
China
Dreaming



GREGORY B. LEE

Copyright

© Gregory B. Lee 2015

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

Preface

This book is divided into two parts. The first text, or chapter, may appeal to those who hope for a happier or more optimistic outcome for today's, and tomorrow's, humanity and the physical ecology, or "world," of which humanity is an integral part.

"EXIT 13 or China and the World in 2030 and how we got there" recounts a utopian world where diversity of all sorts and the doctrines of the Great Establishing of Limits (GEL) and of "Slo-nomics" have become the strategies by which disaster has been avoided and a new human culture has been established.

The second text "China's Spectacular-oneiric Society" is a more sober and analytical reflection on what has led us to where we are and the consciousness and measures necessary to save ourselves and the rest of the planet from imminent and irreversible catastrophe.

Both texts start from the premise that the World without China is not the World, and that China without the World can no longer be China.

Both texts draw on two neglected giants of radical French thought: Jacques Ellul and Cornelius Castoriadis; the shamelessly recuperated Guy Debord and, his one-time comrade-in-arms, Raoul Vaneigem are also essential references.

I should like to thank those who have read these texts for me, in particular Isabelle and Vanessa. Of course, any imperfections remaining are entirely my responsibility. I especially thank my family for tolerating my passion for bamboo: the magical material of the past and the future.

GBL

Lyon, 4th October 2015

The spectacular poverty of those societies in which the technico-economic system prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of dreams.

MARX, *Economic Manuscripts: Capital Vol. I*

> DEBORD, *Society of the Spectacle*

> LEE, *China Dreaming*



Exit 13

or China and the World in 2030 and how we got there

I'd like to take you for a ride... But, in this day and age, I can't, so walk with me. Follow me in space and time. We're on a former French *autoroute*, or highway, outside the city of Lyon, but at the same time we are not in Lyon.

Sortie 13, rien de spécial. Mais même maintenant, 10 ans après que les limites furent fixées, un événement officiellement baptisé « Grand établissement de limites » ou GEL, je me suis à peine habitué à la marche de 20 kilomètres qui séparent la sortie 13 de la sortie 14. Avant que les Grands boulevards verts ou GBV n'aient remplacé les motorways, autoroutes, autostrada et autobahn je ne mettais que quelques minutes pour couvrir la distance entre Pierre Bénite et La Mulatière. A présent en empruntant le GBV du Soleil il faut jusqu'à une semaine pour aller de Lyon à Avignon. Mais au moins on arrive bronzé et ayant pratiqué plusieurs langues. Ah oui, il faut que je vous explique cela. Eh bien, nous y sommes, la sortie 14. (Exit 13, nothing special about that. But even now 10 years after

the “Limits had been fixed,” known more officially as the “Great Establishing of Limits,” or GEL, I am hardly used to the twenty kilometre walk that separates Exit 13 from Exit 14. Before the Grands Boulevards Verts, or GBVs, replaced the motorways, autoroutes, autostrada and autobahn, it used to take just a few minutes to get between Pierre Bénite and La Mulatière. Now on the Boulevard Vert du Soleil it could take you up to a week to get from Lyon to Avignon. But at least one arrived sun-tanned and having practised several languages. Oh yes, I shall need to explain that. And here is exit 14.)

Exit 14, and now we're back in English. Let me explain. When you walk on the Grand Boulevards Verts, or GGWs (Great Green Walkways) in English, which are the former highways, each time you pass a kilometre marker you are obliged to change languages. It gets interesting when you switch from English to French on the old British “motorways”. Whoever would have imagined getting the British to speak French, and on English soil! Nevertheless, trying to get a cappuccino in the former service station at Watford Gap can be a little complicated. In spite of the linguistic agreements which were concluded when the Limits had been fixed, the English are still as useless as ever at learning languages. In contrast, French universities have been teaching in English for the past twenty years and they all now

speak impeccable English. Just before the Limits were fixed there was a move to make Chinese the language of instruction in UK universities since more than 50% of students were from China anyway. But with the limits mass overseas travel became impracticable. Without the Chinese students. more than half the UK's universities went bankrupt overnight.

"But," you must be thinking, "how can you end up in England, if you have just passed an *autoroute* exit in Lyon?" Well, the answer lies in the *Funnies*, or as they are more properly known the PGS's which stands for "psycho-geographic spectacles." But everyone calls them "fun-geography glasses" or *funnies* for short. They are the same as the *Funnies* that work so well in town, but the rules are modified. Of course, the technology existed even before the limits had been fixed ten years ago in 2020. The *Funnies* were inspired by Google-Glasses. You remember? Google, that American mega-company that was bought by the Chinese. Google-glasses used a quite basic technology that enabled the wearer to view the pre-recorded images of the interiors of buildings. The glasses never really caught on.

As I was saying, the rules for PGS-assisted psycho-geographic promenades in towns are slightly different. In town there are posts every hundred meters or so which switch your glasses to the coordinates and lens-images of another town, usually in another country. So, you can jump from Liverpool to Lille, Amsterdam, Shanghai or Beijing instantaneously. In reality you may be

in Piccadilly Circus but virtually you are in Tiananmen Square. As for the languages, the practice in town is different to what occurs on the former motorways. During the big global negotiations summit that resulted in the "Great Establishing of Limits," or GEL, the French had allied with the Chinese to promote "linguistic diversity." This was meant to combat the xenophobia that might result from reduced planetary mobility, and to compensate for what was still seen as the impoverishment of material conditions that would accompany the massive reduction in goods after the disappearance of the consumer society. I personally am not against having to change languages regularly. It's fun. Except that it does lead to misunderstanding. For instance, on the first Friday of every month you are obliged to speak in Chinese at every third post. 那不可能. 他们都会怎么办呢? 你们都不懂我说的话。没办法。我就应该快一点儿。快。快。 到啦. (But that won't do. What will you think. You don't understand a word I'm saying. I'll just have to walk faster. And faster. Ah, there we are. I've arrived.)

Dieu merci. Vous n'avez jamais été si content d'entendre "French spoken". Naturellement, les limitations techno-industrielles sont venues au moment voulu et de façon appropriée. Après tout, c'était la Chine même qui avait le plus besoin des limites dans les années 2020....Ah, another post. (Thank God. Have you ever been so glad to hear "French spoken". Of course, it had been most appropriate and timely that the Techno-Industrial Limitations had

been finally accepted by the Chinese. After all, it was in China itself that the limits were so desperately needed in the 2020s....Ah encore une borne.)

Of course, in 2020 China was facing catastrophe. A succession of industrial, sanitary and environmental disasters finally brought the old ideology to its knees. It was inevitable. The Situationists had understood what was happening in China as far back as the middle of the last century when they described the “society of the concentrated spectacle.” And even before the Tiananmen Massacre and the Fall of the Berlin Wall, Guy Debord had foreseen the “integrated spectacle” of globalization into which China and the rest of the world were converging.

It all started in the Spring of 2014 in Taiwan. The Sunflower Student Movement, or 太陽花學運 *Taiyanghua xue yun* in Chinese, was a protest movement led by a coalition of students and civil society groups who were protesting against the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) that the ruling Nationalist party Kuomintang (KMT) was rushing through the legislature. Sixty-five years after having been kicked out of mainland China by the Mao Zedong, the Nationalist still dreamed of re-uniting Taiwan with the continent; and so did the Communists. The fact that the the sunflower was adopted as a symbol of the movement was quite paradoxical; in Maoist China in the distant times of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the

sunflowers were symbolic of the docile masses who slavishly followed the course of the sun-king, Mao.

Taiwan's "sunflowers," whom the authorities would have preferred to have swept into the dustbin of history, were also understood by Hong Kong's students who saw No Future in China's dreaming. September 2014 saw sit-in protests and mass civil disobedience in Hong Kong. It was known as Umbrella Revolution since protestors wielded umbrellas to protect themselves against tear-gas canisters. The Beijing regime was adamant in its decision to vet candidates for the post of Chief Executive of "Governor" of Hong Kong. In 2015, while the world's attention was turned on the Syrian refugee crisis, China's grip on Hong Kong strengthened. The global media were not responsive. They'd been there and done that.

But the following year, 2016, was the year that young Chinese intellectuals who had studied in France synthesized the critical analyses of Guy Debord and, the scholar-ecologist and advocate of "ungrowth," Jacques Ellul. Debord and Ellul were perhaps unlikely inspirations, except that the absurdity of globalized consumer society had now become obvious. The economy had slumped in 2015. The rich stayed rich, and the poor were disavowed. Pollution of every description shortened everyone's life and made it a misery.

The movement rapidly gained global support. In the broken economies of Greece and Spain, in strife-ridden Turkey and even in the shopping paradise of Hong Kong young people shunned new malls in favour of new-old ideas.

They had understood that the system was untenable, for the faster it went the more violent the brakes on the system became due to the lack of correspondingly necessary new resources. Moreover, the resources created by new technologies were inadequate to the demands of new advances. These young intellectuals produced analyses which spoke of negatives costs and real costs, and of the destruction: the pollution of all sorts, the environmental damage, the impact on human health without those responsible being made to put the damage right. They evaluated the real cost of the spread of the automobile in China, as elsewhere, the accidents, the pollution, the medical expenses incurred, the increase in insurance premiums, the costs of road-building and repairs.

In the face of this world youth movement, which was called the Alliance for a New Human Culture, a planetary summit was organized. The Chinese branch of the Alliance presented a programme entitled *Limits or Death*. Here are a few extracts:

China's adherence to the technological system dates from the moment Deng Xiaoping, through his economic reforms, in other

words the boosting of capitalism, reconnected China to a logic of imitation of the modern Western nation-state. The reforms implemented by Deng, initiated at the end of the 1970s and relaunched, after the Tiananmen Massacre, in the 1990s, merely supplied the conditions of economic growth permitting the expansion of the technological system.

From the moment China re-boarded the fast-moving train of the technological system, it was condemned to imitate, repeat and finally overtake the West. But this overtaking is an illusion. The fact that sensational technological discoveries are now made in China and no longer in the West is without consequence. That Chinese taikonauts were the first to set foot on Mars and not American astronauts was unimportant, and was a consequence of China's turning the handle of a machine invented in, and supplied by, the West, a reasonable and normal consequence, as Jacques Ellul said, of what already existed. (Jacques Ellul, *Le Système technicien*, Paris : Le Cherche midi, 2004, 2012, p. 100 and *passim*.)

But the system is faulty, and it is because of this faultiness that we demand change. We see in today's China the imperfections and the misfirings of the system, the high speed trains that derail for lack of

respect for security provisions, explosions due to lack of safety norms as occurred in Tianjin in 2015, buildings and bridges all over China that collapse because built by non-qualified personnel or because the concrete has been watered down, and road surfaces tarmacked over sub-surfaces consisting of cardboard. There are other obstacles and hindrances challenging the system: the inability of social institutions to move forward at the same speed, and then labour-force rebellion and contestation; witness the mass unemployment and social unrest subsequent to the Black Monday stock market crash in 2015. Then there are the ceilings and limits evoked by Ellul when he refers to Ivan Illich discussing the fundamental problem of the system: that of fixing limits that are so essential to the drawing up of a “road map for a possible future”. The ceilings (pollution, depletion of resources) represent the “boundaries which human action (and technology) must set so that life remains possible.” That, of course, is just the minimum. For if we are interested in creating or re-creating a *culture* we should need to go further and fix “limits that constitute a plan for a culture.” We believe it now falls to China, once colonized by, and currently the agent of, the system to fix “willed-for limits” since as Ellul taught us “it is not the *unlimited* that is capable of founding and

constituting a culture, or a even a human being....It is by establishing limits that humans institute themselves as human” (Ellul, *Le Système*, p. 305 and n.25).

The logic was flawless and the global system, after having suffered innumerable disasters of human making was now ready to impose these limits. But I am talking too much, and walking too slowly. Ah, a kilometre-marker. 又来了. 我不知道为什那么多欧洲人还不懂中文。 最好跑到下个里程.

I was just saying that I don't grasp why so few Europeans understand Chinese. As I mentioned earlier, linguistic diversity was on the agenda of the GEL talks, and one of the chapters of the historic compromise concerning the limits was dedicated to language-learning. After the chapters concerning the abandonment of the internal combustion engine and the conversion of motorways and expressways into a network of psycho-geographic greenways designed so as to encourage the imagining of a new humanity, one of the flagship measures stipulated that Chinese should be one of the languages spoken on a world-scale. French, because of the huge demographic growth in Africa was similarly chosen as a language to be privileged in education.

A period of transition had been allowed for, but now that international travel was impractical and time-consuming - air-travel had also been abandoned

because of its massive contribution to air pollution - getting practice in spoken Chinese had become difficult. The virtual 'Speak Chinese in China' language courses put in place by the former Confucius Institutes had not proven popular. The censorship that had existed at the time had left the world with language manuals that did not facilitate the learning of essential phrases such as 'I'd prefer not to eat pork from pigs disposed of in the Yangzi River having died from HN5PQ0A influenza ten days ago.' Moreover, since the fixing of limits everyone was agreed on the primacy of the real; the virtual being acknowledged as no more than a pale expression of the real. The energy dearth had already dealt a fatal blow to digital technology, and people quickly adapted to a return to former practices of cultural production, abandoning consumer-based practices without too much difficulty.

The Americans found it a little harder, but their voice in such matters was now much reduced. The Indians had to abandon Bollywood and that was a little hard. But China compared to India in 2020 was an ageing society and many octogenarians happily spend their afternoons in the public parks singing revolutionary songs from their youth.

Situationism's implication with China was not recent. The Situationists had understood as far back as the 1950s that the Chinatowns around the world were far more interesting than China itself. In fact, after the 'Great Chinese Construction of Consumerism,' that is how we call the period 2000-2020

nowadays, the Chinese authorities in their quest for 'authenticity' had built thousands of Chinatowns all over the country; even Shanghai which a Japanese novelist in the 20s of the last century had called 'the most cosmopolitan city in the world' had been Chinatown-ized. Consumerism did not suffer. The New Chinatowns were totally compatible with neon lights, shopping malls and gambling casinos. Indeed, China had recently bought and demolished Las Vegas in order to give the monopoly to the casinos of Macao. No, it was simply that President Xi Jinping had demanded the sinification of Chinese modernity and so Shanghai became an immense Chinatown, an enormous mall entirely given over to selling and consuming, a phenomenon that inspired a dissident pop group to issue a cover version of the Bluesman BB King's "I've got a good mind to give up living, And go shopping instead." The lyrics had been somewhat outdated since the modern world had given up on living many decades before. Happily, now, the song was just a reminder of the alienation that had once existed. The malls had now all been replaced by huge open-air, non-commercial recreational parks.

To get back to my story, shortly after the Chinatownization of Shanghai, China had been struck by the H31F14 syndrome, commonly called the flying pig plague; Chinese bio-technologists had crossed ducks and pigs in a process that produced a Peking Duck-flavoured crispy pork-rind meat. These

hybrid creatures proved to be highly fertile, thus reproducing themselves rapidly, and initially producing huge profits for investors. However, they were easy prey to the highly contagious H31F14 virus of which they became carriers. It was a virus that was easily transmitted to humans. The pandemic devastated the Shanghai megalopolis, reducing it to a super-necropolis. In the Shanghai region alone the death toll reached over 40 million of whom around half a million were foreigners trying to make their fortune in this twenty-first century El Dorado. Shanghai fell empty and unlit, it looked like a huge black shadow when seen in satellite photographs.

But political change caught up with Shanghai. There was no opportunity for the once great port city to recover before the Limits were fixed. Once that had happened the energy resources needed to illuminate this once spectacular city were no longer available. And in any case what was the use of a financial and commercial centre that relied on split-second dealing once the new Slo-nomics economic strategy had been instituted.

After the severe measures taken in favour of reversing the climatic disaster that was upon us, global interest in petroleum evaporated. Fracking petered out and oil wells were abandoned since the demand for plastics and pharmaceuticals had been drastically reduced. Natural materials were now favoured over polluting plastics, even the spectacles people wore were plastic-free and the frames now made of wood or bamboo. Now that wild

plants were returning in abundance and tropical forests were being allowed to replace the agribusiness of soya plantations, the medicinal properties of plants were being researched intensely. The cure for cancer that had been found by isolating a compound in a wild Chinese mushroom had been a great boon for plant-based treatments. Cancers were in any case becoming rarer as processed foods, plastics and microwaves of various sorts were no longer in use.

The decline in the importance of petroleum also had a major impact on terrorism and fundamentalism in the Middle East. Since oil no longer had financial value, oil fields held by Islamic extremists no longer provided the money to purchase weapons and win hearts and minds. The influence of the extremists and those who financed them shrank to nothing as oil money ran dry and new forms of citizen-based governance linked to the recently established Slo-nomics agricultural cooperative communities emerged around the globe.

The mass migrations caused by climate change, geopolitical instability and terrorism that had seen hundreds of millions displaced in the second decade of the century had ceased since the causes had been dealt with. The years 2015-2016 had been particularly shameful for Europe as millions fled civil wars that were a consequence of US, European and Russian policies; EU countries and especially the UK countered with meagre humanitarian aid

and indecent asylum policies, and with fences, walls and sniffer dogs. Even the Church of England balked at the heartlessness of British vote-hungry politicians.

Naturally, when populations were evenly distributed after the GEL and water was globally allocated on a needs basis, migration started to wane. Industrial, water-intensive farming, and “virtual water” agriculture whereby China had crops grown in Latin America and Africa to be flown back to China, were stopped.

As for the movement of peoples, why go far afield to grow food when you could now grow it at home? The new home-grown food project coupled with Slo-nomics major public works programmes had even eradicated unemployment.

The Slo-nomics strategy called for new, or rather renewed, forms of transport. The sailing-ship building programmes required millions of skilled workers who had to be trained in the half-forgotten skills needed to create the tall ships that once again ploughed the planet's seas and oceans. Canals were renovated and new ones built. Barges required horses to pull them and consequently horse breeding farms sprang up around the world creating even more employment.

As for personal transportation, the Ghanaian production of bamboo bicycles, that had been what was then called a “start-up” enterprise as long ago as

2012, was expanded massively and bamboo plantations and bicycle factories opened up on all continents. Since synthetic plastic tyres were now banned under the GEL agreements, rubber plantations also expanded their production massively so as to produce tyres for the bamboo bikes. In other areas also, bamboo, which is stronger than steel and grows fast, largely replaced metal and plastics in a whole host of low technology products.

Massive reforestation programmes were launched to provide the wood for boat-building. Wood was also needed for house-building where other materials such as stone were in short supply. Where stone was readily available, stone-built houses had made a major comeback and southern European Roman-style roof-tiles were once more moulded on human thighs, before being baked in wood-fired ovens. The process like many of the new-old procedures took longer than traditional houses built out of concrete but once built they were ecologically ideal since they required no air-conditioning. Local communities would devote a day a month to helping neighbours to build vaulted stone chambers. The process was straightforward: a tunnel-shaped mound of earth or sand would be piled up, and then the stones would be placed against it from the bottom up until the vault was completed. The slower part of the operation entailed digging out the earth and sand, but this could be done over a longer period of time and by fewer people.

With the re-evaluation of former local practices in the fields of medicine and agriculture and irrigation, even the dominance of the Euro-American knowledge and its ideologies began to crumble, and what was known at the beginning of the century as intellectual colonialism, or the colonization of the mind, had now been reversed.

Indeed, it was even admitted that the fixing of limits, just like gunpowder, printing, paper, sorbet ices and pasta, had indeed been invented in China. Its originator was a certain Chinese philosopher called Zhuangzi 莊子 who, two millennia before Ellul and the advent of the 2020 Movement, had elaborated a philosophy that taught the logic of limits and the need for humans to respect the flow of which they were a part. Whereas Ellul saw humans as having eliminated God and having replaced the Creation with the concept of Nature as the other of omnipotent humankind, Zhuangzi perceived no separation at all between a divine authority and humankind, nor indeed between humans and “Nature.” Humans were merely a constituent part of a process, the flow of life and death. Zhuangzi did not exhort humans to live in harmony with Nature, but rather to accept their place amidst the myriad creatures and the inanimate environment, and thus accept their role in the process of life and death.

After the GEL, the fact that Confucius Institutes established at the beginning of the twenty-first century were closed and Zhuangzi Institutes replaced

them with a mission to participate in the enrichment of psychogeography and the imagining of a new human culture, demonstrated that the Taoist understanding of the world had made its “way” (which is what the Chinese word *tao* or *dao* 道 signifies) and had displaced the Chinese leadership’s Communist-Confucian-Consumerist “Chinese Dream.” History had thus finally acknowledged Zhuangzi. Had he not said 2,400 years ago in the second of the Inner Chapters of his writings:

Idiots think they are awake, they are certain that they know what they are: princes and shepherds. What stupidity! You and Confucius, you are both merely dreams, and I, who describe you as a dream, am myself also a dream.

而愚者自以為覺，竊竊然知之。君乎，牧乎，固哉！丘也與女，皆夢也；予謂女夢，亦夢也。《莊子·內篇·齊物論第二》

This new welcome accorded to Zhuangzi illustrates one of the major advances for humanity after the GEL: the abandonment of the idea that the “West”, as it was called at the time, had the monopoly of knowledge and texts that could be explored in the construction of a new human culture.

A new set of moral and political tenets had replaced the former dominant “white” universalist ideologies. They were formulated as the Global Human

Principles. Of course, the future culture needed to raid the past, where else could ideas come from? But the vision of the past and its texts had now become global. While it was true that the Greek philosophers had established a philosophical framework for the modern world, many now thought that texts from other non-European pasts, could help us to imagine the world after modernity. Wasn't it indeed a Situationist who had written about old texts: "How do we judge the value of an old work? From the amount of radical theory that it contains, from the core of its creative spontaneity that new creators can exploit for and through a new poetry." (Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, Paris, Gallimard, nrf 1967, p. 208.)

And there again in the poetry of his everyday life, so dear to the Situationists, just as in the written poetry that describes his imagined travels, Zhuangzi had already showed us the Way of Limits: "My life flow has limits, but knowledge has no limits; using the limited to chase the unlimited will exhaust the flow." 吾生也有涯，而知也无涯。以有涯随无涯，殆已 《庄子·内篇·养生主第三》。

This thought of Zhuangzi's seemed to be grasped by the Chinese students in their 2020 declaration when they said:

Time is short, and we are not sure that we have been understood.

But the choice can wait no longer. We must now go on to overturn

and transform this longstanding affliction. The boundaries must be transgressed and the limits fixed.

But I should leave the last word to the song drawn from the repertoire of MuPsyPlay, the new psycho-ludic music that has entirely replaced electrically and electronically reproduced and stocked music. One of my MuPsyPlay favourite is a transformation of BB King's famous lamentation. It now reads:

I have given up on shopping and gone living instead!

Well, here I am at the end of my journey. I've arrived at the Confluences in Lyon, site of a former early twentieth-first century museum now demolished because of the lack of energy necessary to maintain it. I am going to take a boat up the Rhone. May I take you for another ride?



China's Spectacular-oneiric Society



Since the turn of this century, China's economic power has grown massively, and with it the desire to control and craft its cultural image abroad. This has even given rise to a cultural diplomatic offensive to displace long-standing foreign discourses on and about China with a cultural imaginary and a historical narrative generated by the Chinese authorities themselves. The imposition of an official narrative of history, and thus of the present and the future, has been achieved internally by an increasingly policed Internet and by close surveillance of cultural activities, and abroad by China's soft power cultural diplomacy

initiatives by way of its network of Confucius Institutes. But at the same, in China itself, contestation of the authorities' control over society comes from daily strikes and social unrest, and in the cultural sphere resistance has come from the likes of avant-garde artist Ai Weiwei 艾未未, who though under house-arrest used the Internet to mount his counter-propaganda offensive and embarrass the Chinese government. Thus the technology controlled and manipulated by the state may also be transformed into a contestatory tool in the hands of the artist-activist.

Since the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 - out of living memory for some forty per cent of the country's present population - China's authorities have vigorously advanced the country's integration into the world technico-economic system, gaining membership of the world's major organizations of economic and political power, modernizing the military, preparing to put a person on the moon, and claiming to be engaged in the 'war on terror.' Yet despite these aspirations to global "normality," the government has not yet managed to control and suppress dissent and despite all its efforts the Chinese culture that the world most appreciates is not that which is promoted and sponsored by the state, but that which is unofficial and fractious. In 2014, the central authorities condemned to long prison sentences a number of academics, the most well-known of whom is the Chinese Uighur economist Ilham Tohti. In the same year, the people of Hong Kong demonstrated massively their unwillingness to

accept an undemocratic future in what became known as the "Umbrella Movement." In 2015, a campaign has been launched against "Western" values and the use of "Western" textbooks in universities. These are the contemporary realities that academics involved in China studies in Europe have a duty to contrast against the efforts of China's authorities to project an image of China as peaceful, harmonious and 'normal.'

In the two spheres just mentioned, the academic and the strictly political, we can detect the spectre of a Chinese student slogan that is almost one hundred years old, the appeal of the Tiananmen demonstrators of 4 May 1919 for the principles of "Democracy and Science" to be applied. The students were contesting the weakness and betrayal of China's delegation at the World War One Versailles peace congress which saw Germany's colonies in China handed over to Japan rather than handed back to China. In protest, the students held up banners in favour of the intellectual and political activist Chen Duxiu's call for Mr. Confucius to be replaced by Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science. In 2015, while Mr. Democracy is no longer in vogue, Mr. Confucius raises his head everywhere. *

* The sexism implicit in the figure of the two Misterys is striking and unfortunate, for the reality was that numerous women students were at the forefront of the Fourth May Movement. In fact, in the fight against a patriarchal ideology that not only obliged the young to venerate the old but treated women as almost worthless, women were the most ardent agitators. Indeed, the earliest radical ideologies in modern China were not articulations of Marxism but rather of feminism and anarchism. Anarchism fuelled the nascent leftist movement with revolutionary ideas only to be subsumed under the ideology of the Communist party, while feminism - the early writings of Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904-1986) were a fine articulation of feminist concerns - was likewise engulfed by the dominant universalist communist-nationalist revolutionary ideology.

*

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, China's elite has felt itself obliged to re-invent the country as a modern nation-state. The 1919 post-World War One, Treaty of Versailles and the 4 May Movement to which it gave rise, convinced China's elite of the need to emulate the West as had Japan, in order to (re)create China. Or rather to create a modern nation-state China for the first time. This Western process of *nationalization* was seen as the means to resist the colonialist system that had just humiliated it once again, and to attain sovereignty over what would become a national territory. This was an ideology shared with other colonized peoples. Sovereignty, it was held, could only be achieved via modernity, and the Versailles process had reaffirmed nationalism as the only means to achieve a modern organization of peoples.

A classical radical or Marxist reading of the outcome of Versailles would hold that it put the imperialist world in a dilemma and spelt its death-knell. For if the non-white, non-European world could not benefit there and then from the Wilsonian doctrine of self-determination, the principle of the essential link between nationalism and modernity had been affirmed and would sooner or later bring the decline and fall of colonialism (Frank Furedi, *The New Ideology of Imperialism*, London and Boulder, CO., Pluto Press, 1994, p.5).

But this model of nation-state modernity as a means of self-determination and attainment of sovereignty was a poisoned chalice. Once China had accepted the need for Westernization/modernization — let us recall that the term

西方化 *xifanghua* was in the first half of the twentieth century not only synonymous with modernization it was the "natural" way of referring to the process — China's incorporation into the world system, which has been variously called colonialism, Americanization, globalization, became inevitable. Similarly what this path rendered inevitable was the obligation to adopt Western epistemologies and to junk conventional Chinese knowledge.

Whether or not the Versailles Wilsonian doctrine and the Western imperialist system that gave rise to it did indeed signify that there was never any alternative to mimicry of what was then still a Western system is disputable, but what will be demonstrated below is that this system had led China and the world into an impasse.

Thus far from announcing the end of colonialism and its procedures which were intimately imbricated in what we call modernity, these same procedures were seen as the panacea. The real success of colonialism at the start of the twentieth century, a success that continues to this day, was to have convinced colonized peoples, or rather their elites, that there was *no alternative* to the emulation, imitation and mimicry of the nation-state paradigm. For the elite what counted was access to the colonial powers' knowledge and science.

In the pursuit of this logic an enormous contradiction was pushed aside. In order to regain sovereignty, a power of agency, China turned its back on all that was local and heterogeneous. It had to homogenize its languages and cul-

tures and customs, and sweep out diversity to install uniformity. In short, it had to imitate, and thus even become this Western Other.

Science and scientism took hold of the elite's imaginary as it had taken hold of the Western popular imaginary in the second half of the nineteenth century when "in the name of science it was deemed necessary to destroy false ideas, religions, cultural traditions, myths; all that was a product of the imagination of the dark ages had absolutely to be replaced by the Light of Science" (Jacques Ellul, *Le Bluff technologique*, Paris, Hachette, 1988 ; Fayard/Pluriel, 2010, p. 323: "...il fallait au nom de la Science détruire les idées fausses, les religions, les traditions culturelles, les mythes, tout cela, produits de l'imagination dans les âges obscurs, devait absolument être remplacé par la Lumière de la Science.")

While this logic is still dominant, with all its social, economic, and environmental consequences, it now clashes with the authorities attempts to institute a local identitarian cultural politics with which to combat the temptation of democracy.

*

In recently launching a campaign against Western values in the academic sphere it is as if the authorities wished to cut off China's nose to spite its face. Where do "Western" values stop and "Western" science start? At stake is not

only what is projected as Western culture, which in fact is now a global culture, but what is perceived as Western methodology. Ironically, for the past fifty to sixty years humanistic values have been under attack in the Western academy itself where humanities scholars have been pushed and bullied into reinventing themselves as scientists and into adopting a "scientific" methodology. So, are "science" and "culture" separable?

In attempting to discuss this question, the relationship between technology, which has increasingly colonized "science" since World War Two, and economics also needs addressing. Before doing so, I need to make my position clear: It is evident that the economic strategy of growth is killing our planet, and that there is an urgent necessity not simply to opt for sustainable growth but to adopt the path of ungrowth. As the French political scientist Jacques Ellul has noted this will require a global cultural, or "civilizational," revolution both for China and the rest of humanity to achieve this ambition (Jacques Ellul, *Changer de révolution*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1982; La Table Ronde, 2015).

The question of the specificity of culture, or more specifically of cultural creation, is also an issue that needs to be addressed in this discussion around science and culture.

As we have seen from the nineteenth century onwards the colonized world, was in part forced and in part "chose" to adopt Western epistemology, a Western originated organization of knowledge and of culture. Japan *chose* this

course. To what extent this was indeed a pragmatic choice, and to what extent it was a function of a colonization of minds is also a question to be discussed.

What is immediately pertinent to my current concern is that in the cases of both Japan and China, as elsewhere in the fully territorially colonized world, Western cultural and institutional norms and forms were introduced in addition to scientific and technological ones. Not only were the natural or exact sciences deployed to displace local scientific understanding of the world, but the products of cultural practices were also re-shaped and forced into foreign disciplinary categories; a simple example would be the modern Western forms of narrative: the novel, the short story. Cultural practice has thus taken what was once a "Western" path for the past century. So when the Chinese authorities refuse Western "values" what are we to understand, that while the form is Western the content must be Chinese? But after a century of "modernization," of "Westernization," of globalization, what is now Chinese? Moreover, there is nothing new in this schizophrenic desire to adopt Western technology to make China strong while "preserving" an essential Chineseness. It was at the heart of the movement that followed the mid-nineteenth-century Opium Wars, an intellectual movement which sought to strengthen China by adopting foreign methods in military and political organization and in industry, and, as logically follows, in education. The strategy has been applied erratically but surely ever since. The result has been the China of the twenty-first century which is locked

into a longer moment stretching back a century and a half which we may term the dilemma of Chinese modernity.

As to China's cultural identity, a century ago it was the identity of an elite expressed in a pre-modern language inaccessible to the majority who were largely illiterate. Culture was either local, oral and popular, or it was elite and shared across Chinese space by a class whose power depended upon it. The creation of a "nation-wide" or national culture depended on the bringing about of a Chinese nation, and the building of that nation demanded in turn the creation and instituting of a "national" homogenized language and modern culture. It is that new national language that it is the business of the Confucius Institute network to disseminate beyond China's borders.

There can be no return to "Chinese values." There can be no dereification of a century and half of change. A return to "authentic" Chinese culture would mean a return to a minority culture practiced by an elite, and to local cultures practiced in local languages. National Chinese culture is irredeemably modern. However, there can be, and has been, a false "return" to Chinese values, to a political logic, the overthrow of which Chen Duxiu demanded a century ago. Confucian "values," not for the first-time in Chinese history, have been redeployed and reinvented to reinforce and support totalitarian forms of power both in China and in other Chinese-speaking states such as Singapore.

There is a central question here regarding cultural practice, and whether could and should it be subtracted from the set of globalized practices that are now common to the whole world. Should the former colonized world keep the technology and "return" to an Ur local culture, or even to a reinvented one?

In the twentieth-first century, what is known as "culture" is instrumentalized to identitarian ends, as has been the case in the past with tragic consequences. It is so in China, it is so in Europe. Such instrumentalization pertains to a politics founded on invented cultural identities, nationalized and even supra-nationalized identities. For instance, the French government exploits the French language hoping to maintain and extend its influence in the Francophone world, and even in the Latinophone world. China propagates a myth of an 8,000 year old homogeneous "national" culture and attempts to exploit and extend a Sinosphere sphere of influence.

In the field of Postcolonial studies and tangential academic areas, there is a current debate on the decolonization of the mind; a sort of second-stage decolonization beyond territorial, physical decolonization. For not only do problematic borders and Western forms of social organization get left behind with a proliferation of flags and national armies, but also Western cultural practices and ways of thinking.

Again, if it were deemed desirable, to attempt to decolonize the mind, as opposed to becoming conscious that the process of colonization of the mind

happened and has left its mark, how could it be achieved? Could Western forms of the state be abandoned, could modern military organization be given up? Even the advance of anti-Western Daesh depends on modern military equipment bought or recuperated from Western-equipped armies, and their ambition is to build an Islamic *State*. The prospect of an abandonment of these technological "gains" seems remote and unthinkable. Then why is it thinkable that states should seek to establish cultural norms based on identitarian, xenophobic, racist ideologies of cultural specificity?

Modern "national" cultures are fixed in Western-inherited institutional norms and forms such as the nation-state whose validity was universalized and enshrined by Woodrow Wilson at the same Versailles peace conference that led China's students to demand democracy and science. Without a modern nation-state, there would be no modern national culture, nor would there be a need for one. This begs the question once more: Where, when and what is Chinese culture? Posing the question in Chinese is even more problematic. How do we translate "Chinese" back into Chinese: 中國 *Zhongguo*, 中文 *Zhongwen*, 漢文 *Hanwen*, 中華 *Zhonghua*, 華語 *Huayu*, 中國人 *Zhongguoren*, 華人 *Huaren*, 唐人 *Tangren*? And just transliterating these terms into the official transliteration of the official version of the language popularized by the People's Republic of China already authorizes a certain idea of Chinese-ness.

And what of *wenhua* 文化? A modern word used to translate the Western concept 'culture,' borrowed at the beginning of the twentieth century from Japanese as were so many hundreds of other modern words translating Western terms.

With scientific knowledge came the interrogation and the epistemological re-organization of all knowledge and all social and cultural phenomena. Science as we have seen was deployed by the young elite as a weapon to be wielded against thousands of years of obscurantism, against Confucian ideology which supported feudalism, and prevented China from pursuing "progress" and which was perceived as the ultimate cause of its humiliation. This was the ideology of 4 May, the ideology of the writer and activist Lu Xun 鲁迅. A scientific revolution was needed, and achieving this revolution meant adopting the colonizers' science with a minimum of local adaptation.

Thus mimicking Japan's universities which had already organized themselves on an American model, China's new universities conceived and put in place academic departments that corresponded to a Western organization of knowledge and culture. Having borrowed Japanese translations of such disciplinary names "philosophy" 哲学 or "literature" 文学, content for these categories then had to be found in China's past vast body of writings. What was Chinese philosophy? Thought and thinking of the "Masters" had existed for two millennia but no-one had sought to call it "philosophy." What was Chinese lit-

erature? Multiple genres of writing had similarly flourished for two millennia but rarely corresponded to modern Western categories of "literature," which even in the Europe was a recent cultural category. Both words, "philosophy" 哲学 and "literature" 文学, were imported from Japan.

The great revolution that was needed to bring China into line with other nation states was seen to be the invention of a standard modern Chinese language. Words were invented, equivalences found, literary categories re-mapped to conform with Western epistemology. A new poetry, a new idea of the novel were invented, and regional theatrical practices replaced with this strange Western drama form where the actors only talked, did not sing, and where the audience could not clap, drink tea or eat snacks during the performance.

Soon China had two cultures, or at least two cultural imaginaries, a new modern Westernized culture heralded by the 4 May Movement's call for Science and Democracy and an older culture that was declared obsolete. The advent of the Communist regime did not halt this process, rather its trenchant dismissal of the old advanced it.

Thus, like so much else that has been learnt and borrowed in modern China, the linguistic and cultural practices of today's China are not simply leg's of a table, they are now part of the wood that the table is made from.

When we start interrogating the integrity of cultural categories, they fall apart. The Chinese language promoted by Confucius institutes is not "authentic" or "genuine" or "millenary" or "eternal." What is promoted is a recently invented nation-state normalized official language. It is a *lingua franca* that fails to represent the linguistic and cultural and historical diversity of the space we now call China. The language promoted abroad serves to present China as a homogeneous whole, it is as deceptive as the word "Chinese" itself.

China today is as locked into the global technico-economic system as is Europe; and it has been so for some considerable time. The notion that China's identity can now be preserved or resuscitated by the promotion of an identitarian cultural politics, that even its own intellectuals largely regard as sterile, is illusory.

China in the post-Deng era, has integrated fully not only the world economy but the whole gamut of the world's spectacular circus: tennis championships, the Shanghai Formula 1 Grand Prix, the Miss World beauty competition, and let us not forget its hosting of the 2008 Olympic games.*

*In 2007 Zhang Zilin 张梓琳 became the first PRC Miss World, and in 2012 Yu Wenxia 于文霞 the second.

In my book *Troubadours, Trumpeters, Troubled Makers: Lyricism, Nationalism, and Hybridity in China and Its Others* (Durham, N.C. ,Duke University Press, 1996), I analysed at length the integration and negotiation of Western cultural and artistic practices in twentieth-century China. Even if the epistemol-

ogy remained Western, there were always attempts at adaptation and nuances introduced in the process of intertextuality, resulting in a more or less creatively imaginative hybridity. But, despite the recent campaign against "Western values," China's current participation in these "ludo-economic" spectacular global events reveals no attempt at mitigating, modifying or negotiating Western practices and institutions, no attempt to sinify, to make Chinese, or even to hybridize. Indeed, China is now fully integrated into economic, technological, spectacular global modernity.

If China is now charged with turning the handle of the barrel organ, who made it? If I use the metaphor of the barrel-organ it is because it seems to best sum up China's predicament today. China is now at the controls of a system that emits a music according to a pre-established programme. It is a closed system in which the "musician" produces a programmed melody, where the only variable the organ-grinder can introduce is the speed at which the handle is turned.

The repetition, the stability, the inevitability of the barrel organ is akin to the system which subjugates and dominates us all in the modern world, the "technological system." More complex than a simple barrel-organ, the system nevertheless, reveals itself through the interdependence of its components, through its generalization and through its acquired stability; the system seems so stable, widespread and entrenched that there is no way to reverse it (Jac-

ques Ellul, *Le Système technicien*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy , 1977; le Cherche Midi, 2012, p. 93). The handle carries on being turned and the one now turning it is China.

The technological system having now become global and generalized, China finds itself responsible for turning the handle for all of us. This is the historical logic resulting from nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism, from the colonization of China by Western science and the ideology of Versailles, and from China's elite's embracing of this course as the only means of survival and regeneration.

For the past two decades we have been talking of China's rapid change; how many times have I been told that China is changing so quickly I shall not recognize it on my next trip. But what seems to be an acceleration, a speeding-up, in infrastructural development over the past twenty years, this "rapid change," is merely a result of "normal foreseeable and an almost linear consequence of prior mutation." The concept of "rapid change," as he says, is just a distraction (Ellul, *Le Système*, p. 100).

China's attachment to the "Science" that has led to the present technological system dates from its humiliation during the mid-nineteenth-century Opium Wars. The sudden consciousness of China's military technological, especially maritime, "backwardness" jolted a part of China's ruling elite to initiate reform initiatives in favour of Westernization and "self-reinforcement" 洋務運動, 自強運動, efforts renewed by the Reform Movement of 1898, and confirmed in the post-Versailles

Fourth May Movement of 1919.*

*This historical narrative is one to which pro-government theoreticians gladly adhere. See Yu Keping, "The Transformation of Chinese Culture since the Launching of Reform: A Historical Perspective" (11-06-2013), consulted on the [Theory China website](#) 10.06.2015.

Thus while Deng Xiaoping's post-1978 reforms reconnected China to, and reinforced the logic of, the imitation of the Western technico-economic model, they did not constitute its starting point. However, the national wealth created by the reforms, that were relaunched after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, have supplied the conditions of economic growth which have allowed the expansion of the technological system. Thus China's elite's dream of being part of this system stretches back to the nineteenth century.

From the point when China re-boarded the moving train of this technological system, in the 1980s, it was condemned to imitate, repeat and finally overtake the West, and to take over the handle of the barrel-organ. However, this "over-taking" is illusory. The fact that sensational technological discoveries will be made in China and no longer in the West is without consequence. That Chinese taikonauts will be the first humans to set foot on Mars and not American astronauts is unimportant. Both will be a consequence of China turning the handle of a machine invented in, and supplied by, the West, a "reasonable and normal consequence" as Ellul would say, of "what already exists" (Ellul, *Le Système*, p. 100).

More than thirty years ago, Jacques Ellul analysed China's modern political history and the then Chinese authorities' policies and foresaw the technico-economic *and* political course of the subsequent three decades thus:

The technical as both model and ideology has borne its first fruits in the notable quality of young Chinese scientists and technologists whom we host now in the West where they come to hone their skills and find their feet....The current [ideological] orientation in line with reality. But it also expresses this reality, that the technical has finally vanquished the revolutionary model of Chinese communism. This interpretation allows us to avoid a frequent error that has gained momentum over the past three years [since 1979]. All the French newspapers talk of the "liberalization of the regime." Whereas, I believe that this is a fundamental misconception. The commentators who take this position are always surprised when we are witness to people who stick up *dazibao* are arrested, suppressions of student or workers' demonstrations....Each time they write of "a brake on liberalization." But it is a nonsense. There never was any liberalization and the new political tendency has nothing to do with liberty. There is a transition from a system where revolutionary ideology held sway over technical efficiency to a system where the desire for technical growth effaces revolutionary ideology. The technical at any price and "efficiency first" have nothing to do with liberalization.

La technique en tant que modèle et en tant qu'idéologie a produit ses premiers fruits dans la qualité remarquable des jeunes Chinois scientifiques et techniciens que nous recevons maintenant en Occident où ils viennent se perfectionner et se situer....L'orientation actuelle est cohérente à la réalité. Mais elle exprime aussi cette réalité, à savoir que la technique a finalement vaincu le modèle révolutionnaire du communisme chinois. Cette interprétation nous permet d'éviter une erreur très fréquente qui se développe depuis trois ans. Tous les journaux français parlent de la "libéralisation du régime". Or nous pensons qu'il s'agit d'une incompréhension de fond. Les observateurs partant avec cette idée sont alors tout surpris lorsque qu'on assiste à l'arrestation des gens qui affichent des *dazibaos*, à des répressions de manifestations étudiantes ou ouvrières... Chaque fois on écrit: "coup de frein à la libéralisation." Mais c'est un contresens. Il n'y a jamais eu de la libéralisation et la nouvelle tendance n'a rien à voir avec la liberté. Il y a passage d'un système où l'idéologie révolutionnaire primait le souci d'efficacité technique, à un système où la volonté de croissance technique efface l'idéologie révolutionnaire. La technique à tout prix et "l'efficacité d'abord" n'ont rien à voir avec la libéralisation (Ellul, *Changer de révolution*, p. 227).

Had China-watchers, journalists and academics read Ellul, it might have dramatically reduced the consumption of humble-pie over the subsequent period. Of course, a number of appointed, as well as self-appointed, China specialists have still not tasted that pie.

However, writing in 1982, Ellul did not, or would not, foresee the sea-change that was taking place in the global politics and its economic and geopolitical. He foresaw China transforming its people into an "advanced industrial proletariat" through industrialization and technology which, despite his clarity regarding the absence of political change, he thought might lead to a new revolution. Ellul whose writings did so much to inspire the ecological movement, saw as inevitable China's being obliged to enthusiastically engage in the technological system. Ellul understood the dilemma of China, but could not predict its political outcome. Surprisingly, he seemed to almost welcome China's aggressive participation in the system, and he did so seeing the resultant proletariat as constituting a revolutionary potential which would oblige the system to change. But China's technological industrialization has not led to revolution and thus to liberty, but rather to extremely hazardous environmental conditions and a human rights situation that is getting gradually worse. In hindsight Ellul's optimism was misplaced.

Even so, Ellul's global strategy, one that implies recognizing ceilings and fixing limits, remains the only "road map of a possible future". The ceilings (pollution, depletion of resources) represent the "boundaries which human action (and technology) must set so that life remains possible." That, of course, is just a minimum. For if we are interested in creating or recreating a culture it would

be necessary to go further and fix “limits that constitute the blueprint of a culture” (Ellul, *Le Système*, p. 305 et p. 305 n.25.).

I recently had the pleasure to hear Ignazio Musu of Ca' Foscari University give a talk entitled "Towards a Green Economy" (XV EAN Workshop, Venice, 14 May 2015). Professor Musu, an economist, has consecrated much of his recent career to ecological questions and the issue of sustainability. He has also visited China a number of times and encountered at first hand the contradictions between state directives aimed at improving environmental conditions and the state-driven imperatives focussed on economic growth. Professor Musu talked about regulation and limits and the need to constrain growth. He talked about bottom-up civil society action being necessary to bring that about.

For that to be possible in China, a revolution in China's current culture, as well as in the rest of the world's, would need to happen. That revolution would depend on a radical reassessment of the role and the nature of science and technology in society and human activity.

Technology like science itself is not neutral, and China's espousing of the dominant world technico-economic system has brought about repercussions that are not simply social and economic, but which have resulted in devastating consequences for the environment and climate of our planet.

Science is not neutral. The very concept of "objectivity" and "neutrality" is part of what, writing in 1961, Castoriadis referred to as the "illusion of exact sci-

ences as historical activity outside of history." He noted that while this illusion persists the temptation to transpose 'techniques,' 'methods' and 'categories' from the natural sciences to the "historical sciences" and *human* activity will exist (Cornelius Castoriadis, *Histoire et création: Textes philosophiques inédits* (1945-1967), Paris, Seuil, 2009, pp. 263-267).

Science, Castoriadis reminds us, comes with a history. There is a historicity to science, the "natural sciences," the "exact sciences" whose ideology and place in the imaginary of human society has changed radically over the past century and a half. From science as truth in the mid-nineteenth century to science as happiness, in the 1920s and 1930s, to science as omnipotence in the post-World War Two years, to science giving way to technology which offers us eternal life (Ellul, *Le bluff technologique*, Paris, Hachette, 1988; Fayard/Pluriel, 2012, 332-337).

The current ideology of science is an ideology of salvation ("L'idéologie actuelle de la science est une idéologie du Salut," Ellul, *Le bluff technologique*, p. 339). Not only do we see it as the only way forward, we also refuse to see its negative aspects. Science is the solution to all humanity's problems; this is particularly clear in health and medicine. Indeed, for Ellul, it is this ostrich-like attitude of modern humanity that explains the failure of the ecology movement.

The destruction of rain forests to create "virtual water" (an example of this is China's growing food on cleared land in Latin America to export back to

China), the massive pollution of oceans, the blue-less skies of China's cities, do not move us to act. The public feels an overpowering sentiment of powerlessness when faced with gigantic threats, to the extent that we refuse to absorb negative information: Leave it to science, it has all the answers.

Increasingly studies on China are no longer about just China, they are about the world. Our particular problem as “sinologists” or China specialists is not only that we have created our object of study and observation, but that for over a hundred years we have watched, and watched over, China (re)creating itself as US. And yet as sinologists we often do not want to, or are ill-equipped to, question ourselves. But now, after 30 years of so-called reforms which have turned China into a productivist and consumerist society, thirty years that have seen China driven by a need, a thirst for technology and everything else that constitutes the technological, we are unable to deny that when we are looking at China we are in fact looking at ourselves.

The realities we address today demand an academic capacity to dismantle urgently disciplinary and area studies boundaries. Unfortunately, it is a capacity that has never been pronounced. What goes for the world, what goes for humanity, goes for China too. But China's authorities propagate an image of and to "China" that they also wish to market to the world. That image, says Ellul, is a dream, and he continues:

The universe we inhabit is becoming increasingly a dreamed universe, since the society of the spectacle is changing gradually into the society of the dream. This is brought about by the diffusion of spectacles of all sorts which we ask the spectator to internalize, but also brought about by the maintained dream of a science which immerses us into a world as yet unknown and incomprehensible(Ellul, *Le bluff technologique*, p. 343).

But in the twenty-first century the dreamed universe has *not* displaced what Guy Debord critiqued as the society of the spectacle, the show society, a consumer society in which power and politics had been assimilated to the strategies of communication, showbiz and advertising hitherto largely confined to the market place. Rather what we have witnessed a convergence. We are now living in that post-convergent moment. To the theory of the society of the spectacle must now be added the critique of omnipotent science and technology. And whereas Guy Debord described the late twentieth-century world, in which the manner of exercising power in totalitarian societies (the concentrated spectacle) and in so-called liberal democracies (the diffuse spectacle) were converging, as the integrated spectacle, we are now faced with a further element which is the dreamed universe.

Spectacular society has not been transcended, it has mutated. The convergence perceived by Debord occurred. Ideologies seemed to melt away with the twilight of the twentieth century, but in fact re-disguised themselves as other dreams. The New World Order of a post-Communist era where universal happiness, made possible by technology and paid for by capitalism, had dawned. The American ideology seemed to have won. But that dream

was of short duration. It was broken by the awakening of petty, retrograde, xenophobic, nationalist, and fundamentalist dreams made possible by yet another crisis of capitalism and constructed on the ruins and dregs of the logic of a (post)colonial world order.

We now inhabit a world of seemingly different imaginaries and projected dreams; dreams as individual and collective projects. But more than ever the dreams are articulated and sustained through an assemblage of spectacles which do not seek to hide widespread human misery and planet-wide environmental catastrophe, but rather to mediate them by their integration into the daily show. We are called on to live a dream not of our own imagining. It is a dream in which words are no longer needed to stimulate the imagination; the images are provided. It is a dream articulated by an array of technological gadgets, electronic entertainments, and mediated fears and hopes.

We have entered the moment of the spectacular-oneiric society.

For the Golden Age Spanish dramatist Calderón de la Barca, all of life was a dream, and dreams themselves merely dreams (*que toda la vida es sueño, y los sueños, sueños son*), while for his compatriot Goya over a century later the sleep of reason produced monsters (*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*) for, as the Spanish teaches us, to dream is to sleep.



Natacha Lee after “El sueño de la razón
produce monstruos”,
Los caprichos, Francisco de Goya

Out of a cultural metaphor of early modern society, the technico-economic system has produced the world as dream, a dream(ed) world. For the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China coined the slogan “同一个世界，同一个梦。” The, official, translation of which was: “One world, One dream”.

China's President Xi Jinping has declared his presidency to be that of what he calls the *Chinese dream*, 中国梦. China is enmeshed in the logic of the technico-economic system. Its people are called on to live life as a dream, to invest in President Xi's promise of a "China dream," of a spectacular-oneiric society. But the reality is that behind the blinding ideology of the technico-

economic system, a sleep of reason, has produced the monstrous China nightmare of environmental disaster, and social misery.



Charles de Gaulle airport, 2007.
"This year more than 17 million new consumers of plastic goods will be born in China."

Was what is now happening to China avoidable? Perhaps, but only if other choices had been made sixty, one hundred, one hundred and fifty years ago. What we are witness to now, is the product of the postcolonial nationalist road to salvation to which the logic of Versailles gave rise. But the inevitability of China's and Japan's being enclosed in this logic was already embedded in the imaginary of their intellectual elites at the end of the nineteenth, and the beginning of the twentieth-century. Embedded in Chen Duxiu's 1919 slogan of "Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy", was the roadmap to today's China. Mr Democracy never reared his head, except perhaps in a confused way in the 1980s, and Democracy or no, the technico-economic outcome would have been the same.

Let us also recall that what happened in Japan and then in China and in the territorially colonized world, that is the reorganization of knowledge, the epistemo-

logical revolutions, the denigration of local knowledges, of what E. P. Thompson called "common sense," had also occurred earlier in the West resulting in the kind of human upheaval, alienation and misery we now see in China's recently urbanized new proletariat.

China's failure to realize that half of Chen's sloganized ambition that was 'Democracy', is in part explained by the success of the other half, 'Science.' Science never needed democracy to flourish. The one was not predicated upon the other; the failure of the post-Communist world to shed totalitarian ways has demonstrated as much. But while science and technology may not need freedom to advance, cultural creativity craves it. While China has been capable of imitating the Western technico-economic model, its officially sanctioned art and culture has clearly failed to impress beyond its borders. Since the beginning of the twentieth century hegemonic cultural production has favoured and represented the reinvention of an industrialized technological power, of the march towards sovereignty through the emulation of Western modernity.

We may go so far as to say that the official literature and culture of the Communist era has functioned as an instrument of the post-colonial poisoned chalice insofar as it has shaped, negotiated and represented the post-Versailles ideology which has led to China's transformation into a major agent of the world technico-economic system. But alongside that dominant cultural

production there has always existed a current that has engaged in the critique of that system. And when, as has often been the case during most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, cultural creativity has been suppressed and censored it has resulted in a critical, dissident cultural discourse, for where there is oppression and censorship, there will be resistance and dissent as surely as night follows day.

Rather than imitate and laud the technico-economic system, unofficial modern Chinese creativity has drawn on the West's, and China own, critical traditions to create alternative cultural modernities of contestation. This parallel creativity in poetry, fiction, film and artistic practice is at odds with the spectacular-oneiric vision that is the official China dream.

This disjuncture explains why China's recent cultural diplomatic policy initiatives have failed, and why Western and other Asian visions of the dreamed universe remain hegemonic. Official American, French, German, British, Spanish and other cultural diplomacies are supported by alternative spectacular cultural diplomacies of a modern global dream represented by Hollywood, Disney, the Cannes Festival, film-stars, singers and sports stars. These cultures offer an exotic to the consumer which often foregrounds the new, the innovative, the culturally vibrant and the cosmopolitan. Asian alternative cultural diplomacy has also been extremely powerful in this respect: Japanese manga and video

games, Korean TV series and K-Pop, Indian cinema and Thai cinema are the most spectacular examples.

China has given the world a cultural diplomatic initiative named after Confucius, a name that symbolizes a millenary order, stability and obedience. This strategy of promoting an exotic that is backward-looking, out of step with today's technico-cultural realities, and that excludes its most influential living artists and creative talent, means not only that the policy is ineffectual, it is counter-productive.

The idea that Chinese Modernity can be different if it re-constructs itself within an identitarian cultural capsule, if it "reserves" itself a "Chinese" cultural space, if it models itself on the supposed Japanese example of a supposedly specific form of modernity, is really to misunderstand the nature of the historical processes that have unfolded and to misunderstand the reality of the dangers facing humanity. The 2011 disaster at Fukushima was not a problem of a specifically *Japanese* modernity, but of a global industrial modernity in which technology has been given the upper hand.

It is as if there were a psycho-social schizophrenia that had gripped China's authorities. On the one hand they invest in and promote a Western technico-economic model, while on the other they implement a culturally conservative policy aimed at producing a hermetic, cultural and academic system to constrain "Westernness" to the technical sphere.

Is there a way out of this limit-less system into which nineteenth-century and twentieth-century colonialism has led the world? Perhaps, because the system is faulty, and within this faultiness lies hope. We see in today's China the imperfections and the misfirings of the system: the high speed trains that derail for lack of respect for security provisions, buildings and bridges that collapse because built by non-qualified personnel or because the concrete has been watered down, cruise ships that capsize because warning signs are ignored. There are other obstacles and brakes on the system: the inability of institutions to move forward at the same speed, and then there is the widespread social contestation of labour.

However, without China, humanity cannot retreat from the abyss. In large part, it falls to China, colonized by, and currently the agent of, the system to create a new culture, and to do so by setting "willed-for limits." The unlimited is incapable of founding and constituting a new culture, or a person. "It is by establishing limits that humans institute themselves as human" ("[C]e n'est pas l'illimité qui peut en rien fonder et constituer une culture, ni une personne....C'est en établissant des limites volontaires que l'homme s'institue homme," Ellul, *Le Système*, p. 305 n.25).

Without China's cooperation, even if the rest of the world co-opted for the path of ungrowth, the nightmare would continue. The 26 Chinese nuclear power reactors in operation, the 24 under construction, and those about to

start construction, present not only a mortal danger for China's people but for China's neighbours also [World Nuclear Association website](#) (consulted 9th June 2015). I was reminded of our nationalist vision of nuclear power and of the illusion of a non-global approach to stepping back from dependence on nuclear technology during a 2014 workshop on the Fukushima disaster, when a Japanese speaker suggested that Japanese civil society was now willing and ready to push for the elimination of nuclear power plants. That is fine, but what about the problem of Chinese civil society on the other side of the East China Sea not being able to follow suit?

If China's people wish to re-route their future, if they wish to live and not just survive, then they will have to fix limits. Such a move would constitute a response, albeit belated, to the "progress" proffered by the global system: imperialism, colonialism, Americanization, and globalization.

Such a course is not impossible. Once again, what has occurred in the West, will occur, is already occurring, in China: a shift in opinion consisting in "disappointment, fear, and questioning," a "widespread revolt of workers against efficiency and the subordination of labour to yield" (Ellul, *Le Système* p. 304). In China on a daily basis there are demonstrations and minor rebellions against the system, and at the individual level, suicides in the face of inhumane working conditions are common. It is at this price that the world's con-

sumers are furnished with the electronic trinkets and toys that fill their spectacular-oneiric lives.

However, the rise of consumerist, productivist China has not only revived and prolonged capitalism for a certain period of time, it has also permitted the expansion of the technological system it feeds. At the same time China's participation in this system brings nearer the inevitable social and environmental crisis that Ellul predicted a quarter-century ago. What Ellul wrote in 1986 resonates even louder and truer since China's leadership fully integrated the country into a system in whose super-face the cracks are legion.

China's contribution to the world's future well-being does not lie in reinventing itself an alternative cultural modernity, nor in marketing a cultural sand-castle that crumbles in the fingers, but rather in contributing to a global conversation focussed on limits. Only then will the real issues facing the world's present and future populations be frontally addressed. Only then will the mystique of growth be interrogated and that creativity, *poïesis*, will reassert its centrality in human society. I use the word creativity, in the sense used by Castoriadis. Poïesis is the work of the artisan and the artist that is not subordinated to the constraints of subsistence. It is creation. The artist and the artisan in the post-colonial, post-industrial, ungrowth society will inevitably need to resort to a cosmopolitan bricolage, creating out of the present and the past, out of what is to hand, and out of what may come from afar. This creativity may be

imbricated with new forms of culture, but it will certainly imply a new poetry, or poïesis, of daily life, the abandonment of the dreamed universe, throwing away the barrel-organ handle, and creating a new music. Only then will the sense of *techne* as the human capacity to make and perform be restored.

But, if change in the sense of "ungrowth," abandonment of current economic dogma, and restoring the ecological balance of our environment is to be effected, then the strategy Ellul proposed in the 1980s would need rapid implementation. A new music, a new imaginary, a new ideology in the best sense of the term, together with propitious intellectual and moral conditions, would be indispensable to the creation of a new human spirit. Specifically, narrow self-interest would need to be overcome, and a commonly borne frugality and "revolutionary austerity" instituted. All in all, a profound epistemological shake-up, and a shared and global awakening from our collective dream would be required. This could only be rendered possible by a "cultural revolution" and the institution of "an ethics of powerlessness" or "éthique de la non-puissance" as the French has it, where the word "puissance" also implies capacity to do and not simply the political power to do (Ellul, *Changer de révolution*, p. 36). Alluding to the doctrines espoused by Gandhi and the civil rights movement, Ellul described the spirit of "powerlessness" as going beyond non-violence, as constituting "the choice...not to dominate, not to exploit, and even not to use the means of power that could be available to us" ("[L]'esprit de Non-Puissance,

qui dépasse la non-violence,...est le choix...de ne pas dominer, de ne pas exploiter, de ne pas user même des moyens de puissance que l'on pourrait avoir," Ellul, *Changer de révolution*, p. 419).

To the sinologist that sentiment resembles closely the political philosophy of Zhuangzi 莊子, a contemporary of Confucius who promoted humanity's realizing its own embeddedness in the ecology of the physical world and, who rejected the Confucian desire to homogenize society and institute the totalizing, hegemonic global power of a social elite.*

* Zhuangzi (Master Zhuang), otherwise known as Zhuang Zhou, was a Chinese philosopher who lived around the fourth century BCE. He is represented in the eponymous philosophical work *Zhuangzi* as a scathing critic of Confucius