

# a dream of the invisible pavilion

By David Gosset

to remain relevant in a time of rapid transformation, government policies, business strategies or the conceptual frameworks of analysts must fully integrate the meaning and effects of the Chinese renaissance, arguably the 21st century's major factor of change.

Just as China needs to create channels to better explain its conditions and intentions, the world has to approach the Chinese continent not as a separate and extinct civilization - sinology as a mere chapter of the "Oriental studies" - but as an ubiquitous source of modernity - "global China".

The deepening of a world consciousness depends for a great part on the West's comprehension of "global China" as an actor of history, and on China's capacity to embrace the world with a serene confidence. Trust between the West and China would open an unprecedented era of creativity and prosperity since lasting misunderstandings and suspicions between the two weaken and impoverish the global village.

While the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games have marked in the global public opinion China's spectacular re-entry on the world stage, the gradual replacement of the Group of 8 by the Group of 20, induced by the financial



crisis, is evidence for the world's elites of China's economic reemergence.

The 2010 Shanghai World Expo, a comprehensive six-month event involving science, technology and culture, is another important illustration of China's regained centrality and a symbol of globalization with Chinese characteristics.

Within the expo's site, millions of visitors compare the national or corporate pavilions, discuss their architectural features and the quality of their exhibitions. But it is in the

invisible pavilion where people coming from all over the world share ideas, impressions and emotions that the most significant exchanges take place.

In the “invisible pavilion”, while the Chinese visitors have a more direct access to the world’s diversity of experiences, many foreigners can unlearn misconceptions about China and make the effort to rethink one of the most consequential dynamics of the 21st century.

The world’s most populous country is still often viewed as conservative and immobile, but the perceived empire of rigidity is in reality a dynamic of change whose pace is difficult to capture. In a paralyzed context, China’s social and economic problems could not be managed and would certainly worsen, but in an adaptable overall environment these can be solved - and fundamental equilibriums of the Chinese society protected.

Following the Maoist crusade, the “Great Leap Forward”, the radical “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution”, Chinese people are now adopting the logic of the market economy. Deng Xiaoping’s unleashing of reforms, *gaige*, in 1978 called for the mind’s emancipation (*jiefang sixiang*) and socio-political adjustments that represented the polar opposite of an unprogressive society.

Today’s China, far from being immobile, is all about social fluidity, incomparable energy and movement like the “flows of the Yangtze rushing to the East.”

China’s objective and visible metamorphosis mirrors the flexibility of the Chinese mindset. The transformation of megalopolis or the construction of entire new cities, the development of infrastructure redefining the landscape of an immense territory, the conception of new industrial or high-tech zones combined with the multiplication of state-of-the-art university campuses, the changes in consumption patterns or even in living habits, would not be possible with a population reluctant

to adjust to new circumstances, to accommodate evolving environments.

Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1972 documentary “China” is of great value to appreciate the magnitude of China’s metamorphosis: 38 years ago Beijing and Shanghai were monochrome, uniform bicycles, the famous Flying Pigeons, omnipresent, foreigners a source of astonishment and fear. In four decades a continent recreated itself.

From a long-term perspective, it is fundamentally this capacity for recreation which explains the continuity of the Chinese civilization. The metaphor of China as a “blank sheet of paper” used by Mao Zedong in his Ten Major Relationships (1956) is, to a certain extent, a variation on an ancient Taoist principle expressed by Laozi: “The great form is without shape.”

China’s plasticity can appear chaotic but does expand the possible. In the more crystallized West, definitive forms are comfortable but certainly limit the horizon. In Chinese society, behind the official orderly appearance one can always find a more anarchic layer; light easiness compensates the heavy ritualistic decorum, Confucianism and Taoism balance each other.

While many inaccurately perceive China as a static monolith, some also point to an inward-looking, closed and secretive society. Even if one can conceive that intellectual curiosity can largely be satisfied by the internal richness and subtleties of the Chinese continent, China has, in fact, re-entered a phase of intense communication with the rest of the world. Deng Xiaoping who as a young man had spent five years in France immediately after World War I, not only put China on the path of reforms but had also the genius to open the country to the world with the strategy of opening-up, the *kaifang* process.

As a result, China has never been so cosmopolitan, and even Li Shimin’s Changan, the great capital of the Tang Dynasty, was

comparatively less exposed to the influences of the foreign world.

Despite Beijing's ability to modernize and its unprecedented openness, some question China's willingness to act as a responsible global player. However, given the size of its population, China's achievements have global implications. By creating favorable conditions for a fifth of mankind, Beijing is a major contributor to the world's equilibrium. Moreover, the Chinese government's actions on confronting global terrorism, the risks of nuclear proliferation or the financial and economic crisis, demonstrate that Beijing is a constructive force beyond its borders. A stable and relatively prosperous China is essential to the balance of the international relations, it stands as a promise for developing countries and as a strategic partner for the Western world.

Does Beijing's overall success, in spite of the global recession, generate self-satisfaction and an "arrogant China"? Is it accurate to present a return to imperial China's sense of superiority which would be so detrimental for the country's future? One should put the issue into perspective and make a distinction between arrogance and self-confidence.

From the middle of the 19th century and for more than 100 years, China went through a period of decay and alienation. The Chinese world's marginalization can be partly explained by the concomitance of two opposite dynamics: at the time of the French revolution when Europe was preoccupied by the future, the 145-year old Qing Dynasty, full of glorious remembrances, was already reaching a point when indolence has to follow a long period of rise, and, at the contact with growing Western techno-economic power, stagnation degenerated into the slow but painful disintegration of the Manchu regime.

For German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, China was simply in the 19th century "outside the world's history", and "the fixedness of its character which recurred perpetually took her out of what we should call



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the truly historical". One can debate Hegel's position exposed in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837) since they ignore the Chinese history's discontinuities or Chinese philosophy's internal contradictions, but two years after the *Lectures'* publication the Qing Dynasty fought the first opium war and was forced to accept in 1842 the first unequal treaty. China was de facto losing control over its destiny and retracting from the world's history.

The imposed opium trade, a series of unequal treaties, the territorial concessions, the destruction of the Summer Palace, the transfer of Shandong, Confucius' native place, to Japan, are all tragic moments of China's humiliation. In 1937 the country's weakness and the imperial Japanese army's barbarism led to what Iris Chang called the "Rape of Nanking", an absolute horror in which 300,000 lives were annihilated.

It is in reaction to this collective fall that the Maoist epic can be interpreted. Mao incarnated and formulated the Chinese will to recover dignity, respect and

sovereignty. Forced to withdraw from history, the Chinese people lost confidence; able to reconquer independence and a voice in the concert of nations, they rediscovered faith in themselves. The largest segment of China's elites supported by the vast majority of the Chinese population will avoid the complacency and the arrogance which caused the decline of imperial China and brought disasters to the "central country".

The cognitive operation in which China's legitimate confidence is perceived by the West as arrogance is more a statement on the West's anxiety than an observation on China's objective reality. More generally, the West should try to look at China as it is and not speculate ad infinitum on its own perceptions, magnified by the media. The "immobile and inward-looking empire", the "coming collapse of China", the "China's threat", the "irresponsible player", the "arrogant China" and other fantasies yet to come, are more Western projections than true reflections of Chinese dynamics.

By being attentive to China's conditions and to the sentiments of the Chinese people, by recognizing the economic, socio-political and intellectual dimensions of the Chinese renaissance, the West would put itself in a position to transcend all forms of sinophobia and China would then appear as a co-architect, a co-designer of the 21st century world order. Indeed, China has not only re-entered the world stage but she is also co-writing the play she is performing with other historical forces.

In an era of global interdependence, the Chinese renaissance does not have to entail Western decline. For the world's statesmen, business leaders or thinkers, China's renewal is a source of inspiration, a catalyst for creative synthesis and an invitation to go to a higher level of practice and understanding.

When Chinese and Western cultures meet in broadmindedness and generosity, they cross-fertilize to enrich world civilization: I M Pei's architecture, Tan Dun's compositions, Xu Bing's design or Lin Huaimin's choreographies

illustrate the unique value of Sino-Western synergy. The West's marginalization would not be an effect of China's metamorphosis but the consequence of its elites' parochialism and complacency, of their incapacity to embrace what the Chinese renaissance has to offer.

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