

China as Superpower: A Super-Vision of Power?

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Abstract

One wonders whether or not, as alternative to an American-style use of power considered too intimidating, and as such counterproductive, China's productive fervor means in fact to revamp the old idea that there are, after all, happy slaves despite an overrating of freedom spread globally by the West. To the libertarian ideology claiming that freedom is worth the highest sacrifice, China can be perceived as opposing the naturalism of the wu wei doctrine: avoid confrontation whenever possible and live within your means. Politically, this means accept your stance in life for the sake of general stability and peace, or apply for approval from above if obsessed with change. How does this compare to the Western quest for the next stroke of salutary genius capable of leading the world out of its present crisis into a new horizon? To find out, one needs to disclose the fundamental existential assumptions that exert their unquestioned fascination upon the Chinese mind, inciting it to export its way of being, and not just trinkets. The essay's conclusion favors the idea that a political super-vision must liberate the minds from the spell of any model and flirt with a dangerous loss of control.

Keywords: pacifism, mimetism, ideology, virtual liberation, managerial genius, karoshi (lethal overwork)

1. Introduction

With China poised to move center-stage in the near future, trying to figure out how its exercise in supremacy might unfold expresses more of an existential necessity than a simple curiosity. And certainly, Beijing's keeping the most crucial of its agenda secret is not meant to dull the general interest in the specifics of this envisaged takeover; quite to the contrary: the less explicit its layout, the more it incites to a speculative articulation thereof.

Hence, the present attempt to disclose some of the subtleties implied in this would-be super-vision of power aimed at reordering the world. Considering that a clear rendition of it by its authors is neither extant, nor likely to emerge anytime soon—secrecy obliges—at least the criticism of reading intentions into the Chinese leadership’s minds loses much of its force for lack of an alternative.

Moreover, with dialog at the top of China’s political hierarchy getting scarcer since transfer of power has been deemed an unnecessary perturbation in the system’s already good functioning, debate has no choice but to relocate at lower levels, or cease altogether. How much an imperially re-empowered Xi Jinping is able and willing to examine his own vision of superpower without pressure from political rivals remains uncertain; much surer is that, with the explicit intently withheld, the best one can do is venture some educated guesses at the implicit.

The crucial issue dealt with here is whether or not, as alternative to an American-style use of power considered too intimidating, and as such counterproductive, China’s productive fervor means in fact to revamp the old idea that there are, after all, happy slaves despite an ideologically promoted overrating of freedom. To the libertarian ideology spread globally by the West, and basically claiming that freedom is worth the highest sacrifice, China can be perceived as opposing the naturalism of the *wu wei* doctrine. In social terms, this comes close to the *real* law of the jungle, to be sharply distinguished from the anthropocentric caricature thereof that extolls the superiority of human organization over an allegedly chaotic nature. Its maxim: avoid confrontation whenever possible and live within your means; politically, that means accept your stance in life for the sake of general stability and peace, or apply for approval from above if obsessed with change.

Assuming this comes close to China’s vision of the world order to be ushered in—an interpretation defended all along here—how does it compare to the Western quest for the next stroke of salutary genius capable of leading the world out of its present crisis and into a new horizon? This boils down to

disclosing the fundamental existential assumptions that exert their unquestioned fascination upon a fifth of the world's population to the point of making it want to export its way of being, and not just trinkets. One should not forget that every single item imported from China comes with a certain worldview embedded in and accompanying it clandestinely—a tag enfolded upon itself many times over and carrying inscribed on it the social price of China's aspiration to global hegemony.

2. Naturalizing Confucian humanism

Calling China's view of world order a *naturalized humanism* would not be a misnomer. For, to trust biologists, there are unwritten laws in nature, which want that creatures exert only a freedom commensurate with their natural clout rather than inflated by artificial ideas, such as the right to get fair treatment from the political power, or to question the latter's secretive ways. Authoritarianism merely enforces this naturalist ideology as the ultimate truth, even though superlative beyond doubt is only its fervor to propagate.

A transparent Great Wall supposed to limit the quest for truth is thus erected: if it fails to stand naturally, by virtue of the sheer cohesion between its building blocks, this construct can be held together artificially using a binder—a man-made mortar that imitates the homogeneity of natural stone well enough to escape notice.

In China, such realism by decree is inspired by Confucius' teachings. Taking human nature to be essentially malleable, educable, the revered sage opined that, if systematically imitating the good action, eventually humans really become good—from this point of view at one with Kant, it should be added. The Great Wall of ideology is meant precisely to curb the transgressive, outbound explorations into a repetitive reinforcement of the already found common good. And mimetic education works, which means that a successful mass production of good individuals is just a matter of political patience and resources allocated. In this view, the difference between willingly changing and doing so only under pressure remains a trifle—one retarding factor among others in building the great manufacture of consent, to use Chomsky's simile.

Note that the alleged superiority of the view reinforced through repetition appears to be not intrinsic but extrinsic: it owes its 'greatness' to the great numbers mobilized in support of it and to their even greater fear of dissent. In this attempt to optimize living together, survival ranks above freedom and a resigned compliance with the dictates of power above the risks inherent in the liberation struggle.

But deference toward the hierarchy in place at a given time needs to harmonize with the order of things beyond the realm of human affairs in order to be taken in stride. It is supposed to get 'naturalized,' which means made to look rooted in the immutable 'course of things'—terrestrial and celestial. Without undergoing such a conceptual intervention its legitimacy remains questionable; the traces of artifice, of being manufactured, are meant to disappear literally in plain sight—in the rift between fact and opinion, to be precise—swallowed by what aspires to pass for apodictic evidence. The mortar holding the transparent Great Wall together works best when mistaken for natural stone (the way things themselves are).

Fringing on magic and mystery, the due experimentation in this sense is to be credited to Taoism that shaped the Chinese ethos with its own quest for the elusive 'order of things themselves' and the supernatural decrees that occasionally amend it. The good butcher does not use brute force but finds instead between bones, in the joints, the natural passageway for his knife, according to the teachings of Chuang Tzu. The political upshot of this could be that the whole world forms a bull carcass to be carved up non-violently, simply by clearing the naturally pre-existing fault lines between chunks. But, alas, the anatomy of the world remains elusive, for which reason Beijing prefers to beef up its military, just in case the subtle art of finding the natural interstices for the right global partition fails.

Deep reluctance to use violence also received an additional and most explicit support from Buddhism. Without getting into details, let us retain only that, at the confluence of these three major currents of tradition, the idea of harmonious, smooth developments deeply appeals to Chinese sensibilities. Although perception of the obscure order supposedly emerging from the background has significantly and repeatedly changed—

especially over the last century, or so—the deep belief in it has not. Actually, its spell on the minds gets merely reinforced by the government-imposed media censorship and additionally justified by the contemporary environmental crisis.

This said, Beijing's manifest efforts to offer a major alternative to, and thus depart from, the strand of Western rationality globalized by the US and its allies cannot for long avoid a highest-level, philosophical confrontation with the worldview it wants to dislodge from a supposedly obsolete centrality. Unless, of course, the new order China wants to inaugurate will see might become right to the point of suspending the need for *any* justification whatsoever—by far the most disturbing scenario for Western political sensibilities.

But there is actually more, and more recent, to China's naturalization of truth: not thinking through the Great Wall of transparency also *pays*. Money is the latest evidence that Beijing might have finally got things right. If money is taken to talk so eloquently and unambiguously as to render the order of human affairs self-evident, then perhaps China does deserve to win world supremacy without arguments, simply by flashing this countable 'evidence' of superiority to the point of blinding everyone. Yet money does not talk *by and of itself*; it only does so in ventriloquist fashion, i.e., by distorting the voice of its owner with his/her interests and allegiances. What it says never comes from a putative 'belly of things themselves' (essence of nature) no matter how masterful the deception.

Tracing the discourse 'of money' back to the human manipulation behind it is the business of educated minds; to break the magic spell cash exerts means in the first place to dismantle its counterfeit appearance of naturalness. Notwithstanding its tremendous persuasive power, it is mostly the very needy and the very greedy who are at high risk from its direction—those whose common sense becomes uncommonly insensible due to either brute need, or unbridled desire. At least in principle, everyone else remains capable of hearing human voices coming through the interruptions in the sweet talk 'of money.'

For the rest, Beijing's preparations to make its great splash get the benefit of the doubt here. The big problem with

neglecting the Tao of words is that, *without the lubrication of soft power, hard power needs to get ever harder in order to prevail*—more and more insensitive and crushing, increasingly identical to the inanimate nature where it sought its law in the first place. In this sense, the African reaction to the awkward Chinese advances of the last decade and a half is particularly telltale.¹

So, squeezed between nature and society, how *wild* could the card of “socialism with Chinese characters” become when played by a pair of hands concentrating powers to unprecedented levels? After all, wild is nature at its most natural, which means least predictable.

3. Biding one's time vs. seizing the opportunity

In particular, China's prolonged reluctance to respond to the North Korean crisis with an ultimatum brings into question its taste for tough measures in international relations—coherent with the older, equally carefully measured approach to the reunification with Taiwan.

But how exactly does the game of waiting work? What makes a semblance of alliance with time itself—the supposedly ‘natural unfolding of things’—effective and to what extent? If waiting works, could it also work *too well*, so that the alliance with time, once concluded and hardened into habit, becomes an inertial trap? Granted timing is crucial to the exercise of power, how does patience stand in relation to impatience once a genuine super-vision has struck the mind? One probably agrees that the superiority of a vision can only be judged by its perceivable effects.

It all looks as if, with remarkable prudence, Beijing deliberately refrained from touching upon the limits of its powers, at some level aware that, once those reached, any power inevitably embarks upon its own decline. This is to say that, when doing *everything* within one's power, one has already gone too far and imprudently—terminally, one might say—*overplayed* one's hand. Extreme play is already overplay, and as such harbinger of the endgame.

Noteworthy for theorists and practitioners alike insofar as it departs from the Hegelian struggle for power *to death*, this approach deserves renewed attention. Without exaggeration, it

can be considered the third millennium Chinese twist on the Western cocktail of power theories, the main ingredients of which remain largely distillates of Hegel's thought.

Arguably, what runs against the prevailing Chinese political sensibility is the unjustified fear its Western counterpart experiences with regard to enslavement. A priori preferring death to subjection, which is what the warrior ethos basically inculcates, contradicts the more longevity-oriented tastes cultivated in the Middle Kingdom. This is due primarily to the belief that, with patience and fortitude instead of *furor heroicus*, eventually the slave can triumph of the master—an observation that Hegel, but especially his student Marx, would readily endorse. Seen through the prism of Chinese political prudence, the readiness of the contenders to fight *all the way to death* suffers from not having quite assimilated Hegel's lesson.

As if in the West one failed to tap deeply enough in the wisdom of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which reveals within a conceded defeat the dawn of a deferred victory. If, in good Hegelian fashion, history is understood as the slave's preparation to eventually overthrow his/her master, mistrust in and eventually despair of this process—with one word, impatience—appear as the main culprits for that all too hasty decision to settle the issue in one single heroic battle for supremacy no matter the costs.

By and large, East and West may agree that time works basically as the slave's ally. But there is a long shot from accepting this as a theoretical conclusion to actually cultivating a social taste for patient expectation over and above resolute initiative.² And few would seriously dispute that, when it comes to effectively inculcated, deep-level patience, the West in general, but its present self-appointed leader in particular, are no match for China with its venerable apprenticeship. To treasure longevity as the latter does means to trust in waiting more than in immediate intervention, on some level firmly believing that the best is yet to come; but so is the worst, a Blanchot would rush to point out.

So, granted slavery is undesirable, how *bearable* can one find it, which boils down to how *comfortably* can one travel through time toward the proverbial end of the dark tunnel? If

anything, a long history like China's teaches that prolonged deprivation of freedom turns the latter into something one has to begin by learning how to wait for. Regaining liberty requires that the craving for it be armed with hopeful patience in the first place—the main virtue of the downtrodden, also recognized as indispensable by Christianity. It may well be that a given battle for power decides which of the two combatants subjects which, but this is by no means the end of the story; rather, it inaugurates a dialectical reversal, a *subversion* whereby the slave will eventually replace his/her master.

Note that trust in the alliance with this subterranean current of becoming has to be as deep as the comfort one effectively feels while waiting for its disruptive emergence in the future. And when it comes to easiness at dealing with uneasiness—the capacity to take the latter in stride—China stands out far above the relatively self-indulgent, desire-driven West of the last seven decades.

Obviously, a comparison between levels of adaptation to the wait for the next historic upheaval presupposes that the slave has stopped short of dying for freedom, thereby preserving his/her capacity to intervene in history. Hence, the wisdom of bowing out of a struggle with only a relative result, not to be unduly absolutized by pushing the conflict all the way to death. To someone with superior waiting skills, time will sooner or later grant the expected support; the only problem is to what extent, after prolonged inaction, he/she will still be able to fructify this opportunity. An unflinching trust in the future makes for the passive warrior's most indispensable training, *but also most severe handicap*. This is because the promptness of snapping into action at the opportune moment can very well be lost during the long wait.

Enters work as preparation for the awaited takeover. Insofar as warrior cultures deem death preferable to subjection, they can be seen as suffering from a naiveté and impatience typical of newcomers on the stage of world history. In their impetuous rush, these hotheads omit to place events within a larger context where, in due time and following convoluted paths, any unfavorable trait of the present cannot fail to get undone.

Nonetheless, this is not how Alexander the Great saw things when slashing the legendary Gordian knot presented to him by the sages of Asia—to some, the paradigmatic gesture of Western political sensibilities. The young strategist must have sensed that the task we take up to solve inexorably weds us to its specific temporality, surreptitiously casting our being in its mold. Praxis roots humans in different strata of temporality—the deeper, the more immobile, which means the more harmoniously attuned to that utter inertia timelessness stands for.

Many are the cultural injunctions that shape the Chinese aversion toward an extremism bent on pushing one to take unreasonable risks for the sake of freedom. “We know how to drink bitterness” runs a Chinese proverb—a skill credited with heartening one to traverse periods of hardship while waiting for a change of luck. Or, formulated as “the good general wins with a mere frown,” Sun Tzu’s well-known adage corroborates the same judiciousness of avoiding a heroic bloodshed by patiently nurturing the enemy’s worst fears. Not to mention the powerful Confucian promotion of filial piety, which makes dying before one’s parents—typical of the heroic destiny of an Achilles, for instance—appear as condemnable dereliction of social duty.

If traditionally Chinese sensibility already inclined strongly against killing as being too extreme, the decades of Communism could only have added to this deeply lodged suspicion. For, following Hegel, Marx largely elaborates on the positive, empowering role subjection ultimately has on this class of modern slaves that proletarians are. As their class enemy, the bourgeoisie was to be re-educated through hard labor rather than exterminated. Is not work, after all, the continuation of the master-slave power struggle by other means, to paraphrase von Clausewitz—a kind of diplomacy of the destitute, as it were?

With its constructive fervor, China implicitly raises the question anew: why die fighting heroically in battle when enslavement contains the promise of a future domination over today’s dominators, and when defeat ultimately represents the antechamber of a victory to be prepared through work? In favor of this approach, its history offers spectacular evidence in the

Yuan Dynasty's rapid collapse, to mention just one episode. So quickly did the fierce Mongolian rulers degenerate and end up assimilated by the ruled Chinese that Hegel's talk of accounts being settled only at the end of history must read unwarrantedly pessimistic by Middle Kingdom standards.

Besides, there's another reason for optimism among slaves: from the many of their kind subjected by the master, some fare better than others thanks to their superior waiting skills honed through cultural sophistication. Undoubtedly and universally, slavery is hard to accept; but, apart from trust in the alliance with time itself, the *variety of strands* subjection allows of makes it easier to bear. Because there are hierarchies among slaves, which introduces a most noteworthy mediation in the otherwise too dichotomous, oversimplified master-slave scheme of power.

4. Slave to some, master to others

What substantially alleviates the suffering of the slave, thus contributing to the stability and maintenance of the system, is that there are even worse-off slaves the master rules over. Bad as it is, slavery can get better or worse, which appears reflected in the specific position of different slaves vis-à-vis their master and in their hierarchical relations with one another. Identification with the master works within the limits of that micro-universe where the slave has others of his/her kind in subordination.

Based on this insight, slavery can be made to look all relative—just like mastery, for that matter. What is more delightful to a slave than to see his/her master humiliated by an even greater master—idea that defines God's sense of justice, according to Christianity (Luke 1:52)? If, among slaves, some wield more power than others and enjoy more freedom, by moving them around and keeping them at varying distances from him/herself, the master can produce very persuasive *liberation-effects*. That is, virtual liberations: not in fact but in effect.

The biggest question is to what extent this brow-raising deal tacitly aspires to pass for China's ultimate vision of global managerial genius.

In a stimulating analysis focusing on Beijing's handling of the North Korean crisis, Rodger Baker strives to convince of China's traditional preference for a passive rather than active use of power: "So long as the neighbors did not fundamentally counter China's core interests," he writes, "they were largely left to their own devices." (2017) According to him, a desire to influence from a distance without coercive interference would characterize Beijing's understanding of the right international exercise of clout. In this theory of concentric circles of power, a multi-layered mediation bridges the antagonism between center and periphery. Hence, why overemphasize one agent's enslavement in relation to those situated closer to the center, when the opposite can also be done in relation to those placed farther out, thus preserving a certain optimism indispensable to the idea of systemic harmony?³

The last Congress of China's Communist Party disconfirmed Baker's thesis on the regional limitations of Beijing's ambitions. But his analysis still remains valuable insofar as it highlights a system of vassalage where a mere frown of the supreme master becomes effective enough to deter from more risky, possibly desperate and, because of this, extreme forms of contestation. No longer insisting on the simplistic difference between master and slave, this more complex arrangement shifts the emphasis on the position within the whole system of a hybrid agent whose existential condition results from a conflation of the two classical Hegelian roles—the *masterslave* that each of us basically is.

Using the same logic, nowadays financialization exalts everyone's status of potential investor, just as yesterday's neoliberal rhetoric undercut class consciousness by featuring everyone as a capitalist (possessor of something marketable). Differences of degree replace allegedly more fundamental differences of nature, class, or condition as oversimplified by classical Marxism.

If Hegel saw in the slave bowing before the master a sign of weakness concretized into a socially unfavorable role, China's fixation on pacific solutions attempts to rebrand this weakness as deep wisdom of waiting for emancipation. And definitely the confusion gets at least maintained, if not

increased, through the incentives the master offers to help defuse his/her old armed antagonism with the slave and pursue instead a more 'constructive' path together. If only construction did not cover a more obscure, less acknowledged destruction taking place without belligerence in the strict sense...

So far at least, China's would-be super-vision of power has little to offer the world apart from its much touted constructive approach epitomized in the 'Belt and Road' mega-project. But, even though the superiority of pacific construction over military destruction is supposed to go without saying for China's very busy masses, it appears far less self-evident to others who have the leisure, freedom and willingness to look deeper.

This is partly because, apart from representing the disreputable existential choice of a death-fearing slave, pacifism at all costs also bespeaks a dubious incapacity of governance to diversify the roles played within a given society so that heroic ideals can flourish. A managerial shortcoming, in other words, a lack of broader comprehension. Past a certain point, consensual homogeneity compromises the masses' very capacity for dialectical self-overcoming, rendering them unable to wrestle a future for themselves through that riskiest and most problematic of human actions, which is the heroic one—killing others at the risk of being oneself killed. For it is the consensus-breaking hero who extends the social contract beyond ordinary praxis, into that realm of shadows where praxis makes room for its conditions of possibility.

The hero's self-sacrifice can win his/her society nothing short of a future by dealing the apparent impossible a glorious yet exorbitant blow, in the wake of which fresh possibilities emerge.⁴ The drawback of this uncanny magic is that the presence of heroes in a society poses a major threat on the stability of the power in place, according to the principle 'that which preserves stability and continuity can also most severely compromise them.' In addition, one of the founding clauses in the social contract wants that, in exchange for the highest risks assumed, the heroic elite can claim the lion's share—a demand that encroaches upon the bureaucratic management's ambitions. Instrumentalizing its heroes, in the sense of making

their moves predictable and controllable, remains one of the most daunting tasks governance faces.

5. Work as wait for *both liberation and death*

Despite inevitable fluctuations, the value of self-sacrifice has remained high since the dawn of human organization, which cannot also be said of the emancipatory virtues ascribed to work in general. Hegel's emphasis on the latter as the specific means through which the slave can overcome his/her initial weakness and gradually acquire the capacity to subdue the master is two centuries old now. As Foucault has convincingly shown, not only the specific methods of exerting mastery have evolved, but also the nature of work itself—in particular, its potential to empower the worker.⁵

Indeed, massively assisted by technology as it became nowadays, work in general has lost a good deal of its formative virtues extolled by Hegel and Marx. Automation reduces the risk of human error, but it proportionately diminishes the educational value of work, since mistakes happen to double as great opportunities for learning and self-growth. That which may still hold for the upper, more creative echelons of the workforce no longer applies to the lowest, least free basis tasked mostly with drudgery. Within the confusingly comprehensive category *workforce*, the middle is rapidly eroding and a growing majority is settling for the unenviable status of slaves among slaves and tools among tools. Mass adoption only lubricates the exploration of this nadir of the human.⁶

Because of this, the special knowledge of drinking bitterness proverbially extolled by the Chinese turns out to be highly ambiguous—potentially self-constructive *or self-destructive*. For one can also become too skilled at neglecting one's frustrations to still heed the call for help they voice, just as in the Greek myth King Oedipus became too knowledgeable to remain in control of his excessive knowledge, ultimately responsible as it was for the knower's self-mutilation. As Freud rightly pointed out, when internalized as super-ego, the master can become way more merciless than his/her external model.

Mastery at drinking bitterness renders the latter *imperceptible*, which means that its 'disappearance' is not

factual but effectual. Instead of triggering an empowering, history-changing revulsion from the depths of one's being, in some cultures the absorption of bitterness gets perfected to the point of inducing nothing but a fatefully resigned, routine and limitless acceptance of self-degradation. This passively expectant resignation marks the limit where, adrift on the fluid instinctual magma within us, as it were, the human existential plate undergoes a subduction by the neighboring inhuman one.

A discomfortingly massive evidence—felt as such acutely mostly by the leisure-loving, self-reflective West—indicates that large swaths of work have turned into a deferred, barely disguised suicide, to echo a Cioranian reflection.⁷ Among others, the spate of suicides that plagued China's workforce not long ago served as grim reminder of the self-destructive force this less-than-liberating experience of work can also have.

All in all, if slave prudence is the halo circumscribing what China has to offer in terms of a new vision of power and as 'constructive' alternative to the realpolitik of "peace through strength," it smacks of *déjà vu* and less than excellent, to put it euphemistically. It may still be inevitable for managing large social systems likely to veer into chaos if granted Western-style freedoms, but is far from making it exemplary on a world scale. The grindingly dull work of the manufacturing majority and the self-fulfilling activity of a creative minority of workers appear to have quite different existential impacts.

Absorbed in work, more often than not one fails to notice and seize the opportune moment of emancipation, which consequently slips by. Loud government-orchestrated praises to work in the heroic spirit of self-sacrifice help greatly with this process by downplaying the self-destructive aspect of it. Arguably, *in China the social image of work is by far more lethal than all the work accidents combined*. If focused on work to the point of unreflective self-abandonment, the slave is likely to keep deferring the decision to part with it and *break* free: strangely, the very preparation for liberation stands in the way of its advent.

Between death by *karoshi* (Japanese for lethal overwork) and death on the battlefield the latter choice might have the advantage of offering more unknowns, and therefore

more unforeseeable chances of survival worth exploring. The scientifically organized self-destruction that large areas of work have become, especially in its ruthless extreme-Oriental version introduced to the world in the 1970s by Japan, brings 'the Chinese dream' too close to a nightmare to really inspire daydreaming among the deeply suspicious Western workforce. Among the management, though, the authoritarianism encouraged in the East does make dream and exhilarates. Which partly explains why, unlike its American counterpart, the work-inspired Chinese dream meets significant resistance abroad, at least among those who can still afford to question before unconditionally losing themselves in work.

Precisely because a vast majority of the 1.4 billion Chinese can boast unmatched mastery at drinking bitterness, the political vision that extolls their exploit before the world *inspires very divisively*: met with enthusiasm at the top, it sends shudders across the basis of the social pyramid. Now, dividing happens to provide great preparation for ruling, as the Latin adage goes. *China's mediocre vision of superpower becomes a super-vision insofar as, wedge-like, it splits the global public opinion graciously, with little more than a polite Confucian smile.* Sun Tzu's excellent general capable of avoiding bloodshed with a mere frown is nowadays surpassed by a premier who can get the same done with less than that—a reassuring smile that his 'Belt and Road' is all for the better.

To the question, 'Can you still sell individual self-sacrifice in the very age of individualism and in plain sight?' Beijing tacitly but confidently answers, 'Yes, we can, since we are the world's biggest market and the world understands itself to be essentially a market.' It is not an overstatement to claim that, in terms of efficacy, the politically induced narcosis that abets China's penchant to mass-masochism rivals the Macedonian phalanx of ancient times, or the swarming Mongolian cavalry of the Middle Ages.

6. Vision and the entrapments of patience

Does political vision acquire excellence simply upon being adopted by large numbers, or does the nature of this vision alone determine its value? Notwithstanding its indispensable social transmission, vision remains an

expression of individuality—a breakpoint, a potential interruption of imitative repetition, the possibility for action to strike off the routine course followed by most. But, insofar as it disrupts this business-as-usual functioning, the new vision encroaches upon the previously adopted, politically guarded version of common good.

Under the conventional name *genius* individuality spearheads necessary social change.⁸ A superior vision empowers its visionary receiver to cross the limits of prudence into a highly exposed domain where a new order lies concealed. Against all odds, the opportunities it articulates might let themselves be wrestled out of concealment. As this feat of daring seems unfeasible to most, its value is proportionate to its social rarity and to the risks incurred. Most remarkable about this act is that, in it, impatience brings prudent patience to an end. *A super-vision signals itself most distinctively through an irrepressible sense of urgency toward action*—a breaking of routine patterns under the pressure of what the visionary genius experiences as necessity.

Inasmuch as it displaces the ultimate initiative from the established site of political power to an outsider, this necessity envisioned by the genius can be expected to encounter passionate resistance. Fortunately, it comes prepared to break through various obstacles, which means backed by a firm resolve capable of defying the ordinary injunctions of prudence and of assuming the risks involved in the clash. Its greatness translates most directly into greatest courage and highest urgency to act. As countless examples of self-sacrificing visionary heroes have shown since at least Empedocles and Hermias of Atarneus—including Giordano Bruno, Galileo Galilei, and the white-shirted man who stopped the column of tanks rolling into Tiananmen Square in 1989—the resolve accompanying a super-vision can fringe on madness; it is impatience at its most burning.

Prudent patience makes for but a poor suitor of a super-vision; if controllable, the passion simmering in it is mediocre enough to raise doubts about their match. Continuing to wait as before after receiving an enlightening insight constitutes evidence that the insight in case did not quite capture the next

necessary step of becoming. By definition, necessity tolerates no delays; expectative inertia in response to a great vision speaks either against the latter's greatness, or against the visionary's capacity to deliver it to the world immediately and regardless of costs (lack of real genius, which consists in the effective power to initiate a major game change in response to a super-vision). Haggling over the price of their action is not for those touched by grace to the point of actually feeling resourceful *beyond calculation*. Indeed, what could one still be waiting for once the right thing to do appeared to him/her as such—as both *the right* thing and the one *to do*? Only to hopeless procrastinators the moment is never opportune enough.

In short, vision cannot be separated from its propagation: the more excellent, the more irresistibly and promptly it musters the means for its actualization. If it does not start by empowering its receiver to actualize it superlatively—urgently and unconditionally, that is—its alleged superiority fails the reality test. A super-vision is supposed to induce a super-mobilization against inertia, as necessity dictates more authoritatively and efficaciously than any political leader. Hence, the socio-physiological question: to what extent the *social* body will respond to the inspired vision with the same unflinching compliance as the genius's own *physical* body?

It is the physical response that makes the genius stand out from the crowd of mere dreamers lost in endless deferrals when it comes to actualizing their dreams—those beautiful but impotent souls Hegel called *die schönen Seelen*. By analogy, one could say that it is the mobilization of the social body—people's acting in sync with one another and with their political leader—that makes the fundamental difference between nations that deliver and those that indulge in mere fantasizing. Now, if anything, China is delivering spectacularly; but vigilance needs to be increased precisely when the show unleashes its most captivating radiance.

Because it works, the Chinese model risks to work *too well* to still be human: tranquilized through the massive ingestion of ideological opium—the religion of work, to paraphrase Marx—will the slave even remember that he/she is

enslaved, let alone seize the opportunity for liberation? By empowering Xi Jinping in unprecedented ways, implicitly the Chinese people want him to keep the good work going *without unproductive interruptions for debate*, as if more good were always better than just good. But is it really?

An automatic functioning under narcosis jeopardizes the system's capacity to dispel its lucrative torpor and rethink its stance in life from the ground up in accordance with changes of the overall situation. Once humans reach great mastery at imitating the planned functioning of machines, will not the 'stop' button appear obsolete? Massively doped through ideology, the worker can prolong his/her productive but self-destructive inertia all the way to suicidal *karoshi*, just as the martial hero can keep delivering his/her grim destruction long after the war is over. The problem with this generalized state of war through 'peaceful' and 'constructive' work is that it may never really cease of itself; one needs to keep in mind Heidegger's simple observation that it takes a break in the hammer for the worker to pause.

In the end, China's immoderate fear of uncontrollable situations faithfully parallels the West's visceral phobia of over-controlled ones. But no super-vision can claim excellence past its expiry date. In and of itself, China's productive fervor is no better than the US's military zeal, as Chinese-style work only exerts its destructive power in slower and less conspicuous ways than battlefield brutality. Is it conceivable that, at some point in a brighter future, unbridled work propaganda will become chargeable crime (incitement to suicide)? For work—the drug that life cannot do without—is also capable of terminating it if taken without a limiting prescription. What to say of a political prescription that abets, instead of preventing, workaholic excesses?

Crucial when judging the next world order is not the choice between construction and destruction but that between interruptible and uninterruptible visual contact with any model image. The penchant for stability veers into a ruinous passion when seized by fascination, which is just another name for the control images can assume of human minds. Insofar as 'the Chinese dream' refers to this irrational surrender to the spell of

work *at all costs*, nothing distinguishes it from a self-actualizing nightmare of the worst kind.

7. Conclusion

Superiority of vision might be literally in the eye of the beholder—to be precise, in the eye's kinesthetic ability to avert its gaze from excessive exposure to any given image. The ancient wisdom of *'festina lente'* should be applied to blinking in the first place: visual contact with any image should be generously interrupted in order to let the mind 'ruminate' the latter as due. A political super-vision appears as the mind's ability to exert self-supervision—to extricate itself from its own ongoing act and hang above the latter like an impatient guillotine.

One is never too impatient when it comes to mental readiness for change: rupture for rupture's sake, desisting in the name of a salutary non-coincidence with oneself is a necessary exercise for whoever feels the entrapments lurking in stability. Constructive fervor, just like its destructive martial counterpart, can be a slow-drying concrete whereby rigor mortis surreptitiously and untimely sets in. There is no point in exalting longevity as long as the liveliest moment in it—life's very capacity to differ from itself—has disappeared engulfed by hardened routine.

It did not take much genius to see that the China of Deng Xiaoping badly needed to address its poverty and backwardness problems; even less was required for adopting the model of more advanced societies. But seeing the existential threat imitation poses might take nothing short of prophetic clairvoyance.⁹ The problem with the Confucian injunction to imitate the good is that, once people get the hang of aping and applaud it uncritically, in principle nothing can stop them from faking their own humanity with ever grosser approximations.

In order to reach farther than it already did, China's leap forward might need to flirt dangerously with *instability and fragility*. The greater the advance, the more frail and flexible the social body needed to sustain the forward movement; after all, upon thrusting one's feet away from the rest of one's body as if meaning to break apart, one can never be quite sure of remaining in one piece, never mind landing upright.

Without somehow shaking off their ideologically baked rigidity, how could China's terra-cotta warriors come (back) to life? Stuck in intimidating martial postures, they fascinate the gaze with their image of past greatness, inducing their stiffness in the beholder's mind. But only a would-be *step out of control* on their part could make the world beyond China believe that they actually are, and not just look, real.

NOTES

¹ A good example of hard power without the backing of its soft counterpart comes from China's recent African adventure, in which the series of infrastructures Beijing offered in exchange for local natural resources failed to win it a sustainable welcome. This weakness is precisely what India, arrived in Africa behind China and way less financially comfortable than its predecessor, is trying to exploit in the name of business sustainability. Philosophically, the fate of this competition for Africa's favors is interesting insofar as it pitches mostly soft against hard power.

² One can also wait until forgetting what one is waiting for, according to Maurice Blanchot. (1962) The issue acquires particular political importance when this awaited thing is nothing other than the return to a state of humanity beyond doubt. For our humanity is a quality possessed only uncertainly, i.e., susceptible of being lost through self-complacency and self-neglect—indeed, sometimes lost to the point of forgetting this very loss and taking abject degradation in stride. Which not by accident echoes the argument imperial Japan invoked to justify its Nanking massacre of 1937: past a certain point, patience dangerously skirts a state of resignation with the very worst.

³ Interestingly, Yanis Varoufakis denounces the same logic at work in the European Union's painful spasms of self-redefinition, supposedly “. . . leading to a Europe in which a coalition of the willing will proceed with the original ambition while the rest form outer circles, connected to the inner core by unspecified bonds.” (2017).

⁴ One remembers that, in his *Alkestis*, Euripides depicts the heroic engagement with death in this most heuristically convenient way, which is a wrestling match.

⁵ In the interview published under the title ‘Truth and Power,’ Foucault points out that, upon closer inspection, this particular exercise of power known as work appears as war by ‘peaceful’ means: “Peace would then be a form of war, and the State a means of waging it.” (123, 1980).

⁶ A most telltale omission in this sense occurs in Kojève's commentary to Leo Strauss' appropriation of Xenophon and dealing with the worker's motivation for work. After an initial admission that “the joy that comes from labor itself, and the desire to succeed in an undertaking, can, by themselves alone, prompt a man to undertake painful and dangerous labors (as is already shown in the

ancient myth of Hercules)” in the next sentence Kojève lets the reference to painful work slip out of attention in favor of that to dangerous labor: “A man can work hard risking his life for no other reason than to experience the joy he always derives from carrying out his project or, what is the same thing, from transforming his ‘idea’ or even ‘ideal’ into a reality shaped by his own efforts.” (1991, 140) The argument for joyful work has no problem passing, but the one for painful work is simply trying to take a ride on its back. The big problem is that motivation for success at all costs cannot be completely freed from the suspicion of masochism—that most dubious alchemy of the human psyche responsible for making pain pass for pleasure. In the language of our epoch, this foul deal allows the mind to sell the body a ruinous toxic derivative: joy—the hard currency of vital exchanges—gets counterfeited in the darkest recesses of one’s individuality.

⁷ “A book is a deferred suicide,” rules Cioran on what remains one of the most stimulating, creative, and therefore intrinsically rewarding human activities. (1995, 1332) But, if interacting with a book—presumably both writing and reading it—has the virtue of chasing away thoughts of utter meaninglessness, the same cannot be said of other, less interesting objects one gets involved with in most other types of work. In parallel with the rise of technological alienation and despair at the dullness of the tasks performed, overwork is becoming the rule for the ever fewer who manage to find employment at all. Which supports the idea that, past certain levels of competitiveness, work turns against the worker—either directly, as self-destructive behavior, or indirectly, as readiness to eliminate the competitor at all costs.

⁸ This account of genius is based on Heidegger’s description of the authentic Dasein in his *Being and Time*. Cf. especially Division II, Part 1: “Dasein’s Possibility of Being-A-Whole, and Being-Towards-Death.”

⁹Or the genius of Matsuo Bashō: “Don’t imitate me;/it’s as boring/as the two halves of a melon.”

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