



China Through Media  
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*For Western governments and firms, coping with China is an ever more pressing concern. To respond wisely, they need to understand what makes China tick. The Economist 28<sup>th</sup> November 2020 p55*

A man carrying a heavy suitcase at an underground station refuses to allow his suitcase to be scanned. He threatens to blow it up, is overcome and arrested. The transport police break open the suitcase and find, inside, a dead man.

What murderer would be so crazy as positively to invite arrest?

In the 10-part series *The Reticent Truth*, the cerebral detective Yan Liang, little by little, understands what's been going on.

He begins to realise that what he's investigating is a meta-story, a means by which his attention can be drawn to the real story. The real story is the violence and perversion of some very powerful people.

That real story started many years before when a rural schoolteacher was murdered because he uncovered the sexual trafficking of his pupils.

Several people had tried to investigate and, because of police corruption and moral cowardice in the legal system, suffered.

This detective series was transmitted earlier this year. As with Montalbano, the Sicilian detective series, the personality of the cop is a key attraction.

The message is that there are always going to be greedy and corrupt people but as long as there are some people with a sense of public service and responsibility these matters can be sorted.

*Reticent Truth* indicts business leaders – is perhaps reflective of Mr Xi's left-wing bias – whereas the last, very popular, drama of this genre - *IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE* - indicted officials, both junior and senior, even right up to the top of the government. This graphic illustrates their networks.

We might deduce from such willingness to discuss weaknesses openly that China may be less corrupt than the European Union and many of its constituent countries, in which journalists have often found themselves so restricted that they give up (Alfter 2020, Bucak 2020 and Palczewski 2020).

The heroes of these crime dramas, police officers, lawyers, whistle-blowers are inspired by heroes from China's past. They want to be upright officials like the 11<sup>th</sup> century Bao Gong, serving society and adhering to the moral precepts of Confucianism.

Chinese officials and journalists refer to Bao Gong in the way we might refer to Horatio Nelson, as a model of service to the nation.

A difficulty in talking about media in very general is that the media are everything from emoticons to museum displays to the more customary magazines and television programmes of many different genres.

China's media pose the further difficulty that, although very few Brits have ever come across China's media, they often have quite fixed views about them.

They appear to believe, for example, that they consist entirely of political propaganda, as one ex-FCO Minister said to me not long ago. We shall see.

By the way, conventional media are delivered in other languages, including French, Arabic, Russian and Spanish (play English)

My first objective is to provide a quick overview of the media scene so that we can grasp its extent and variety and dispel the rather silly idea about China's media being nothing but political propaganda.

I want to give you an idea of what we can learn about China through its media and I am not looking at the omissions nor am I fault-finding. I am looking for what I can learn about this ginormous country and what ideas I can pick that might be useful for us.

After the overview I shall go on to look at three media phenomena which each tell us something about Chinese society and polity.

- The first will be the representation of the current pandemic
- The second is the way that people talk about governance, including democracy
- The third is the working out of social issues in the media

### Networksphere

- At 900 million, the Chinese are the biggest single group of Internet users and china biggest E-commerce market in the world.
- There are 1.3 billion mobile phones, and the majority are also used for news and entertainment
- 60% Internet users watch TV online

What does all this mean for the rest of us? It surely means that China has seized the opportunities of the Internet with colossal enthusiasm.

It suggests that they will be at the forefront of cyber enterprise and AI / and that we are not just talking about an elite being attuned to the new world of commerce and development, but use of the new technologies being generalised over the entire population.

There are some other takeaways.

Because of the government's insistence that China have its own search engines and social media platforms the Chinese are not in thrall to the monopolists of Silicon Valley, Google and Facebook.

We used to berate China for restricting access to the US-dominated Internet. Now that we are aware of the huge power and possibly subversive influence of it, we are lamenting that we do not have our own alternatives to the media empires of Silicon Valley.

Despite Party influence on the media in China, it seems to observers who come across Chinese students and professionals that they are better informed about the world and better educated than most Americans and possibly than many Europeans too.

How is that possible? Access to the Internet may be one reason and then there is the vast amount of factual TV and net streaming.

Curiosity as to how the rest of the world works is notable but surely the quality of school education – as in other parts of East Asia - is significant too. Chinese pupils have long come higher in the PISA tables than many Western countries. When Chinese youngsters come to UK schools they are, famously, streets ahead of their local contemporaries. And, as if that were not enough gall, new generations of students in the creative subjects from fashion design to industrial design, media or music are notably enterprising and innovative. We had better watch out.

### Investigative Journalism

The Agriculture Ministry promotes genetically modified foods, but Cui Yongyuan's blog exposed that the Ministry's own canteen excludes them. Cui is a celebrity investigative journalist.

Cui makes enemies among the powerful but gives hope to 20 million followers. For them, his fearless exposure of frauds, corruption and malfeasance makes him a hero. Thousands send him reports and he re-posts.

Recently Cui has taken on the Supreme People's Court, the film industry and its star celebrities as well as the Agriculture Ministry and its supposed experts on genetic modification.

He demands that laws be upheld and condemns bad laws. He has berated China's most powerful man, the head of the Party's Discipline Commission, Wang Qishan.

Social media are the means by which millions of Chinese debate, complain and gossip. The authorities listen in carefully and take note, often adapting their policies in consequence.

There is a long tradition of whistle blowing in Chinese governance and modern investigative journalism emerged in the 1920s. Although suppressed during much of the period of Mao's rule, it had a second Golden Age in the 1980s-90s but is now going through a period in which considerable courage and chutzpah is needed.

### Tik Tok 抖音

Tik Tok, from Bytedance, has huge take-up. 2bn downloads. Why is it so successful?

In the Anglophone world it may be mainly exhibitionist, but, in China, Tik Tok provides ordinary people, not exclusively youngsters, with opportunities to earn money by becoming fashion gurus or opinion leaders.

## The Press

When I was first in China there were less than 70 newspapers.

There are now over 2000 and they vary from mouthpieces of the party to liberal critical. Again I have to say that times are not good for the critics these days. But they will not last forever.

China's most popular newspaper is a curious one, REFERENCE NEWS, a summary of foreign news reports originally exclusively for officials.

It is now publicly available. The fact that a summary of foreign news is the most read newspaper is evidence of the interest in things international. People want to know what others think and they want to learn from others who are more advanced or prolific.

## Periodicals

These are the 4 highest circulating magazines, two of which deal with family issues, one of which contains stories, often with a moral tone, about daily life, and THE READER which introduces and summarises books.

## Current Affairs

Current Affairs magazines have smaller circulations but greater scope for critical discussion than newspapers.

The two most important featured here are *Truth Seeking*, the journal of the Central Committee of the Party and *Finance*, China's version of the *Economist* or *Financial Times*.

The two leading financial magazines are essential reading for foreign businesses in China, or at least for their Chinese -reading consultants and advisers.

## Foreign Magazines

Scooping up much of the advertising for beauty products and fashion are foreign magazines.

Foreign involvement in media is very circumscribed and it is only in highly commercial, product-oriented, magazines like these that foreign companies such as Haymarket can get into the media market.

## Television

The medium engaging most people's attention and thus most influential is television, or, as we should increasingly say, screen media because of the variety of platforms.

- 1.2 billion access TV
- China has more broadcast channels than any other country
- Average citizen watches TV 3 hrs per day, mostly drama

- China produces more programming than any other country
- It's international market for drama is growing rapidly, competing with the Korean, Indian and Turkish drama industries.

## News

News programmes are unashamedly the announcements of the authorities – national in the case of CCTV, but provincial, county and city further down the tree.

- CCTV dominates News coverage with the state news agency, Xinhua, providing much of the content
- Before President Xi, the national media had more autonomy but Xi has tightened political control
- Simulcast News 新闻联播, daily 7pm to 400 million followed by the provincial or local news

Since power in China is more devolved than in the UK, media also have distinct characteristics in different provinces. Provinces have populations equal or exceeding European countries.

## Actuality

News programmes in the provinces and counties are less formal and their approach varies according to the local government and current management.

## Bai Yansong

In this photo you see our very own Jeremy Paxman with his equivalent, Bai Yansong, an influential journalist who has been suspended on occasion for offending authority but has always bounced back.

I got them together for a conference on what is meant by Public Service media. There are threats to public service media in both countries – in the UK from hostile commercial competitors and in China from the party bureaucrats.

Nevertheless, there is a vast number of current affairs talk shows, in which much of the discussion is about economic policies and projects.

## Chat show *Weirdo Says* 奇葩说

Should we be concerned about people whose relationships are all with robots? Recently two irreverent commentators led teams to debate this topic on the Aiqiyi platform *Weirdo Says*.

Now in its 6<sup>th</sup> season *Weirdo Says* is adored by millennials who join its cutthroat debates on

- how to conduct relationships,
- making a career,
- coming out as homosexual,
- the limits of friendship,
- whether women need to choose between career or family and
- how you should respond to your parents when they beg you to marry.

The quality of debate is as important as the topic; rhetoricians comment on the arguments and the use of evidence, as do viewers.

The show has spun off books on public speaking, negotiation and effective communication, with the premise that anybody has the right to an opinion and can develop the skills to express it.

China, remember, considers itself a democracy, even if its critics do not.

## Youth Chat Shows

### 放学别走 After Class

A chat show devised and produced by a former student of mine. With some members of the production team is an English assistant, now at Cambridge studying politics. She chose to spend her gap year learning Chinese.

## Talent Shows

China is replete with hundreds of talent shows, unsurprising in a country where people sing and perform poems, jokes and tricks every week at dinner parties and outings with friends.

## Dimension Nova

China has just produced what I think is the first virtual talent show. Again from Aiqiyi, it pits 32 virtual contestants against each other, judged by three current 'celebrities'.

Winning contestants are expected to become commercially valuable idols just like real humans in fact more so, because unlike real humans they don't get tired and can be made to do almost anything.

It seems that virtual idols attract fans just like human ones. I suppose the best thing you can say is that it's much better to have a doll as an idol than a politician.

## The Nation's Treasures 国家宝藏

THE NATION'S TREASURES 国家宝藏 was developed in the UK on a China Media Centre TV Innovation and Development Course and has since been transmitted in China to enormous success.

Nine major museums each present three national treasures across the episodes.

Each treasure is explained by national treasure keepers (historical figures performed mainly by celebrities) telling their stories.

Eventually nine 'winners' are chosen by public vote from the 27 treasures whose stories have been dramatically reconstructed.

With 800 million requests on TV and video portal sites and over 1.7 billion online comments, the show has become an instant TV and cultural phenomenon. The number of visitors in the nine museums surged by 50%.

What does this tell us about China today?

Pride in traditional culture; aspiration to be educated, consciousness of belonging to an influential country.....these are all part and parcel of being Chinese today.

As an English boy growing up in Italy as a child I was very aware of the contrast between the story of England – a missionary nation whose greatest heroes were (then) military commanders – and the contrasting Italian view of Italy as a country of painters, poets and philosophers.

When Chinese leaders talk of making China Great Again (I use the slogan popularised in the USA) they talk of science, the arts and an Ancient Civilisation of many achievements. They rarely refer to expansion, war and enterprise – although there is plenty of enterprise – but refer to learning and cultivation. I think that it is important that our leaders dealing with China understand this. As Graham Alison has written.

It is very silly to assume that China's vital interests mirror those of the United States. China and the west are separated by deeply different civilisational values and it is essential to understand that.

Allison Graham (2017) *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?*

### Dating Shows And Job Shows

This dating show 非诚勿扰 (don't bother me if not sincere) recorded one edition at the University of Westminster in London. To generalise, we can say that dating shows are not about sexual attraction but about mental, social and emotional compatibility. And also about practicalities such as 'does the man have enough money to keep a wife and child in the manner she considers appropriate'. The regulator has recently forbidden the mentioning of specific amounts of money but many of the questions posed to the candidates are clearly aimed at finding out how well off they are.

This is a society in which, notwithstanding the rise in the number of divorces, marriage is taken very seriously as a matter that affects the whole extended family, plus the interests of generations before and after.

### 职来职往

There are many job shows in China and some of my students have appeared on them. Very similar to dating shows and at least as tough, candidates pitch themselves and get interrogated by potential employers.

Young people are prepared for this by college life, which more and more includes opportunities for debating, pitching and self analysis.

This is a really socially valuable use of TV. Speaking of socially valuable there are many programmes lauding local heroes, people who have devoted themselves to charity or improving the environment or other good works.

### Forget Me Not Cafe

This extraordinary reality show was, to my great surprise, a huge hit among young people. 5 people with Alzheimer's run a café, managed by actor Huang Bo 黄渤

- It is shot in a seaside village in Shenzhen
- Has very high ratings, especially youth
- It is sponsored by the largest mineral water company

I found it hard to believe that young people would really want to watch it until I talked a few days ago with some students in St James Park.

They reaffirmed to me that they had watched every episode. Why? I said? What is interesting about watching wrinklies losing their minds?

Well, replied one student (and all the others agreed) our grandparents are the most important people in the world to us, so it's like being with them!

### Historical Drama

30% of what people watch on screen is *made-for-screen* drama and 5% consists of films.

Much of this is historical drama, apparently because people love the court intrigues which are more prominent in Chinese historical drama than are fights.

It is said that Chinese viewers liked *Downton Abbey* because it was all about intra family intrigues.

Dynasty Dramas take history seriously and implicitly criticise today's politicians.

Viewers are quick to see the resemblance between the realities of the twenty-first century and times past. Some historical dramas connect the grandeur and glory of ancient China to current-day excitement at China's re-invigoration.

### Good Husbands

This is successful marketing CEO Li Xiaoran.

In the drama series *The Good Husbands* she wants to marry her former university tutor, a divorcee 20 years older than she. Here she is, trying to ignite his interest.

But Li Xiaoran will not marry without her parents' approval, because she believes in the family as much as any Confucian grandpa.

That approval is not forthcoming.

But when her own sister is abandoned by her youthful husband, then Xiaoran's parents suddenly see some virtue in the older man.

Every character – even the errant husband - cares terribly about keeping the three-generation family together, despite multiple threats and challenges brought about by the evolving position of women, urbanisation, economic change and the collapse of communist ideology.....

It is inspiring to see how drama and literature subverts the anti-family discourses of both Marxists and capitalists, even while reflecting the pressures on traditional family life.



## Woman Drama

### First Half of my life

- There are 2 female friends, 1 a housewife/mother, 1 a highflying professional
- The Housewife's husband shacks up with colleague
- The Housewife divorces, starts from the bottom rung of the job ladder
- The Housewife then has to resolve
  - her child's longing for his father,
  - her younger sister's marital crises and
  - her widowed mother's loneliness
- The now ex-Housewife struggles to find work but is helped by highflier's fiancé
- Fiancé falls in love with housewife
- Men are vile

### A Wenzhou Family 温州一家人

This is the drama which to my mind expresses best Chinese peoples' views of themselves and their struggle from poverty and backwardness.

- The *Wenzhou* father bullies his teenage daughter to emigrate to Italy to 'get rich', ie work as a virtual slave in a restaurant
- his son trades in Siberia;
- father sells the family croft and drags his wife into the big city sifting rubbish for reusable plastic.

Sometimes driven to despair by the struggle to survive, all ultimately achieve some stability – they survive:

Father makes the family fortune in the oil business;

- daughter's business sense supports her parents through crises;
- son settles down, 'opting out' in the countryside that his father longed to leave, becoming a rural primary teacher in an impoverished village and
- mother, who also becomes a successful businesswoman, is the bedrock.

*Wenzhou Family* is China's economic renaissance made flesh.

It explains the toughness of parents and the sharp practice of businesspeople, one step from failure and starvation. You may not like these people, but by God you admire them. They make demands on each other, but they stick together. And they never give up.

This, I suggest, is how the Chinese see themselves.

Now we come to the three big issues I want to say a little more about.

This is a gargantuan media system serving 1.3bn people and now with a growing number of participants, viewers and readers abroad.

So, it is risky to make generalisations let alone to say that media stories and reports are truly representative of a nation as vast and diverse as this one.

But I think that to a great extent they are and, at the end, I shall explain why I think that

Meanwhile I shall take three themes, one of which is topical, ie the tackling of Covid19.

The second theme I have called 'Our system' by which I mean the unending discussions which have gone on for a century and a half about how China should be run.

These have moved into a very new stage in recent years for two reasons:

(1) the unending attacks on, and criticisms of, China by the USA and Europeans demand a response and

(2) China's successes and in particular her perceived successes in governance when compared to the USA, give Chinese thinkers the opportunity to explain why they believe that China's mode of government is more efficacious than that of the Western critics.

Finally, perhaps the most discussed issue of any, family life today and, in particular, the situation of women.

### Pandemic on Screen

There has been a vast number of programmes about the pandemic and its consequences in China, in Wuhan, in the world.

Clockwise from left to right are four examples.

The Chinese Doctor is by an independent production company for an independent platform. It stresses the role of the medic and the difficult decisions he or she has to make.

The second, *Lockdown: One Month in Wuhan* is a harrowing documentary about the panic that took over Wuhan in the early days and the ways in which people responded, it is a social observation. How did people cope with their lives being shut down so suddenly?

The CCTV official documentary, *Fighting Covid 19*, presents the heroic and self-sacrificing work of every arm of the public services, inspired to work together as if in a war. In a typical scene, you see medical staff reinforcing each other's resolve like soldiers going into battle. The same approach was found among transport personnel, the uniformed services and industries commandeered to face the problems of provision.

Finally, *With You* portrays the individual and family stories in heart rending detail.

Although their emphases are all different, the messages of these programmes would be familiar to the UK's Second World War generation.

For, they are all, in their different ways, celebrations of solidarity and community in the face of terrible threats.

That is not so different from the way in which we have chosen to see ourselves in similar circumstances although we are chary of stressing togetherness too much. We also make much of

the failures of our government – it's always government – whereas Chinese media eschews that line of enquiry and officialdom often shuts up the few lonely individuals who question the policies.

Accentuating the positive is not only a domestic ploy. China's media abroad tend to report as positively as they can.

Media academics call this 'constructive reporting' and there is an emerging theory to justify it as being less focused on the sensational, the depressing and the violent. Reporters claim that they want to focus on how solutions to problems are being found, how victims are getting over their sufferings and on projects to improve the environment rather than failures alone. At least that is what they intend.

*This is China* is a one man show more like a David Attenborough polemic than Andrew Neil's interrogations. It comes from Dragon TV, in Shanghai. In this edition Zhang Weiwei is out to inform his elite viewers, many of whom will have been educated abroad or have sent their children abroad,

- that East Asia has overcome the virus better
- and what this tells us about governance in the West and in China.

He is not the only pundit pondering the fate of China, the world and global issues: there are several others. But Zhang has lived and worked in Europe and offers a perspective on China which is informed by his knowledge of the West. He brings Western politicians and intellectuals onto his programme as interviewees.

In a recent edition, dealing with the pandemic, he argues that responses to the pandemic, like responses to the global financial crisis of 2008-9, have revealed the strengths and weaknesses of different systems of government.

Zhang Weiwei argues that, not only can Chinese authorities take decisive action, but in dealing with whole-society threats such as the pandemic they have no need for compulsion.

They can rely upon citizens' sense of solidarity and mutual responsibility towards others. And their trust in the authorities' competence. (well attested by US opinion polls)

In support of this Zhang shows how Chinese political decision-makers are more highly educated, more experienced and more tested than Western political leaders.

He doubtless has in the back of his mind the behaviour of President Trump when he compares 'Western politicians' unfavourably with Chinese decision-makers. But he also makes a more profound point.

Western politicians and opinion formers are deeply ideological, convinced that they and only they, know how the world should be run. Their minds are closed to other ideas. If someone disagrees with them, or, even worse does better than them, they must be an enemy.

Their arrogance and prejudice inhibited them from learning from the East Asian countries (with their experience of SARS) so their people have suffered from the pandemic much worse than the East Asians.

So much propaganda, you may say. And it is true, that what Zhang says must be pleasing to the Party.

But don't imagine that Chinese audiences swallow the Party's ideas hook line and sinker. Just as they are canny shoppers, so they are sceptical consumers of media. In my experience, they read

between the lines, think what is behind the stories, they reconstruct what they think may be the 'reality'.

This is not just because the news media are dominated by the Party but because there is a deep aversion to credulity itself in the Chinese psyche. This has probably been reinforced by politicians attempting to impose Marxist shibboleths. But there are some other possible reasons.

One great contrast with the Western world is that there has never been a transcendental religion of any sway among China's educated classes. Zhang points out that 18<sup>th</sup> century European thinkers admired China for its disregard of religious fantasies and superstitions.

Jesus Christ, like Guan Yin, assorted Buddhas and ex-officials, are revered as good chaps who can be cited in times of stress but in China everybody thinks they know that Gods are all human creations. In the pick and mix world of Chinese superstition, the idea of *blind faith*, as Christians, Moslems and Marxists know it, is not part of the package.

There are well-loved poems and stories eulogising soldiers who ran away rather than die for some politician; the idea of being martyr for a cause – especially being martyr for a God or an idea which was dreamed up by some foreigner with a big beard – is ludicrous.

Confucians have really never deluded themselves that humans are more than creatures of nature, but we are animals who need to be circumscribed and civilised by tenets and rituals such as those of Confucius.

Especially after the ideological insanity of the Mao years, people are pragmatic and, as Richard Sykes of Imperial College noted on his visits to China, this pragmatism provides a very good basis for being scientific or at least empirical in their approach to everything.

Thus, the gung-ho style of news and current affairs is both (A) acceptable and (B) like water off a duck's back.

There is a second possible reason why the kind of carping and revelation of the squalid which we think of as part of the communicator's job may not be of interest.

Chinese life has been so difficult, so unstable, so demanding for several generations that they may prefer their media to help them get through life, give them useful advice and wholesome models; people have enough troubles not to want negativity when in front of the screen.

And here's a third reason: The Anglophone media reflect a tradition of state-society opposition which is foreign to China. To my Chinese students, China is a family, sometimes, as George Orwell said of England, with the wrong people in charge. But you do not set out to get rid of your naughty parents, you seek to bring them to reason. There is no *Her Majesty's Opposition* but there are intellectuals, journalists and now netizens who believe they have the right to 'supervise' the powerful and social media are their vehicles of choice.

Zhang Weiwei is welcome for another reason, too. For generations Chinese were told they were inferior.

When Europeans strutted around China telling the Chinese to buck up and become Christians they smarted and lost faith in their own institutions.

In Mao's time the Communists called for the destruction of their own culture and its replacement by a Western ideology (Marxism Leninism) which – unknown to Chinese – had already been rejected by advanced countries.

After Mao's death Deng Xiaoping showed China how backward it was compared to the USA and Europe. Another disillusion.

Now - Zhang, and others, want to restore faith in what is, after all, a great human civilisation which has recovered from trauma and, as Australian PM Kevin Rudd put it,

### Show

Over 30 years China has pulled off the 'the English industrial revolution and the global information revolution combusting simultaneously and compressed into not 300 years but 30'.

Zhang wants Chinese people to feel that they have, at last, restored their civilisation.

### Same

Below the picture of Zhang is one of my bookshelves where the yellow volumes are part of the so-far 16 volume *Civil Servant's Diary* 官场笔记.

A novel. If you are a Trollope reader then I can tell you that its author is a 21<sup>st</sup> century Trollope. Trollope's Barchinonshire Chronicles in China are the Lingxi Province Chronicles of these books. (Lingxi is an imaginary province)

The analogy is apt in another way too – China's renaissance today is not merely economic and political, but cultural. There are vast quantities of literature published and *Civil Servant's Diary* is by no means outstanding as fiction, its just that it is extraordinarily interesting for what it tells us about how China is managed.

Here is the story...

Upon graduation from an insignificant local university, protagonist Hou is posted to the sticks at the lowest level of public servant in a backward province. Enthusiastic and ingenious, he manages to build the road and bridge to connect his villagers to the county economy and transform their lives.

His career takes off when the villagers ignore the Party's candidate to elect him to head them and he gets on the lowest rung of the Civil Service proper, where his abilities and social skills advance him rapidly.

The story of the law graduate's career from village dogsbody to Mayor of a City is spellbinding. All the major issues that bedevil governance are there:

- Expropriation of farmland,
- alienation of state assets,
- bank failure,
- the hated one-child policy
- police brutality,
- media casuistry,
- factionalism among officials,
- nepotism,

- criminal gangs,
- suborning,
- ideological contradictions.

Hou's relationships are sub stories woven into the plot: his family life; his dealings with superiors and dependents; love affairs; his own business ventures to supplement his pitiful salary; how he networks with dining, dancing and card play.

Hou and his credible adventures epitomise the human dimension of China's governance, where power is dispersed, and officials are judged on their enterprise and their contribution to economic development and employment.

From these novels you can understand the role of the officials in China's great leap forward of the past 30 years and why Chinese people tell all the Pew surveys that they are well-governed, despite the lack of electoral democracy.

### Now to Family Life

If you have had the pleasure of reading the great 18<sup>th</sup> century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, published at almost exactly the same time as Feilding's *Tom Jones*, you will know the model of family life, if not the ideal, that Chinese people have inside their heads – and hearts.

Several generations are living together, with the younger generation sharing life not only with their own children but with their parents to an extent that is quite extraordinary to Anglophone societies.

Today the multi-generational household is difficult to maintain thanks both to communist ideology and to the housing policies of successive governments which have broken up families.

Rural families can still manage them and middle-class families – if they can afford it - will often group their flats together so that grandparents, siblings and cousins are in the same block.

If they can work this, then mutual support and cultural transmission can go on as in the old days and mothers are the ones to benefit most.

In a world in which girls, especially only children, are conditioned to believe that they must have a career that flatters their parents and in which men are not reliable breadwinners, multiple difficulties emerge. And these are reflected on screen, day in, day out.

### All's Well

The title of this series is ironical – almost nothing is 'well'.

The father is the Head of the Family. He's bereaved, so the sons rally round.

But he is a selfish hypochondriac. He expects his eldest to buy him a smart flat because he won't live in the house which reminds him of his miserable life with his wife.

The two boys have well-paying professional jobs and pretty working wives.

But it is the daughter who is the most successful, managing a substantial fintech company, unmarried and with bitter memories of her parents' favouring of her brothers over her, the mere girl.

She even ran away from home when her mother decreed that she could not go away to university and she supported herself through her studies.

Her brothers took no notice. Nor did father, terrified of his bossy wife.

Vicious arguments arise over who should care for widowed father but none of the siblings question their ultimate interdependence – that they belong to each other.

In Chinese families the tie that binds is not between husband and wife; it is that between parent and child, which endures forever. Even when the parent doesn't deserve the care his children will lavish on him.

If that sounds far-fetched to you, it is not. In my experience of Chinese students and colleagues, they put their parents' wishes and needs before anything else.

In *All's Well* the eldest son is prepared to sacrifice the interests of his own wife and child for father. But his wife's not having it.

Both this series and *A Wenzhou Family*, to which I referred earlier, reveal negative aspects of the traditional family.

They also show us the endurance of Confucian values and the reciprocity which cements Chinese society and underpins individual achievements.

Family life is the theme of most soaps and TV series the world over. What is distinctive about the Chinese versions?

The Chinese ones deal with what I would call mainstream issues which academic Xu (2008) believes really address the concerns of the majority of people.

These are moral issues, as they directly address how family relationships and values are threatened by an increasingly individualistic and materialistic society.

Relationships between siblings, between children and parents and grandparents, between lovers.

There is conflict between individual desire and family interest, between modernity and tradition, and between family life and national political turmoil.

- How to adapt to modernity yet keep hold of values developed over generations
- Men's' proclivity for polygamy compared to female preference for monogamy.
- How to be a loyal and good person despite the pressures of modern life. Being a decent human being – 做人 – has long been the key life aim in this society.

Filial duties, in-law relationships, parental responsibilities, and maintenance of family harmony in an extended family are constantly recurring themes.

The many difficulties faced by the families lead to frequent ethical dilemmas and moral conflicts. Relationships are depicted as mental and emotional, rather than physical lust.

By comparison, UK TV shows ostensibly dealing with the family (Brookside, East Enders and Hollyoaks come to mind) often focus on the outlandish or titillating, and 'liberation' from tradition. Addiction, dysfunctional families, gender confusion and minority relationships are prominent.

The depiction of working-class people on UK television is, according to Owen Jones, squalid and humiliating.

The only way I can explain this is that the British media class is more ideological than China's, propagating its own ideology rather than reflecting majority concerns. Moreover, hedonism and self-assertiveness are not presented as negative as they tend to be in China.

Chinese media writers and directors are keen to warn people about what they see as Western selfish individualism.

Sometimes China's drama compares Chinese behaviour with that of Westerners. They can do so smugly, in ways that show that they consider themselves morally superior.

Where they appear in the screen programmes that I have seen, Europeans are flawed but basically decent people (Wenzhou).

They are often weak, selfish, prejudiced and ignorant of anything outside their own countries. Although they can show kindness – as in a French lawyer who helps out in Wenzhou Family.

American society, on the other hand, is morally corrupt. For example, the American protagonist of a TV drama series filmed in the USA (*Beijingers in New York*) is portrayed as a self-centred man who manages his business ruthlessly, has little concern for his employees, and cares about nothing beyond making money. In one scene, his girlfriend Guo Yan asks him what he loves more — money or her. He replies: "Money."

## Conclusion

I am not suggesting that all Chinese mainstream media are responsible and uplifting.

There is much vulgarity and silliness. But the main melody is the communitarian sense.

There is a motif running through the mainstream media that we are all in it together, facing common challenges.

These are the challenges of personal development, of responsibility to others, of social disintegration in the wider community and of hostility from the world outside China.

Chinese viewers and readers and listeners know very well that their news media are circumscribed, that the censors work overtime and that (increasingly since Xi came to power) you must be careful what you say.

But they say 'that's life. And not necessarily permanent. '

China has gone through open and closed periods and anyway, nothing today approaches the awfulness of that life lived by the grandparents.

Although Zhang Weiwei and some other intellectuals have recently taken to pointing out the greater success of Chinese governance and economic development there has been no sense, at least until very recently of

(1) *ideological* superiority or



(2) *righteousness*, as in a battle of good and evil.

Ex-President Trump's view of the world has no dead ringer in China.

This is perhaps the greatest difference between Chinese media and ours: we tend to assert that our ideology – electoral democracy and human rights - is best, nay, the only one worthy of respect, whereas the Chinese advance no more than 'What works to make people better off is what matters'.

The roots of this lie in the philosophical difference between our two civilisations.

The West has long been seized of a monotheist, universal religion, whose sects and factions have fought over theology for generations and extirpated challengers. As science undermined the Christian story – if not Christian ethics – its place was taken for many people by a secular religion, Marxism in its various forms. It too claimed to be universal and liquidated doubters.

China has had no wars of religion until the Marxism-inspired campaigns which culminated in the Cultural Revolution and, although a minority of its educated classes took up Communism, or secularised Christianity, they abandoned it once they saw the damage done by faith and superstition (Shi 2004). As Deng Xiaoping had it, they

- seek truth from facts,
- cross the river by feeling for stones and
- eschew modern superstition,

**And by modern superstition he meant both Market liberalism and Marxism.**

Finally, *the media generally reflect that optimism and enthusiasm for life which is typical of China today.*

We might ask: How can they dare to be optimistic when we are so down in the mouth about everything?

For several generations China went through hell as society disintegrated under the last dynasty, governance collapsed from the blows of imperialism, the Japanese raped, tortured, starved and butchered much of China (I have recently been reading accounts of British and American witnesses) – and it was even worse than what the Germans did in Poland.

Then Mao Zedong competed in cruelty with Lenin and Stalin, slaughtering nearly a hundred million in evil campaigns to impose a foreign ideology.

And much of this is within living memory.

Now China is

- strong enough that its enemies fear to attack it,
- smart enough to be not dependent upon abroad for economic survival
- wealthy enough to help other countries develop and
- free enough for people to look on their children's' future with equanimity.

The optimists foresee the restoration of the traditions of what they call China's enlightenment of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and a renaissance in culture, creativity and science.

**We Brits had such an age of enthusiasm and expectation under Victoria. Now China thinks its China's turn.**

These are some take-aways from china's media today.

Thank you for your attention.

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