

Heavenly dynasty

As long as China is not satisfied at home, it cannot be satisfied in the world



AFP

A question of Hu and Wen

"LET us imagine", says Lin Chong-pin, president of Taiwan's Foundation on International and Cross-Strait Studies, "how President Hu Jintao in his dreams might wish the opening of his Beijing Olympics to be." Not only, says Mr Lin, will he have brought the world's finest athletes there, but also its artists and celebrities. So far, so plausible. He will also have, on his right hand, the leader of the communists' civil-war foe, the Kuomintang, newly elected in the spring of 2008 as president of Taiwan. And on his left a beaming Dalai Lama, thankful to be back on Chinese soil once more after an exile of nearly 50 years. "It would", says Mr Lin, "be the heavenly dynasty all over again, and the barbarians coming to worship." That this happy vision, though technically possible, is still implausible provides insights into the paradox of China's rise.

On the one hand, China appears over the past decade to have signed up wholeheartedly to an international order, of globalised trade and rules-based relations among states, that was not of its making—even as America, the chief architect of that order, has partly walked away from it, with its "coalitions of the willing" and growing opposition to unfettered trade.

China has signed up because it realises it is probably globalisation's greatest beneficiary. This, more than anything, explains the country's remarkable levelheadedness in its dealings with the United States ever since the last crisis in bilateral relations, in 2001, when an American spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter. The levelheadedness has paid off. For as American power has been distracted in the Middle East, so Chinese power has moved up.

A touch of the diabolic

On the other hand, Chinese intentions about what to do with its power in the long run remain deeply ambiguous. If China sees its constellation as heavenly—and the Chinese, like the Americans and the French, have a sense of manifest destiny—neighbours see hints of the diabolic.

Perhaps the growth in the military budget reflects China's growing wealth and prestige, along with a desire to protect its rising shipments of oil and other commodities: the country seems bent on building a blue-water navy. Understandable, perhaps, within China's terms of reference, to have a military strength capable of deterring Taiwan from declaring independence. But why missiles with a range to hit Japan? Why, in January, did China test-fire a rocket to destroy an old weather satellite, when it insists no one is more committed to the peaceful development of space? And why, last autumn, did a Chinese submarine suddenly pop up next to the Kitty Hawk, an American aircraft carrier?

Equally, what is China doing building roads, ports and pipelines in Myanmar and Pakistan, connecting west and south-west China with the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean? The point could simply be to help the development of backward Chinese regions. But these links could equally serve as future supply routes for the Chinese navy.

For Brahma Chellaney, at the Centre for Policy Research in Delhi, the conclusion is plain: along with the planned extension of the new Qinghai-Lhasa railway, which could in theory bring military material up quickly to the Tibetan border, "it amounts to a strategic squeeze of India."

India's government is less willing than some of its intellectuals to see China's actions as a strategic squeeze. Nevertheless, it is trying to balance China's advances. Noting that the West's abandonment of Myanmar in the absence of democratic change opened the way for Chinese influence, India is trying to make its own advances to the awful regime there. ASEAN is doing the same.

Thus China's rise is quietly bringing about an opposite, if not yet equal, reaction. Japan's relations with China are much improved since the anti-Japanese riots two years ago sparked by visits by the then prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, to Yasukuni, Tokyo's militarist war shrine. As soon as Shinzo Abe became prime minister last September, he made a fence-mending trip to Beijing. North Korea's nuclear games may also have pushed Japan and China closer.

As for Taiwan, China currently calculates that in next year's presidential election a pliable Ma Ying-jeou, the KMT's favoured son, will succeed the independence-minded Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party. Mr Ma's election prospects, however, have got murkier since his indictment in February over alleged misuse of funds during his time as Taipei's mayor. And even if he does win, China may face disappointments.

It believes it has an understanding with the KMT (whose elder statesman, Lien Chan, visited the mainland in a groundbreaking trip two years ago) that Taiwan is a part of China. Certainly, Mr Ma says he will push for closer economic co-operation and wants Taiwan to be a "peacemaker not a troublemaker". But he also says the Taiwanese want to keep the status quo—in other words, a sovereign Taiwan that is independent in all but name. "We will not pursue talks on reunification," Mr Ma insists. "The matter will have to wait until the mainland becomes democratic and prosperous."

The home front

Doubts about China's intentions, however, stem perhaps less from its actions overseas than the values that underpin its behaviour at home. After all, China's political and economic affairs are still run with what is essentially a Leninist apparatus of state. The state's instinct is to co-opt those within the empire who question the political orthodoxy—or if that does not work, to deal with them harshly. Thus the Dalai Lama is vilified, and Tibetans are demeaned in their own land. Over Taiwan, China reserves the right to nuke what it says are its own people.

As the Dalai Lama puts it: "Mr Hu's constant emphasis on a 'harmonious society' suggests that something is missing." China is wracked by social inequality, environmental damage and government corruption. Beijing's preparations for the Olympics are a heart-rending metaphor for this. The games have provided a pretext for an orgy of official corruption and cultural vandalism which in a few brief years has all but destroyed a unique historical city. A few scraps have been left for touristic consumption. Beijing's inhabitants have been shunted into tower blocks on the city's edges. In their place rise vast bombastic structures, architects' and politicians' self-indulgences with no civic context.

A constant theme heard from thoughtful Chinese is that China's rise lacks a moral underpinning, and that a moral vacuum lies at the heart of Chinese life. The Dalai Lama puts the blame on the Communist Party's "radical atheism" and predicts that "sooner or later, a spiritual or moral culture will have to come to fill an internal emptiness; externally, there will have to be rule of law, democracy, freedom of the press."

A slow enriching of both public and private life may already be under way. Non-government organisations to tackle social and environmental issues have grown hugely in number since earlier this decade. Some corners of the press have pushed the frontiers of what they can write about. And across China evidence is growing of a resurgence of spiritual and religious inquiry.

All the same, raw and volatile forms of nationalism lurk just beneath a usually placid surface. They erupted in 1999 when NATO bombs struck the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo war, and again in anti-Japanese riots in the spring of 2005. Internet chatrooms are full of vituperative anti-foreign sentiment.



Carrie Devorah – WENN
The Dalai Lama sees a moral vacuum

The memories of past horrors in China—foreign occupation, civil war, the cultural revolution—have made older Chinese generations into advocates of a peaceful region. All the same, the current leaders ignore popular sentiment at their peril. Passing on the lessons of history to a younger, more nationalistic generation that never experienced horrors at first hand is China's "big problem", says Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's elder statesman.

All this feeds into the neighbours' surviving suspicions about China's intentions, despite a decade-long charm offensive. So long as China is not satisfied within its own borders, how can it be satisfied in the world?

In the long run, this will place limits on Chinese power and influence. It is not just America's allies such as Japan and Taiwan that want it to stick around for a long while yet. ASEAN countries also need the United States to balance China. Singapore recently signed an agreement allowing American forces greater access; Indonesia and America have resumed bilateral military contacts; and Vietnam wants to forge a strategic alliance with its former enemy.

There is also, Thailand's recent military coup notwithstanding, Asia's general embrace of democracy. Michael Green of Georgetown University, a former Asia director at America's National Security Council, sees it as a tremendous potential source of "soft" power for America. Whereas China rigidly sticks to its policy of non-interference in the affairs of other nations, ASEAN has moved on. Malaysia's prime minister, Abdullah Badawi, says ASEAN's hallowed principle of non-interference must be "updated". A new draft of ASEAN's governing charter says that regional stability rests on "the active strengthening of democratic values, good governance, the rule of law", and so on.

Such sentiments around Asia might, at the very least, stand in quiet opposition to Chinese power. But if China embraced some of them for itself, who can guess at the limits to its celestial realm?

Disponível em: <<http://www.economist.com>>. Acesso em 4/4/2007.