

# 'China Strikes Back': An Exchange

**Perry Link, reply by Orville Schell**  
NOVEMBER 20, 2014 ISSUE

**In response to:**

*China Strikes Back!* from the October 23, 2014 issue

*To the Editors:*

In "China Strikes Back" [*NYR*, October 23], Orville Schell sounds a much-needed wake-up call about China's recent attitude toward the world. He notes the "China dream"—a vision of modern life that sidesteps human rights and democracy—and that the government is pushing with increasing "truculence." He might have added that the truculence has been even stronger inside China than outside. In late September Chinese bookstores were ordered to remove all works by Yu Ying-shih, who is arguably the world's greatest living historian of China, a few days after Yu made a speech supporting the pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong.

I salute Schell for his excellent piece but find one point where I think we need to probe more deeply. Schell refers to "China's new confidence in its own system of Leninist capitalism," and I wonder about that. We need, first, to disaggregate what we mean by "China." Schell is describing primarily the mentality of an elite—urban, wealthy, and ready to identify with the state. But this is hardly everyone. On October 7, in a small city in Guizhou province, far from Beijing, about ten thousand people took to the streets to protest official corruption (and later were bloodily suppressed).<sup>\*</sup> "Confidence in a system of Leninist capitalism" hardly describes their case.

Moreover, even within the wealthy, Party-aligned elite, the word "confidence" presents a major problem. Many studies in recent years have shown a strong emigration trend among China's wealthy. The US, Canada, and Australia are favorite destinations, but so are places nearer by, like Hong Kong. Among the many complaints about mainlanders that Hong Kong people have had, one is that maternity wards in their hospitals have become overcrowded because mothers-to-

be come to Hong Kong to give birth to babies who will have automatic residence rights there.

Why do people in China's elite—the ones who have it best—want to leave? Polluted air in the cities is certainly one reason, but others relate to “confidence.” Education of the young, for example. The numbers of Chinese students from the social elite who travel to the West for college, and even high school, have risen sharply in recent years. Xi Jinping's daughter graduated from Harvard last June. Jiang Zemin's son has a Ph.D. from Drexel. One of Deng Xiaoping's grandsons was born in the US. Another benefit of emigration has been convenience in parking money overseas—as realtors in cities like Vancouver and Los Angeles can easily attest. And most fundamentally (although people are reluctant to articulate it), legal émigré status is an insurance policy against an unpredictable future in China: life in the West offers a feeling of security that life in China, despite government expenditures of hundreds of billions of yuan per year on “stability maintenance,” cannot offer.

If people in the Chinese elite were truly confident in their system of Leninist capitalism, they would not need a huge budget for domestic repression, would not keep a Nobel Peace laureate in prison, and would not be looking to emigrate. Schell correctly notes that they find Western criticisms of their one-party rule to be condescending. But that very fact reveals their ambivalence about the West. If they were really confident that their system is superior, they might simply pity the misguided West. That they feel “condescended to” shows that, at one level in their minds, they are still according the West an elevated position.

In short, the force behind the truculence is not hate so much as rivalry. Young nationalists who are elated that their country seems headed to overtake the US often tuck away their Chinese given names and call themselves Quentin Qi or Melissa Wang.

My point is not to dismantle Schell's warning about “dangerous possible consequences for the rest of the world.” Indeed I believe the inner insecurity that I am pointing to makes the danger even worse. An insecure rival can have sharper elbows, and be less predictable, than a secure competitor. One of the many costs of the trouble in the Middle East is that it distracts attention from what seems to be brewing in China.

Perry Link  
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**Orville Schell *replies*:**

I read Perry Link's letter reflecting on my article "China Strikes Back" with great interest. He raises some important points.

Link wonders about my allusion to "China's new confidence in its own system of Leninist capitalism." It is, of course, always perilous to speak of "China" in any shorthand manner since, as he points out, there are few countries besieged by more contending and contradictory forces than the PRC. And many of these forces are incontrovertibly centrifugal in nature, undermining an overall sense of well-being, not to mention confidence in society's long-term stability.

Nonetheless, the regimen of "reform and opening" initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and carried on by three other sets of leaders over the intervening three and a half decades has accomplished an enormous amount in terms of economic development, particularly in building infrastructure, institutions, and a dynamic global trade profile. And coming after more than a century of failure, these successes have given the Chinese Communist Party, which has presided over these reforms, grounds for much new pride and also some significant measure of confidence.

Of course, even as many are benefiting from this so-called "China boom," a large portion of Chinese society is still being left out. (But then, this problem of inequity is not one unfamiliar to Americans.) Still, perhaps it would have been more precise to have spoken of China's "new pride" rather than its "new confidence" in the accomplishments of its Leninist system of cryptocapitalism.

What is more, if one substitutes the word "pride" for "confidence," it allows for another complementary, but also somewhat contradictory, set of forces—namely patriotism and nationalism—to be factored into the China equation. In my experience many Chinese are very patriotic and quite naturally want to feel pride in their country's accomplishments, even as they may remain quite dubious about the durability of their country's current political system. As Link points out, this wariness about the future makes the wealthy send their kids abroad to be educated, buy real estate overseas, put funds in offshore banks, and seek US green cards and even citizenship, hardly hallmarks of confidence in their own country's domestic future. But this does not mean that they are not still proud of their country's accomplishments or incapable of feelings of nationalism.

And here there is a dangerous combination brewing. When a certain quotient of success leads to pride, arrogance, and nationalism, and when these impulses

merge with a sense of historical victimization, insecurity, and the indignity of being condescended to in a quest for global respect, as Link suggests, China could easily become more defensive, pugnacious, and truculent as a rival. And the effect of such a tendency would be to lessen the chances of finding comfortable ways of cooperating with the US and other Western-style democracies on such critical issues as climate change, pandemics, and nuclear proliferation.

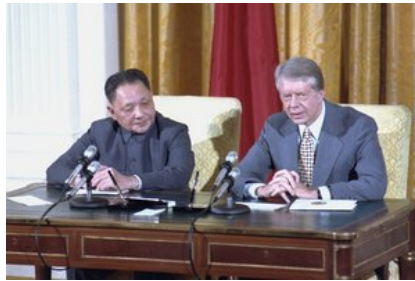
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\* Photographs and video of the protests can be seen at

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