Eastern intelligence

As the global influence of Asia's largest superpower grows, so does the importance of understanding the history of Chinese thinking

BY ROEL STERCKX

During a recent outreach visit at a secondary school in England, I showed a group of 15-year-olds a picture of the Gate of Heavenly Peace that leads to the entrance of the Forbidden City in Beijing. Above the portal of this gate, hangs one of the most widely circulated portrait images of Mao Zedong. Flanked by two placards saying 'Long Live the People's Republic of China' and 'Long Live the Great Unity of the World's People', the Great Helmsman stares serenely across Tiananmen Square.

I asked the students if they recognised the scene or the gentleman perchign above the entrance. For some, the upturned roof eaves and red lanterns gave the game away. "It has an Asian feel to it," one observed, "perhaps somewhere in China or Japan". A handful among my audience spotted that it was the Forbidden City — one had been there recently — but only three identified Mao by name and were able to add only a brief commentary in which the keyword was 'communism'.

This lacklustre response wasn't a surprise. East Asia hardly figures on British school curricula beyond its place in a narrative of imperial or Cold War history. The well-educated secondary school graduate in Britain might at best associate China with Opium Wars, revolution, communism, Hong Kong or the Great Wall, with a few making connections with the Terracotta Warriors and the Second World War.

While Brexit-supporting politicians enthuse about engagement with the rest of the world, and how the UK will cash in on trade deals with China or become a second Singapore, the generation charged with turning these ideas into reality is poorly served, being taught next
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to nothing about the core social, political and philosophical values that have shaped China over centuries. The British media, meanwhile, links China with a limited set of memes: a rising, autocratic superpower, threatening the west via trade wars and industrial espionage.

Although politicians and educators increasingly recognise the value of teaching the Chinese language, few realise that we may all benefit from studying China beyond its very recent past and outside the framework of Sino-Western contacts. We have started to speak Chinese but fail as yet to think Chinese.

Taking a longue durée view of Chinese history, one could argue that the ideologues of China’s 20th and 21st centuries have had a relatively minor role in shaping the world view and cultural DNA of Chinese society today. Some of its foundational ideas about power, leadership and loyalty were conceived during the classical age, in the teachings of masters of philosophy, some of whom lived 25 centuries before the foundation of the People’s Republic in 1949. The need for a strong work ethic, the importance of family, respect for authority, parents and seniors—these are the legacy of Confucius (551–479 BC) and his followers.

Such ancient texts inform not just how people live their lives, but also the approaches taken by those in power. The Chinese obsession with education as a way to improve self and society, for instance, is ingrained with quasi-biblical authority in classical texts that were required reading for any official wishing to pass the civil-service examinations until the early 20th century.

Ancient China’s masters of philosophy and their texts are quoted and invoked in public discourse in China just as Shakespeare or Machiavelli have been turned into adjectives in the English language. The ideal of the ‘harmonious society’, in which unity and cohesion prevail over individual ambition, was not invented by today’s Chinese politicians who often trumpet it—nor was the conviction that society is best led by one monarch or leader, or the notion that the state is an extension of the family ruled by an unyielding father of the people. Confucius already acknowledged that it is better to manage than suppress the human desire for wealth, which sounds suspiciously like a plea for condoning capitalism in a socialist society.

Today, as China modernises and turns over its soil for roads and housing developments, archaeologists uncover bamboo-slip manuscripts that have lain hidden from view for over 2,000 years. Legal documents from the time of the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang (who ruled in the late third century BC) reveal an institutional environment in which the state already micromanaged the private sphere of people’s lives in considerable detail.

Scale aside, such practices seem ominously similar to the gathering of big data by government, or to the monitoring of citizens’ digital imprints. Both are hardly unique to China: just substitute government with Facebook or Google and swap ‘citizen’ with ‘consumer’.

I cannot fault those bright teenagers for failing to identify Mao; after all, some might be equally perplexed by a portrait of Oliver Cromwell or Margaret Thatcher. But if our engagement with China is to be anything beyond an expedient, short-term economic romance, we all might benefit from introducing the next generation to the basic outlines of Chinese thinking alongside the Greeks and the Romans.

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