

Worrying China

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I would like note that today is the second day of national mourning in China for the victims of the 12 May 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake.

A Gust of Wind

The viewer enters a vast studio space cloaked in darkness. In the centre of this cavern is a pile, an ill-defined mass of ruined walls, collapsed roof beams, vegetal remains, crushed furniture, scattered books, broken lights. It is the devastated husk of a large, comfortable sitting room.

Walking around this 3-D wreckage the viewer sees five single-sided screens at the back of the studio space. The screens show five views of a living room appointed with all the markers of bourgeois comfort—from a large-screen TV and cut flowers, to a capacious fish tank, a Chinese-style chair to oil paintings, a bust and photographs on the walls, and well-stocked book shelves. The screens study the room from different angles and at alternating speeds. The mesmeric images create the illusion of a living space, yet it remains a stagnant scene, one that despite the moving images conveys the impression of permanence, fixity and material certainty. But as the cameras pan, tilt, move in and seemingly caress the objects in the room, the curtains suddenly flutter, animated initially only by a teasing breeze. Gradually, the movement increases as the welling air picks up its assault, the trees shake and the curtains billow. Soon the scene of restful contentment is shattered by the insistent waves of wind from the outside world. They build into a crescendo, seen still from every angle, until the chandelier falls, sparks fly, the windows blow in, walls collapse, and the roof in tremulous fury crashes down. The place is reduced to a dusty wreck. Angry bursts of light caused by electrical faults irradiate the room in its dying moments.

A Gust of Wind (*Zhen feng*) was created by the Hangzhou artist Zhang Peili. I attended the opening of the show at the Boers-Li Gallery in the booming new art zone of Caochang Di in Beijing on 26 April. On the opening night it already felt like an overwhelming, deeply disturbing, work. This creation by one of China's most creative video artists provided a powerful meditation on the instability of the middle-class dream, and a visual essay on the fragility of our modern lives. Now, following the recent mass devastation in Sichuan province as a result of the heartbreaking Wenchuan Earthquake, Zhang's *A Gust of Wind* seems hauntingly prescient and truly horrifying.

Of course, the Wenchuan Quake did not strike the prosperous middle-class world of Eastern China, but the western hinterland, where so many people who have helped build modern China's prosperity through their labour come from. However, people throughout China have responded to the tragedy with an outpouring of sympathy, support and generosity. This profoundly human, and humane, moment in contemporary Chinese history calls for thoughtful reflection.

Being Chinese

The events of the last two months have thrown into relief a number of issues related to our understanding of China, and prompt educators to consider how to encompass the complexities of these events and to comprehend better the powerful emotions that surround them. In the following remarks I would like to reflect on these events in the context of some long-term concerns for those of us who teach and write about China, people who think about the Chinese world and are involved in multifarious ways with the Australian engagement with China and our region of the world.

The 'China' of which I speak does not just encompass the geopolitical territory defined by the People's Republic of China or its citizens, for it includes diasporic global communities as well. In fact, my colleagues and I often prefer to speak of the Sinophone world, that is the individuals and communities who use one or another—or, indeed, a number—of China-originated languages and dialects to make meaning for themselves, be it through speaking, reading, writing or engagement with various electronic media. Of course, the Chinese world incorporates many ethnicities, which have rich and vibrant languages, lineages, histories and cultures of their own. I will say more of these below. I will say also a few words about how parts of these cultural and linguistic communities have and continue in complex ways to coalesce with peoples throughout the Asia and Pacific region, and also more broadly globally—Europe, North and South America and Africa—in the process of creating other ways, or more possibilities for 'being Chinese'.

In this new millennium we are, I believe, in a new sense co-creators of the understanding of China, and the broader Chinese world. To be involved in this world brings us into engagement with one of the most exciting, challenging and transformative processes of recent time. Such an enterprise means also, I would reason, may be able to broaden the nature of whom we are, how we think and how we participate in an expansion of the range of human possibility. I would equally observe that to limit preemptorily this expansion of the possible, or to cut our cloth to fit the requirements of the present nation-state of China is, in the longer run, to do a disservice to the richness, variety and human potential of this ancient yet vibrantly modern cultural sphere.

We are in a particular moment—hyper-nationalism on a global scale, and now national mourning for tragedy on a profoundly shocking scale—has influenced, both negatively and positively, much of what has been said about China this March to May. In the last week, with the devastating Wenchuan Earthquake and the surrounding areas in southwest

China, the powerful responses generated by the March rebellions in Tibetan China and the April Olympic Torch Relay have been replaced, for the moment, by an outpouring of raw and uplifting human sympathy, as well as of practical support. In both cases, that of the rebellion and again in that of the earthquake we have seen the emergency response of the authoritarian state. We have witnessed the deployment of large numbers of troops, para-militaries, police and citizen groups, the guided response of the media which, while reporting on the events has also moulded public opinion, that ultimately extols the paternalistic state. We have also seen, however, the very human and moving face of China, that of Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier (not to mention the numerous men and women working to save, help and treat the victims of the disaster), who through real compassion and practical engagement has shown his own people—and his colleagues—as well as the world, another possibility for China, that of accessible, sympathetic and moral government. In this process, we have seen ordinary citizens reaching beyond themselves, towards their compatriots, in human solidarity.

Beyond China Proper

Teaching China today is a task that can, and should, reflect these vastly different and complex responses. As I have said in the above, the Chinese world and the Sinophone realm create meaning predominantly through the use of the Chinese language (or China-originated languages). But the world encompassed by 'China' is vast, multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-cultural. It is important to recognize that diversity, and more important for educators and commentators to be mindful of these complex realities and their historical dimensions. For that diversity has made China what it is, and promises the potential for what it can become.

But also the languages, peoples, cultures and traditions of those within the present geopolitical territory of the People's Republic have their own autonomous histories, regardless of how intertwined they may be with the politics of the Central Plains (*Zhong Yuan*) or the other northern, southern or invader dynasties of the past. Indeed, in debates among specialists during the 1990s much was made of the history of invasion dynasties in creating much of what is today regarded as Chinese, and predominantly Han-Chinese history. The Toba-Wei, the Turkic elements of the great Tang dynasty, the Khitan Liao dynasty, the Jurchen Jin, the Mongol Yuan and the Manchu Qing, are all epochs marked by complex ethnic relationships. This is not to discount the dynasties born of the Central Plains themselves. But there is important and good scholarship on the issue of China's profound diversity. One thinks, for example, of the relatively recent writings of Ho Ping-ti, Evelyn Rawski, Frederick W. Mote and Mark Elliott. And it is helpful to be aware of the 1990s' debate between Rawski and Ho regarding 'Sinicization', and how scholars of Manchu-Qing China like Mark Elliott approach the subject.

John Minford, my good friend and head of the China Centre at the ANU, and I are preparing our own study of one group of Manchu writers and bureaucrats from the early 19th century that, we hope, will contribute to an online Chinese Studies project that we are developing with colleagues at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Part of our work

is to trace the evolution of a particular cultural world of Manchu, Mongolian and Han-Chinese writers in late-dynastic China. We believe that this work, on a virtually un-researched topic, will also help others understand differently the making of modern China.

Thus, like other scholars and thinkers on China, I would suggest that stories of various regional and community identities and languages also have a significance far from being limited solely insofar as they add to or adorn mainstream contemporary Han Chineseness. These Others—be they internal Others today, or part of the inter-connected history of a broader Chinese civilization in the past—have autochthonous value and richness. It is here that teaching of multiculturalism, the debates about difference, modernity, globalization and related issues is of vital importance for those in Australia who wish to learn about the larger Chinese world.

I speak on the basis of experiences, and research and thinking, of someone who has for their whole adult life been ‘embedded’ in things Chinese. But I would emphasize that other frames of reference and cross-border, region and temporal understandings are powerfully productive of a better understanding of things Chinese in the context of our own evolving and dynamic world. Colleagues who work on South Asia, on Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, or Singapore, for example, add much to the way that we do and can see things. China is a global presence, through its history, its people, its trade, language, thought and now as a result of its economic and diplomatic reach. Disciplinary approaches provided by history, anthropology, economic, cultural and gender studies, sociology and political science, as well as environment studies, are also crucial in a more complex way to teach about China. From my own perspective, I think of the Korean historical costume drama *Dae Jung Gum* that was such a hit in China (and elsewhere) in 2005. Depicting an era of Korean history that had resonances with the revival of interest in the Ming dynasty in China, combining the beauty of the actors, imperial pomp, the lavish preparation of food, traditional medical cures and both tragedy and celebration it was part of what in Chinese is called *Han-liu*, or ‘the Korean wave’. It is through such work—TV series, YouTube videos, songs, literature, as well as a range of academic disciplines from history and literature to gender studies and economics, we can introduce students to the rich cultural cross currents of the region as well as far more.

We understand other language-realms (with all that entails) to enrich ourselves. But we also should educate so as to allow our students and our fellows to appreciate that there are truly different ways of being, and an empathy for that is what broadens the possibility of our own humanity.

Worrying China

The title of my talk today is ‘Worrying China’. It contains an obvious play on words. I indicate that ‘China’ is a worry, a worry not only for itself, for there is a large corpus of writings from the 19th century related to concerned Chinese thinking and worrying about China. But many other places also worry about China. It—more as a nation-state than

anything else perhaps—is a worry, because it elicits concern—whether for those thinking of economic growth, or environmental issues, or political and social stability, or cultural richness. It is a ‘worry’ that can easily give in to the negative, but to worry is also to express concern, a hope that things turn out for the better.

I also use the word ‘worry’ as a transitive verb, that is to work at something, to tug it this way and that, to get what one can out of something, to ‘distress’ it, that is through use and familiarity to cause wear and tear, or even a certain intimacy.

In the above I have mentioned the devastating 12 May Wenchuan Earthquake. During the days that followed we saw the Chinese media reporting on this disaster in ways that have challenged the prevailing control over information exercised by the Party’s Ministry of Propaganda. But, also the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has been highly visible. One of the most senior figures in the Chinese government raising the clarion call to his people, running to their aid, shedding real tears for a vast human tragedy and offering comfort and solace not only to those immediately affected but to a nation in shock and mourning. Wen Jiabao—or as many in Beijing affectionately called him even before the earthquake ‘Bao Bao’—has been a fascinating figure for many years. Some of you might remember his ashen face as he stood behind Zhao Ziyang in late May 1989 when Zhao went into Tiananmen Square to meet students, bidding them tearful farewell with the words ‘We have come too late...’ Despite the stigma of that event, Wen eventually rose to become premier in 2003, and he has shown a humanity of the kind that made Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang celebrated even among some of the most cynical people I know in China.

In September 2006, in a noteworthy moment, Wen Jiabao answered a question from Jane Macartney *The Times* correspondent in Beijing related to what motivated and moved him. (Her question was: ‘What book do you most like to read before you go to sleep at night, and when you put the book down which of China’s problems most often keeps you awake?’) As the other journalists at the collective interview at the Ziguang Ge in the Lake Palaces, headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council of the People’s Republic, waited to get back to the more pressing economic and political issues of the day, Wen paused and shared a moment of insight into his thinking, and emotions with Jane. In his reply he quoted (mostly) Chinese classics, expressing himself in the time-honoured tradition of a Chinese thinking person, one committed to state service and to bringing the culture of rulership into the realm of practical politics. This is a tradition in which the engaged individual ‘worries about the people and the nation’ (*you guo you min*), a tradition in which a profound sense of ‘anxiety for the nation’ (*youhuan yishi*) finds expression in engagement, politics and, one should add, just as frequently, paternalism.

As Macartney noted when Wen Jiabao answered her question:

His voice quivered when he recited a verse by the 3rd-century BC statesman Qu Yuan, regarded by many as the father of Chinese poetry. ‘Long did I sigh to hold back tears, saddened I am by the grief of my people.’¹

Faced with the quotations from a range of thinkers from the 3rd-century BC to the 20th century (Qu Yuan, Zhang Zai, Zuo Zongtang, as well as the philosopher Immanuel Kant), Jane Macartney—a friend of mine for over twenty years—called me and we discussed the men (and, yes, they were all men) that Wen Jiabao had chosen to quote, their significance in terms of an intellectual lineage and the wider cultural import of what this group of thinkers meant. I also suggested that Jane approach my colleague and collaborator Gloria Davies of Monash University, for Gloria is an expert on the subject of ‘worrying about China’, and an important book by her on that subject was published just last year.

Both Gloria and I were educated in Chinese at a time when there was an emphasis not only on the modern language of Standard or Common Chinese (*putonghua*), but also on the kinds of literary Chinese that make the extraordinary wealth of the culture accessible. It was a training that equipped us not only to appreciate the provenance, but also significance and meaning of the quotations from pre-modern texts used by the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in the present day, how traditions are brought to life and transmute to create new potentials as well as to define new limits. This is part of a cultural awareness that we are concerned to promote among our own students and as part of an undertaking that I call ‘New Sinology’.

New Sinology

We are thinking and teaching about Chinese realities that today, the complex origins of those realities, as well as Chinese possibilities for tomorrow. Just as the Anglophone world—that is the realm that started out as one on the British Isles, has become part of world culture, and have French and Spanish and Arabic, so too the Sinophone world is one of global reach and a certain universality. Its ‘hybridity’ adds to lives, thinking, feelings and possibility wherever it reaches. I believe that we, and more importantly, those who are being and will be educated now, will be co-creators in this process.

In the academic context of research, education and outreach activities, I have spoken of this effort as part of ‘New Sinology’. This is an expression I chose in 2005 when I founded with a colleague the China Heritage Project at The ANU. Simply, put, and to quote my initial essay on the subject, New Sinology is

¹ Jane Macartney, ‘How books and learning reveal mind of a man who will shape future’, 6 September 2006, *The Times*, online at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article629275.ece>. For the full text of Wen’s interview, see <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article628778.ece>. On ‘worrying about China’ in the 1980s, and before, see also Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin, eds, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices* (New York, 1992), pp.138-70, esp. p.170.

descriptive of a robust engagement with contemporary China and indeed with the Sinophone world in all of its complexity, be it local, regional or global. It affirms a conversation and intermingling that also emphasizes strong scholastic underpinnings in both the classical and modern Chinese language and studies, at the same time as encouraging an ecumenical attitude in relation to a rich variety of approaches and disciplines, whether they be mainly empirical or more theoretically inflected....

It is an approach

that recognizes an academic and human relationship with a vital and voluble Sinophone world that is not just about the People's Republic, or Taiwan, or Chinese diasporas. It bespeaks an involvement that is part of the intellectual, academic, cultural and personal conversations in which many of us are engaged, not merely as Australians, but as individuals, regardless of our background, individuals who are energetically and often boisterously interconnected with one of the great, complex and lively geo-cultural spheres of the world.²

A New Sinology, or a more profound and humanly rich engagement with China and the Chinese world, is not a study of an exotic, or increasingly familiar Other. It is part of study and an attempt to realize a shared humanity in all of its contradictory, unsettling as well as inspiring, complexity. It is a study, an engagement, an internalization that enriches the possibilities of our own humanity.

In that essay I also spoke of our critical engagement being

with a language and a culture that has already altered our Anglophone habits of mind: an 'Other' that haunts us from within, in the sense of a common humanity that Pierre Ryckmans evocatively affirmed, using the phrase 'we are all Chinese'; or which Benjamin I. Schwartz spoke of as part of the enterprise to 'bring the experience of the entire human race to bear on our common concerns.' [For more on New Sinology see 'Further Reading' below.]

Nor is this merely an engagement in one direction. For to talk of some divide, some chasm that has to be bridged or crossed, is to accept too easily the belief that difference predominantly creates barriers and distances. I would suggest, for example, that we should remember that the architect Liang Sicheng—son of one of China's great reformist thinkers Liang Qichao—was involved in the designing of the UN headquarters in New York. And, we should be mindful of the fact that P.C. Chang (Zhang Pengchun, playwright, philosopher and diplomat) joined with Eleanor Roosevelt, as a vice-chairman of the committee that helped frame the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the late 1940s.³

² <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/pah/chinaheritageproject/newsinology/>

³ Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Knopf, 2000). Roosevelt wrote in her memoirs: 'Dr. Chang was a pluralist and held forth in charming fashion on the proposition that there is more than one kind of ultimate reality.'

Young people—no matter what ethnic or multi ethnic background—are and will be part of this extraordinary new era of human engagement. I would point out that many Australian-born Chinese are, while pursuing various careers or studies, also interested in learning more about the Chinese world from which they come. Similarly, many students from the People's Republic, Hong Kong, Taiwan, or ethnically Chinese students from the region, study China-related subjects at tertiary institutions. Co-creating China for them, and for students of other backgrounds, is part of what should and will be possible. Writing, thinking and creating in Chinese, not as merely passive receptors, not just to be told *ad nauseum* what 'We Chinese' think, is part of the way that a developing enmeshment with the Chinese world is already unfolding for many young people. We have already seen such an evolution and interaction throughout South-East Asia, where Chinese languages, cultures and communities descended from various provincial or local Chinese areas, religions and thinking systems have been part of the fabric of diverse societies for many years. We have seen too how what I have called the 'Kong-Tai Ark' (see my *In the Red*)—that is the world of Hong Kong and Taiwan not dominated by the Communist Party from the 1940s, played a crucial role in China's mainland reinvention of itself from the late 1970s. We have also seen the waves of cultural fashion, imbricated with economic exchange with Korea and Japan have contributed to the richness of modern Chinese identities.

English as a global language used in every sphere of human activity has been transformed and immeasurably enriched by its users. So too will the Sinophone world be enriched and enhanced by the growing communities of users of Chinese who learn, use and creatively engage with the living Sinitic legacy. Speaking, using, writing Chinese, imagining through Chinese, creating with Chinese—these are all acts that enrich not only those who live in Chinese but those who grow through Chinese.

Young people from countries throughout the world have gone to China in recent years lured by the economic boom and employment opportunities, or just by the desire to see what is happening in a place that has been the talk of the world. Many I have encountered have found employment in big cities, or teaching, or in entertainment, or in a host of other professions, venerable or more hoary origins. Indeed, it has been the fashion these last few years for Chinese firms to employ a foreigner or two who can speak Chinese to make PowerPoint presentations at meetings with new business partners, or for the adornment of negotiations, or even on rent-a-dates for social occasions with business people. (This is a practice familiar to many from earlier days in Hong Kong and Taiwan.) One of my former young scholars, for example, apart from an exciting life as a writer and events manager, has also been employed on occasion by high-level officers in the People's Liberation Navy in one of China's port cities to attend meetings with gruff, but

The Declaration, he said, should reflect more than simply Western ideas and Dr. Humphrey would have to be eclectic in his approach. His remark, though addressed to Dr. Humphrey, was really directed at Dr. Malik, from whom it drew a prompt retort as he expounded at some length the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. Dr. Humphrey joined enthusiastically in the discussion, and I remember that at one point Dr. Chang suggested that the Secretariat might well spend a few months studying the fundamentals of Confucianism!

straight-down-to-business merchants from Russia. He was there to add a certain foreign street-cred to what seem to be shady deals, to read the occasional document, and to be present for business dinners and the inevitable night clubbing, including karaoke. When I speak of the creative engagement with the evolution of the Sinophone world, I do not just mean that foreigners will be a trendy accessory or a useful tool.

What's Possible

Last month, I was invited to give a keynote address at a workshop in Shanghai funded by the Zendai Museum of Modern Art. The theme of that workshop was 'What's Possible?' In my comments, I made a fairly abstract statement to the effect that:

'What's Possible?' is reliant upon what has been possible, on what potential existed for past possibilities to become what is present reality. What has been possible reveals how the potentialities of the past have been realized and form the contingencies for 'that which has not yet come' (*weilai*).

What is possible depends what has been possible and probable. It also depends on what as a society, as a place that educates, elucidates and fires the imagination of people—whether they be students, the broader public, specialists, hardened journalists or people in government.

I would suggest that if as a nation our education and public thought is directed to what's profitable, or to increased productivity and the working family alone, then we are setting our sights no higher, or making our national vision no broader than that of a regime that is concerned with economic growth as a way of staving off radical social, political and cultural change. If we are in a lockstep with policies that address only the lowest economic desire for prosperity and accumulation we are squandering the years of boom in terms of national potential, and what is truly possible.

In 2003, at the time of the celebration of the 30th anniversary of Sino-Australian diplomatic normalization I was invited by Professor Stephen FitzGerald, the first Australian ambassador to the People's Republic of China, head of the department in which I now work and the founder of the Asia-Australia Institute at the University of New South Wales, to participate in a symposium on relations with China.

In my comments on that occasion—one that came past the mid way of the long decade of Liberal Coalition rule in Australia, I observed that:

In many ways, for Australia I hope that our past will tell us more about the way ahead than our present.

For China capitalism and the fickle rule of the market is a contemporary reality and a seemingly unavoidable future. It was a future that, in the heyday of Maoist socialism, everyone thought had been resolutely relegated to the past. Now what

was once the past—the future was the promise of a utopian communist world—has become the vision for everyone’s future.

Meanwhile, I hope that in our own future we will not be subjected to the endless repetition of the tired rationalizations of the present. I hope for a future that moves us beyond our present predicament, one in which we may gain a measure of our seemingly irredeemable past, a past in which vision and humanity, as well as a certain cultural humility, made a better future seem both desirable and possible.

[These remarks were included in my address to the 50th Anniversary Conference of the Oriental Society of Australia entitled ‘Shared Values: a Sino-Australian Conundrum’ on 5 December 2006 and subsequently published.]

We have a new political leadership. We have already witnessed moments of hope and inspiration such as the Kevin Rudd’s Sorry Speech at Parliament House in Canberra on 13 February, or indeed his address to Chinese university students at Peking University on 9 April this year in which he framed his comments, some critical (including the issue of human rights abuses in Tibet), in the context of a long-term, profound and mutually involved relationship with China. If we are to build on what is spoken of as a friendship, it will be one that avoids the pitfalls that have so often hampered a mature, thoughtful and principled relationship.

As I observed when analyzing the Prime Minister’s speech a few days after he delivered it, and speaking in relation to his use of the term ‘*zhengyou*’ 诤友:

To be a friend of China, the Chinese people, the party-state or, in the reform period, even a mainland business partner, the foreigner is often expected to stomach unpalatable situations, and keep silent in the face of egregious behaviour. A friend of China might enjoy the privilege of offering the occasional word of caution in private; in the public arena he or she is expected to have the good sense and courtesy to be ‘objective’, that is to toe the line, whatever that happens to be. The concept of ‘friendship’ thus degenerates into little more than an effective tool for emotional blackmail and enforced complicity.

Rudd's tactic was to deftly sidestep the vice-like embrace of that model of friendship by substituting another [that of the *zhengyou*]. ‘A strong relationship, and a true friendship,’ he told the students, ‘are built on the ability to engage in a direct, frank and ongoing dialogue about our fundamental interests and future vision.’

These words were aimed at a Chinese audience, but I believe they speak to those of us who would be training those who will be part of that future vision.

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