CULTURE AS IDEOLOGY

Will today's youngsters buy into new constructions of Chinese culture?

By Nick Young

The longevity and continuity of Chinese culture and civilization is legendary, so goes the universal mantra of today's mainland tour guides. Emphasis on continuity itself has a long pedigree; it was, indeed, a central preoccupation of Confucius, who some 2,500 years ago set out not to "create" a philosophy but rather to articulate and pass on what he saw as wisdom and traditions that were already ancient. The point for Confucius was not to change the moral world but to describe and preserve it; and in that sense he was quintessentially and quite deliberately conservative.

In modern Chinese history, since the rebellions, colonial intrusions, and wars that convulsed the Qing Dynasty, two broad and interrelated issues have preoccupied—and frequently divided—Chinese intellectuals, officials, and rulers. First, whether and how far to break with the past, and whether to reaffirm and stand by its traditions and values. (As the most extreme effort to break with the past, Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution proved so spectacularly wretched that it is hardly surprising there should now be a countervailing revival of interest in a more "traditional" China.) Second, how much to borrow from overseas: Is it enough to transfer scientific and technical know-how or is it also necessary to study, adopt, or adapt political, legal, commercial, and administrative systems and institutions? (This discussion has now reached the interesting terrain of innovation. Will an economy that depends largely on technological imitation ever be creative enough, without institutional change, to rise above reliance on cheap and disciplined labor?)

These debates continue today—indeed, now that communism has disappeared in all but name, they have renewed resonance—and they are audible in the contributions of the roundtable panelists presented in the previous section (pp. 6–14). There we find echoes of pride in Chinese civilization, offset by a feeling that this pride has been manipulated and corrupted by the Communist Party, as well as a feeling too that China labors, as Gao Wenqian puts it, under the "burden" of history. In a sense it is a double burden. There is actual history marked by the perennial struggle to maintain intact what is, by a very long measure, the world's most populous and enduring empire; and there is the officially constructed history, with its deep and assiduously cultivated sense of grievance—that China was brought low by outsiders, notably the West and Japan—which distracts attention from the need for internal change to create more equitable and sustainable rule. All of this can generate a feeling that China is somehow trapped in itself.

But real continuity, even continuity of the cage, requires cultural transmission: new generations must think and act in much the same ways as their forebears. So, given the zigzagging discontinuities of the last few decades, it becomes relevant to ask what is going on in the hearts and minds of young Chinese people today.

FAREWELL TO ALL THAT

There are at least four respects in which the life experience of Chinese citizens born within the last 30 years has differed profoundly from that of their parents. Some of these changes are internal to China; others reflect, to varying extents, global change.

First, owing to the notorious family planning policies of the "reform" era, today's children and youth are/were raised in small families, very many of them as "only children." In China one often hears the complaint that this produces over-indulged "little emperors," spoiled (but also pressured to achieve) by parents and grandparents who have only one focal point for their care and vicarious ambition. However, Ai Bai has a different story to tell in the article that follows (pp. 49–51). His decades of experience as a rural teacher and youth worker lead him to conclude that today's youngsters are more assertive and confident, and less inclined to the unquestioning obedience that characterized the Confucian ideal.

Second, there has been a pronounced increase in formal educational opportunity and attainment. Many Chinese and international educators and activists have pointed over the last decade to alarming disparities in access to and quality of education, and quite rightly so, because these inequities are marked and growing. There is even some evidence of rising illiteracy among the poorest and most marginalized social groups. (This reflects current patterns of poverty that extend well beyond China's borders: a few people enjoy great wealth; many just about make ends meet; a sorry underclass gets left further behind than ever.) But this should not obscure the facts that, overall, a larger proportion of the Chinese population than ever before is completing nine years of elementary schooling, a larger proportion is going on to complete high school and college, and a larger proportion is studying overseas. (See "Education: More Extensive but Less Equal" on *p. 47–48.*)

Education is a basic form of cultural transmission and the state of course has a strong interest in—and, in China, more or less absolute control over—shaping curricula in order to shape citizens. Indeed, China's state has long led the world in this. Some of the shaping that happens today is cultural in a narrow sense (first-graders learn Tang Dynasty poetry); some is clearly ideological (the official narratives of history); and some invoke rituals of allegiance (raising the flag and singing the anthem). The near-universalization of state education strengthens national and centralized constructions of history, language, and identity at the expense of localized and customary worldviews. This is especially true in China, where the distinctive cultures of non-Han nationalities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) are at least still recognized in official parlance as nationalities, not merely "ethnic minorities."

However, this kind of thought control, which all states exercise to at least some extent, is by no means total in China today. Over the last two decades, both curricula and teaching methodologies have changed substantially in response to pressure to promote national development and international competitiveness, and new disciplines have opened up in higher education. Significant factors have included: (i) new managerial, technocratic, and business elites who want better schooling for their own children—this includes Chinese "sea turtles" (*haigui* 海龟) who have studied overseas, and whose brains the Chinese government is determined to lure back, and who will want better schooling for their own children; (ii) educational researchers and administrators, many of them whom have studied at postgraduate level overseas, as well as schools that are eager to attract fee-paying students from new elites, have shown interest in "quality education" methods that pay less attention to rote learning and somewhat more to creative collaborative work; (iii) at tertiary and, now, high school level, there is much greater interaction—and growing competition—with international institutions; (iv) the ability to read foreign languages, most notably English, has spread rapidly and was initially far more important than the Internet in making non-Chinese thinking available to the intelligentsia.

Intellectual freedom is hardest to find in the humanities and social sciences, but even in these fields there is greatly increased latitude compared to 20 years ago, at least in terms of what can be read, not only in foreign languages but also in Chinese. For example, Chinese publishing houses recently put out translations of James Scott's *Seeing Like a State*[1] and Amartya Sen's *Development As Freedom*,[2] two favorites of mine. Sen's book was quoted liberally in the 2005 United Nations Human Development Report for China, *Development with Equity,* which was written by Chinese researchers from the State Council's own Development Research Centre. There was a long delay in publication while the National Development and Reform Commission studied and demanded changes to the text; but eventually a somewhat milder version did see the light.

Of course, it is fair to say that this relative freedom is largely confined to intellectual elites and seldom extends to publishing original opinions. It is also true that Chinese students from kindergarten onwards are subjected to intense pressure, both competitive and parental, driven by the belief that "education changes fate." The teaching and assessment system is heavily geared to pushing children to the top of the academic ladder rather than meeting the real-life needs of the majority, who step off on lower rungs. This handicaps students from rural and, especially, minority nationality backgrounds who, contending with relative poverty at home and second-rate classroom environments, are the least likely to rise far, and so must continue to endure the ignominy of hearing from their urban cousins that they are people of "low quality."

Yet, despite all of these and many other shortcomings in formal educational provision, there is no doubt that most Chinese people in their twenties today are far more knowledgeable and have had more exposure to diverse opinions than their parents, whose education in most cases was largely confined to parroting Mao Zedong. This does not mean that China will suddenly become a nation of libertarian free-thinkers, but it may mean that the orthodoxies promulgated by Party ideologues will have to become somewhat better-reasoned and more evidence-based (as, indeed, has been signaled in the Hu-Wen "scientific approach to development" rubric).

An interesting subplot of this story is that, in its eagerness to expand tertiary education, the government has created far more university and college places than graduate employment opportunities. A growing pool of unemployed graduates may well prove harder to control than illiterate peasant "surplus labor," especially if the graduates are endowed with some of the assertiveness and independence of spirit that Ai Bai has noted.

GLUED TO THE TV

A third major change for China's younger generations is that they were born into an era of mass communication. A great deal of attention is currently paid to the impact of the most modern, interactive communication technologies: the cell phone, Internet, chat, Facebook, etc. Again, these changes encompass the globe, not just China, and they do beg fascinating and important questions. But in my view it is still too early for answers; leastwise, those who get the right answers will either be prescient or just lucky guessers, for we do not yet have much real evidence or experience on which to base an opinion.

It is worth considering, though, a powerful medium that is sometimes overlooked because its novelty has worn off: television. In 1982, only two percent of Chinese households had access to television. By the mid 1990s, coverage had become virtually universal, barring only the new underclass. Today's Chinese teenagers are thus the first generation to have grown up with the constant stimulus (some would say anesthetic) of TV. It has, like formal education, become an important mode of cultural transmission, a new shaper of citizens. It is, like formal education, subject to state controls and thus, *prima facie,* might serve as a vehicle for promoting ideological conformity, just as it promotes and universalizes the national language.

The power of television is evidently not lost on China's political leaders. The point of recruiting Zhang Yimou to direct the Olympic Games opening ceremony was that it had to look good on TV—and not just to a billion Chinese viewers but to an estimated three billion foreigners. (Zhang, even without the support of Steven Spielberg, was an astute choice. I once attended a dinner where Zhu Lin, wife of former premier Li Peng, angrily denounced Zhang who, she said, "just made films for foreigners" that "did not show the real China." So he was definitely the right man to impress the world!)

But the Communist Party is not prescient and it is unlikely that it foresaw the full impact of following richer countries into the television era. Controlling news content is relatively easy—but not altogether so, as Chinese media professionals begin to discover their vocation and aspire to compete with international networks. In other programming, TV opens up new lenses and mirrors, offering glimpses of previously invisible worlds as well as showing ordinary people representations of themselves in soap operas and dramas that attract huge audiences. Policing these is much less easy because, if they fail to reflect real concerns and interests, viewers will simply vote with their remote (and are, in ever increasing numbers, going online to find shows that don't make the satellite networks).

Elsewhere, TV has proved on the whole to be powerfully demotic, tending to dislodge "high" culture from the elevated position that it occupied across Europe for centuries. Today the Queen of England has come out of the Royal Opera House and into the music hall: she watches TV along with the rest of us. Politicians in democracies have found "telegenic" qualities increasingly essential (even without democracy, Chinese leaders will come under similar pressure). New heights of populism are now being reached (or depths plumbed) with "reality TV" and the associated phenomenon of ordinary people becoming celebrities who can oust the royal families of Europe from the continent's gossip magazines. And these trends are rapidly internationalizing. Shows in the style of *American Idol,* with audiences participating as voters, have become highly popular with Chinese viewers, and a show in the style of *Friends*, which also borrows dashes of "reality" from the UK's *Big Brother,* draws 1.5 million viewers to the Mofile video website.

None of this is to say that TV is an unequivocal good, or even a good at all. Some would strenuously argue the contrary. (See Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* for a detailed and data-rich argument that in the United States, TV has impoverished civic associational activity, undermined community bonds, and lowered social trust.) But it is certainly a powerful shaper and reflector of perceptions and self-perceptions, of what "the masses" think about and how. And the Communist Party is not in any real sense leading the development of this cultural space; it is reacting to it. Naturally the Communist Party wants to control and manipulate the space, but is it so omniscient that it really knows how? I doubt it. Last year an edict was issued requiring TV entertainment to be "ethically inspiring." As management strategies go, this looks no more inspired than Canute's edicts to the tides.

And how will China's traditional esteem for moral sages and intellectual elites fare under the rising tide of popular culture? Can we imagine Confucian tele-evangelists competing with shopping channels and game show hosts in the TV ratings? Well, maybe. But having to compete in the marketplace of ideas and cultural influences was no part of the original Confucian vision.

DETACHED FROM THE NANNY STATE

Another aspect of universal TV coverage—the power and reach of its advertising—relates to the fourth point I would highlight which is, obviously enough, the development of a mixed economy and entrepreneurial society. This has strong elements of crony capitalism, for economic opportunity in China remains intimately connected with administrative power. If local entrepreneurs lack political connections, they generally have to do without credit from state-controlled banks and often endure bureaucratic interference from rent-seeking local authorities. At the same time, although the Communist Party adopted an almost entirely *laissez faire* approach to "township and village enterprises"—which, during their heyday in the 1990s were a key driver of economic growth and seemed a kind of halfway house to a private sector—the Party remains strongly interventionist, intent on developing, sheltering, and directing powerful "pillar enterprises" to hold up the new sky.

Nevertheless, and in complete contrast to the experience of their parents, Chinese people born since 1980 have grown up in a society where personal initiative is not the political liability it once was, but rather, an increasingly important asset. Following parents into the field or factory, keeping their heads down, and doing only what they are told is neither a necessity nor much of an option for today's youngsters. Fortune favors the adventurous, whether their options are as narrow as working on a construction site in the county town or as expansive as selecting a university for overseas study. But without special connections and influence, they also face intense competition for scarce opportunities and niggardly state or collective protection against personal failure. Personal freedom can be both daunting and tough.

Chinese parents and grandparents, whose own youth was spent in such different circumstances, are not necessarily well equipped to advise their children on how to navigate these new waters. An emerging "generation gap" is a growing concern on both sides of the gap, especially among better-off, urban families whose young people are beginning to enjoy some of the material prosperity and personal liberties that came to Western youth decades ago: some disposable income and choice of how to spend it; moving out of the parental home and into independent accommodation before marriage; sex without (not merely "before") marriage and more chances to explore sexual orientation; more opportunity to experiment with creating their own lifestyle and identity—all under the marked influence of TV. This new kind of life experience and the difficulties it brings to communication across generations cannot but nibble away at the traditional bonds of parental authority, if not affection and respect, while eroding the power of elders as the custodians of morality.

Extensive personal freedom is, of course, mainly the privilege of what are often called—somewhat misleadingly, since their incomes are well above the median—“China’s middle classes.” A proper understanding of generational change in China would require a distributional analysis of how it differs across social groups; for economic reforms are bringing not just a “free market”—which sounds so cheerfully liberating—but increasingly complex social stratification in which the costs and benefits of production and consumption are distributed far from equally. Nevertheless, the factors I have mentioned (smaller families; more opportunities to receive a wider-ranging education; a broader cultural life with more space for self-examination; greater need for self reliance) touch all but the destitute underclass to at least some extent. And it seems to me that this is making young Chinese significantly different from their parents.

Chinese teenagers enjoy a rock-and-roll festival to mark Chinese National Day on October 2, 2005 in Beijing, China. Photo credits: Guang Niu/Getty Images.

This does not necessarily mean that new generations will be politically radical, or actively resist Communist Party rule. To all appearances, the great majority of young Chinese today continue to concentrate, much as their parents did, on personal and family advancement. (And they should not be despised for that. In China there is an immense, pent-up desire to enjoy better living standards after long years of almost universal austerity and poverty. Only the genuine ascetic, who has denied herself all material comfort, has any right to frown on this.) China’s youngsters may, however, prove more assertive than their parents in defense of their own interests, although not necessarily under the banner of—or even with any special interest in—human rights. Maybe. We do not yet know.

It is also the case that many young people are beginning to exercise not just personal but also civic activism and initiative—partly, although not exclusively, through around 5,000 NGOs, according to *China Development Brief*’s last rough count (in 2006). It should by no means be assumed, however, that all voluntary, civic activity must somehow be politically oppositional or even tend naturally in that direction. The 13 years I spent in China closely observing this field led me to conclude that most of it isn’t and doesn’t. The majority of social activists I knew were aiming not to unseat the Communist Party but only to co-exist with it. This does suggest a developing plurality of sorts, but not the “democratic surge” that outsiders, looking at China, often hope to see and that some try, usually ineptly, to promote.

It is also instructive to remember the generation gap that was perceived in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States and Western Europe. This too occurred against a background of momentous change in the actual experience of life. Oral contraceptives gave women, for the first time in human history, easy and reliable control over fertility; while generations of men coming of age would, in at least some countries, never have to face being press-ganged by a local lord or the nation-state into dying in some war. This was in many ways liberating and, in my view, it brought profound cultural change. But it was not, in the end, the politically radicalizing development that many at the time predicted. In fact, somewhat to the contrary, many of the Parisian *soixantehuitards* who ran around in the late 1960s thinking they were Maoists, and the baby boomer weekend hippies who sat around smoking pot and listening to The Grateful Dead, went on to bear children who in very many cases proved more politically conservative.

But the fact remains that generational change is clearly happening in China—even if it does not fit the wishful vision of some observers—and that this entails a cultural shift, a significant pulling away from tradition. For better or worse, Chinese people are, like everyone else, being drawn into a post-traditional world; and, unless we regard culture as no more profound and meaningful than a folkloric badge (a kilt for a Scotsman, chopsticks for the Chinese), it is perfectly obvious that Chinese culture is changing significantly. (And why not? Things that do not change have, sooner or later, to be pronounced dead.) The continuity story is precisely that—a story. In most respects today's 20-something year-old Fudan University graduate has far more in common with her counterparts in New Delhi or San Francisco than with the Chinese contemporaries of Confucius.

CULTURAL RECONSTRUCTION

It is entirely understandable that, having abandoned its "dictatorship of the proletariat" project, the Communist Party of China should seek to prolong its reign by renegotiating its relationship with the Chinese people. This is not because it is "communist" or because it is Chinese; it is simply in the nature of human institutions to reinvent reasons and strategies for their own continued existence when their operating context changes. (Do we ever hear of political parties or movements voluntarily disbanding because their historical task is accomplished?) Thus, creating new narratives of legitimacy is an urgent task for the Party. Over the last two decades legitimization strategies have largely centered on stability and prosperity—the argument that only the Party can hold China together and deliver development—but this claim has been weakened by the growing social divisions that a more dynamic but much less equal economy has brought. It is now a perfectly logical strategy for the Party to try and bolster its standing by associating itself with the idea of—even implying that it should take the credit for—a Chinese cultural renaissance.

The reinvention of "Confucian" society is of course a chimera. It might be possible to reconcile the Confucian ideal of structural stability and permanence with a stagnant, autarchic form of communism, but it is impossible to reconcile with the restless dynamism of global capitalism. For, as Marx famously emphasized, capitalism is all about change: sweeping away old customs, destroying "Asiatic culture" (*New York Tribune*, 1853), and "battering down all Chinese walls" (The *Communist Manifesto*, 1848). And it is hard to imagine a form of capitalism more offensive to the Confucian ideal, with its attachment to public virtue, than China's current state of robber baronetcy, with not-so-virtuous officials deeply engaged in capital accumulation.

But these points are in fact largely irrelevant to the process of ideological reinvention. A mythology does not have to be true in order to matter; it just needs to be believed. Besides, there is a rather glaring precedent for re-connecting with antiquity: the European renaissance, when the Catholic church began to lose its ideological grip and classical Greece and Rome came back into scientific and artistic fashion, leading Enlightenment thinkers to cast themselves—even if somewhat speciously—as intellectual descendants of city-state democracy. (Democracy with slaves, *bien sur.*)

So the real question is, what can the Party make people believe? I don't know the answer, but, *prima facie,* there is plenty for Party ideologues to exploit, and build on their past success. For in China, there is already a deep desire to believe in cultural unity and continuity. (A Chinese person is *far* more likely than a Canadian or a Patagonian to take offense at my skeptical approach to cultural continuity; I can anticipate the bloggers' obloquy.) And, in times of great change, when many people yearn for some moral certainties to hold on to (as is also suggested by the rise in both authorized and unauthorized religious belief in China), it can be comforting to believe that one is securely anchored to one's past. The brilliantly ahistorical claim that things have "always" been this way—e.g., that Tibet has "always" been part of China—lends a comfortable solidity to the status quo.

But, on the other hand, the Party also has to cope with new, cosmopolitan yet demotic cultural influences: from TV sitcoms to the "management success for idiots" books that, irritatingly, clog up Chinese airport bookshops. (Where is the poetry, for God's sake? That's what I want on a plane.) The Party allowed this to happen, but I have no sense that they are in control of the consequences. We live in a puzzling era of deliberative and elective culture, where Western corporations have snatched the baton from NGOs in celebrating diversity—just look at HSBC's advertising campaigns—and in which people, lucky people that is, mix 'n match a bit of this and that: tai chi (*taijiquan* 太极拳) before breakfast, black jazz musicians after dark. This has hitherto mainly been the privilege and habit of Californians, but my experience of China was that Californication had started, in at least some places. I don't know what to think about this except to repeat that we need, if we want to understand anything, to watch and listen out for young Chinese people instead of poring over the annals of Party history and whatever damned decision was made at whatever plenum of whatever forlorn committee.

It is, finally, also the case that "Confucianism," just as much as Marxism or Christianity, lies open to a variety of interpretations. Confucius has been the victim of journalistic simplification, in that (non-Chinese) broadsheet readers tend immediately to connect him with authoritarian rule. (In this, his fate resembles that of Plato, whose "Republic" comprised only a small and untypical part of his vast output; yet, to modern readers it is by far the best known part, and routinely anathematized as politically unsavory; the noted philosopher and defender of liberal democracy Karl Popper famously dubbed Plato, along with Marx and Hegel, the "enemy" of "the open society.") But this is a very narrow reading.

Vodaphone is currently running an advertising campaign across the UK with the slogan "I am who I am because of everyone." This strikes me as a fairly direct rip-off (and not a bad summary) of the Confucian concept of the person—as being not the freewheeling, autonomous moral agent of the Enlightenment that Kant and Hume and Sartre took for granted, but part of a moral nexus, defined by responsibilities and duties to others. (And therefore, logically, we just *have* to keep phoning and texting them all at only 10p per message!) The rip-off troubles me, but I find nothing scarily totalitarian about the original thought; rather, it's how my life feels to me.

And how about Confucius's "*san ren xing, bi you wo shi*" (三人行必有我师), roughly: "where three people walk together, at least one of them must have something to teach me." Not a bad anthem, I would say, to human reciprocity, exchange, and participatory learning. (And if I see it on an advertising hoarding next year I will revert to autonomous moral agency and sue.)

We have already seen how, in China, "harmonious society" has become the rhetorical framework within which people argue about politics and society; often with hues of subtlety. A resurgence of Confucian studies and discourse need not mean an end to contestation, dialogue, communication; it might even be a new beginning. And it is by no means necessarily a bad thing that a Chinese philosopher, rather than a European Marx or Lenin, should provide the intellectual framework for this debate. Activists and observers alike will just have to brush up on their *Analects.*

Notes

1. James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* critiques the large-scale experiments run by central governments in the 20th century, including Mao's Great Leap Forward. Scott challenges the attempt to model society based on scientific laws, and argues that these experiments most often resulted in disastrous human tolls.
2. In *Development as Freedom,* Nobel prize-winning economist Armartya Sen argues that development cannot be achieved through markets and GDP growth alone, but also hinges on rights such as political freedoms, education, and healthcare.