

Introduction

One merely feels she is there, a tremendous existence somewhat too big for the human mind to encompass, a seemingly inconsequential chaos obeying its own laws of existence ...

Lin Yutang

In the years when my intellectual hunger seemed insatiable, I read many books on philosophy: General introductions like *The History of Philosophy* by Hans Joachim Störig, but also the works of the great thinkers themselves. My favourite philosopher was Friedrich Nietzsche. His poetic way of writing, and surprising use of metaphors, made his thinking more accessible than the often elaborately-phrased thoughts of Kant and Hegel. In Nietzsche's writing, fiction and philosophy seemed to merge effortlessly. Growing older, I am less susceptible to the charms of the 'Philosopher with the Hammer', but one of his observations has guided me through the years: 'It (i.e. philosophy) always creates the world in its own image; it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical impulse itself... In the philosopher, on the contrary, there is absolutely nothing impersonal; and above all, his morality furnishes a decided and decisive testimony as to WHO HE IS...'¹

What are my 'images' of China? Which 'morality' has shaped those images? For ten years I have studied sinology at Leiden University. I have been a China expert at the ministry of Economic Affairs, and from 1985 I lived for twenty years in Beijing: First as a banker, then as a businessman. I have travelled through all the provinces and autonomous regions of this continental state; I slept in creaky tents, dirty guesthouses and five-star hotels. I have climbed the huge mountains of Tibet and swam in the Li river, which shaped the surreal Karst mountains of Southern China which have inspired countless Chinese painters. Observing carefully, I have experienced China to the bone, but as a Sinologist I have also tried to make intellectual sense of what I saw. I read hundreds of books and thousands of articles; yet never reached the point that I fully came to understand the shapeless mass of what is being called 'China'. By studying sinology, I have been put on a road of discovery that knows no end.

This short summary of my resumé is not meant to convince the reader that this book is 'authoritative' – but to clarify where I come from and which experiences have shaped my images of China. It is harder to define the 'morality' which has processed

these images into ideas and convictions. I believe that nothing is impossible, but I am also conscious of human fallibility. Romanticism and realism have (I suspect) ‘tyrannically’ shaped my Chinese world.

The romantic impulse already manifested itself at a tender age. Hendrik Bos, the neighbour of my parents, was a sinologist who as an interpreter and diplomat had been living in China before the Second World War. I have no memories of Hendrik (he died when I was two years old), but I do remember the things that he had left behind: Rooms filled with blue-white porcelain vases and long scrolls depicting bamboo sheds reduced to insignificant dots against the background of magnificent, misty mountain ranges. From then on it dawned on me that one day I must make my own journey to the east, and see these magical lands with my own eyes.

When studying sinology, I came to realize that the ‘China’ I had been dreaming of as a child did not bear any resemblance to the China that had been created by the Communist Party after 1949. Mao was still alive, and the country was in a state of disruption owing to the ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution’ that the Great Helmsman had launched in 1966. Many western intellectuals believed that Mao had created a better and happier society than ours. I was sceptical. I felt a profound resistance to the bombastic slogans predicting the inevitable victory of the proletariat, the propaganda posters depicting happy peasants collecting bumper harvests year after year. Truly revolutionary books such as *Chinese Shadows* by Simon Leys, and Fox Butterfield’s *Alive in the Bitter Sea*, confirmed that Mao had created a hell rather than a heaven on earth. When Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978, this was admitted in China as well – albeit using different wording, because the Cultural Revolution that had destroyed millions of lives was being dismissed as a ‘mistake’ attributable to the ‘Gang of Four’, the clique headed by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing that had supposedly misled the Great Helmsman.

The position of the Communist Party itself could not be questioned. That became manifestly clear in the spring of 1989, when the mass demonstrations held in Tiananmen Square were crushed with excessive violence. I was working at the time for the AMRO Bank in Beijing, and saw with my own eyes how the dramatic events unfolded. That was perhaps my most defining China experience: The sight of millions of people who had for weeks called on their government for a more humane society, only to be suppressed when the tanks of the People’s Liberation Army violently cleared the Square of Heavenly Peace. The memories of that Beijing spring² have been carved in my mind forever: The thrill of a new dawn that filled the air, the feelings of desperation and disgust when the Party started shooting at its own people.

Cultural Revolution

The *Wuchan Jieji Wenhua Dageming* ('Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution', better known as the 'Cultural Revolution') was launched by Mao Zedong in May 1966. Its purpose was 'to destroy the old and create the new'. Temples, monasteries and city walls were destroyed all over the country. Opera, theatre, music, sculptures, dance, film, poetry and literature were also targeted, because many of these artistic expressions were regarded as 'feudal' and 'immoral'. The class struggle against the representatives of the old order – teachers, musicians, factory directors and high officials – killed or mutilated millions of people. Behind the ideological façade of 'attacking the old', almost all of the Party's leading officials were purged: In Mao's view, these people were guilty of 'revisionism' and 'bourgeois thinking'. In 1969 the worst excesses had ended; but only with the arrest of the Gang of Four, following Mao's death in September 1976, did the Cultural Revolution officially come to an end.

'Patriotic Education'

The importance of 4 June 1989 was truly monumental. It showed that great political movements seem to come out of nowhere, and are (as the Chinese saying goes) like 'sparks turning into a prairie fire'. It almost meant the end of the Party's grip on power, so once that threat had disappeared its policies were all the more surprising. Almost all the China experts in the West (genuine or self-proclaimed) were convinced that Beijing's gerontocrats would close the door to the West – just as Leonid Brezhnev had done in 1964 after his coup d'état – but the opposite happened. Deng Xiaoping, the 'Supreme Leader' nearing ninety years old, launched a vigorous renewal of the 'Open Door' policy which put the country on a two-track approach: Support for economic reforms, while suppressing calls for political reforms. This policy of 'one-legged development' resulted in an unprecedented economic boom that transformed China within 25 years from an impoverished agricultural giant into a high-tech superstate that has become a crucial player in the world economy.

But the Party felt that more was needed than creating economic prosperity. A new ideological base had to be found to re-affirm its right to rule. The sight of hundreds of thousands of young people singing and dancing in Tiananmen Square was felt to be deeply unsettling. How was it possible that the protest movement's leaders were trained at China's top schools such as Peking University and Qinghua University? How could China's future leaders have had the audacity to erect the 'Goddess of Liberty' on Tiananmen Square – symbol of power of the communist state? The Party was unequivocal in its conclusion. Its work had fallen short in one of the key areas

supporting communist power: Propaganda. With this grave omission, the time had come to launch a major counter-attack, positing the Party as saviour of the nation and symbol of patriotic fervour. Its major tool was the Patriotic Education Campaign, which set out to rewrite the country's history textbooks.³ The so-called Century of Humiliation (1839–1949) – when foreign imperialist powers colluded to dismember the old empire – received a disproportionate (given the length of Chinese history) amount of attention. Chinese children were henceforward being taught that only thanks to the Party had this imperialist aggression been brought to an end, and that only thanks to the Party had the creation of a 'New China' been made possible.

Takeover of the South China Sea

In 2012 the Chinese navy took possession of the Johnson South Reef in the South China Sea by lifting millions of cubic meters of sand from the ocean floor, and turning the virgin reef into an artificial island that could be used for docking ships and landing planes. No violence was used (not against humans, at least), no people displaced, and no international protest was submitted. The necessary ingredients for 'breaking news' were absent and so no attention was paid to it by the western media. In the Spratly Archipelago alone, China has since then built seven artificial islands and militarized them.⁴ Beijing's barely concealed aim is to transform the entire South China Sea into a Chinese lake – an area that is five times the size of France, rich in oil and gas, and whose waters act as a highway over which more than a third of the world's trade is being shipped. Littoral states such as Vietnam and the Philippines, who also have territorial claims to (some of) the islands in the South China Sea, have been protesting against their huge neighbour's policy of land reclamation for years. Former president Aquino of the Philippines even compared Beijing's actions in the South China Sea with Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938.⁵ Brushing off these criticisms, China is taking possession of existing islands and creating new ones – thus making it clear who is the regional boss, and preparing itself for what many strategic thinkers in China see as inevitable: A military clash with the United States.

Seen from an ideological perspective, Beijing's actions are harder to explain: No country in the world proclaims as loudly as China that non-interference in the affairs of other countries is one of the basic norms that govern relations between states, and that disputes must always be solved peacefully. Even more, Beijing uses this argument as a defensive weapon against Western thinking that in certain situations the international community has the right, even the duty, to violate the sovereignty of other states – when, for instance, that state has committed genocide or other crimes against humanity. According to Beijing, intervention in other countries is always forbidden.

Foundations of Nationalism

Why does Beijing in the South China Sea violate its own core principle of non-intervention? Political opportunism is one of the reasons. To stay in power, the Party needs a rallying cry to unite the people behind its banner. 'Preserving the territorial integrity of the motherland' has in the early twenty-first century become a key mission that justifies the Party's right to rule China. But there are other reasons as well, drawn from deeper sources than the daily-felt need to keep the party in power.

The People's Republic of China has not yet turned seventy – no more than a fleeting moment in the endless stream of Chinese history. When Mao Zedong ruled (1949–1976), China's pre-modern history was seen as a dark period of feudalism and oppression that, according to the laws of historical determinism, only served as a kind of preliminary phase for the more developed eras of capitalism and socialism. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, ideology no longer restricts Beijing's historical thinking: The imperial era is now seen as a glorious time when China reigned supreme, and the foreign barbarians humbly acknowledged Beijing's supremacy. Inspired by a same sense of pride, President Xi Jinping frequently talks about the 'Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation', but what makes present-day nationalism complex and at times difficult to read is that other source of historical consciousness: The Century of Humiliation. China is not only proud of its magnificent historical achievements; it is also brittle and prone to fits of bad temper when sensitive issues (such as its historical relations with Britain or Japan) are brought up.

With these observations I touch upon some key questions that this book seeks to answer: What feeds Chinese nationalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and what are its most important manifestations? And even more important: How serious is the threat it poses for peace and security in East Asia and the rest of the world? To give a brief answer to that last question: Extremely serious. Beijing's assertiveness in the South and East China Seas has led to structural tensions with Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam. For their defence, these first two countries are leaning more and more on the United States, and even Vietnam is intensifying the military relationship with its former adversary. This increases the risk that a local conflict will turn into a global war – even more so because Washington will not sit idly by and let its major geo-political rival take over sea routes vital to world trade. The two major powers communicate through various channels on economic, political and military matters, but that does not necessarily lead to an increase in trust. On the contrary: Mistrust seems to be the name of the game. Perhaps this is inevitable. Writing in the fifth century BCE on the conflict between Athens and Sparta, the Greek historian Thucydides already claimed that war between an upcoming and existing power cannot be avoided. In the case of the United States and China, this risk seems

even greater because their different political systems result in a fundamental lack of trust. Mistrust runs deepest on the Chinese side: Beijing is convinced that Washington is secretly plotting to change China's political system.

The End of History?

Can the two major powers escape Thucydides' historical determinism? Are they 'free' to avoid a major conflict? Clear-cut predictions on how China will behave are usually off the mark, but I am convinced that there is less risk of conflict if Beijing were to choose a different system than 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Will this happen? In his essay 'The End of History and the Last Man', political historian Francis Fukuyama argues that the global victory of political and economic liberalism is inevitable. Fukuyama made his prediction, significantly, in 1989 – the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall. 'What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: That is, the end point of man's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government'.⁶ Fukuyama leans heavily on the German philosopher Hegel, who saw history being propelled forward by a kind of universal 'Mind' that manifests itself through great individuals in the realms of religion, art, culture, politics and philosophy, and has one overriding aim: The establishment of a free and equal society where reason reigns. Hegel's dialectical world view inspired Karl Marx, although the founder of communism did not see the 'Mind', but rather the materialistic relations between classes as moving history forward.⁷ In the end, Marx predicted, history will be completed by the establishment of the classless society. As to China: Who will be the true, and who will be the false prophet? Hegel or Marx?

Almost 30 years after *The End of History* was published, China's cities have unmistakably become part of the globalized world that Fukuyama saw coming into being. Shanghai is not only an integral part of the new globalized economy; it leads the way. In the city's countless coffee shops, latte-sipping youngsters are continuously online. The concentration of software and design start-ups is higher than in any other city in China. A CNN travel documentary has difficulty in limiting the reasons why Shanghai is 'the best city in the world' to only fifty attractions. From its rich historical legacy, its bars and entertainment to its magnetic bullet train which connects the city with the airport: The buzz and excitement can be felt everywhere.⁸ Shanghai has always been a pioneer in China's modernization drive, but in the early twenty-first century the whole country has rejected the pallid uniformity that characterized Maoist China. At the Berlin Film Festival of 2014, the film *Black Coal, Thin Ice* won the prestigious Black Bear Award. Painters like Zhang Xiaogang sell their

works for millions of dollars, and the 2008 opening ceremony of the Olympic Games dazzled the world through its extravagance and creativity. China's participation in the global world of 'leisure and lifestyle', however, does not mean that its government allows a convergence with Western political culture as well. On the contrary: The Party's resistance to Western thought in general is becoming stronger. The Chinese citizen can choose what he wants to wear or what music he wants to hear, but does not have a say in which leaders govern him. This clashes fundamentally with the western idea of the 'consent of the governed' – an idea that was originally crafted by the English philosophers Hume and Locke, and adopted by America's Founding Fathers as one of the core principles in the Declaration of Independence: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the *consent of the governed*.'⁹ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, elevates sovereignty of the people to an international norm and links it to democratic elections: 'The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.'¹⁰

China signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (though it did not ratify the latter), but that does not mean that ideas on individual freedom and representative government are deeply rooted in the Chinese mind. The resistance to these typical 'western' ideas is not only fed by Party propaganda; also among Chinese intellectuals there is a deeply felt reluctance to accept western political thought as universal. Rather instinctively, many of the country's leading intellectuals feel that China's sophisticated philosophical tradition is too old, too unique and too superior to fit into western models of thought. As the prominent intellectual Gan Yang phrases it: 'China's very existence creates a problem for Western accounts of world history. The Bible didn't say anything about China. Hegel saw world history starting with primitive China and ending in a crescendo of perfection with German civilization. Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis simply replaces Germany with America. But suddenly the West has discovered that in the East there is this China: A large empire, with a long history and glorious past. A whole new world has emerged.'¹¹

It is more difficult to gauge the political views of the Old Hundred Names (the people) – the last time that free elections were held in China was in 1912. This has given rise to the somewhat condescending view (often heard in the West) that 'the Chinese' are not interested in politics, and are only interested in making money. I strongly disagree. When in the spring of 1989 the shackles of authoritarian rule were temporarily removed, people from all walks of life expressed their political views with

great detail and nuance. I will never forget the old man who grabbed my hand and said with tears in his eyes ‘Two hundred years ago you had the French Revolution in the West; now it is our turn!’ Just as we do, Chinese people value ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ – no matter how different their cultural and historical background may be. The many years that I lived in China have, however, also left a less hopeful impression: It is not man (to quote the Greek philosopher Protagoras), but the Chinese man who is the measure of all things. Hence the saying *hua yi zhi bian* – there is a difference between China and the barbarians. This generally-held view provides the Party with a fertile ground for planting its seeds of nationalism. A Chinese friend of mine once praised in exalted terms the glories of the Song dynasty (960–1279). I suggested that Europe’s contribution to world civilisation had at that time also been substantial, witnessed by the many magnificent cathedrals built in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. He did not believe me: ‘in those days you people were still going around in bear skins!’

A New Model?

Can the Party continue to limit the freedom of its citizens? Many western politicians and intellectuals believe that is impossible. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is typical in this conviction. When asked in 2011 about Beijing’s defensive reaction to the Arab Spring, she said: ‘They’re worried, and they are trying to stop history, which is a fool’s errand. They cannot do it. But they’re going to hold it off as long as possible.’¹²

This statement articulates America’s long-held conviction that the global march towards liberty is irresistible and that the ‘manifest destiny’ of the United States lies in spreading the gospel of freedom. Fukuyama’s claim that ‘The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism’¹³ is treated in Beijing with derision and condescension. In 2011, twenty years after the demise of the Soviet Union, *The People’s Daily* crowed that China’s economic success showed that Fukuyama’s thesis of the ‘end of history’ was nothing more than an illusion created by the West. Why did the Soviet Union fall apart while China stayed strong and united? ‘Because Moscow was not capable of carrying out genuine economic reforms.’¹⁴

This is a telling statement: The Party thinks it can not only escape from the tide of history, it can even write history by creating a model that is more successful than the Western one, and that can serve as an example to those countries who are fed up with the West taking the high moral ground. Seen from that perspective, the bloody crackdown of 4 June 1989 on the demonstrators on Tiananmen Square was not the final convulsion of a doomed regime, but the violent birth of a new order which

Harvard professor Larry Summers calls 'authoritarian mercantilism': Export-driven growth, state-guided capitalism, nationalistic and anti-democratic.¹⁵ Through a combination of economic reforms, sophisticated repression and ideological flexibility, the Party has up to now managed to escape the fate of its sister party in the Soviet Union. Can she keep it up? And if not, which system will replace 'authoritarian mercantilism'? Will Fukuyama's economic and political liberalism indeed prove to be invincible? Or will we see something of a 'third way' taking shape, the creation of a system that is more receptive to the voice of the people, but also draws its inspiration from Confucianism – China's dominant ideology before the empire fell in 1911? These are the second set of questions being raised in this book, although I must immediately add that 'big questions' can seldom be met with 'big answers'. Certainly not if the subject of our inquiry concerns China – a country (as every Chinese intellectual is fond of reminding his Western counterpart) which is actually too big and too complex to comprehend. Books such as *The Coming Collapse of China* or *When China Rules the World* unfortunately confirm what the simplicity of their titles suggest: A one-sided explanation of a country that Lin Yutang calls a 'tremendous existence somewhat too big for the human mind to encompass'.¹⁶ The good thing about asking big questions, however, is that it forces us to look at developments which tend to disappear from view through the daily stream of news on natural disasters, political turmoil and terrorism. Giving clear-cut answers on what will happen is pretentious at best, but we can try to make an educated guess on a possible direction.

To encourage the reader to continue reading: The chance that China will follow the 'third way' is by far the biggest possibility. The repressive one-party state is doomed because it is not equipped to solve the endemic corruption that has pervaded it; the introduction on the other hand of a western-style parliamentary democracy is also unlikely: On top of feelings of cultural exceptionalism, China simply does not have the institutional framework to make democracy a success. Certainly not in the short term. Chaos would likely rule.

As a consequence of this probable domestic development, I expect China's foreign policy to follow the 'third way' as well. Beijing will reassert its 'natural' position in East, Central and South-East Asia. It is already doing this now, but the legitimacy of the new regime will depend first of all on clean and effective domestic government, not on seeking confrontation abroad. Old Confucian virtues such as the *Zhong Yong* (moderation, seeking the middle ground) will prevail once more, and, just like in the imperial days, the barbarians will feel compelled to pay their respects to the emperor in Beijing – not because they are forced to, but by the irresistible pull of Chinese civilisation. Tu Weiming, a famous professor of Chinese philosophy at the university of Harvard, sees modern China as a battlefield of three 'ism's: Socialism, Liberalism and Confucianism.¹⁷ I think he is right. The China that we now see coming into

being is a complex cocktail of ideologies and ideas to which various ingredients have been, and still are being, added. But in the end, I expect the heavy, time-tested taste of Confucianism to prevail. In his book *The Clash of Civilisations*, Samuel Huntington, Fukuyama's great intellectual opponent, predicts more or less the same: China's course in the twenty-first century will be set by the rediscovery of its own civilisation, not by western ideas on liberalism and socialism.¹⁸

The Past Determines the Present

George Orwell's 1984 is forbidden in China, but the communist regime has meticulously put one of its maxims into practice: 'Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.' History is an important tool for the Party to legitimize her hold on power: Only *she* has been able to liberate China from its domestic and foreign oppressors, without *her* there would have been no modern China, and only the Party can restore the country's territorial integrity by recovering the lands that were lost at the end of the imperial age. To truly understand what motivates the Chinese leadership and intellectuals, one has to look back – to the long history of supremacy, but also to the Century of Humiliation (1839–1949). History therefore makes up an important part of this book – not by summing up the dry facts, but by analysing several big ideas and major events which are the reference point of China's elite when looking at the past. Unavoidably, the use of these facts to frame the present will also be described in this book. 'Who controls the past...'

The Party's obsession with the past, however, cannot be explained only by its wish to stay in power or the chauvinistic feelings it harbours on the glories of the empire. It also has to do with the perception of time. From the dawn of Chinese history, time has been perceived to move in circles, not in a linear direction like in the West. The eternal interaction between Yin, Yang and the Wuxing – the five elements of fire, water, wood, metal and earth that feed and destroy each other – does not only drive nature forward, but also the human world. Individuals, families and kingdoms rise and fall in an endless line of unbroken, natural rhythms. There is no narrative of creation, no founding myth that explains why man exists or where he comes from. The Western calendar era begins with the birth of Christ, while in the Islamic world time is set into motion by Mohammed's flight from Mecca to Medina. To the Chinese, these are strange stories. Time, after all, knows no beginning. With the accession of each new dynasty, time simply starts anew – just like spring replaces winter.

The notion that time and dynasties always repeat themselves entails certain risk for the historical profession, because the presented facts can easily be read as a mirror of the present. In 1965 the historian Wu Han wrote the play *Hai Rui Baguan* ('Hai Rui is dismissed from office'). It tells the story of the virtuous sixteenth century official Hai

Rui, who had the courage to criticize the emperor for his mistakes. After first having praised the play, Mao Zedong later read in it an implicit attack on his own rule. Wu Han was arrested and died in prison in 1969.¹⁹

Dynasties must fall, but each imperial family will still try to extend its rule as long as possible. The regime that now rules China is no exception; but unlike its predecessors, the Party is guided by Marxism, an ideology that predicts progress leading towards perfection, not decay. Karl Marx saw time as a sequence of historical phases which lead to the final phase of the classless society. History is then fulfilled, and time completed. Is the end of history nigh in China? At the 19th Party Congress of October 2017 Xi Jinping predicted that ‘a new era’ is at hand – albeit not the end of history. By the middle of the century China will be ‘prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful’. And yes, socialist as well, but Xi did not mention the classless society that according to Marxist futurology is the key characteristic of a truly ‘socialist’ society. In fact, nobody in China believes in the communist ideal anymore. Marx and Mao are still revered in name, but behind the façade of their outdated thought a grand ideological reorientation is taking place. A key element of the new narrative is that the Party (in spite of all its ideological twists and turns) is a ‘necessary’ historical movement that represents the fundamental interests of the people and protects the essence of Chinese culture. A Party that is capable of fulfilling the mission of the ‘Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’ by being non-corrupt and providing excellence of governance.

In the West we are justifiably concerned about Chinese nationalism and its side-effect of rapid militarization; but the true challenge lies in China’s domestic project: If the world’s second economy delivers higher growth and is more successful in solving environmental and social problems, then the ‘China Model’ would receive an even greater acceptance than it already does now. Not only by dictators in Africa and the Middle East, but also by many in the West who believe that democracy is a broken system, incapable of taking major and necessary decisions.* The risk of a conflict between the United States and China then also increases, because the Peloponnesian War that Thucydides wrote about was more than a battle of hard power: It was also a battle of ideas – between the democracy of Athens and the oligarchy of Sparta. After winning a few initial victories, Athens lost the war: The citizens of that city state were not united and determined enough to fight for their freedom. Sparta won the war, and Athens’ democracy perished.

* The Party has always been reluctant to present China as an example for other countries, but during the 19th Party Congress of October 2017, Xi Jinping called China’s socialist model ‘a new option for countries who want to accelerate their development while preserving their independence’.²⁰

The Great Harmony

China and the United States are both nuclear powers with large conventional armed forces. A war between these two would be a disaster of apocalyptic proportions. I don't think it will happen. Wishful thinking may guide my optimism, but there is a more rational reason as well: The perfection of autocracy that Xi Jinping is now engaged in cannot succeed. In the 'new China' that will arise after Leninism has failed, the voice of the people will carry more weight. Legitimacy will be derived from a cleaner environment, less inequality and better health care – not from protecting China's 'territorial integrity'. Nationalism will no longer determine foreign policy to the extent that it does now, thus substantially lessening the risk of an armed confrontation with the United States. This does not mean that China will (or should) disregard its own cultural and philosophical heritage. That is also not desirable, as one of China's finest minds in the early twentieth century, the reformist writer Liang Qichao, noted: 'What is our duty? It is to develop our civilisation with that of the West and to supplement Western civilisation with ours so as to synthesize and transform them to make a new civilisation.'²¹ This journey already started, certainly in intellectual circles. Chinese thinkers are coming up with original and valuable ideas on finding a new balance between freedom, solidarity and responsibility for the wellbeing of nature. This is not only important for China, but also for the world at large. Perhaps, through China's contribution, we will even see the dawn of a new order that will signify the end of history. Not Fukuyama's liberal world order, and certainly not Xi Jinping's 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Age' – but rather the World of the Great Harmony that was described more than two thousand years ago in the *Book of Rites*, and which is being given a new meaning by philosophers such as Tu Weiming. At the end of this book I share some thoughts with the reader of how this 'Chinese Dream' could look like.

A Realistic Check on my Romantic Vision

Some thirty years have passed since the spring of 1989, when millions of people called for freedom and a representative government. Especially under the rule of Xi Jinping (since 2012), China has moved in the opposite direction: Scores of activists have been jailed, meaningful policy debate in the top of the Party has been replaced by stultifying declarations of loyalty to the Great Leader, and the Party has retaken control of all levels of society – be it companies, religious organizations, local government, schools, universities or the army. As Xi Jinping succinctly phrases it: 'Government, the military, society and schools, north, south, east and west – the party leads them all.'²²

The liberal intellectuals in China I spoke to are divided on how to read these developments. Some point out that the Party leadership is actually more divided than it appears to be, and that changes to the present hard-line policies are bound to be made. Their optimism is also based on the wisdom of that old Taoist maxim *wu ji bi fan* – when things get too extreme, a reaction must follow. Others are less hopeful. They are astonished to see that forty years after Deng Xiaoping launched the ‘Open Door’ policy, that same door is (mentally at least) being closed again. The abovementioned Liang Qichao remarked that as long as the Chinese only care about themselves and their family, and not as citizens take responsibility for the affairs of state, then tyranny would have a good chance of prevailing: ‘As the government seeks repeatedly to eradicate opposition, the resistance gets steadily weaker, more despondent, and melts away until eventually the rigorous and intoxicating consciousness of rights comes increasingly under control and is increasingly diluted, to the point that any hope of its restoration is lost and the people come to accept repression.’²³

As in the early twentieth century, China is once again at a crossroads. But this time, its political choices not only affects the wellbeing, peace and stability of the country itself, but also that of the world at large.

History

In China the past always serves the present. When establishing a new dynasty, the emperor immediately instructed his historians to write the history of its predecessor. Without exception the former rulers were always portrayed as morally depraved – thus giving justification to the new, virtuous dynasty to take over the reins of the realm. The People’s Republic of China presents itself as the ‘New China’ that has left the corruption and chaos of the Republic of China (1911–1949) behind it, and has opened a new shining chapter in the nation’s history. Devastating events such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which were directed by the state and cost millions of Chinese their lives, do not fit into the narrative of the virtuous renewal that the new regime has supposedly brought about. They are therefore retold to fit into the Party line, or put away as ‘mistakes’.