

Letter from china

By John Battersby

On a visit to Beijing last April, I watched Chinese tourists flocking to the Summer Palace, a heritage site reflecting China's imperial history dating back to the twelfth-century Jin Dynasty. They were enjoying a three-day holiday to mark the festival of Qingming, when the Chinese pay respects to their ancestors. After coming to power in 1949 the Communists had allowed such traditions to fall into obscurity, seeing them as obstacles to socialism and modernization. But the Communist authorities revived Qingming as an official holiday in 2008.

The Qingming custom is for people to return to their towns and villages to sweep the graves of deceased relatives. The Chinese have turned the holiday into a long weekend to picnic in parks and visit national cultural sites. "With the development of the Internet and social media, young people have forgotten the meaning of traditional festivals," Yang Muqing, a law student told me. "So the government took measures to revive them."

The Communist government's new fondness for Chinese traditions seems driven by a desire to mitigate the growing influence of globalization on the country. The Beijing regime is nervous that digital technology in the form of social media and other tools—despite rigorous censorship—is chipping away at the Communist Party's authoritarian system of

control. The party's dilemma is desiring further integration into the global economy as a means of expanding its soft power abroad, yet wanting at the same time to maintain a tight grip through security measures and propaganda at home. It is a dilemma that is intensifying as the middle class continues to grow, and as a Chinese elite led by some two hundred billionaires becomes increasingly worried about its wealth in a country with a rule of the party rather than a rule of law. Some 400 million Chinese can now afford to take an annual holiday inside China, and 100 million are able to take a holiday abroad each year.

China is experiencing its greatest economic slowdown in three decades, due to a confluence of factors: a natural plateauing of catch-up growth, flattening domestic demand, leveling exports, declining labor migration, and, some argue, a crackdown on corruption by President Xi Jinping that has disrupted some commerce and cooled unrestrained spending. Growth has fallen from 12 percent in 2010 to 7.4 percent in 2014—the smallest expansion in a quarter century—and may fluctuate in the 5–6 percent range for the next few years. After so many years of robust foreign investment, massive government spending on construction and infrastructure, and double-digit economic expansion, the official term for a projected era of slower growth is the "new normal."

Can anything be called normal in China? For one thing, let's remember that China's slowing economy is already twice as large as that of Asia's second-ranking economic powerhouse, Japan. A country that is used to being governed from the top down is clearly discovering the inevitability of change due to factors outside

any regime's control—demographics, for example. The government has found it necessary to relax the rigid internal migration control system known as *hukou* as well as the rule strictly limiting families to one child. With these steps, the government is responding to increasing demands for the skills needed to drive China's economy, and also to the rising challenge of elderly care in a country whose strong family traditions—including children looking after their aging parents—have been eroded by the one-child policy.

Beneath this interplay of control and reform is the emergence of a Chinese civil society, sanctioned in principle by the ruling party yet increasingly forming an identity of its own. The establishment in the past five years of organizations such as the Chinese Philanthropy Research Institute (CPRI) signals a significant shift in governance that does not feature in Western stereotypes of the country.

CPRI founder and director Wang Zhenyao sees the elderly sector as a key test of China's ability to develop a strong civil society. Groups like CPRI are not only creating impetus for domestic reform toward a more people-centered system, they are also forging platforms for direct links with international foundations and institutes outside government auspices. Wang, who explains how he deepened his own understanding of philanthropy through exchanges with the British group Save the Children, recently led a group of Chinese entrepreneurs on a visit to Britain to examine best practice for elderly care.

When I met Wang in his modest office in Beijing, I found a queue of influential people waiting to steal a few minutes of his time. A

former minister of civil affairs in the Chinese government, he is a well-known public intellectual, the author of a best-selling book on building bridges between the government and the governed. "If China is to integrate fully in the global economy, we need to be able to form credible relationships with universities and foundations in the United States and Britain and other global players," Wang told me. CPRI has already established partnerships with the likes of the Brookings Institution, British Council, and the United Kingdom's Shaw healthcare.

Wang is among those who represent the unexpected face of change in China—change coming from within the Chinese system rather than from internal dissent or foreign pressure. Another I encountered is Hu Da Ping, a personal coach who advises corporate executives, thought leaders, and high-net-worth individuals looking for more than material gratification and the trappings of wealth. He told me that his coaching incorporates the tenets of Taoism, Buddhism, and even the lessons of Nelson Mandela's life and leadership. Notably, Hu said his coaching also espouses Confucianism, which like other Chinese traditions was long vilified by Communists as a relic of the country's feudal past. Confucius, too, is enjoying an official revival. In the ruling party's quest to find a Chinese path to development—and sustain itself in power—the country now celebrates the birthday of the ancient sage whose ideas promoted humanism and social harmony.

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