture on the Chinese side, incorporating 'cyber-nationalist expressions, in terms of tone and content, into formal diplomatic communications'.[19]

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16 Michael Berry, 'Chinese Cinema with Hollywood Characteristics, or How the Karate Kid Became a Chinese Film', in Carlos Rojas (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 170–89.

17 Shi Wei and Liu Shih-Diing, 'Pride as Structure of Feeling: *Wolf Warrior II* and the National Subject of the Chinese Dream', *Chinese Journal of Communication* 13, no. 3 (2020), p. 329.

18 Jonathan Sullivan and Wang Weixiang, 'China's "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy": The Interaction of Formal Diplomacy and Cyber-Nationalism', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 52, no. 1 (2022), p. 12.

19 Sullivan and Wang, 'China's "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy"', p. 13. A similar example comes from the sci-fi movies *The Wandering Earth I* and *II*, from which the epigraph of this essay is taken. Both are set in the future, and both have Chinese heroes who succeed in rescuing the planet. For an analysis of *The Wandering Earth I*, see Jeroen de Kloet, 'Rising, Becoming, Overcoding: On Chinese Nationalism in *The Wandering Earth*', in Irfan Ahmad and Jie Kang (eds), *The Nation Form in the Global Age: Ethnographic Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 155–74.

However solid *Wolf Warrior 2*'s commitment to Stuart Hall's first model of identity may be, based on history, roots and fixation, it tends to move, however involuntarily, to his second model, in which identity becomes fluid, processual and ambiguous. Yet it still holds a strong patriotic flavour that appeals to some audiences, although not all.

Art house: looking for the elephant

Compared to the upbeat main melody spectacles, Chinese art-house cinema presents a radically different reflection upon Chinese identities. Many contemporary movies show the flip and dark side of the often celebrated rise of China, engaging with the people who are left behind, those who are excluded from the Chinese dream, who are laid off by government-owned companies, or who fail to find a job at all. A telling example of this kind of new art-house cinema deserves our attention: *An Elephant Sitting Still* from 2017 by the late director Hu Bo.

The movie is as long (234 minutes) as it is slow. Set in a gloomy town in north-east China, the movie weaves an intricate narrative structure around its four main young characters. All 234 minutes of the movie radiate a sense of hopelessness and despair, and there seems to be no salvation possible. When the female student Ling is having a date with her lover, the school dean—something that would later go viral on WeChat in a short clip that was secretly shot in a karaoke club—she explains she wants to leave this crappy town, to which he responds that a move would mean 'new place, new suffering'. Earlier, the dean told Ling that 'when you graduate, most of you will become street vendors'.[20]

The main character of the movie, Wei Bu, is on the run after being involved in an attack against school bully Yu Hsuai, who later dies in hospital. He spends the rest of the film on the run, trying in the city of Manzhouli to find the circus elephant, which is notorious for its passivity, spending all day sitting and staring. The elephant somehow reminds me of Samuel Beckett's Godot: people talk about him, but do not get to see him. Yet in the closing of the movie, we do hear the sound of the elephant. The elephant's bellowing is perceived as a cry of rage

20 Robert Koehler, 'An Elephant Sitting Still', *Cineaste* (2019), p. 47.

and resistance.[21] In my interpretation, it also a sign of hope, however ephemeral, because unlike Godot, the elephant does at least appear, and its sound signals a different possible life. Just as the characters are not just hopeless, there is a lot of stoic resilience in the ways they move on, despite all odds.

The suicide of *An Elephant Sitting Still*'s director Hu Bo in 2017, at the age of 29, further amplifies the underlying despair that the movie itself evokes. In an interview that formed part of the movie's press kit, Hu explains 'there is simply no ideal life. It is only about choosing what kinds of regrets you are willing to live with'. For him, 'the truly valuable things lie in the cracks of the world, and not pessimistically so'.[22]

Hu's statement cues me to Leonard Cohen's famous line, 'There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in'. The sound of the elephant operates like such a ray of light, amid all the darkness. As such, the movie not only represents the cruel flip side of the Chinese dream. It speaks to a global zeitgeist, in which climate change, the return of a cold war and a global pandemic all feed into a sense of instability and unease. My point here is consequently quite basic: not only does the cinema of the late Hu Bo help to confront us with the cruel optimism of the Chinese dream, and thus to fragment and complicate any univocal claim on one essential Chinese identity, but the movie also speaks to a global human condition, beyond the confines of Chineseness.

Elusive: just like us

Chinese identities are not stable but are on the move and fluid. They are in a constant process of becoming, without, indeed, ever arriving. The point here is *not* to question which articulations of a Chinese identity are more or less truthful. *All* cinematic mediations are refractions of a refraction of reality. As such, they not only display but also construct a certain version of reality. This makes Chris Berry pose the question: 'can China make movies, or do movies make China?'[23]

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21 Tony Rayns, '*An Elephant Sitting Still* Review: A Howl of Desperate Defiance', *Sight & Sound* (2019).

22 See: https://www.kimstim.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/AESS-Presskit_KimStim.pdf

23 Chris Berry, 'If China Can Say No, Can China Make Movies? Or, Do Movies Make China? Rethinking National Cinema and National Agency', *boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998), pp. 129–50.

Blockbuster movies like *Wolf Warrior 1and Wolf Warrior 2* tend to celebrate a strong and rising China and predict its role as a world power. Yet the Hollywood style of such movies renders any univocal, essential Chinese identity impossible. Why do we need a Hollywood aesthetic to articulate a Chinese dream? When we turn our gaze towards a movie like Hu Bo's *An Elephant Sitting Still*, any idea of a powerful and rising China becomes both obscene and perverse. What is left are the struggles and pains of those who are excluded from that dream, the hopeless youth in grey cities located in the polluted backyard of the shiny and glamorous first-tier cities. We are here confronted with the cruel optimism of the Chinese dream.

When the idea of upward mobility and a better life is fraught with frictions and blockages, what is left for China's new generation? These questions go beyond China and speak to a general global condition of uncertainty and precarity, if not despair. As such, it would be fallacious to interpret *An Elephant Sitting Still* as an articulation of the Chinese condition alone—on the contrary, it does more, and powerfully moves beyond the question of Chineseness. Above all, movies like this are such a far cry from discourses over national humiliation, or the rise of China. Instead, it is 'a halting, anguished cry of resistance against the all-pervasive decadence and smug, professional loftiness of our world'.[24] From space warriors to school dropouts, from action heroes to suicidal youth, Chinese identities are above all multivocal, elusive, fluid and perpetually on the move—impossible to pin down. Dare I say, just like ours?

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24 Aliza Ma, 'Ice Age: With *An Elephant Sitting Still* Hu Bo Leaves Behind a Shattering Final Testament to China's Postindustrial No-Hopers', *Film Comment* (2019), p. 51.

The United States and China Have Come Full Circle

Dr Heleen Mees

2001: birth of the world's factory floor

On 10 November 2001, when the dust from the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC had not yet settled, the 142 members of the World Trade Organisation in Geneva approved China's accession to its body. China would legally become a member 30 days after the World Trade Organisation (WTO) had received formal notice that the Chinese Parliament had ratified the agreement. The Chinese Parliament did not waste any time. Exactly 30 days after the World Trade Organisation's ministerial conference gave the green light, on 10 December 2001, China became a full-fledged member of the world's chief trade body.

Within a year of China's accession, the World Bank ran an article in its *Transition Newsletter* under the headline 'China Is Becoming the World's Manufacturing Powerhouse'.[48] The article pointedly described how the Dutch electronics company Philips, when it began planning in the early 1980s for business opportunities in China, adopted what seemed an obvious strategy at the time: sell as many Philips products as possible to one billion Chinese consumers. Instead, China became a place where Philips made its products—and then shipped them elsewhere. By 2002, Philips operated 23 factories and produced about USD 5 billion worth of goods in China each year, nearly two-thirds of which were exported overseas.

In 2000, approximately USD 10 billion in Chinese-made merchandise made its way to Wal-Mart Stores (as Walmart was then known) every year, either directly from manufacturers in China or from other suppliers that source their goods in China. By 2005, that number had sextupled to USD 60 billion. In 2004, 60 per cent of Wal-Mart's merchandise was imported, mainly from China, compared

48 *The World Bank Transition Newsletter* 13, no. 6 (October–November–December 2002).

with just 6 per cent in 1995.[49] Manufacturers ranging from General Electric to Samsung, as well as thousands of Chinese companies, found that it was often more profitable—and almost always far easier—to use China as an export base than selling goods inside the world's most populous nation. Once viewed as the one-billion-people market, China had quickly become the world's factory floor, re-drawing not only the global corporate landscape (for example, supply chains) but the macro-economic cosmos (for example, wages, inflation and interest rates) as well.

The flip side of the outsourcing/offshoring coin was that workers on the other side of the globe, particularly in the United States and Western Europe, started to feel unease about their jobs and wages. Being able to purchase groceries 20 per cent cheaper at Wal-Mart did not make up for the wage losses suffered because of foreign competition. Even if trade produced a surplus of winners over losers so that winners could in principle compensate losers, as economic orthodoxy has it, there was no guarantee that the winners would indeed compensate the losers.

China's accession to the WTO added almost a billion workers to the global economy at the beginning of this century. India added another half billion. Many of these workers had earlier lived off a dollar a day. The implication of the endless supplies of labour was that companies could hire ever more workers without having to raise wages. All that employers had to pay was a subsistence wage that keeps their workers alive. Under these circumstances, the gains in labour productivity did not translate into higher wages, as mainstream economic theory has it, but in higher profits instead. Multinationals such as Apple could pay their workers in China developing-world wages, while selling their products at first-world prices.

After 2001: ramifications in the West

China's entry into the global economy put downward pressure on wages in advanced economies. In the United States, labour's share of GDP decreased between 1980 and 2013 by 9 percentage points. At the same time, profits as a share of GDP increased by roughly the same amount. The same happened in virtually every economy, including Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan and

49 'Wal-Mart Imports from China, Exports Ohio Jobs', Report, AFL-CIO Wal-Mart Campaign, 2005.

the Netherlands.[50] The ascendance of the world's most populous country in the global economy not only depressed the labour share of GDP worldwide, but also had a considerable impact on the world's capital markets.

While companies worldwide reported record profits, corporate investments remained flat, meaning that companies started to accumulate huge stockpiles of cash. As household savings dwindled, global corporate savings hit a record high. In 2005, US Federal Reserve governor and soon-to-be chairman Ben Bernanke cautioned that a 'global savings glut' depressed the yield on US government bonds (also called Treasuries).[51] Because the yield on a government bond is inversely related to the price of a government bond, the huge demand for government bonds drove up bond prices and pushed down interest rates.

Bernanke blamed emerging economies, and in particular China, for running large trade surpluses and investing the foreign reserves predominantly in US government bonds and US agency bonds. But while Bernanke singled out emerging countries, he failed to notice that big multinationals in the United States also accumulated stockpiles of cash, which the multinationals also invested heavily in US government bonds and US agency bonds. Because of the ferocious appetite for US government bonds, the yield on ten-year US government bonds and agency bonds kept falling, even though the US Federal Reserve was raising the short-term rate to reign in the economy.

The precipitous drop of interest rates in the mid-2000s fuelled housing bubbles in the United States. The same happened in the eurozone, especially in the periphery. The possibility of the housing boom one day turning to bust, leaving many homeowners penniless, seemed not to have caused any sleepless nights at the US Federal Reserve or the European Central Bank at the time. That is, until the collapse of investment bank Lehman Brothers in September 2008, which set-off a melt-down of the global financial system and allowed the housing bubbles across the United States and Europe to pop. In short, China's accession to the WTO depressed wages and long-term interest rates in the United States and Europe, which fuelled housing bubbles, which eventually resulted in the global financial crisis in 2008.

50 *Global Wage Report 2012/13: Wages and equitable growth* (Geneva, International Labour Organisation, 2013).

51 B. Bernanke, 'The Global Saving Glut and the US Current Account Deficit', speech no. 77, Board of Governors of the US Federal Reserve System, 10 March 2005.

Without China as a major economic player, the US Federal Reserve would have begun raising the short-term interest rate much sooner in the early 2000s, and the European Central Bank (ECB) would have followed suit, thus reining in housing bubbles. If not for China's accession to the WTO, a portion of manufacturing would have been preserved for the United States and Europe, thus aiding economic growth in these regions, driving up inflation, and propelling the US Federal Reserve and the ECB into action sooner. More importantly, without China's rise, there would not have been a striking shift from labour to capital, no ferocious appetite for government bonds and no downward pressure on long-term interest rates.

After Lehman: China to the rescue and the populist backlash

Ironically, the United States and Europe depended on emerging economies —especially China—to buoy the global economy after the collapse of Lehman Brothers. As Western demand fell off a cliff, China went on a spending spree, investing domestically in harbours, high-speed railroads and housing. China's trade surplus with the rest of the world dwindled from 10 per cent of GDP in 2008 to about 3 per cent in 2018. China alone accounted for two-thirds of global economic growth in the decade after the collapse of Lehman Brothers. The so-called Middle Kingdom proved to be the economic spade that the United States and Europe needed to dig themselves out from under their mountain of debt.

China's foreign direct investments reached almost USD 300 billion in 2013, ensnaring a variety of Western companies, ranging from upscale hotel chains, harbours, to robotic companies. In May 2015, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang launched a new industrial policy to move China away from being the 'world's factory' and instead making China a dominant power in high-tech manufacturing: 'Made in China 2025'.[52] Through government subsidies, the mobilisation of state-owned enterprises and the acquisition of intellectual property, China aimed to catch up with—and then surpass—Western technological prowess in advanced industries.

52 State Council, 'Made in China 2025' (中国制造 2025), 7 July 2015.

China's growing assertiveness coincided with populism roaring its ugly head in Europe and the United States. In June 2016, a narrow majority of the United Kingdom's electorate voted in a referendum for Brexit. Within five months, voters on the other side of the Atlantic elected US President Donald Trump, who had run a nationalistic campaign, railing against China and illegal immigrants alike. With Brexit, China lost a reliable foothold in the European Union; and with Trump's ascension to the presidency, China's rise suddenly became contentious and much less 'peaceful'.

In 2018, Trump launched a trade war to pressure Beijing to make changes to unfair trade practices, including the forced transfer of technology, limited access to Chinese markets, intellectual property theft and Chinese subsidies to state-owned enterprises. To this day, US tariffs on Chinese exports remain elevated at 19 per cent (six times higher than before the trade war began in 2018), covering 66 per cent of US imports from China. Chinese tariffs on US exports also remain elevated at 21 per cent, covering 58 per cent of China's imports from the United States.[53]

Although the trade war caused economic pain on both sides and led to a diversion of trade flows away from both China and the United States, Joe Biden's administration has yet to roll back the Trump-era trade tariffs. President Biden has stressed the importance of boosting investment in US infrastructure and technology to compete with China, and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has called China the most serious long-term challenge to the international order.[54] While the Biden administration likes to frame the clash between the two superpowers in terms of democracy versus authoritarianism, it is evident that it is also apprehensive about China's growing economic dominance.

In 2022, the United States imposed sweeping restrictions, which apply not only to the export of US semiconductor chips to China but also to any advanced chips made with US equipment.[55] The pretext for the US export ban is that China uses

53 R. Hass and A. Denmark, 'More Pain than Gain: How the US–China Trade War Hurt America', Newsletter (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2020).

54 US Department of State, 'The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China', 26 May 2022.

55 US Department of Commerce, 'Implementation of Additional Export Controls: Certain Advanced Computing and Semiconductor Manufacturing Items; Supercomputer and Semiconductor End Use; Entity List Modification', 7 October 2022.

the advanced chips to produce military equipment and commit human rights abuses, but the advanced chips are also central to mobile devices, electric cars and gaming consoles. They are the foundation of next-generation technology from 5G internet to cloud services and artificial intelligence (AI). The export controls will restrain Chinese technology companies, from chip-makers to AI companies. Without access to large amounts of these chips, China may fall behind technologically.

After Trump: race for technological dominance

We have come full circle. From the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and China joining the WTO in 2001, to the race between the United States and China for technological dominance—like the space race between the United States and the former USSR during the Cold War. The United States aims to decouple China from the West. The US National Defense Strategy cites China as the 'pacing challenge', just as the USSR was the pacing challenge during the Cold War.

The rise of China is not only a story of Chinese ingenuity and labour, but also a story of Western hubris (some would say naivety). In *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Francis Fukuyama envisioned a world where market liberalism would automatically bring democracy to all corners of the world. Fukuyama believed that Chinese households would eagerly buy American television sets once trade barriers between the United States and China had been lifted.

Political leaders ignored early warnings that the American economy would not necessarily benefit from international trade with China if the latter could close the innovation gap.[56] Even those who conceded that international trade would yield net economic losses for the United States if China did close the innovation gap dismissed the idea as impractical. They simply did not believe that China would ever be able to close its innovation gap with the United States.

The sweeping export ban that the United States imposed in 2022 shows that China is catching up with the West too fast for comfort. The stakes are enormous. Not only are US-made semiconductors vital for China's rapid progress in AI

56 Steve Lohr, 'An Elder Challenges Outsourcing's Orthodoxy', *The New York Times*, 9 September 2004.

technology, the consequences of which we do not yet fully understand. China also accounts for almost one-fifth of the world's production of lower-end chips that are used in virtually all consumer electronics and industrial equipment.

If China surpasses the West's technological capabilities, which is its officially stated goal, China will not only dominate the world's production of lower-end chips, but also the production of higher-end chips. Those who believe that scenario to be far-fetched given the intricacies of the semiconductor industry, should think again. Not only has Beijing already committed more than USD 100 billion to underpin the local chip industry, but by 2025 Chinese universities will also produce nearly twice as many science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) Ph.D. graduates as US universities.[57]

A possible 'reunification' with Taiwan, which is home to the world's largest advanced semiconductor manufacturer (TSMC), also looms large. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in October 2022 reiterated that China's plans for annexation are 'on a much faster timeline' than previously understood.[58] US Naval chief Michael Gilday warned in a speech to the Atlantic Council that China may invade Taiwan as soon as 2023 (although most China watchers deem that scenario unlikely).[59]

It is not entirely reassuring that Taiwan reportedly has plans to destroy its semiconductor capacity before Beijing could capture it, as such a move would greatly affect the West's technological capabilities.[60] China will likely be able to close the innovation gap in the field of semiconductors on its own by the end of this decade, despite the US chip ban. Yet if US officials are correct in their assessment of China's plans *vis-à-vis* Taiwan, the global chip industry will be in hot water much sooner.

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57 R. Zwetsloot *et al.*, 'China is Fast Outpacing US STEM Ph.D. Growth', *CSET Data Brief*, 2021.

58 Ellen Francis, 'China Plans to Seize Taiwan on "Much Faster Timeline", Blinken Says', *The Washington Post*, 18 October 2022.

59 Demetri Sevastopulo, 'US Navy Chief Warns China Could Invade Taiwan before 2024', *Financial Times*, 20 October 2022.

60 TSMC is investing USD 40 billion to build a second advanced chip factory in the US state of Arizona as a hedge against China.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, China was expected to surpass the United States as the world's largest economy during the second half of this decade.[61] However, the pace of China's economic rise has slowed in recent years, because of its stringent zero-Covid policy and other headwinds, including the ageing of its population (China's working-age population has been in decline since 2015). Goldman Sachs now estimates that China will surpass the United States as the world's largest economy by around 2035 (while it estimated in 2011 that China would surpass the United States by 2025).[62]

Much will depend on whether China is able to preserve its entrepreneurial spirit amid the government's campaign to assert greater control over its people's lives and thoughts. The average living standard in China in 2022 was only one-sixth of the living standard in the United States, so there is still room for catch-up growth.[63] China owes its economic success in the past few decades not only to low wages, but also to the entrepreneurial spirit of the Chinese people. The question is whether the Chinese government's crackdown on private companies and on people's lives, from the clampdown on Big Tech to the mandatory teachings of 'Xi Jinping Thought', will break that spirit.[64]

During the last few decades, more than a billion people in the developing world, particularly in Asia, have escaped desperate levels of poverty. In the early 1990s, two-thirds of the Chinese population lived in extreme poverty. By 2015, the share of Chinese living in extreme poverty had fallen to less than 1 per cent.[65] At the same time, inequality in rich countries reached levels not seen in a century as

61 China already surpassed the United States as the world's largest economy measured in local prices, or purchasing power parity (PPP), in 2015.

62 'The Global Economy in 2075: Growth Slows as Asia Rises', *Insights*, Goldman Sachs, 8 December 2022.

63 'GDP Per Capita, Current Prices: US Dollars Per Capita', IMF Datamapper, International Monetary Fund, October 2022.

64 'Xi Jinping Thought'—an abbreviation of 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era'—is a political doctrine derived from the writings and speeches of President Xi Jinping.

65 *Four Decades of Poverty Reduction in China: Drivers, Insights for the World, and the Way Ahead*, report (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022).

the West failed to offer proper protections for globalisation's losers, leading to populist revolts, most notably in the United Kingdom and the United States.[66]

With hindsight, China's accession to the WTO should have been more gradual, giving high-income countries more time to adapt. China has attained the status of an upper middle-income country under the World Bank classification. It is therefore unseemly that China still elects for itself the status of developing country under the WTO framework, which brings significant perks (note that the WTO has not defined 'developed' and 'developing' countries, so member countries are free to announce whether they are 'developed' or 'developing').

A democratic government is not a precondition for nations to join the WTO, otherwise the trade body would not count Russia and Saudi Arabia among its members. Still, it is unfortunate that liberal democracy does not come with free trade.

66 E. Saez and G. Zucman, 'The Rise of Income and Wealth Inequality in America: Evidence from Distributional Macroeconomic Accounts', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Volume 34(4), 2020, pp. 3–26.

To Rule ‘All Under Heaven’

Prof. Roel Sterckx

Rhetorical tangerines

In a speech at the College of Europe (reported in the *People’s Daily* on 2 April 2014), Xi Jinping quoted the following lines from the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Yan*:

> Tangerines growing south of the river Huai produce oranges. Tangerines growing north of the river Huai produce trifoliate oranges. Although their leaves are similar, the fruits taste different. Why is this? Because the water and soil are different.[67]

Chinese politicians often embellish their speeches with excerpts from the classical canon. Even when direct links between the old masters and contemporary current affairs may seem tenuous, invoking past wisdom lends a tinge of authority to one’s diagnosis of the present. Master Yan, an advisor to Duke Jing of Qi (sixth to fifth century BCE), is the archetypical wise counsel who tries to keep his lord on the straight and narrow. The message here is: do not try to export models that suit the political climate on one side of the river to the other side. Or, as Xi continued: ‘The world is developing poly-dimensionally, and the history of the world never goes in a single line. China cannot indiscriminately imitate the political systems and development histories of other countries’.

Self-confidence and sino-centrism

Xi’s sense of self-confidence about the Middle Kingdom’s place in the world is not new. It has been embedded in Chinese political thought for centuries. One could argue that such self-assured positioning can be traced back to pre-imperial times, the age of China’s great thinkers.

67 Xi Jinping, *How to Read Confucius and Other Chinese Classical Thinkers* (New York, NY: CN Times Books, 2015), pp. 239-40.

Confucius (551–479 BCE) is quoted in the *Analects* as claiming that a Chinese state without a ruler still functions better than a barbarian state with a ruler.[68] Confucius lived during the so-called Warring States period, a time of internecine warfare between contending territorial states. Many local rulers of his time were absorbed in a geopolitics of overt violence and military conflict.

Yet alongside Confucius, early China's political thinkers were also keen to highlight the limits of power secured by the sword or public sabre-rattling. Texts associated with Daoist or Legalist thought articulate an alternative view of power that became equally formative to Chinese political culture—namely, the idea that the most powerful ruler remains hidden and concealed from view. He commands affairs of state from the depths of his palace and knows everything about the world ('All Under Heaven') without having to peep through his window. Intelligence-gathering ('to see without being seen') was a technique the hidden monarch had to master. This could take the form of military espionage, as formulated for instance in Sun-Tzu's famous *Art of War*. It could also involve an exercise in 'cultural' reconnaissance. For instance, during the Han dynasty (second century BCE to second century CE), the court's so-called Bureau of Music was established to collect songs and ditties from around the empire to gauge the mood of the realm. The successful mastery over foreign lands away from the Chinese court and its heartland depended on its ruler being able to grasp a region's 'winds and customs' (a term that still translates 'mores' in modern Mandarin).

The idea that the Chinese ruler aspires to command the world through passive interference rather than active and physical aggression—covertly rather than overtly—is sometimes linked to Sino-centrism: the belief that the universe—both nature and human society—fares best with the Chinese imperial court at its centre. Centrism, of course, can be said to apply to all empires in some form or other. Yet it only partly explains the tendency of imperial China's thinkers to emphasise the value of covert over overt influence.

68 *Confucius: De Gesprekken* (translated and explained by Kristofer Schipper) (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Augustus, 2014), p. 124 (III.5).

Spheres of influence

Early Chinese geographical thinking conceived of the world as a set of concentric circles, with the Son of Heaven operating from a cultured heartland. His sphere of influence diminished the farther one moved away from the centre. Just as all roads led to Rome, Confucian doctrine held that foreign powers would spontaneously succumb to the virtuous radiance of the Chinese ruler. In China's political vocabulary, 'ruling' the world was often formulated with the expression 'transforming all under Heaven'.

Deeply rooted in imperial China's dealings with the rest of the world was a conviction that foreign policy entailed a civilising mission: those who wanted something from China had to be prepared to acknowledge its cultural and moral authority. Throughout Chinese history, so-called 'tribute missions' were the symbolical enactment of this relationship. In exchange for often superior returns of goods and gifts, outside powers would appear before the emperor in embassies to the court, thereby accepting nominal Chinese supremacy. Although tribute missions were mostly a fiction in economic terms, they accorded the Chinese court status. Such ritual recognition of its centrality in the international order buttressed the status of the Son of Heaven as an almighty and omnivoyant pillar, who stood at the centre of the world and the cosmos at large.

To be sure, the positioning described above was often no more than an ideology, anchored in a Confucian view of the world. China's 'century of humiliation', which started with the Opium Wars in the mid-19th century and resulted in the founding of the People's Republic of China, is proof of the disjuncture between political ideology and historical reality. Yet in reflecting on China's attitudes towards the international order, two factors are often overlooked.

First, for all its claims to a continuous and unbroken history that goes back over three millennia, we should remember that for large swathes of time, China was ruled by regimes that were not ethnically Chinese. The Mongols (Yuan dynasty) and Manchus (Qing dynasty) alone already clock up nearly four centuries of China's historical chronology. Second, China has never been a uniform giant—either sleeping, restless, or rising. Whether before (pre-221 BCE), during (221 BCE to 1911 CE), or after empire (post-1911), it has always been a regionally diverse and multi-ethnic civilisation. History may help put the longevity of the People's Republic of China and its ambition to secure and preserve unity into perspective: more than ten centuries had already elapsed before China would emerge for the

first time as a unified empire in 221 BCE. During the period from the early third century CE to the mid-tenth century CE alone, more than 45 dynasties ruled over parts or all of its territory. So China's self-acclaimed historical continuity is marked by a striking degree of discontinuity, and hence military and political disorder. China was, and still is, as diverse a continent as Europe. As a result, the moral characterisation of political enemies as 'barbarians' was often a rhetorical device applied to both 'Chinese' and 'non-Chinese' regions or states alike, depending on shifting political circumstances.

Soil and soul

There runs a persistent red thread through Chinese sources that links foreigners, psycho-somatically, to their native lands: the soil one inhabits, and its climes, influence human character and its social formation. Duan Chengshi, a well-travelled chronicler active in the ninth century CE, sums it up as follows:

> Eastern people have big noses. Their intelligence is linked to the eyes. Muscular strength is associated with them. Southern people have big mouths, and their intelligence is linked to the ears. Westerners have big faces, and their intelligence is linked to their noses. The intelligence of northerners is linked to the genitals and their short necks. The intelligence of people of central regions is linked to their mouths.[69]

Intermediaries always played an important role in transmitting communications between the Chinese court and outside partners. These could be envoys sent out on fact-finding missions through voluntary or forced residence in foreign lands, or messages that were delivered through a chain of interpreters. Another tactic was to marry off a princess to potential rivals (an early form of ping-pong or panda diplomacy). Contact with the outside word was hardly ever direct. While emperors would engage in grand tours within the empire, the onus was never upon them to head up foreign missions.

Rhetorically, at least, the world was to come to China. Those who turned to China in allegiance had to be supported. Those who did not were justifiable targets

69 Carrie E. Reed, *A Tang Miscellany: An Introduction to Youyang Zazu* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014), p. 86.

for a punitive mission. Ironically, what constituted the 'Chinese sphere' changed over time. One could enter or exit it. Even the founders of the Chinese empire, the Qin, were at one point described as aggressive jackals and wolves who were bent on gobbling up neighbouring states with the determination of a caterpillar. Nevertheless, the notion of empire as an imagined community was always kept alive as a constant and everlasting ideal.

All under heaven?

Confucian interest in the foreign was limited. Once the boundaries of the realm have been established, the Chinese ruler turns back at the border. In the *Essentials of Governance* (eighth century CE), one petitioner to Emperor Taizong submits:

> I have heard that in ancient times when wise monarchs governed the court and enlightened kings created institutions, they inevitably put the Chinese first and the barbarians second. They spread moral transformation to them but did not engage with remote territories.[70]

Ethnic diversity and political unity were never considered complementary opposites in traditional China. The Son of Heaven by default ruled 'All Under Heaven'. To rule in traditional China meant being seen to have kept together, or restored, an empire that one was mandated to preserve *as one*. The ideal was to safeguard the 'Great Unity'.

This has been the foundation of Chinese political culture since the days of Confucius up until today. It still echoes in the mission of the Chinese Communist Party. Successful rulers gained ascendency when they unified or reunified a territory or polity that they inherited. From the first emperor through to today's president, claims to political authority are grounded in a commitment to 'make one', or restore a once golden and harmonious age of political concordance. To extrapolate this philosophy to today: laying claim to outlying territories such as Hong Kong and Taiwan is nothing more than the natural outcome of what constitutes the very *raison d'être* of anyone occupying the so-called 'dragon throne'. Chinese dynastic legitimacy was anchored in an unquestionable belief

70 Wu Jing, *The Essentials of Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 306.

that the default order of empire is unity, or at least an imaginary unity that could be situated in a golden past. This belief was, and continues to be, shared by all its main political actors. Anything, therefore, that deviates from this ideal of unity can de facto be construed as an aberration.

To no great surprise, when the Chinese empire pitched itself as central compared to the rest of the world, this was often no more than an ideological strategy to reinforce internal unity across a vast and diverse realm. Acting outwardly with unity of purpose can mask internal discord.

Think of the symbolism associated with the Great Wall, that ritual platform on which foreign dignitaries are still welcomed today. Walls protect and divide, they separate communities that live within, but also offer a military and cultural barrier against potential outside influence. Walls are boundary markers that can embody both expansionist and protectionist ambitions.

Very early on, the Chinese conceived of the world in terms of dyadic spheres. The terms ‘inner’ (*nei*) and ‘outer’ (*wai*) are part and parcel of pre-modern Chinese political vocabulary. The analogy here is that of a household’s inner sphere versus an outer sphere located beyond the boundaries of the home. Within the household, the imperial state ran its domestic affairs with the aid of a meticulous bureaucratic apparatus that controlled and organised public and private life, often at a very granular level. The Son of Heaven acted as the overseeing paternal figurehead.

One mantra, encapsulated in *The Great Learning*, a foundational text in Chinese political thinking, holds that in order to rule the world, order the state and rectify the family, one should start by cultivating the self.[71] Given the vast territorial size of imperial China, rulers understood that it would be unfeasible to export or replicate the model of one’s own internal household elsewhere. Instead, dynasties insisted on maintaining a sphere of influence over those regions in the form of loosely administered ‘dependent’ states, some of which were largely left to govern themselves autonomously. Even when ‘spheres of influence’ were thin or non-existent on the ground, they were nevertheless important symbolically as an assertion of the Son of Heaven’s transformative influence over the world.

71 Roel Sterckx, *Chinees Denken: Over Geschiedenis, Filosofie en Samenleving* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Nieuwezijds, 2021), chapter 4, particularly pp. 185–88.

'The means to profit my state'

Chinese thinkers never fundamentally questioned the notion that China should be ruled top–down by one monarch (and institution) with powers that have an autocratic reach. In such a tradition, claims about the merits of equal partnerships between those who rule and those who are ruled, or between regions and those at the centre, or between the Chinese court and the world beyond its frontiers, should always be read with rhetorical caution.

The philosopher Mencius (fourth to third century BCE) was probably more accurate in putting his finger on the real purpose of diplomacy. In a famous dialogue that opens the book of *Mencius*, a king asks him, 'Venerable sir, you have not considered a thousand *li* too far to come to me. Surely you must have some means to profit my state?!'[72] Mencius here offers *realpolitik* based on a core tenet that has remained constant in Chinese foreign affairs: ritual etiquette and diplomatic protocol aside, relationships between states are, in the end, commodified—they revolve around the flow of goods, trade and wealth creation. The exchange of gifts and polite language coats the primal motif that spurs societies to interact with each other: economic interest.

Despite a deeply ingrained rhetoric that presents historical China's relationship with the outside world as a Chinese–barbarian binary, history also reveals a great deal of variation and pragmatism at work, depending on historical circumstances and the individual political actors. Structures such as the tributary system, ideologies such as Sino-centrism and watchwords such as neutrality, non-interference, friendship and mutual cooperation may be the public face of Chinese diplomacy, but behind the doctrine lurks a carefully directed pragmatism.

Traditionalism can be an expedient tool to dress up foreign policy doctrine. After all, some of the ethical norms and values proposed by China's ancient philosophers (peace, harmony and duty of care, etc.) are universally recognisable and echoed in ethical thinking far beyond China. But China's leaders have proactively invoked this cultural heritage and are likely to continue to do so, as it adds rhetorical weight to the notion that policy can be qualified as having 'Chinese characteristics'.

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72 *Mencius* (translated by Karel L. van der Leeuw) (Eindhoven: Uitgeverij Damon, 2020), 1A.1, p. 67.

At the World Peace Forum in 2013, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke of ‘traditional values with a unique oriental touch’ and he hailed a ’5,000-year history’ that provides ‘an endless source of invaluable cultural asset for China’s diplomacy’.[73] Political observers might argue that China today no longer hides to bide time. Unlike imperial China’s Son of Heaven, its current leader travels widely and attends international summits, and China’s proactive Belt and Road diplomacy reaches far beyond the confines of the ancient Silk Road. Yet the ancient masters continue to tread along conveniently in China’s proclaimed ‘New Era’. A Confucius figure moulded by the state spearheads cultural diplomacy through the Confucius Institutes. In another speech, Xi Jinping noted that ‘A large state should be the estuary of a river where all the streams of the world come together’.[74] He was quoting from the *Daodejing* (The Classic of the Way and Virtue), a Daoist text associated with Master Lao, some time back in the sixth to fourth century BCE.

73 Quoted in Yan Xuetong, ‘Chinese Values vs. Liberalism: What Ideology will Shape the International Normative Order?’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (2018), p. 9.

74 Xi, *How to Read Confucius and Other Chinese Classical Thinkers*, pp. 236-37 (the reference is to chapter 61 of the *Daodejing*).

The tide of great power strife is rising once again. When tensions between rivals increase, the need to understand each other becomes greater. Where newspapers write about geopolitical considerations, Undercurrents dives deeper below the surface. It argues that we need to persist in our attempt to comprehend what is obscured and asks: what undercurrents are driving China's evolution as a global power?

In this collection of essays, introduced by political theorist **Ties Dams** (ed.), eminent European scholars share their view of what's shaping China's geopolitics:

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Philosopher and sinologist **Roel Sterckx** distils the ancient philosophies that flow through China's contemporary geopolitics.

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