EDITORIAL by FABRIZIO PERRETTI*

The China That Is Also a Part of Us

An argument exists that we should never write about China, because historically it is a country where the system always exists with what can change it, and by the time we describe it, it has already changed. Yet much has been written about China, and the numerous descriptions oscillate between two extremes: that based on the misunderstanding of China being far away, "mysterious," incomprehensible, and inexplicable; and on the other hand, that of a China that is close, that we can interpret with the categories and logics familiar to us, and where "we ourselves are also Chinese in our own way."[1]

If the descriptions and analysis of China are distinguished based on the distance from which we observe and judge the country – often either too far or too close – all of them, however, highlight the same contradictions present in it. On the one hand, the authoritarian/totalitarian system based on the dictatorship of the Communist Party; on the other, the last (?) bastion of the current capitalist system, a fundamental pole and strenuous defender of economic globalization. A society of "great harmony," described as a reservoir of "promising wisdom," but at the same time also much discussed and criticized, and painted in dark colors as one of the worst nightmares of our future.

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While these extremes reflect the Asian dialectic of "yin" and "yang," where the good always contains a bit of evil and vice versa, the risk also lurks of the orientalism described by Edward W. Said.[2] That is, we must atone for the traditional Western attitude of imperialist domination and cultural discrimination. At the same time, though, we must be careful not to fall again into the opposite extreme, and to necessarily seek in the "other" the description of our world, as in the celebrated passage of Calvino's Le città invisibili, in which Marco Polo confesses to the Great Khan that ultimately all of the descriptions of the Chinese cities he visited are nothing more than different versions of his Venice. In fact, the West often considers China as a means to project outward the anathemas that it carries in its heart, or to transfer into its own passions a series of political ghosts that do not pertain to it.


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China is changing. It always has been. Through the Party, the Chinese are at the same time attracted and repelled by change. They continuously ask if they can change, if they will change, and what will happen if they change. Already in 1861, Carlo Cattaneo observed that "those who consider China to be immobile, if they consult the histories, will see that it is in continuous agitation."[3] Still today, China seems suspended between tradition and dynamism, between what it wanted to be and what it has become. The nation that defines itself, and in a certain sense still is, "a developing country," has been subject to a wave of incomparable growth and progress. Yet, as the distinguished sinologist Marcel Granet observed, numbers are nothing but emblems, in which the Chinese are careful not to see abstract and binding signs of quantity.[4] In its labors to grow and change, in China the balance between "quantity" and "quality" is important. Growth ("catching fish") must never risk "draining the pond," of which the "ancient and glorious Party" is the only guardian.

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the Party (and China par excellence) is trying to regain that balance that – right or wrong – it believes it has lost in these decades of growth. That is, a model of development that if not controlled (even accepting a slowdown of growth), risks exposing to a crisis, or even failure, Chinese communism itself, that China has attempted to construct and has jealously cultivated and defended. And when the future is uncertain and at risk, China looks to its past. If the pandemic brought the country back to a phase of external isolation, typical of the Maoist period, the rise and triumph of Xi Jinping has characterized the recovery of pedagogical and messianic positions typical of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Yet while during this period the goal was to "bomb the headquarters" represented by the Party itself, in this case it is the Party that attacks and no longer tolerates the private profit and economic

oligarchies that have been created in China going beyond a certain limit (the case of the "disappearance" of Jack Ma, founder and CEO of Alibaba, is an example).

Thus in China we again see the fundamental contradiction of capitalism between quantitative development and qualitative degradation (of labor and the environment), and at the same time, there is a test of the ability of Chinese socialism to keep together collective wellbeing and individual aspirations. This rare and unique combination represents the so-called "Chinese dream" (*Zhōngguó Mèng*), the slogan launched by Xi Jinping starting in 2013. While in the United States, the only other country in the world to have national ideals expressed in oneiric terms, the writer John Steinbeck had already highlighted the fragility of the "American dream" – where without limits and confines it is difficult to know where to place and preserve one's happiness[5] – China has stressed the need and priority to set limits and confines on individual and business freedom in an evident manner, without hesitation.

If a society is judged with the same method that it has chosen to be judged, it would be wrong to measure China with the metric of consumption and individual freedom as in the West. As the Chinese Emperor Ch'ien Lung told English King George III at the end of the of the 1700s: "We are profoundly different from you and we could not possibly accept the transplant of your civilization into ours. We set no value to the things you offer us." He added, though: "I have but one aim in view, namely, to hold the scepter of the wide world, maintain perfect governance, and fulfill the duties of the state."[6] In this case it is a principle that is still valid

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in contemporary China. The slogan of the "harmonious society" (hexie shehui), introduced in 2004 by the leaders Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, has officially become the symbol of the new political doctrine elaborated by the Chinese Communist Party and the warhorse in the process of construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The pandemic and the recent protests, however, seem to indicate that the Chinese themselves are no longer willing to accept the limitations set, even daring to openly criticize their leader and the Party itself.


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Street protests – "mass incidents" in the official euphemism – are not rare in China. Yet they tend to have a local focus: against corruption of cadres, the hoarding of land, or pollution. For the first time since 1989, now a national expression of discontent is emerging towards the government in Beijing. Slogans such as "Xi Jinping, resign!" or "Communist Party, resign!" were unthinkable until they were pronounced. None of the demonstrations have reached the numbers of Tiananmen Square 33 years ago, and they are already fading as the police state gets moving. Only time will tell if and how much this recent agitation will modify the traditional and apparent immobility of the Party.

According to Granet, the Chinese people have a social instinct, that more than on rigid subordination is based on respect for hierarchy, along with an anarchic temperament, that however tends towards order. This sentiment reflects the law of maximum integration that governs all relationships in China: fail together, or grow together. This is the true challenge of China with itself. But in part it is ours as well. Observing China is in fact a voyage within ourselves, in which we run the risk of discovering things that we would have preferred not to know, and in which our destiny could be to have to choose what perhaps we do not want.

[1] *C. Cattaneo, "La China antica e moderna,"* Il Politecnico, *X, issue 56, 1861, p. 223.*
[2] *E.W. Said*, Orientalismo. L'immagine europea dell'Oriente, *Milan, Feltrinelli, 2002.*
[3] *Cattaneo*, op. cit., *p. 221.*
[4] *M. Granet*, Il pensiero cinese, *Milan, Adelphi, 1971.*
[5] *J. Steinbeck*, La valle dell'Eden, *Milan, Bompiani, 2014.*
[6] *See L. Bertuccioli*, La letteratura cinese, *Florence, Sansoni, 1968.*