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de Burgh, H.**

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# The Re-imagining of China under President Xi Jinping

HUGO de BURGH  
University of Westminster

**Abstract:** This article explains how Xi Jinping is consolidating an identity for China, at home and abroad, which draws upon the country's past more than upon its recent revolutionary history. In so doing, he appears to be acknowledging the desire of many, perhaps the majority, of Chinese people, to defend their culture against conversion; he is also providing an ideology to inspire the young and the servants of the state, offering an alternative to 'westernisation' and, in effect, replacing the now discredited Marxism-Leninism of his predecessors. Rather than rejecting China's past as they did, Xi speaks of a renaissance of it. The implications for international relations are substantial. The writer suggests that Westerners should welcome this, as the ideology is not missionary or universalist, but advances stability and respect for difference as fundamentals of its approach to the wider world.

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Academics outside China who follow the activities of President Xi have been paying particular attention to the exertion of discipline at home, and the restless energy with which he seeks to bind the development of other countries to China. Academics characterise the polity that China is thought to have become in very different ways, from Stein Ringer's shocked denunciation of a 'perfect dictatorship' to Zhang Weiwei's enthusiastic acclamation of a 'consultative democracy'; Howard W. French and others interpret present strategy as aiming to restore the Empire as it was before the arrival of the barbarians.<sup>1</sup>

Less discussed is a most pregnant development of the Xi years, the re-imagining of China. He is consolidating identity, with implications for both domestic governance and international relations.

Xi Jinping's predecessors tiptoed towards a revised ideology and the implicit acknowledgment that Marxism had limitations. 'Mousecatching' philosophy<sup>2</sup> negated economic determinism; the *Three Represents* abolished class struggle; the *Harmonious Society* was a rejection of revolution. Renmin University's Shi Yinhong informed us that, in Main Street, PRC, Marxism-Leninism had

been jettisoned by the population as a whole (Shi, 2004, p228); the leaders could not but follow. What is to take its place?

Until 1949 Chinese were not confused about their identity, though often distressed by the failure to realise it and by the material superiority of the foreigners who

clawed at the carcass of the Qing Dynasty and the struggling Republic. They still saw themselves as heirs, if temporarily on hard times, of the greatest civilisation on earth and a society and polity based on principles that were superior to all others. Later they were embarrassed by the cruel idiocies of the Maoist period, even when they bought into Mao's conceit that China had, only thanks to him, 'stood up'. But confidence in China's moral status and passionate adherence to the idea of China rarely faltered.

## A Confucian renaissance

Confucius is the symbol of that status. Abjured for thirty years after 1949, the sage has been edging his way back into public life; some talk of 'neo-Confucianism' as modern media interpreters provide a sanitized version that attracts post-Marxism generations. Expositions of his philosophy abound in the media and the most successful was a series *Learning from Confucius* by Yu Dan, transmitted in 2006. Over 2014-2016 Gao Xiaosong, who broadcasts online with a reported 900m views, has had great success when he has been discussing topics relating to the Confucian tradition.

Even while he cites Mao Zedong for his spontaneity and patriotism, President Xi Jinping has joined in the rehabilitation of Mao's *bete noir*, Confucius, his adherents and his ideas. Xi is said to be the first Communist Party leader to give a speech in commemoration the sage and has visited his birthplace, with its great temple and many memorials, to say nothing

<sup>1</sup> Ringer, Stein (2016) *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* HK: HKU Press introduction; Zhang Weiwei. *The China wave: rise of a civilizational state*, Hackensack, NJ: World Century Publishing; 2011; French, Howard W. 2017 *Everything under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power* New York: Knopf and Allison, Graham (2017) *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* Dublin: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

<sup>2</sup> 'Mousecatching philosophy' is the shorthand for Deng's famous dictum that ideology is to be judged by efficacy, 'it matters not whether a cat be black or yellow as long as it catch mice'.

of the homes of descendants, to show respect. He makes more references in his speeches to Confucian thinkers than to any other category. (Sun, 2014)

Under the Xi administration, senior government officials are obliged to take lectures on Confucianism, as part of their in-service training (Page, 2015)□ from academics who would once have been labelled reactionaries. Establishing or restoring temples honouring Confucius has become commonplace; so are recitals of Confucius' Analects and many other related rituals. (Osno, 2014)

Xi has converged ideas that in the past were associated with Communism, with those of the sages. In his view, not only does 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' have its origins not in western thought but ancient Chinese philosophy, but socialism is more or less a Chinese invention. A typical Xi quotation, at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary of the 18<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee in 2013, came from the Analects (c400BC): 'do not worry about poverty but instead over the unequal distribution of wealth'. (Zhang, 2015 p14)

The people must be listened to; indeed the mandate of heaven depends upon the rulers being in touch with the people. For this, Xi finds an aphorism from a philosopher of the Eastern Han Dynasty, Wang Chong:

'The people living in a house know better if the house is leaking: the bottom of society knows better if a policy is improper.' (Zhang, 2015, p8)

Thus today's 'consultative democracy', explained for us by luminaries such as conservatives Hu Angang and reformers He Baoguang, appears to be the modern name for ancient practice.

Xi regularly uses old saws to remind his audiences that 'the people hold the country together', 'governance requires the peoples' support' and 'both civility and law are required to govern'. (Xi, 2015)

### Why?

There are multiple uses for this 'return', the first in foreign policy. The USA and the EU aggressively project themselves as models and leaders; decades of soft power projection have influenced foreign publics to give them the benefit of the doubt. China, as the principal trading partner of 124 countries, and with economic interests everywhere, wants to be viewed with the same benign or respectful eye. If seen as vessel of a discredited model – communism – it will have limited purchase; to be seen as a follower of the USA, trying to catch up, is unacceptable for a culture with its own norms and standards which its elite regard as equal, if not superior, to any. China is to be regarded as an alternative civilization.

Then there is cultural imperialism. Confucians and Marxists are as one in their revulsion against a society in which business is the principal power, and against individualism. This is how they see Anglophone society, which they do not admire, even if they respect American

wealth or the Anglophone political achievement. Cultural globalization, which is seen as the diffusion of capitalist values under cover of universalism, is to be resisted. The fight to get UNESCO to pass, in 2005 and against strong US objections, its *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression* was an illustration of that view.<sup>3</sup> It is not just intellectuals who worry about this. According to Pew's 2016 Global Attitudes Survey, 77% of Chinese believe that their way of life needs to be protected against foreign influences.

Xi Jinping reflects these popular inclinations. His predecessors talked of *going forward* to modernity, *discarding the past* even if not utterly repudiating it. Xi speaks of *renaissance*, of a *revival* of the greatness disrupted by foreign imperialism. One of his advisers recently remarked that Xi wanted to stop teachers referring to 'the Enlightenment' as something that took place in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe; 'our Enlightenment took place in the Spring and Autumn period' [771-476 BC], Xi is reported as saying.<sup>4</sup>

President Xi responds to concern at the absence of a moral consensus. It is widely grumbled that the undermining of traditional norms by the revolution did not give rise to 'socialist morality' but simply to greed and crass selfishness plus the extreme corruption that is usual in Marxist societies, in which the main currency is political connection. In resurrecting Confucian moral values and tolerating the re-emergence of Buddhism, the leaders are tackling the *belief void*.<sup>5</sup>

Society at large has been ahead in this proceeding, as we see from schools, public exhortation, the media and cadre training.

### Schools

Since the 90s the road to Shaolin Monastery, the shrine of martial arts, has been lined with schools, primary and secondary, in the vast courtyards of which hundreds of children exercise, wearing traditional costumes. This was one early example of parents seeking 'traditional' schooling for their children. Today many millions of children are accessing the Canon of Chinese civilisation, and this may have much greater impact than the martial arts.

After the failed attempt at political revolution in the 1980s, the enthusiasm of patriots and intellectuals

<sup>3</sup> <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001429/142919e.pdf>, Accessed 06 April, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Kong Dan, head of the CITIC think tank, quoted to me by his associate, Professor Li Xiguang on 17 May 2017.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see Lim, BK and Blanchard, B 'Xi Jinping hopes traditional faiths can fill moral void in China' <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-politics-vacuum/xi-jinping-hopes-traditional-faiths-can-fill-moral-void-in-china-sources-idUSBRE98S0GS20130929>, Accessed 27 September, 2017

focussed on cultural development, particularly *guoxue*, or the Canon. Gradually Marxism-Leninism came to be seen, except by the far left, as a foreign imposition of little relevance to China. Shi Yinhong, a leading light of Renmin University, a CCP foundation, put it thus:

‘...the most remarkable manifestation of civil society in China is found in the alienation of society from the state’s ideology, belief system, political culture, and “official discourse.” Political indoctrination courses and their examinations have long been viewed as repugnant by undergraduate and postgraduate students, who muddle through them with the least amount of effort. There is hardly any private subscription to the central and local Party newspapers, magazines and journals. The Chinese Communist Party’s propaganda-producing departments are viewed as the least prestigious party institutions by intellectuals. Political functionaries are regarded in most places as cadres possessing no specialized or professional skills who make their living with “empty talk”.’ (Shi, 2004 p228)

The USA was admired for its material success but, especially after 2003, neither for its culture nor for its claims to moral leadership. Many who returned from study in the Anglosphere are reported to have taken back with them a heightened sense of the differences between the two cultures and advocated a return to roots (Westad, 2015, p457).

In the 1990s small independent schools calling themselves Confucius Academies were inaugurated and the national press lauded them. <sup>6</sup> Later, members of Congress called for the establishment of schools for the study of the Chinese classics. <sup>7</sup> And there has been lobbying for the reversal of language reform, the restoration of full-form ideograms, to connect youngsters with the literary heritage and with the diaspora, often conceived of as having maintained true Chinese culture while it was being undermined in China itself.

Today there are a great many academies<sup>8</sup> but the main impact of the Canon is probably in the generality of schools in which *guoxue* classes have become a growing component. In 2014 the Ministry of Education required

<sup>6</sup> In 1993 two articles were published in the leading national party newspapers, in effect ‘legalising’ the movement. The *Peoples’ Daily* published *Guoxue quietly comes back to Peking University* 国学,悄悄回来了 and the *Guangming Daily* published *The charm of guoxue and the guoxue masters* 国学的魅力与国学大师. [http://www.huadingshuyuan.com/cn/news.php?show=detail&news\\_id=1278](http://www.huadingshuyuan.com/cn/news.php?show=detail&news_id=1278) (accessed 12 January 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Among the most famous is the Chengxian Guoxue Institute 成贤阁 in Peking, situated in the *Guozijian* 国子监 where, from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, officials took their civil service exams and where once again the pupils wear traditional robes and recite classical Confucian texts. Others include the Four Seas Confucius Academy 四海孔子学院 and the Peking University Academy of Erudition 北京大学通雅堂.

more lessons on traditional culture to be added to the curriculum in both primary and secondary schools; by interesting coincidence, this occurred at about the same time as there was discussion in Beijing education circles about reducing the weight given to English in the high school curriculum.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently universities have also been admonished to reduce ‘foreign’ learning and those private schools which have a purportedly international focus have been instructed to Sinify their curricula.

The advance of the Canon<sup>10</sup> is also a repercussion of the idea, implicit in much discussion, that China’s successes of the last 30 years have come about as functions of Chinese culture rather than of learning from the West. <sup>11</sup> It is reasoned that when China adopted ‘Western’ notions, ie Marxism, it failed to develop; once these were abandoned in the 1980s, China raced ahead.

If you look at the content of *guoxue* classes, at least at the primary level, you are first struck that they are about teaching manners, behaviour and the acknowledgment of interdependence. <sup>12</sup> This is the stuff

<sup>9</sup> City of Beijing Education Committee (2013) *Framework Plan for the Secondary School Leaving Examination* 北京市2014-2016年高中阶段教育发展规划 <http://edu.people.com.cn/n/2015/0601/c244541-27084479.html> (accessed 19 December 2017)

<sup>10</sup> To bring the older generation up to speed, universities and private colleges have also set up such classes. Tsinghua, my own university, has a *Guoxue Department* (see <http://www.tacl.tsinghua.edu.cn>).

<sup>11</sup> Perkins DH. (2000) Law, family ties and the East Asian way of business. In: Harrison LE, Huntington SP. (eds.) *Culture matters: how values shape human progress*. New York: Basic Books. See also Berger Peter L. and Hsiao Hsin-Huang Michael (eds.), (1988) *In Search of an East Asian Development Model* New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books. Tai Hung-chao, (ed.) (1989) *Confucianism and Economic Development: An Oriental Alternative?* Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute Press. Chung-Hua Institution for Economic Research (1989) *Conference on Confucianism and Economic Development in East Asia* Taipei: CIER Press. Vogel, Ezra F. (1991) *The Four Little Dragons: The Spread of Industrialization in East Asia* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Jochim, Christian (1992) Confucius and Capitalism: Views of Confucianism in Works on Confucianism and Economic Development. In: *Journal of Chinese Religions*, no. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Peking University Blue Bird Junior Schools textbooks. These are complemented by prettily produced versions of the great children’s classics, *Rules for Siblings* 弟规 *The Analects of Confucius* 论语, *The Three Character Classic* 三字经. As in the past, young children recite them. When asked how much the children can actually understand, the response from the teachers is that

of childrens' rhyming classics such as the 'Three Ideogram Classic' and the 'Rules for Pupil and Child' which are again widely used, but they are also reflected in newly produced childrens' schoolbooks. Teachers and parents both say that moral education is a priority, that it is the fundamental basis, that the child must learn to be a good, cooperative and therefore moral member of society before anything else. The individualism and competitiveness that is so much prized in Anglosphere schools are not admired; to the contrary, the child is to see him or herself as in what Burke, in another age and place, famously described as 'a partnership . . . not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born'.

### Public exhortation

Chinese authorities have long regarded moral exhortation as among their most important duties and admonitions abound in China, on walls, hanging from cranes or on park railings. Under the Communist Party, and until recently, they have been very political ( '*Raise high the banner of Socialism with Chinese characteristics*' ), but there has been a gradual metamorphosis from red to homely, with calls to be a considerate grandchild or to contribute more to the harmony of society ( '*the country and you should treat each other with a mother's profound affection*' ).

These are put up by local government; but even nationally-inspired slogans, pointing out the 'key values of Socialism' on stickers, in parks and shopping centres, on street hoardings, are light years away from Marx or Mao: *Affluence and Strength, Democracy*  $\square$  *Civility*  $\square$  *Harmony*  $\square$  *Freedom*  $\square$  *Equality*  $\square$  *Justice*  $\square$  *Legality*  $\square$  *Patriotism*  $\square$  *Professionalism*  $\square$  *Sincerity*  $\square$  *Kindness*. These are often accompanied by pretty pictures of jolly families of three generations.

The *latest* trend has been to cite traditional Chinese philosophers, including Confucius and Mencius.<sup>13</sup> Among the precepts presented in conventional propaganda mode, are:

- *Should you not know the conventions, you cannot establish yourself*
- *Cultivate and discipline your moral life, admire virtue and incline to what is good, be modest and considerate of others.*

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understanding of the classics varies from age to age; the young child will have a limited comprehension but when she matures much more will grasped and, later, the adult will be able to draw on the full wisdom of the classics once experience of life and study has readied her. This approach to learning helps train the memory and concentration.

<sup>13</sup> More on this in de Burgh and Feng (in press). The Return of the Repressed: three examples of how Chinese identity is being reconsolidated for the modern world to be published in *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies*.

Thus the young Chinese citizen is left in no doubt as to where she or he is to find inspiration.

### Officialdom

2017 has seen the screening of a gripping drama, *In the Name of the People*, about a police investigative team uncovering a network of corruption that connects mayors, deputy provincial governors and even a minister beside the throne. The fact that the Propaganda Department and the regulator have approved this series (it was first spiked in Jiangsu, where it was made, but Hunan TV took it on) indicates the confidence now felt in the system. Flaws and faults can with equanimity be exposed for discussion, they will not provoke revolution, since the investigators are so obviously imbued with a profound sense of responsibility with which every upright citizen can identify. In this drama, the particular forms of corruption to which China is inclined are scrutinised unrelentingly. Nevertheless the system itself is legitimate because, in essence, it is in accord with tradition, though infused with a sense of public service replacing loyalty to an Emperor.

In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping re-established the civil service as a body recruited on merit and, countless changes later, China's managers are in principle well educated, selected by examination, promoted through a triangulating system and constantly refreshed and retrained.

It is for these officials that President Xi has devoted considerable effort to adumbrating his moral vision, reviving the Confucian ethic of governance. When addressing meetings of civil service and Party personnel, he repeats saws which almost always hark back to the past, as in this quotation from around 1000BC:

'Government officials who are good at governing a country will treat the people like parents caring for their children.....Hearing that the people are suffering from hunger and cold[], they will grieve; seeing that the people are working too hard, they will be in pain.' (Zhang, 2015, p32)

If paternalism is the first principle of Confucian government, then the moral character of the ruler and his assistants is the second. Thus the wise ruler is given to self examination and Xi exhorts as much from his acolytes, in this quotation from the *Three Ideogram Classic*:

'The jade that is not fashioned does not become a jewel, nor yet does the unlearnt man become one of stature.' (Zhang, 2015 p181)

Officials have a higher cause and must steel themselves in order to execute it. This means constant vigilance against corruption and sloth if they are not to forfeit the trust of the people. It means cultivating yourself to 'be a civilized person'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Chinese term is *zuoren*. To translate *zuoren* literally as 'to be a man' gives quite the wrong connotation as 'be a man'

No longer is the official class expected to repeat the Marxist Leninist rosary that the CCP learnt from the Russians 80 odd years ago. Frank Pieke has examined the education and training of current cadres and found that the content is mostly what an MBA candidate might get from any good business school. There is a theory module too, but theory does not mean Marxist exegesis but understanding the meaning of the *Three Represents*, the *Harmonious Society* and *China Dream*. For hearts that hanker for a spiritual dimension there is *Red History* with which trainees are taught to revere the mighty work of the Party in driving out the exploiters and the foreigners. Red History has its saints – Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai of course. *Red Tourism*, or outings to sacred places of the Party insurgency, inspires further devotion. (Pieke, 2009, pp89 *et seq*)

In this formulation, the early CCP was a band of patriotic heroes. Missing from its genesis are not only Marxist theory but the Russian midwife; the disasters of the first 30 years of government have given way to a story of continuity.<sup>15</sup> China's renaissance is coming about because that heroic band created a Party which would be, and still is, the spine of modern China and the guarantor of the continuity of its great civilization. As President Xi puts it: 'without compass and setsquare, no one could form circles and squares'. (Zhang, 2015, p26)

### Populism

In his recent book analysing a great divide in Western politics, David Goodhart finds that a gulf has grown up between the 'somewheres' who believe that their countries' essence and their own interests are under threat from cultural, economic and political globalisation and the 'anywheres' who feel no attachment to the nation but are universalists looking forward to the victory of a transnational ideology. He notes that this divide has in various ways emerged in many different societies and that populists have emerged to represent the oppressed 'somewheres', from Erogan to Le Pen, Farage to Tsipras. President Xi appears to be speaking to similar hopes and fears; in other words his behaviour is not merely an

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in English has echoes of butch footballers or action films. 'A man' in this Chinese sense is certainly not a testosterone fuelled commando but a self disciplined, considerate and reflecting adult of either sex.

<sup>15</sup> Brady likens the Party to the medieval Roman Catholic Church and Zheng Yongyuan sees Party rule as a modern dynasty. Pieke refers to it as the superego of governance and its pivot, the Zhongnanhai leadership compound, as the 'Sacred Void'. By the latter he appears to mean much of that which Bagehot meant when he characterised the British monarchy of the age of empire: 'Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic. We must not bring the Queen into the combat of politics, or she will cease to be revered by all combatants.' Pieke identifies the mystery of the core leadership as its great strength.

acknowledgement that the Chinese people have rejected the ideology imposed upon them after 1949, but reflects too a populist repudiation of the obvious alternatives, in particular 'universalism', the post-Marxist ideology of Western political elites.

It is not just philosophical maxims or calligraphy that are to be defended, but a way of looking at the world and seeing yourself in it. That China has a culture that is distinct from that of the Anglo-Saxons is not just an intellectuals' conceit, but a popular conviction. Geert Hofstede<sup>16</sup> defines culture as the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group from another, and he proposes four cultural dimensions. Chinese and Anglophones are at opposite ends of those dimensions and help explain why the paternalist, authoritarian and communitarian aspects of Chinese society that cause Western liberals such angst are legitimate in much of China and seen as preferable to the 'other'. An understanding of this difference, once confined to anthropologists and social psychologists, is now routine in China among students, media pundits and talk show participants. Indeed it is standard fare for Marketing Studies, too, suggesting that it does indeed have real-world use!

The current TV drama of 48 episodes, *Good Husbands*, tells of the crises and confrontations within an ordinary family as one daughter seeks to marry and the other to divorce, both against the parents' wishes. Although modernity, here reflected in the economic independence of women, the gap between the generations and consumerism, is shown to have put a strain on the Confucian family, ultimately everybody wants to hold to it and seeks to adapt modern life to the Confucian ideal.<sup>17</sup>

According to Harvard's Li Jin, it is still the case that how a person fulfills the role assigned within a network or community is more important than the expression of individual personality. Building on the pioneer sociologist Fei Hsiao-tong, she emphasizes how in Chinese society individual humanity is defined by relationships and their moral significance (Li, 2012, p37). The 'little platoon' embraces as much as it restricts and few want to leave it.

Chinese enjoy many freedoms that their grandparents lost and have more rights than people in

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<sup>16</sup> Hofstede, Geert (2001) *Culture's Consequences: comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* Thousand Oaks: Sage. Hofstede is only the writer who presents these ideas particularly clearly. Others who have shed light on the cultural dynamics include Chiu, Chi-yue and Hong, Ying-yi (2006) *Social Psychology of Culture*. New York: Psychology Press.

<sup>17</sup> The 2015 family drama *Good Husbands* 大丈夫 (Anhui/LeTV) tells the story of two sisters and their relationships with their father and husbands, representing the women as assertive, dynamic and enterprising.



many other countries, as the government points out when criticised. But these rights are trumped by duties, not only in the family but the wider community. Leaders of commerce, entrepreneurs, the job creators are certainly admired and they may flaunt their wealth. Yet, in Confucian eyes, their successes come about because of the support of the community from which they come and, ultimately, their wealth belongs to the community which enabled them to become what they are.

Astonished at the contingency of commercial power, Oxford's Stein Ringen remarks, 'the socialist market economy is like no other economy. China is different'. (Ringen, 2016, p18) Abjuring Google, Twitter or Facebook and creating a Chinese cybersphere is as much about defending the Chinese order as it is about halting the power of transnational capital.

China is also unapologetic about its political system, and when people talk of democracy they are not necessarily talking about adopting Anglophone electoral democracy. (deBurgh, 2006, p26) This apparent contentment with authoritarianism can make Anglophones nervous.

#### **But should it?**

For when Anglophones think of a country led by an authoritarian ruler articulating a unifying ideology, they tend to assume that this will be aggressive. It would be wrong to jump to such a conclusion because what President Xi advances is a restoration rather than a crusade. The idea of a 'true faith' which it is a duty to proselytize to the benighted is rather to be associated with monotheist societies. Now that China has sidelined aspects of Marxism, in particular its search for paradise and belief in universal truth, it has reverted to the complacent Confucian idea that China is the shining light upon a hill which will attract the world. This may be quite difficult for Westerners to take in.

In Western understanding of the last century, the United States, backed by some Europeans, saved the world from evil ideologies and promoted a bundle of institutions which we term 'democratic' and which, we sometimes remember, largely derive from England – rule of law, distribution of power, balance of estates, accountability through elections, free media.

It is a wonderful story, and those who were victims of universalist ideologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be as enthusiastic for it as are the Anglophones themselves. Perhaps because it is such a great story, Anglophones are mostly blind to the fact that we have turned it into a missionary doctrine, to which much of the political class subscribes: That they have the right and duty to subvert those who offend their universalist assumptions, in domestic life certainly but in international affairs too.

By comparison, what President Xi is consolidating is much less militant. It is true that many Chinese are very

sensitive to threats to the integrity of the country. The territories of the Qing Empire which the British, Russians and Japanese sought to dismember have, in the minds of many Chinese, become the inviolable homeland. Yet wanting to right the wrongs of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to diminish the American encirclement and to restore China's predominant position in East Asia is not the same as aggressive militarism.<sup>18</sup>

Xi is at pains to show that Chinese assertiveness is different. He declares that China will be an example to others over the environment, international trade, non-interference, contribution to UN peacekeeping and, most remarkably, in its transnational development programme, the *One Belt One Road* Initiative. The initiative will bind much of Asia to China through infrastructure on land and seapower on the oceans. China is to be leader and paradigm. But he goes out of the way to warn other countries to take their own paths and not copy China. (Ringen, 2016)

Chinese inclusiveness is what Xi promotes, not a universal truth to be foisted on others, and he insinuates that this contrasts with the West's evangelism. At the College d'Europe in 2014, he spoke of his belief that China should not copy the political institutions or development model of other countries and that all should respect difference. He said:

'A tasty orange, grown in southern China, would turn sour once it is grown in the north. The leaves may look the same, but the fruits taste quite different, because the north means different location and different climate.' (Xi, 2014b)

Soon after, he emphasised his point by reminding the Europeans of their own diversity, and suggesting that respect for diversity should be a principle of relations all over the world.

#### **The refounding myth and a new world order**

Sceptics dismiss the myths by which nations live as so much invention and mumbo jumbo. Yet politicians who started with the desire to destroy inherited culture – Stalin and Hitler come to mind – found they had to co-opt it in order to mobilise their subjects, so powerful were those myths. In recent times the universalists have had setbacks in Europe and the USA as the myths have refused to fade away. Something similar is going on in China, where the rulers have grasped that their people too 'want the country back'. On the street, Marxist universalism and religiosity have given way to a

<sup>18</sup> French and Allison go into greater detail but in essence come to the same conclusion. See French, Howard W. 2017 *Everything under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power* New York: Knopf and Allison, Graham (2017) *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Tucydides' Trap?* Dublin: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

