

Chinas künftige Krisen

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China is an economic superpower. With economic growth invariably in the ten-percent-plus region, China has become the second largest economy in the world and the third largest trading nation. The economic model is easy to understand: it is an outward-oriented economic model, based on a giant reservoir of cheap labour and close attention to foreign economic balances (especially export and inward foreign direct investments), that has been employed by many other emerging countries before: “Asian Tigers”, the “Keltic Tiger” of Ireland, “the Southeast Asian miracle” or the “Estonian miracle”. Beyond worldly understanding, apparently, and beyond human behaviour too, such rapid economic development cannot be portrayed without Biblical terms or references from the animal kingdom.

Yet there is no equivalent term for the Chinese development. There is no talk of a “Chinese tiger” or sundry references to its “economic miracle”. Chinese economic development seems so much beyond comprehension that the usual labels don’t fit; commentary must merge the faculties of religion and nature to get the proportions right. It’s become a mythological story blended by C.S. Lewis spiritualism and Walt Disney animalism; it is so supernatural that we can only imagine it in the form of a dragon.

China’s economic growth is not a miracle. Nor is it beyond human understanding. But inevitably it will slow down and crises will occur – economic as well as political crises. What will be the sources of these crises? Four new books on China give us some insights.

Rob Gifford, a former China correspondent and author of *China Road. A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power*, writes in the difficult genre of travel-cum-current-affairs literature. This genre is the art of composing stories *en route*; stories inspired by sudden encounters with people; stories midwived by close observation of daily life. It is books with two references to academic literature, at worst. Footnotes are entirely banned. Yet the stories should tell the bigger picture; they should be condensed knowledge wrapped in the form of journalistic narratives.

This is an art that only a handful has mastered: Evelyn Waugh, Shiva Naipaul, Bruce Chatwin, Ian Buruma, and Paul Theroux. Gifford’s book is not of vintage Theroux class. It does not, as every other China travel books in the last 20 years, come close to Theroux’s 1988 masterpiece on China, *Riding the Iron Rooster*, written from a long train journey through China. Yet Gifford is highly readable.

Gifford travels along Route 312, a modern version of the Old Silk Road, which crosses the whole country, from sizzling Shanghai on the eastern coast, over Xian and Lanzhou, to the western border to Kazakhstan. His mission is to get a better understanding of the varieties of modern China. In Shanghai he stumbles on rising individualism and China’s new breed of

party members. In Nanjing, once the capital of the Ming dynasty, Gifford gets a history lesson, but not a lesson of Chinese strength but one of weakness and humiliation: from the defeat in the 1842 encounter with the British Royal Navy to the Japanese massacre there in 1937. In Southern Henan, Gifford avoids to get caught by government inspectors when he visits HIV/aids villages once created by Chinese authorities but now hidden away from the rest of the world. And on a bus in southern Gansu, far away from the coastal growth regions, Gifford meets two young missionaries in the cosmetic trade, determined to bring modernity to the remote parts of poor, inner China.

Many of these encounters reveal a bigger narrative, mostly of societal change, but also of the tensions growing inside this reforming-yet-still-entrenched communist dictatorship. What Gifford does best is to put the socio-cultural development in the context of the party's grip on power, especially the likelihood of keeping its power. China today is much different from the collectivism of the Maoist revolution. Beyond the high street of cheap commercialism, fake brands and stereotypical business culture, which all lives and breathes a heavy dose of collectivism too, there is a growing individualism, sometimes obsessive in nature or form.

This quest for identity surpasses feelings of anti-communism, and curtails Confucianism and Chinese tradition as much as the spirit of Maoism. Gifford talks to a radio talk show host who fears the cultural erosion in modern China, and he bumps into businessman Tintin, a shave-headed, pipe-smoking member of the Shanghai Off-Roader Jeep Club who carefully nurtures his eccentricity. The balance between individualism and collectivism has always been the main source of conflict in societies. The party has little hope of persuading individualistic Chinese, who have abandoned communist values, of the virtues of its collectivist rule. The chief long-term strategy to stay in power is rather to enrol the young elite, the best and the brightest of future China. The story of modern communism in China, it is hoped, should be one of modern, rich, well-educated, and globally-oriented comrades.

This strategy may have its sponsors in the business regions, but neglects the sociological base of China's revolution: the peasants. Mao's special contribution to communist history was his alliance with the poor countryside. But the current leadership of China is repeating an age-old mistake of neglecting the hinterland.

In her new book on Chinese internal politics, *China. Fragile Superpower*, Susan Shirk, a China hand in the Clinton administration, comprehensively studies the factors that may shake the party's quest for stability. At the centre is growing nationalism, but not only nationalism as a theory or historical idea; equally important, if not more, is nationalism as the only legitimate way to voice critique of the government.

There are many groups behind the sharp growth of nationalism. Peasants who have lost their land constitute one group. As the rapid development has moved inwards from the coast, local authorities have seized land from farmers, who still lack individual property rights, without paying them. Another group is university students who avoid a repeat of the Tiananmen massacre of 1989 by not criticizing the government on democratic grounds, but nationalistic. The military is a third sponsor of nationalism, especially in the issue of Taiwan and one-China policy.

But the object of rising nationalism is not only Taiwan. Equally contentious, and today also out of the government's control, is the hostility to Japan. Anti-Japanese demonstrations grow in number and size. A survey of young Chinese in 2005 found that more than half hated or

disliked Japan. *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the famous movie, was cancelled by the government out of fear for public outrage; three Chinese movie stars plays geisha's in the movie.

Shirk records many other factors that erodes the rule of the party, and she has a good understanding of the shaping of China's foreign policy. But it is her portrait of rising nationalism that makes the book intriguing.

Chinese nationalism has historical roots. Hostilities towards Japan feasts on historical humiliations, some of which are old, others more recent: Japan's occupation of China, the Nanjing massacre, the conflict over Manchuria and Korea, et cetera. Yet China's nationalism cannot be explained without an understanding of Chinese history beyond every individual conflict.

Two splendid books on Chinese history have recently been published; both centres on the forming of the Chinese state and the struggle against disintegration through history. In her book *The Great Wall: China against the World 1000 BC-AD 2000*, Julia Lovell, a young Cambridge academic, follows 3000 years of Chinese history through the prism of the Great Wall. Harry Gelber, an Australian academic, takes a similar view, but unfolds China's history through eye of the West in *The Dragon and the Foreign Devils: China and the World 1100 BC to the Present*.

Their highly readable portraits of China's history are particularly interesting from the vantage point of nationalism. Lovell especially refutes the idea of a Chinese nationalism with historical roots. She rather understands Chinese nationalism as a product of the Chinese politburo and a phenomenon not older than 100 years. Before then China was almost never referred to as China but to the name of the incumbent dynasty. But she talks about a "revival" of nationalism, as a way to rescue the country from "the threat of imminent collapse". What was revived?

Chinese unification started in 200 BC by Qin Shi Huangdi, who assumed power at the age of 13 and proclaimed his rule "all under heaven". This epoch is still very present in the historic imagination of the Chinese and the recent discovery of his grave chamber in Xian, protected by thousands of terracotta warriors, has sparked a renewed interest for this brutal ruler. The name China probably originates from Qin (pronounced Chin), and when he died he left an empire heavily modernized in comparison to earlier dynasties. Qin built a modern bureaucracy, modernized the military, introduced a uniform legal code and a standard currency, and expanded early forms of the Great Wall. Furthermore, he politicized all parts of Chinese life, including families. Qin did not rule for a long time, and his imperial ambitions exhausted the country, but he is remembered for centralization of power and the belief that China can only be strong by holding together its vast regions.

These properties of the Qin rule have lived through the history of China. It is believed that times of weakness have sprung from internal divisions – between regions and within dynasties. And it is in the times of weakness that China has been humiliated – by Mongol conquerors in the North and colonialists from the West and the East (Japan). The romanticized idea of history is powerful: it assumes progress and modernization to be an ally of centralization, amassed central power is believed to be the apex of nationalism, and it all must be protected by walls (physical or mental). It also lends legitimacy to brutal methods of government – from Qin's slaughter of scholars and burning of books to the Tiananmen massacre and repressive control of Internet users.

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