

SLEEPLESS IN BEIJING

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I landed in Beijing in Mid-March just as two cataclysmic events exploded--the Tsunami and nuclear meltdown in Japan, and the third installment of the Arab uprising in Libya. I spent the first week talking to people in Beijing, then went on two pilgrimages, first to the Shaolin Temple in Henan province 200 miles south, then to the hallowed Tai Shan (Big Mountain) in Shandong province. What I saw was a country in the throes of massive transformation, determined to catch up in 30 years with the Industrial Revolution that took us 300. Oppressive high rises, bumper-to-bumper traffic, uprooted rural population pressed into the industrial cities on the eastern strip, and eye-burning, throat-choking pollution. In an uncanny way, we have succeeded beyond our wildest dreams in passing on to the Chinese our most crass values--unbridled development, planetary despoliation, and rapacious capitalism. In short, we have sold them on Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations" minus his "Theory of Moral Sentiment", that oft-ignored preamble that makes our own free-market Capitalism just bearable.

My pilgrimage afforded no escape either. Both Shaolin and Tai-Shan turned out to be teeming tourist traps, where the formal rituals and mundane trappings of Buddhism are hawked from mini-shrines and concession booths loaded with plastic junk. Does the old spirit linger on underneath? Perhaps, if you could somehow block out the noise, the crowds, the relentless hustle.

In talking to members of the educated elite and reading the government-controlled English-language press, I was struck repeatedly by the love-hate relation they have with us, how they see us in the same breath as both a model to emulate and a grave existential threat. And how, in a curious way, their view of us mirrors our view of them; how we both seem to have constructed a largely fictitious view of each other, vis-a-vis which we then reassert our cherished self-image.

1. Libya: The subversive siren song of freedom

However much they may love our capitalism and computers, our Big Mac and KFC, whatever we do is perceived by Chinese officialdom as a hostile conspiracy. Here is a quick sampler of what they had to say about our reluctant entanglement in Libya:

"...China accused the allies yesterday of causing civilian casualties and called for an immediate cease-fire in the war-torn North African nation. "The purpose of the UN Security Council resolution is to protect...civilians, but the military action taken by certain countries are causing civilian casualties" China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Jiang Yu said..." (*Battle for Misrata Kills at Least 40 People: Witness, Global Times, 3-21-11*)

"...[it] is the third time that some countries have used force against a sovereign state in this century after the Afghan War and the Iraq War... [it] violates the UN charter and also [is] a[n] interference in peace and development... some people are still stuck in Cold War mentality and are keen to use

force..." (*War Not Long-Term Solution to Libya Crisis*, Zhong Sheng, commentator for *The People's Daily*, reprinted in *Global Times*, 3-21-11)

Our motives remain forever suspect, most emphatically our--surely false--concern for human rights. Above all, a well-entrenched view of history colors the Chinese perception of our motives:

"...The West has dominated the world for centuries, and clinging to world dominance still remains its major strategy. The air assault against Libya is partly motivated by sympathy toward Libyan civilians. Nevertheless, it is primarily a political decision taken by a few Western powers, and the very first message it delivers is that these Western powers are still the judge and executioner on a global level... China is still a weak player in the realm of ideas. Western countries have been our mentors over the past decades. However, we should clearly understand that these mentors maintain their own interests. We ought to learn from them; but at the mean time, we should never be deceived by them in certain areas..." (*ibid.*)

Here is what a well-vetted academic panel has to say about our policy in the Middle East:

"...The US is ostensibly bombing Libya for humanitarian reasons. But US President Barack Obama refuses to condemn the repression and government killings of protestors in Bahrain using US-made tanks and weaponry, because that is where the US 5th Fleet is stationed..." (*Libyan Quagmire Could Drag More US Forces In*, Prof. Marjorie Cohn, Thomas Jefferson School of Law, *Global Times*, 3-24-11)

"...Western intervention will lead to a long internal war in Lybia. The West started the air strikes partly out of humanitarian sympathy toward Libyan civilians. However, the coalition later refused Gaddafi's call for cease-fire and continues to exert pressure on him. This exposed that the West still has other purposes. ..." (Prof. He Wenping, Chinese Academy of Social Science; *ibid.*)

"...if the West continues to conduct the military intervention, some Arab countries that support [it] may change their attitude later. The military intervention into Libya will become a risky precedent, and it may be abused by the West to interfere with the internal affairs of other developing countries..." (Prof. Shi Yinhong, School of International Studies, Renmin University of China *ibid.*)

Logical contradictions and ultimate motivation (oil) aside, what really brings our Libya adventure close to home is the Chinese's obsessive fear of our intervention in the internal affairs of other countries:

"...In the eyes of these Western countries, they morally justify themselves in dethroning the decades-long autocrat who is accused of carrying out a civilian slaughter... Even the League of Arab States (LAS) has chosen to side against him, though the defection of the LAS is also a result of the West's strategy to divide the Arab world... Gadhafi's ruthless attack on opposition forces is no

excuse for Western countries to use military means to push forward their power politics in a sovereign nation... It is France that has taken the lead in advocating military intervention. The Libya crisis is seen as a chance for Paris to break Washington's strategic chessboard in the Middle East and gain the initiative in the struggle among the world's power for dominance in the region..The intervention by outside powers into the internal affairs of a sovereign nation means a big step backwards in the world's pursuit of democracy and peace, and demonstrates the double standard some Western countries have adopted toward the social unrest that has occurred in various Middle East countries... But like the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the ultimate goal the West hopes to achieve via military action in Libya is to exploit its rich oil resources... The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have already shown that [the] West's claim that "human rights stand higher than sovereignty" is only a fallacy..." (Li Qingsi, *Bombs Aim for Regime Change, China Daily*, 3-25-11)

2. Tibet: The integrity of the Han empire

The Han Chinese fanned out of the Tibetan plateau perhaps 5,000 years ago, spreading east, then south and eventually cobbling up an empire that absorbed, gradually but relentlessly, the various indigenous Austro-Asiatic peoples. To this day, Chinese is the odd-man-out in the Sino-Tibetan language family, bearing the indelible marks of interaction with the conquered substratum. Two most conspicuous pieces at the extreme west of the Han empire, Xin-Jiang and Tibet, remain undigested, being the empire's most recent acquisitions. Tibet has been part of the Han empire only since the 13th Century AD, courtesy of the Mongol conquest of both. Official Chinese historiography ever since the re-absorption of Tibet by Mao in 1951 and the suppression of an indigenous rebellion in 1959 furnishes both the most recent kinks in the Imperial grand design and the appropriate self-serving narrative of brotherly liberation:

"**Lhasa.** Padma Choling, Chairman of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, delivered a speech on Sunday to the Tibetan people in celebration of the Third Serf Emancipation Day and promised more efforts for a new Tibet that is stable, united, democratic and well-developed... During the past 52 years since the end of the serfdom, the autonomous region has seen great achievements in economic and social development, the chairman said... At the end of last year, Tibet's population had increased to 2.93 million. And the life expectancy of the Tibetan people reached 67 years, almost double the 35.5 years that is was prior to the liberation of Tibet... The autonomous region has almost eliminated illiteracy among juveniles... "All the achievements should be attributed to the socialist system and the leadership of the Communist Party" said the chairman..." (Hu Yongqi & Dachiog, *Tibet's Achievements Celebrated, China Daily*, 3-28-11)

The villain of this idyllic set piece is the retrograde champion of feudal restoration--the Dalai Lama. What is at issue is the territorial integrity of the Han empire, and this is the real import of Western intervention in Libya:

"...In 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama and his supporters staged a rebellion. The central government foiled it and initiated a democratic reform to end the slavery system in Tibet. "The democratic reform conducted 52 years ago abolished the cruel brutal serfdom that existed to exploit the Tibetan

people for thousands of years. The reform freed 1 million serfs and allowed the Tibetan people to enjoy legal rights and interests" Padma Choling said. "Tibet belongs to China. But the Dalai Lama and his supporters have been attempting to separate Tibet from China and restore the feudal serfdom. His conspiracy is doomed to failure. The sky in Tibet will forever belong to the Tibetan people and Tibet will always be part of China as it has been". This year marks the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Tibet...marking the date on which about 1 million of serfs in the region were freed half a century ago...In 1959, the central government dissolved the aristocratic local government of Tibet and replaced it with a preparatory committee for establishing the Tibet Autonomous Region..." (*ibid.*)

"...March 28 is "Serf Emancipation Day", a day celebrated by more than 2.9 million people of all ethnic groups in the Tibet autonomous region. On this day in 1959, a democratic reform was carried out, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which overthrew the theocratic feudalism and freed millions of serfs and slaves, and heralded a new era in the history of the region.... But the Dalai Lama and his political group, the chief representatives of old Tibet's serf-owning class, have never ceased their attempt to split the motherland and undermine region's progress and ethnic unity. They have been trying, unsuccessfully, to restore feudalism in Tibet..." (Yi Duo, a commentator based in Tibet, *Come See the Real Tibet*,, *China Daily*, 3-28-11)

The message is hammered in relentlessly, with the list of blessings that accrued the Tibetans upon their re-absorption:

"...A look at the history of Tiber before 1959 reveals a political system that was more brutal, barbaric and backward than feudalism in medieval Europe. The serve-owning class, comprising less than 5 percent of Tibet's population, owned nearly all of Tibet's means of production. The serfs lived a life of dire misery and poverty, and the theocratic system prevented development and pushed the local economy into a labyrinth of stagnation... Tibet's GDP soared from 174 million yuan (\$26.5 million) in 1959 to 34.22 billion yuan in 2007, a 59-fold increase with an average annual growth of 8.9 percent at comparable prices. Since 1994, the local GDP has grown at an average annual rate of 13 percent, higher than the national average... The average life expectancy in Tiber is 67 years, 31 years more than it was in 1959. And Tibet's population has increased to more than 2.9 million, 1 140 percent increase over the 1959 figure of 1.228 million..." (*ibid.*)

History must be told and re-told again from the right--righteous--perspective:

"...In the spring of 1959, Tibetan people took of the reins of a new socialist region after overthrowing the feudal lords, and started enjoying all the rights enjoined in the country's Constitution. Today, they are no longer subjected to political an religious persecution, and are free of slavery and serfdom. Nor are they subject to corporal punishment, heavy taxes and exploitation... People in Tibet have ushered in a new society, and treasure their hard-won political, economic and social progress, and are now eager to build a socialist Tibet... But after the violence in Lhasa on March 14, 2008, some Western media outlets splashed fabricated reports, with a few of them even

doctoring photographs to substantiate their falsity. The facts have ultimately nailed their lies, and it's time they stop giving credence to rumors and publicizing distorted reports on Tibet... For years, some Western media outlets have been publishing and broadcasting fabricated reports and spreading misinformation on the pretext of freedom of the press. If they really values the well-being of the people of Tibet, they should learn to respect Tibetans' choices and look at the achievements of new Tibet, instead of trying to glorify feudal Tibet as heaven... History proves that unity and stability bring prosperity and happiness, and separation and turbulence are the source of disaster..." (*ibid.*)

In talking to educated young professionals in Beijing, one is struck repeatedly by how uncritically they have absorbed the Han imperial narrative. That the story is different abroad mystifies and vexes the Party. Here is how one of its foreign hired guns attempts to explain to them their predicament:

"...When you meet Westerners who have never visited Asia or are unfamiliar with China and ask them about Tibet, many say it is a place of horrors where the Chinese government ruthlessly cracks down on Tibetans. Such Westerners assume Tibetans do not have any freedom to practice their religion, they are forced to live in poverty and the Chinese government has created a "concentration camp" atmosphere under the control of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)... these Western assumptions are based more on fantasy than facts.... Nevertheless, Beijing has not done a good enough job to dispel the myth and prove that in reality the social, economical and cultural life of the Tibetans is a lot better in the Tibetan autonomous region today.." (Tom McGregor, China Radio International commentator, *Chronicle of the Region Needs to be Retold*, *China Daily*, 3-28-11)

The culprit in this propaganda failure is, once again, the dastardly Dalai Lama, that cunning wolf in sheep's clothes masquerading as a lovable, spiritual man of peace:

"...To overcome misconceptions, the central government has to play a more efficient role in leading a renewed public relations campaign to explain how it is enhancing, not harming, the quality of life in the Tibetan autonomous region... But this is not going to be easy because the Dalai Lama holds sway over the Western mind and has been very successful in his public relations blitz. The Dalai Lama has been so effective at playing the game that to imagine this separatist leader living in India's hill town of Dharmasala as anything but an angelic figure would be deemed as "heresy" by most Westerners. The Dalai Lama is a genius at public relations... How can you criticize a man who travels the globe and tells the world he loves "peace, harmony and compassion" and glosses over the fact that Tibet was never the utopian paradise before 1951, when China liberated the region? The truth is that the Tibetans were subjected to egregious human rights abuses before 1951, because Tibetan rulers imposed a harsh Theocracy on the people where only Buddhism was the permissible religion... Yet casting aspersions on the Dalai Lama will not garner the support of the West. Instead, China must talk about its achievements in Tibet in terms of the progress that the region's economy and society has made. Beijing has to show that the new Tibet is better than the old, feudal Tibet..." (*ibid.*)

3. Stability, Security, Happiness: Confucius and the Imperial State

The official media--the only media tolerated in China--is besotted with the Confucian ideals of stability, security and happiness. It is as if the 6th Century BC ideologist of the Middle Kingdom has become the official sage of the Communist Party. The obsession with Western interventionism under the patently-bogus pretext of human rights, and the relentless suppression of political dissent and independent media, can all be traced back to the teachings of the old Imperial sage. Thus consider:

"...Happiness became a new term of discussion during the annual meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC) and Chinese People Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). As NPC deputy Cheng Jing said, people will be happy only if they have a sense of security. Only if a country is prosperous, strong and socially stable can its people feel safe and happy. What Cheng meant to say is that people cannot be happy if their country is not stable, says an article in People's Daily...Deng Xiao-Ping's emphasis on social stability is still relevant as China moves forward on the road to modernization, reform and opening-up..." (*Appreciate the Country's Stability*, unsigned editorial, *China Daily*, 3-28-1)

Conveniently, the disruptive mayhem of the Cultural Revolution are cited as a warning, never mind who precipitated the disaster:

"...Turmoil leads a country toward disaster and creates hurdles in the life of its people. The "cultural revolution" (1966-1976) retarded economic development and created shortages of goods and services..." (*ibid*)

And the evils of instability and turmoil are projected back to the current events in Libya:

"...The people, all of about 36,000 Chinese citizens who have returned from the uncertainties of Libya to China, can better understand what safety and stability in China means..." (*ibid.*)

The discerning reader will not fail to hear the unmistakable mellifluous tongue of the old Imperial sage:

"...A stable country is akin to a stable family, which signifies harmony and camaraderie among all. As CPPCC National Committee member Ye Xiao-Wen said, harmony and stability are just like air. We may not know it's there, but we realize its importance soon as it becomes thin...Stability is as important for a family as it is for a country. Without stability, a society can never be happy. Hence, we should value the stability and harmony that Chinese society enjoys today. Moreover, we should appreciate the improvement in people's livelihood made possible because of the country's economic development..." (*ibid.*)

Veiled criticism of the Party, intermingled with dread of an uncontrolled Internet, amplifies Confucius' familiar preoccupations:

"...After more than 60 years of the Communist Party of China being in power, China's economic strength, national defense capabilities and public recognition of the national path are at peak, which has formed the basic conditions for China's overall development. However, social discontent is spreading among certain people, with the Internet intensifying this trend. Chinese society still lacks enough ability to handle instability..." (*CPC Must Keep High Public Satisfaction*, unsigned editorial, *Global Times*, 3-24-11)

"...The ruling party should work hard toward improving social stability. Social stability rests on people's satisfaction with the ruling party. Therefore, the most important is constantly improving public satisfaction with the CPC... The CPC's popularity could well be highest among ruling parties in other countries worldwide. However, due to the long-term one-party governance, it is often questioned. To deal with these doubts, the CPC must always maintain a higher level of public support, which is why the central government always reacts quickly to any dissatisfaction, no matter how small...It is very difficult for the ruling party to maintain high support rate. In Western countries, the support rate of the ruling party often drops after one or two years in power. This must be prevented in China. As information becomes increasingly available, the CPS's ruling environment also becomes more transparent. Public satisfaction must be substantial..." (*ibid.*)

Like a benevolent patriarch, the Imperial state is responsible for its people's happiness, and must therefore be sensitive to public disaffection:

"...Bickering over old trees [in the path of a new subway] in Nanjing also reflects the urgency of improving public representation in political life. The in Internet age, this dilemma is amplified. The online world grants people an easy tool to magnify their voice, but also makes it more difficult to truly gauge public opinion. The majority could be hijacked by a minority-yet-present voice. Ignoring public opinion is harmful, but overly representing one voice is risky..." (*Gauging Public Opinion Essential for Policy-Making*, unsigned editorial, *Global Times*, 3-24-11)

While in the state-controlled media Confucius is not openly acknowledged, Chinese scholars abroad have no trouble tracing the signs to their source:

"...*Zhong-yong zhi-dao* [The Middle Way]: For all the radical attempts of the past century to sweep China's "feudal tradition" into the dustbin of history, Confucianism--with its emphasis on benevolent rule, refinement, and social harmony--is enjoying a major revival here. You see it in popular TV lectures on the Analects, in best-selling books on Confucianism and Taoism, in the vogue for reading classics among children and adults. It's in the new government slogans of "building a harmonious society", in Premier Wen Jiabao's penchant for peppering his speeches with classical quotations, in the state-funded establishment of Confucius Institutes abroad. So much of the contemporary culture of the state--the bureaucracy, the power hierarchy, the theatricality and

sonorous rhetoric--represents a return to an old imperial manner..." (Zha Jiang-Ying, *Servant of the State*, *The New Yorker*, 11-8-10)

The Analects has never been my favorite Chinese classic. Still, having come back from China massively jet-lagged, I pulled off the shelf Arthur Waley's scholarly translation (NY: McMillan 1938; Vintage ppbk 1989). What I got was a refresher course in the ethos of the paternalistic, hierarchic, Imperial state:

"The Master said, In serving his father and mother a man may gently remonstrate with them. But if he sees that he has failed to changed their opinion, he should resume an attitude of deference and not thwart them; may feel discouraged but not resentful". (IV-18)

"Of Tzu-Ch'an the Master said that he found the four virtues of the Way of the true Gentleman: In his private conduct he was courteous, in serving his master he was punctilious, in providing for the needs of the people he gave them even more than their due; in exacting service from the people he was just". (V-15)

"The Master said, A gentleman who is widely versed in letters and at the same time knows how to submit his learning to the restraints of ritual is not likely, I think, to go far wrong". (VI-25)

"When gentlemen deal generously with their own kin, the common people are incited to Goodness. When old dependents are not discarded, the common people will not be fickle". (VIII-2)

"The Master said, The common people can be made to follow; they cannot be made to understand". (VIII-9)

"The Master said, he who hold no rank in a State does not discuss its policies". (VIII-14)

"The Master said, I can claim that at Court I have duly served the Duke and his officers; at Home my father and elder brother..." (IX-15)

"The Master said, First and foremost, be faithful to your superiors, keep all promises, refuse the friendship of all who are not like you..." (IX-24)

4. In the mirror of the other

China's love-hate relation with the West mirrors our own obsession with China ever since Marco Polo. What we both saw in each other as desirable was not just trade and technology. What attracted generations of Western intellectuals to China--from Fr. Matteo Ricci, SJ in the late 1500s to Arthur Waley in the early 1900s to Alan Watts in the 1960s--was not Confucius' orderly Imperial state, but rather the elusive anarchy of classical Taoism and the

sparse beauty of Chang (Zen) Buddhism. What captivated a savvy Communist like Deng Xiaoping in our Capitalism was not love for our rambunctious freedom of inquiry and its handmaiden, eternal doubt. Rather, he was seduced by our can-do technology, engineering and entrepreneurial spirit that somehow, mysteriously, bloom in the wake of doubt-based inquiry. In gazing longingly upon each other, China and the West have been picking and choosing. Our respective foreign policies seem to be predicated on near-blindness to the spiritual concerns and mundane fears of The Other. What we seem to be seeking in the eyes of The Other is reaffirmation of our own self-image, as we grapple with each other like two blind wrestlers--or lovers. Here is how Voltaire put it, somewhat overblown but still illuminating:

"Four thousand years ago, when we couldn't even read, the Chinese knew all the absolutely useful things we boast about today".

The Philosophical Dictionary, 1764

If China and the West are ever to come to terms with each other, we will both have to pierce through the veil of our mutual misconceptions and learn to see both ourselves and The Other through The Other's eye.