eurozine

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Surfing the dragon

Can China ever break out of the narrative in which it has bound itself? Can there be peaceful change and equal space for political and economic freedom?

In the negotiations that led to Beijing's selection as the host city for the 2008 Olympic Games, China made certain promises. There were, of course, the promises that the Olympic infrastructure would be adequate, that transport would work, and that the air in Beijing would be breathable. There were other promises, too –– that human rights in China would improve, and that foreign journalists in town for the Olympics would be allowed to cover any topic they chose in the manner they saw fit.

Barely two hours after the Olympic key was handed to the mayor of Beijing in 2001, the *Guardian*'s correspondent in Beijing, Jonathan Watts, was harassed and detained as he attempted to cover a peaceful demonstration. It was not an auspicious start, and the discouraging trend has continued. In August 2006, a group of human rights organizations –– Olympic Watch, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), International Society for Human Rights (ISHR/ IGFM), Solidarité Chine, and Laogai Research Foundation –– issued a joint statement pointing out the lack of progress on such issues as freedom of speech, fair trials, and the death penalty, and calling for discussions on a possible Olympic boycott. Separately, Amnesty International issued its own call for Beijing to be held to the promises made. Among AI's complaints were the fact that Beijing had put out to tender under the banner "New Beijing, New Olympics: The Opportunity for China and the World", an execution chamber where those sentenced to death by the Beijing High People's Court would be killed by lethal injection, a gesture that, Amnesty complained, negated the "preservation of human dignity" that Beijing as the Olympic host city was committed to uphold.

That call for an Olympic boycott is unlikely to be heeded, but the catalogue of Beijing's recent arrests, harassments, procedurally challenged trials, and outrageously long sentences of defendants, who range from foreign journalists to human rights lawyers, leaves only the most wilfully optimistic with the hope that, in just two years' time, Beijing will be running a regime that would no longer make a principled Olympic committee blush.

The promises of new infrastructure and facilities, on the other hand, are more than likely to be fulfilled: one of today's China's notable features is the rapidity with which buildings are torn down and new ones erected. An apparently inexhaustible supply of underpaid –– or, in some cases, unpaid –– migrant labourers allow construction to continue round the clock. Neither planning

regulations nor the resistance of residents threatened with dispossession by a new stadium or an Olympic village are allowed to delay a project.

As for Beijing's vile air quality, time will tell, but so seriously do the authorities take this bid for international kudos that all construction is to stop a full year before the games open to allow the dust to settle; factories will be shut down and cars will be selectively banned. Beijing, briefly, will sparkle.

The Olympics present a grand opportunity for China to strut its stuff as the coming power, a formal farewell to images of poverty and backwardness and hello to the century of Asia. Scale, glamour, dazzle, and impeccable organization are de rigueur. Whatever it takes, Beijing will present the very image of a twenty–first–century capital –– the showcase city of China's peaceful rise. The hardware will be impeccable.

The software of the new Chinese state, though, presents more intractable problems. Baggy, contradictory, and unresolved, it sometimes threatens to throw the whole image of modernization off balance. For at the heart of the contemporary official narrative –– designed to justify both China's ambition of international dominance and the refusal of domestic political change –– there is a profound, state–level identity crisis.

In a perceptive essay on what he calls the "history gap" –– between the way the Chinese understand the uses of history and an outsider's view –– the scholar Thomas Bartlett wrote:

> The principal aim of the official historiography is to present China to the world as a unified, sovereign entity, profoundly autochthonous and morally self–sufficient throughout five millennia –– the same people in the same place consistently practising the same distinctive way of life. Thus China is sometimes said to be the most ancient civilization, a subtly tendentious phrase which actually implies, "the most ancient continuous civilization".

There are, of course, civilizations of equal antiquity, but the Chinese argue that they came and went. Only China, they say, can claim an unbroken line of descent from remote antiquity. For the contemporary powers in Beijing, this seniority informs a further step: that China is exceptional, sanctified by history, and therefore morally and politically unchallengeable in its modern form by junior political entities. In this use of a spurious antiquity to place the regime beyond question, the contemporary official narrative of China resembles nothing more than a dubious reinvention of ancestor worship.

It is no accident, to borrow a tired Marxist formulation, that political ancestor worship is prized in today's Beijing. The Party's current narrative of China's political trajectory abandons Marx's theory of class struggle in favour of the theory of "harmonious society" –– a neo–Confucian construct that, in its first iteration, dictated that each would know his place and live accordingly. (In Confucius' version, this depended on the righteous conduct of the ruler, but perhaps Confucius was always doomed to see his targets missed in this respect.)

The "harmonious society" is the domestic version of the internationally tranquilizing story of the "peaceful rise" of China. Central to this is the argument that, since the days of the Yellow Emperor, the mythic ancestor of

the Han race, traditionally dated to 2700BCE, China has been a powerful but benign neighbour, content to mind its own business and expecting the same of others. China's increasing power today, therefore, is no threat to anyone. "Harmonious society" and "peaceful rise" are the most recent refinements of a national narrative that has, through its multiple revisions, retained the character of the imperial "mandate of heaven" –– sanctifying the right of the Communist Party to occupy the imperial throne.

Even when the Party still appeared to believe in communism –– and based its claim to rule on the ideological imperative –– historical myth never completely lost its charge. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, a time of violent national, political, and historical iconoclasm in which all symbols of tradition and history were under assault, there was, astonishingly, no interruption to the annual ritual of official homage to the Yellow Emperor.

Even as Chairman Mao urged the mob to destroy the Chinese past, the Yellow Emperor received his state–sponsored dues –– an insurance policy, perhaps, against the failure of the attempt to begin history anew in 1966. Today, with Maoism in the wastebin of history, the rituals are conducted with renewed state enthusiasm.

With each revision of its story, the Party has used the past to justify its power. In its days as a revolutionary party, it was a negative justification: the past was the oppressive prehistory of the Party's arrival in power, a story of oppression that was broken by the Party's new socialist society. The imperative was ideological. When the Communist Party ditched Maoism and embarked on its belated but frantic market modernization, two implicit promises legitimized its continued grip on power: rising living standards at home and the restoration of China internationally to her rightful place as the world's biggest economy, thus erasing the humiliation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when China's weakness allowed the upstart powers of the West to dictate their terms. But ever rising prosperity is more of a temporary pacifier than a unifying narrative and, as the pervasive unrest, obvious to any observant visitor and admitted by the state, indicates, it is effective only with the beneficiaries of China's uneven prosperity. If the economic project falters, it will not even satisfy them.

The challenge, then, is to construct a narrative that will substitute for the power of ideology and render the Party proof against challenge. Ideology is as dead as Mao's badly preserved corpse, still gruesomely displayed in Tiananmen Square, and if the rule is every man for himself economically under China's new market conditions, why not politically? If competition is king in the marketplace of goods, why not in the market of ideas? The answer, for now, lies in history. The Party today relies on a myth not of rupture but of continuity for its validation. The story is full of holes, beginning with the claims to antiquity.

The Yellow Emperor is invoked to backdate the origin of Chinese culture by a couple of millennia. Like Ram, though, the Yellow Emperor inconveniently left no archaeological trace; for that –– and the first writing –– we have to wait until the Shang Dynasty in 1700BCE, in the Loess plateau in the bend of the Yellow River (an area then lushly fertile but now reduced to man–made desert). Politically, the ancestral state emerges later still, with the military conquest, by 221BCE, of a group of princely states by Qin Shihuangdi, first emperor of the Qin Dynasty.

His conquest of his neighbouring states is reckoned to be China's founding moment. Crucially, he imposed a cultural uniformity on his newly conquered neighbours by anointing one official script and banning all others, thus creating a powerful tool for cultural assimilation and paving the way for a narrative of Han continuity. In today's China, mutually incomprehensible spoken languages are written in the same script and called Chinese, thanks to Qin Shihuangdi. He imposed political uniformity, too, banning all books that advocated alternative forms of government, burning the writings of the great philosophers of the One Hundred Schools and executing more than 400 of the more independent–minded scholars. It is easy to see why he was one of Chairman Mao's favourite emperors.

His dynasty was short–lived but crucial to China's story. The uniformity he imposed set the template for subsequent dynasties as they steadily expanded the territory he bequeathed them. But despite this founding role as the creator of the Han state, Shihuangdi himself embodies the half–truths of the Chinese historical account: he was only half Han. His mother was a barbarian, a member of one of the many neighbouring peoples who were destined to be conquered and absorbed over the next 2000 years.

In today's official narrative, "China" has lived peacefully with her neighbours for millennia, threatening nobody. A cursory glance at an historical atlas, though, reveals that the state of Qin was relatively small, occupying the modern province of Shaanxi on today's map. To the north, west, and south were other peoples leading different lives, speaking different languages, and with different cultures and political systems. Today, Qin Shihuangdi's neighbours –– and many other peoples –– have been obliterated by the steady expansion of the Han. China's territory now stretches from Outer Mongolia in the north (Inner Mongolia has been absorbed and overrun with Han) to Central Asia in the west and the South China Sea in the south. It encompasses Tibet and Xinjiang. Taiwan, which has so far escaped military conquest in the modern era, is included on China's official maps.

Much of the expansion is relatively recent: in the Ming dynasty, which fell in 1644, China was roughly half the size of today's state. The Qing, the last imperial house, was not Chinese but Manchurian. The Manchu were one of many powerful steppe peoples who had conquered China at one time or another; peoples who challenged and overthrew the Chinese state, only to find themselves assimilated out of existence.

A friend from Harbin, in what used to be Manchuria, regards that conquest as an historic blunder of catastrophic proportions. The short–term result looked good: adding China to their prior conquests beyond the Great Wall, the Manchu ruled the largest empire that China had ever seen. They were careful of their homeland, too: Chinese were banned from settling or hunting in the ancestral lands of the Manchu royal house. The thick forests that covered most of Manchuria were protected. The Qing emperors ruled in magnificence from Beijing, but they returned to Manchuria to be buried. Life must have seemed pretty good.

From the point of view of my friend, though, it was a catastrophe. Today the Manchu have disappeared as a people. Their language, their culture, and their homeland have been erased, their forests have been felled and their minerals plundered. "If we hadn't invaded China," says my dispossessed friend, ruefully, "we would have been a small, oil–rich state in north Asia. We would still exist."

The Manchu disappeared through their own military success. A more common fate for the peoples who were once the Han people's neighbours was to disappear through Han military conquest. There are officially 54 different "minorities" in China today whose cultures are recognized as distinct; many others have vanished entirely, incorporated into Beijing's seamless narrative of cultural continuity.

Two conspicuous exceptions remain to remind us that modern China is imperial: the Uighur homeland now called Xinjiang (New Frontier) and Tibet, two–thirds of which has been directly absorbed into Chinese provinces, leaving the rump of the Tibetan territories still identifiable in the Tibet Autonomous Region. As followers of Tibetan Buddhism, the Manchu had a priest/protector relationship with the Dalai Lamas of Tibet, whom they revered and to whom they offered a security guarantee, without a full occupation of Tibet. When the Manchu dynasty collapsed in 1911, the successor Chinese states claimed Tibet as their own. Tibet disagreed.

The Uighurs, like other Muslim peoples, have a recent history of armed resistance to Beijing. Between 1862 and 1877, a Muslim rebellion spread across the present–day provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, Yunnan, and Ningxia, severely weakening the Qing dynasty. When the Qing fell, separatist movements in Xinjiang led eventually to the establishment of the Eastern Turkistan Republic Flag on 5 January 1945, covering the three Xinjiang districts of Ghulja, Altay, and Chochek, around 20 per cent of the territory and about 25 per cent of the region's population. Its declared intent was to end Chinese rule and it was effectively an independent state until the Communists took over China in 1949 with a 25 000–strong army. The state acceded to China in return for a promise of full autonomy, a process greatly assisted by the strange deaths in a plane crash of the leaders of East Turkistan, who were en route to talks in Beijing in August 1949.

In recent times, the collapse of the USSR and the setting up of the Turkic Republics led to discontent among the Turkic peoples across the border in Xinjiang. Discontent became visible unrest in 1997 with rioting in Yining (Gulja) and a number of car bombings which led to several deaths and allegations of torture, false imprisonment, and summary executions, as well as an increased military presence and a harsh crackdown on the mosques that the Chinese suspected of fostering Uighur nationalist sentiment.

The continuing problems in Xinjiang and Tibet cannot be denied, but they can be misdescribed. Those who tell the national stories of the Tibetans or the Uighurs, like those who value the right of the Taiwanese to democratic self determination, are accused of trying to "split" China, as though these territories had always lain within China's borders and always must remain there, whatever the will of their peoples. China, which has made heavy use of anti–imperial and anti–colonial argument against the West, will not hear of it at home. To acknowledge that today's China is an empire of relatively recent date is to question the lie at the heart of the official narrative of 5000 years of Chinese civilization –– a narrative that is designed to bolster two propositions: that China has always been as China is now, and that China is unique unto itself and must be allowed to set its own standards without regard for dissenting international or domestic opinion. There should, therefore, be no conditions on China's rise: the world must adjust to accommodate a country bent only on returning to its rightful place as the world's biggest economy, the world's strongest nation, and a superpower worthy of profound respect for the antiquity and innate virtue of its culture.

It is certainly true that China is bent on a peaceful rise in the short term –– China's boat is floating on a tide of trade and investment and for that China needs the world to take a benign view. The rise of China has many benefits, and constructive engagement is undoubtedly the best policy. But that does not mean that the narrative that supports the argument is true, or that, unchallenged, it is benign in the long term.

The Chinese famously take historical and cultural narratives seriously and, knowing the weight of them, understand the need to keep them under control. History is rewritten to mask the contradictory and fractured nature of the present, and of the many problems that China faces at the beginning of the twenty–first century, one of the most intractable, absent political modernization, is the challenge of defining what China is, politically, socially, and historically.

The leadership's preoccupation with this question can be read in the vigour with which other points of view continue to be suppressed. Keeping the story under control demands inordinate amounts of official effort –– from the theorists tasked with refining new versions to the repressive apparatus that is dedicated to the suppression of alternatives. Internet users, the press, and a weak but growing civil society are all pressing against the ideological fence and the ever stricter controls imposed on them in recent years are well documented. In academia, there is much more freedom today than in the recent past; even here, though, the limits of permitted historical inquiry are visible.

On 24 January 2006, for instance, the government ordered the closure of China Youth Daily's popular weekly supplement *Freezing Point* (Bingdian). *Freezing Point*, edited by Li Datong, was a liberal magazine that vigorously reported daily reality, as well as carrying a regular column by the eminent Taiwanese commentator Lung Yingtai, none of which endeared it to the government. But the official excuse for the magazine's closure was an article written by Yuan Weishi, a history professor at Zhongshan (Sun Yat–sen) University in Guangzhou, on the way history is taught in China.

Professor Yuan complained that Chinese textbooks systematically concealed Chinese responsibility for historical events –– in this case, the Boxer Rebellion –– and blamed others instead for China's troubles. After many high–level protests at its closure, *Freezing Point* was allowed to resume publication, but Li Datong was no longer the editor and there were no more articles from Professor Yuan.

If that is the response to a challenge to the official view of a relatively minor incident at the beginning of the twentieth century, imagine the consequences were any historian foolish enough to assert that today's China is an empire and that more than half its land mass was acquired around the time the British added India to their imperial possessions, or the Czar expanded eastwards. But the refusal to acknowledge these facts leaves today's China with a continuing problem of narrative as well as of political definition. Not only must the stories of the "peaceful rise" and "harmonious society" camouflage the desire of many non–Han citizens for liberation from Chinese colonialism, with its mass migration of Han settlers and threat of cultural extinction, it must also obscure the desire of many Han citizens for liberation from Communist Party rule, with all the repression and corruption that goes with it. It is a big challenge for what is rather a thin story, and one that is unlikely to serve China for long.

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