

ENTER THE DRAGON

Decoding the new Chinese empire

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When future historians look back on our discordant times, they will surely note an epochal shift of global importance: the return of China, after nearly two centuries of humiliation, to world pre-eminence, and the bungled efforts to restore the American empire to greatness. But today this transformation comes wrapped in bitter disputes and conflicting predictions. Some policy specialists are sure that “the rise of China” is unsustainable, or that forecasts of its global triumph are grossly exaggerated. Others recommend getting tough with an uppity Beijing through trade wars and military clashes in the Taiwan Strait or in the South China Sea. Still others believe that a lengthy period of conflict – a new Cold War – is upon us, or that rough-tongued and cack-handed efforts to rejuvenate a militarily overstretched and fiscally overburdened America will have the unintended consequence of making China great again.

Like bellows to a fire, fallacies about China are inflaming controversies and stoking divisions. These misconceptions are dangerous because they spread confusion, attract simpletons, poison public life and blur political judgements. But which misconceptions are most urgently in need of correction?

The most obvious concerns the nature of the political system of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It is commonly said to be a worrying instance of "totalitarianism". But, strictly speaking, totalitarianism refers to a one-party political order ruled by violence, a single "glorious myth" ideology, all-purpose terror and compulsory mass rallies. The bulk of Chinese people would say that daily life in their country just isn't like that. The Mao days are over. There's a larger point here, for in reality China contradicts the key terms found in political science textbooks. The Chinese polity is something new. It's not a Mugabe-style corrupt military-bureaucratic dictatorship. It is neither an "autocracy" nor a "tyranny", if by those terms is meant a state ruled by a strongman consumed by lawless desires.

China watchers who tell us that Beijing's government is "totalitarian" or an "authoritarian dictatorship" or an "autocracy" sustained by the material benefits it delivers to its toad-eating subjects seriously misperceive things. Not only do they marshal Orientalist prejudices (kowtowing Chinese who haven't yet realised the beauty and benefits of Western liberal democracy), but they ignore the basic fact that citizens who stay inside the government's electric fences enjoy a wide range of daily freedoms without fear. In the PRC, state violence and

repression are masked. Coercion is calibrated: cleverly camouflaged by elections, public forums, anticorruption agencies and other tools of government with a “democratic” feel.

Why do the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders seek to win the loyalty of the population? The shortest answer: because they know the political dangers of self-aggrandisement. Their skittishness is palpable. From the Politburo Standing Committee all the way to the bottom, state officials know the teaching of ancient Chinese political thinkers: power does not in itself

breed the authority required for enduring rule. The leadership instinctively grasps that jobs, full rice bowls, skyscrapers, shopping malls, and talk of socialism and holidays at home and abroad

aren’t enough to ensure their legitimacy. They know by heart the proverb that when trees fall, monkeys scatter. That’s of course why the active public scrutiny and restraint of their arbitrary powers is both unwelcome and impermissible. They don’t like open talk of China as a system of state capitalism that in the name of socialism hatches super-rich tycoons faster than any other country (257 billionaires in 2020 alone). The slightest whiff of a challenge to the CCP’s power can bring down the hammer, as evidenced by mass detention camps in Xinjiang and crushed dissent in Hong Kong. But here’s the thing: the rulers also know that rich and powerful people must fear too much power, just as

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pigs fear growing fat. They reject power-sharing, power-monitoring democracy, yet they fret about reckless abuses of power. That's why the CCP leadership trumpets China as a "people's democracy" and embraces a "phantom democracy" governing style (*shenjingshi min zhu*) that mocks but mirrors and mimics electoral democracies, where the fear of election defeat puts leaders in constant campaign mode.

Phantom democracy

What does it mean to call China a phantom democracy? Examples are plentiful. Most obvious is the proto-democratic style of the present leadership. In the hallowed name of the people, the Party showboats. It practises the common touch, as when President Xi – rumoured to be the world leader who's survived the most attempts on his life, but also has amassed more titles and formal powers than any Chinese leader since the 1940s, including Mao – springs a well-crafted "surprise" appearance and presses the flesh in a Beijing bun shop, rides a bicycle with his daughter, tips a humble trader in the back streets of Nanjing, praises state television journalists or kicks a Gaelic football during an official visit to Ireland.

Chinese phantom democracy extends well beyond leadership style. It includes village elections and the spread of "consultative democracy" into city administration and business. The telecommunications giant Huawei is an example: its governing board, called the Representatives Commission, comprises 115 employee representatives elected through secret ballot by the company's nearly 100,000

shareholder employees, who are scattered across more than 170 countries. Throughout China, state-funded “people’s mediators” resolve conflicts, at no cost to litigants, in disputes over property and labour, divorce, and minor criminal and civil matters. There are neighbourhood assemblies, public hearings and experiments in participatory budgeting. Competition and “anti-corruption” mechanisms are built into state bureaucracies.

Chinese phantom democracy thrives on the clever use of digitally networked media as sophisticated tools to shape public opinion and policymaking, and as early warning devices. Yes, everybody knows the authorities censor and crack down on “inappropriate discussions”. Dawn raids by plainclothes police, illegal detentions and violent beatings by unidentified thugs happen. Less well known is the way China’s CCP rulers use digital media as a listening post – users are urged to vent their grievances, even to fight against the abuse of power. Since the early 1980s, the regime has built a giant information-gathering apparatus designed to shape public opinion. It has many parts, comprising hundreds of registered polling firms – including the Canton Public Opinion Research Centre (C-por), the largest such independent research agency in China, and the *People’s Daily* Online Public Opinion Monitoring Centre, which uses data-harvesting algorithms to send summaries of internet chatter to officials in real time, often with advice about terms to use and avoid during public brouhahas. The apparatus also includes sophisticated digital strategies such as the Blue Map app, which informs citizens in real time about water quality

and local sources of pollution; virtual petition sites, e-consultations and online Q&A sessions; and webcasts that come packaged in official assurances about the need to encourage transparency.

Underpinning these phantom democracy experiments is the idea that government stability rests on public opinion (*min yi*). Ignored by those who view China as a country run by totalitarian bullies and authoritarian autocrats, this principle is of utmost importance in grasping that the new Chinese despotism is equipped with shock absorbers, and therefore more resilient and durable than many suppose. When Xi Jinping told the Central Committee in 2013 that the survival of the regime depended on “winning or losing public support”, he gave an old maxim a new twist. If opinion is the foundation of stable government, then the government must create stable opinion. In the name of “the people”, the imperative is to keep an ear to the ground so that the goal of “guiding public opinion” towards harmonious rule becomes a reality. Cognisant of the errors of the Soviet Union, the party-state is aware it must consistently ensure the people’s loyalty so that its “separation from the masses” never grows perilous.

In this way, oddly, the rulers of China acknowledge that power doesn’t ultimately flow from the barrels of guns, or from Xinjiang-style interrogations, arrests and internments. They admit that little sustains the political order beyond the population’s loyalty – their willingness to believe that the system addresses their complaints, and that democracy with Chinese characteristics is therefore better than its ailing “liberal” alternative.

A new Chinese empire

If the People's Republic of China is understood as a one-party phantom democracy, what can we say about its burgeoning global role?

Here we encounter a second set of misconceptions. When Chinese intellectuals, journalists and diplomats are quizzed about China's foreign policy, they usually reply that the era of "crossing rivers by feeling for stones" (Deng Xiaoping) has been replaced by "crossings of oceans" (Xi Jinping). Scholars have told me that China's newfound global role is as a force for good, in harmony with the Confucian principle of "all under one heaven" (*tianxia*): China is becoming a great power (*daguo*), whose leaders have a responsibility to rule wisely over all in their command. The inference is that China's leaders cannot be reckless: by stirring up political disorder or war, for instance, they would lose their "mandate of heaven" (*tian ming*). That is why, runs the reasoning, China wants to be a "humane authority to improve the world order", as Chinese public intellectual Yan Xuetong claims, and why it respects territorial sovereignty and doesn't interfere in the domestic affairs of others.

Note the absence of any mention of empire. In China, "empire" (*digu*) is a pejorative term best directed at others. The historical fact that China was ruled by empires from the establishment of

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the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE to the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 is bracketed. State officials and media instead use the word to stress China's past victimhood ("the century of humiliation") at the hands of Western imperialism. In the United States, the word similarly triggers embarrassed silence. Americans regard themselves as a benign global power, upholding democracy and international cooperation. Former US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld said it clearly: "We don't seek empires. We're not imperialistic. We never have been." His words could just as easily have been spoken by the current Chinese leadership.

The Confucian edict that the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name has clearly been scuttled. If by "empire" we mean a jumbo-sized state that exercises political, economic and symbolic power over millions of people, even at great distances from its own heartlands, without much regard for the niceties of territorial sovereignty, then technically China is already an empire. It's the word that's needed to describe accurately China's rising global role in such fields as finance capital, technology innovation, logistics, and diplomatic, military and cultural power.

China is an emergent empire of a kind never seen before. Let's call it a galaxy empire. The celestial simile helps describe a massive universe of institutions and activities gravitationally centred on the Beijing-led heartlands.

The most prominent project of this galaxy empire is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its scale and complexity are astonishing.

Launched in 2013, the huge program to build railways, roads, deep-sea ports, bridges, power grids and other infrastructure is set to cost more than a trillion dollars, seven times as much (when adjusted for inflation) as the United States invested in rebuilding Western Europe after World War II. Fifty special economic zones, modelled on the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone that Deng Xiaoping opened in 1980, are planned. When measured in terms of investment opportunities and export markets, and combined with domestic policies designed to boost income and consumption (such as Made in China 2025, which aims to turn China into a high-end producer of goods), it is clear that China's leaders are using BRI to craft an alternative to the US "pivot to Asia". For instance, the renminbi, China's official currency, is being promoted among BRI partners as a serious alternative to the greenback.

The BRI is funding megaprojects on a colossal scale: with plans to link more than sixty-five countries, there are currently 528 overseas projects with a contract value of over \$50 million, and this figure is rising fast. Many of these projects – a \$5.8-billion hydropower dam in Nigeria and a high-speed railway linking Kunming to Singapore, for instance – are still under construction, but the contours of the linkages are already clear. The original Silk Road of the Han dynasty period (206 BCE – 220 CE) powered an early wave of globalisation fuelled by trade networks that stretched west through central Asia, down to the Indian subcontinent and all the way to Europe. The BRI updates this expansionary vision. Beijing-financed infrastructure is

reordering the lives of millions, from South Africa, Nigeria, Hungary, Greece, Iran and Sri Lanka to Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, Jamaica, Mexico and Argentina. Every continent is touched by the new empire, including Antarctica, where China will soon open its fifth polar station, and is out-investing the United States and Australia in research and development.

None of this should surprise. China has already surpassed the United States as the world's largest trading nation. It holds half the globe's patents and has outflanked bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to become the planet's largest creditor. It's now Africa's biggest trading partner, and rivals the United States in Latin America, where Chinese investment, extraction of resources and trade jumped tenfold in the first decade of this century, with China now the largest buyer of iron, copper, oil and soybeans in the region. It's clear as well that the great pestilence currently disrupting the world is working to China's advantage. In 2020, the country accounted for an unprecedented 30 per cent of global economic growth. Despite facing a rapidly ageing population, China appears to be succeeding in its determination to escape the so-called middle-income trap (the failure to shift from low-skilled manufacturing to higher-value goods and services) that during the past generation bedevilled close to 90 per cent of countries that reached China's level of wealth.

What is the long-term significance of these trends? What kind of Chinese empire is emerging at the global level?

The new Chinese empire already defies some classic distinctions. European empires depended on a capitol and key cities in their colonies. China, by contrast, is preoccupied with capital of a different sort: the flow of investment, the spread of networked information technologies and the growth of global markets for its competitively priced goods and services. It connects cities and hinterlands by high-speed railways, airports and shipping lanes. Buoyed by its dependence on digital communication networks, fluid mobility is its currency.

Britannia could not have ruled the waves without coal-fired steam engines and sails. The railroad and telegraph enabled the young American empire to push westwards. The vast global reach of China is strengthened

**[China is] an
information empire,
propelled by
commercial interests**

not by clippers and copper wire but by networked communications systems backed by giant state-protected corporations – such as the e-commerce and technology behemoth Alibaba, and Tencent, the controller of the multipurpose messaging app WeChat, used by 1.2 billion people worldwide. These companies are key stakeholders in the “cyber-sovereignty” net China is casting over spaces well beyond its borders. This model, a serious rival to Silicon Valley, promotes high-speed broadband flows of information in support of China’s governance, investment and financing schemes, and ideas, news and culture. The empire’s surging foreign press corps is an example. Journalists at

the China Global Television Network and the *China Daily* newspaper are more than reporters filing stories from abroad; they double as intelligence providers for the party-state. And cyber-sovereignty is big business. The empire sells its techniques and tools, as in South Africa, the first African country to buy a Huawei-powered 5G network to support smart healthcare, ports, mining and manufacturing.

Harold Innis's much-vaunted distinction between militaristic empires fixated on space and religious empires preoccupied with time is not meaningful with China. It's not a gunpowder or dreadnought battleship or B-52 bomber empire. It's an information empire, propelled by commercial interests, innovations such as the Beidou ("Big Dipper") global satellite navigation system and multipolar governing arrangements.

Striking is the degree to which China has committed to participating in and building cross-border institutions. Declining empires talk big but look inwards, retreating to strongholds and building walls. Rising empires look towards horizons and fling themselves into – and onto – the world. Through institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation alliance and the Chiang Mai Initiative currency-swap arrangement, China actively partners with its fourteen neighbouring states. It plays a high-profile role in regional bodies such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Institutional restructuring and the soliciting of leadership roles within global bodies is equally high on its agenda. China already heads four of the fifteen United Nations

agencies. In recent years, it has helped build, and now leads, multi-lateral institutions such as the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, which are founded on pragmatic consent, not formal treaty alliances.

Kaleidoscopic government

How does China behave within these institutions? Here's another novelty: this empire isn't framed by a dominant ideology. Empires of old typically ruled through a set of legitimating symbols – the Portuguese and Spanish emperors were proselytes for monarchy and the church. China critics say its rulers are in the grip of Marxist–Leninist ideology, while scholars such as Rana Mitter worry about a “new nationalism”. But both assessments miss the point that at home and abroad the regime's leaders come dressed in colourful coats made of different languages and styles. They take a leaf from the book of Charles V, the legendary sixteenth-century Holy Roman Emperor who learned so many languages to help him rule over his vast empire that he was said to speak Spanish to God, Italian to friends, German to enemies and French to lovers.

The promoters of China's galaxy empire speak in tongues. This gives them the tactical advantage of sailing with the political winds and being different things to different people in different times and places. They are hard to pin down. The worship of country means that state-enforced amnesia about past mistakes is compulsory – an obligation acclaimed Chinese author Ma Jian satirises in his novel *China Dream* with “China Dream Soup”, a broth of eternal forgetting.

But what's equally significant is the way CCP leaders spout mantras such as “socialism”, “harmonious society”, “people’s democracy”, “rule of law”, “ecological civilisation” and “ancient Chinese civilisation”. Government, business and cultural leaders all adopt this rhetoric when operating abroad. Power craves authority, which is why the empire throws its cultural weight around on the global stage. Mercedes-Benz was humbled into apologising for Instagramming an inspirational quote from the Dalai Lama. Foreign airlines were pressured into deleting online references to Taiwan. The Houston Rockets basketball team paid dearly for its general manager’s tweet in support of Hong Kong protesters.

But there’s evidence that China’s officials and their media publicists are conscious of the reputational dangers of ideological attacks on free expression. They know those who grow thorns reap wounds, and that’s why they want to be seen as champions of peace and tolerance, wealth creation and good governance. Within bodies such as the World Trade Organization, Chinese diplomats and negotiators display strong commitments to rule-of-law precepts and often impress outsiders with their knowledge of procedural rules and technical details, their preparedness and their tough negotiating skills. In matters of public image, there are paradoxical moments, as when the Chinese government – the enemy of multi-party elections – outflanked the European Union and the United States by providing Cambodia with computers, printers, voting booths, ballot boxes and election monitors in support of its sham mid-2018 general election;

and when China donated large quantities of personal protective equipment to Myanmar, to be used in its 2020 general election.

The de-facto emperor displays a similar kaleidoscopic style. Xi Jinping, the “Chairman of Everything”, doesn’t exude the unchecked megalomania of dictators such as Napoleon, Stalin and Hitler. He’s more like Shakespeare’s Duke of Gloucester, confident in his ability to boost the power and prestige of the empire by adding colours to a chameleon and changing shapes with Proteus. He gives a whole new meaning to dialectics: at home, he’s a tough-minded, iron-fisted champion of “socialism”, head of the armed forces and benevolent man of the people; abroad, he dons the mantle of moral redeemer, champion of ancient Chinese civilisation and stout defender of peace through multilateral institutions.

Predictions of China’s future are warped by wishful thinking

China’s leaders are acutely aware of the pitfalls of military overstretch. That’s why they seek to calm nerves by promoting their empire as a force for peace. This portrayal rests upon spin, silence and secrecy: according to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data, for instance, China is now the second-largest arms manufacturer, behind only the United States, and it has more cruise missiles and middle-range ballistic rockets than its great-power counterpart. The PLA’s navy is the world’s largest. Military bases to supplement its existing Djibouti and Tajikistan installations are no doubt in planning.

China's public relations task is nevertheless made easier by the fact they are up against an American empire that some would say is obscenely overarmed. Those who speak of China as a "bully" and an "aggressor" must remember that the United States remains the world's commander-in-chief. It has military bases and installations in 150 countries, and according to SIPRI spends more on its armed forces than the next ten countries combined.

China's reputation as an irenic empire is reinforced by active contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations – for instance, clearing landmines on the southern Lebanon border with Israel. Its best-known foreign engagements so far have been *withdrawals* of Chinese civilians from conflict zones, as in Libya (2011) and Yemen (2015), where a Chinese version of the "responsibility to protect" ("military officers must be the guardians of the people's security, and military ships must be like Noah's Ark for our compatriots" was the foreign ministry spin) suddenly replaced the doctrine of non-interference in the affairs of other states. Finally, its claim to be a force for peace is bolstered by its unconventional military strategy towards the United States: since it is not an empire in a hurry, it can act under Sun Tzu's guidance to wear down its competitor by avoiding war, demonstrating that deferral and avoiding "lengthy operations in the field" can yield lasting victories.

The next imperial age

The history of empires is suffused with talk of “decline”, “fall” and “collapse” for good reason. Even the mightiest empires are eventually undone by their excesses – by rising costs and revenue shortages, by corruption and cumbrous administration, by unrest on their margins.

Opinions about the sustainability of the new Chinese empire are divided. Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger is among those who are convinced that we have entered the Chinese Century. Others say the growth dynamics can’t last, that Xi Jinping’s galaxy empire will suffer the fate of many of China’s past dynasties. Who is right? What can we say about the durability of the new galaxy empire?

Here there’s a third cluster of misconceptions. Predictions of China’s future are warped by wishful thinking. “I’d give the regime a couple of years, no more than a decade,” a prominent China scholar told me three years ago. He’s been saying that for three decades. The bravado is the flipside of the ill-fated 1990s prediction that market reforms would turn China into an American-style liberal democracy. Regime collapse is also on the political agenda of hawks, who liken China to a house of cards, liable to be scattered by a firm flick of the wrist. They want a new Cold War. They’re convinced of the moral superiority of American democracy. They regard China as a dragon power responsible for the theft of American jobs and a global pestilence. Like former Trump adviser Stephen K. Bannon, they are sure that “the lies, the infiltration and the malevolence” of its rulers render China just as vulnerable to collapse as its Soviet predecessor. They stir

up public sentiment against the “totalitarianism” and “authoritarianism” of the CCP-led regime. They see acts of silent espionage and systematic takeovers of businesses, governments, universities, newspapers, churches and civil society bodies beyond China’s borders. They warn of threats to “sovereignty” and the coming death of liberal democracy.

There is some validity in these warnings. Empires always try to shift the balance of power to their favour. The trouble is this new Cold War politics spreads fickle misconceptions. It understates the resilience of the phantom democracy that anchors the CCP regime. The warriors’ sense of the history of empires, masterfully probed in such works as John Darwin’s *After Tamerlane* (2007), is feeble. They wrongly imagine the new Chinese empire to be a repeat of Ottoman bribery, corruption, decadence and quarrelling advisers. Talk of “getting tough with China” functions as a call to discomfit and debase China – it is a cry of pain from within “the West”. It attracts xenophobes, racists and Orientalists. These bull-in-a-China-shop warriors seem blasé about the probable consequences of the desired downfall – “the collapse of a world empire,” notes the German scholar Herfried Münkler, “usually means the end of the world economy associated with it.” They may be picking a fight that delivers political, economic and reputational setbacks to the United States, or further hastens its demise as an imperial power.

Reckless China-bashing and moonstruck love affairs with America are dead ends. Talking up military aggression in the age of nuclear

weapons is madness. Since there is no Thucydides Trap (the idea that armed conflict is almost inevitable when a rising empire challenges an established one), except in the heads of the New Cold Warriors, a realistic strategy for dealing with China is needed.

We could call it agile non-alignment. Governments, businesses, non-government organisations and citizens committed to engaging critically with China would embrace cooperation in such fields as infrastructure development, scientific research, higher education and renewable energy. Some prickly exchanges with Chinese partners would be expected. Former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd was on to something: when it comes to dealing with China and its allies and opponents, he liked to say, truly durable friendships (*zheng you*) are built on unflinching advice and frank awareness of basic interests and ambitions. Such frankness can yield positive results. On this logic, breaking up with China isn't necessary. It would be self-destructive and foolish.

Agile non-alignment would necessitate the opening of minds: a new willingness among political thinkers, journalists, citizens and politicians to dissect their own ignorance about China, to see with fresh eyes its complexity and to avoid underestimating its shape-shifting resilience. The evidence speaks against the exaggerations of those, like the global China editor of the *Financial Times*, who claim

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that “the wheels are falling off the BRI” and “fiascos are piling up”; that a China “so vaunted for planning its own extraordinary development” is being revealed as “largely unable to pull off the same feat abroad”. Such generalities not only downplay the CCP’s crisis management capacities, demonstrated yet again by its handling of the COVID-19 pestilence it hatched. They underplay the empire’s structural weaknesses.

Imperial flaws, democratic openings

What are the faults and flaws of the new Chinese empire? Most obviously, it is dogged by legitimacy problems. Its leaders are already being reminded that resistance and social unrest are the price of influence and control. They are learning that they cannot unilaterally determine the habits and hopes of people who fall within the ambit of the empire by using methods trialled in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

Every Chinese government official, diplomat and businessperson should read *The Vizier’s Elephant* (1947) by Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić, the classic tale of resentment against the pinched promises and hypocrisy of occupiers, to grasp how easily imperial power can be doubted, satirised, worn down and defeated. The age of communicative abundance makes cultural resistance – mutinies against the maltreatment of local workers, for instance – much easier. Digital tools give new life to the Chinese writer Lu Xun’s principle that “discontent is the wheel that moves people forward”. Local

disenchantment with the empire can readily follow – as happened, for instance, in Kazakhstan in 2019, with large-scale protests against the construction of Chinese factories and the maltreatment of Muslim and Turkic peoples in Xinjiang; and in Zambia, where bitter clashes between local mining workers and their Chinese employers have been rife for decades.

There's also a flaw that troubles all empires: chronic tensions between the central rulers and administrators at the periphery. The Dutch East India Company was constantly troubled by disputes with distant ship captains, company representatives and local governors. British mishandling of its American colonies ended badly. China's difficulties in Libya in 2011 provided a similar lesson: when state-owned companies invested in the local petroleum industry and infrastructure projects, they never anticipated that the collapse of the Libyan regime would require a military rescue operation that inadvertently publicised suspected Chinese arms sales to the Gaddafi regime and embarrassed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The galaxy empire stumbled. Talk of “non-interference” in “sovereign” states was dropped. After declining to veto a UN Security Council resolution sanctioning NATO bombing of Gaddafi's forces, China then urged compromise with the regime and condemned the air strikes. As the regime collapsed, Chinese forces intervened to protect seventy-five Chinese companies and deliver 38,000 workers to safety.

In the coming years, legitimacy problems and tensions between centre and periphery are bound to trouble the Chinese empire,

exacerbated by local and regional concerns about how mounting debt conflicts are to be handled – by persuasion, legal proceedings or force.

There are environmental concerns, too. China invests much more in renewable energy than the United States, yet at least a third of its groundwater is unfit for human consumption. And there are bio-challenges abroad, in places such as Antarctica, where the Chinese-owned Shanghai Chonghe Marine Industry Company, awaiting delivery of the world's largest krill-fishing boat, is sure to encounter protests against its profit-driven plans to mega-harvest the small crustacean currently suffering population decline in delicately balanced biomes.

These vulnerabilities feed China's greatest flaw: its lukewarm and contradictory embrace of public accountability mechanisms. China's leaders say they want open connectivity and uncorrupted cross-border institutions based on consultation. Yet, as a one-party regime, it requires secrecy, dissimulation and unchallenged power. Several leading Chinese international relations scholars have told me privately that their country can't succeed globally unless it opens its power structures to much greater scrutiny, both at home and abroad. Its currency must be eternal vigilance, wise deference to complexity, humble open-mindedness. They have a point: the fundamental weakness of every expanding empire is bombast and vulnerability to public exposure and public rejection. This weakness is especially threatening to an empire born within the information age. Put bluntly, democracy shortages are China's greatest weakness.

Well-functioning monitory democracies nurture watchdog bodies such as public enquiries, judicial review and futures commissions that serve as risk-reduction mechanisms, designed to deal with threatening uncertainties, corruption and nasty surprises. At home and abroad, China tries to mimic these methods. In places such as Sri Lanka, poster campaigns announce the coming of “extensive consultation, joint contributions, shared benefits”. Yet unexpected events can extinguish these promises. A corruption scandal, poisoned food chains, the collapse of a corporate behemoth or sudden social resistance to infrastructure projects can rock China’s power to its foundations. Small beginnings can hatch big dramas. Democratic openings can occur. Backed by demands for public accountability, supported by civil society organisations and political leaders, the push for monitory democracy can spread – even across borders, into the heartlands of the empire. Cross-strait troubles with democratic Taiwan might well prove to be an example in the coming months and years.

It may be that China develops a commanding resilience

But it may be that China’s galaxy empire develops a commanding resilience most observers hadn’t anticipated. Among the biggest imaginable surprises might be that its rulers, tempered by skittishness and smart governing methods, succeed not only in harnessing phantom democratic mechanisms at home to legitimate and strengthen their

single-party rule, but also abroad, in the far-flung districts of their empire. China might perfect the art of what has been called “administrative absorption”: the ability to win over resistance, to convince clients everywhere that Chinese infrastructure projects, ways of life and commitments to multilateral governance are universally good, and clearly superior to the confused American alternatives on offer.

Suppose the present Chinese political system stays on track to humble the United States. That its economy becomes twice as large, with its well-educated population at least half as wealthy as Americans. Then imagine that those who govern the new Chinese empire outdo the Ottomans and the British by cleverly paying homage to their subjects everywhere, employing surprising degrees of self-scrutiny, experimentation and administrative absorption. Let’s further imagine that a mix of economic growth, social policy, state surveillance, political repression, middle-class support, dreams of restoring China to greatness and American foolishness all help to fertilise its power. Wouldn’t China become the global torchbearer for one-party government grounded in the willing loyalty of its people – a strange new post-democratic regime with a democratic feel? Not a “thoroughgoing return to totalitarian politics”, as Chinese scholar Xu Zhangrun has warned, but a tremendously powerful phantom democracy triumphantly beating a path towards a world with little or no room for the power-sharing constitutional democracy of earlier, happier times. ■