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For years now, looking at China from Ireland often seemed like looking at a country through the wrong end of a telescope. Not only did China seem very strange, it also appeared to be very far away. Within less than a year, all of that has changed. One might date the shift of perspective from May 12th, 2008, when a great earthquake devastated the area around Chengdu, a city in southwest China, sweeping away as many as 70,000 people. With it was swept away, perhaps forever, the sense that China was a distant place. No strangers to tragedy ourselves, the hearts of the Irish people have gone out to the people of China: to those that have lost their homes, their relatives, and in particular, their only child.

Now that sense of immediacy has been again brought home, in 2009, by another crisis: the sudden and shocking collapse of the global economy. In trying to understand how this has come about, we Irish have been once again impressed with how tightly bound we are together as nation to nation in this world. The laws of economics do not respect national boundaries; collapse in one economy can mean devastation in another. As a small, open economy, we Irish are learning the hard lesson of what that entails. It is a lesson worth learning, if it means that we can begin to understand that the Ireland of the coming times must evolve within the context of a new community, in which China is now taking its place one of our most valued partners.

Bur why has it taken so long? There are two answers: one is that Ireland has been, since its founding as a sovereign republic, fairly self-preoccupied. The other answer is simply that, up to now, most Irish people have encountered China only as little islands of isolated experience. They may have visited the gardens at Birr Castle, for instance, perhaps only then learning how many of its trees and exquisite flowers

came from China. They may have wondered at the jade books or elaborately embroidered imperial Dragon Robes at Dublin's Chester Beatty Library, but without knowing what connections the Qianlong Emperor had with Ireland. Or, nearer to home, they might have met some of the more than 11,000 Chinese nationals who now live in Ireland. But what relation can one discover between these different experiences? How can one actually connect them up?

Until recently, it was relatively difficult to create any sustained interest in a country apparently so distant. And today, despite its rising importance, we in Ireland still have a great deal to learn about China. Certainly the sheer disparity between the two countries make initial comparisons appear a little absurd. In terms of population alone, China's 1.34 billion means that, effectively, one of five people on this earth is Chinese. By way of contrast, the island of Ireland's six million people could fit comfortably within a small Chinese city. Yet in world terms, Ireland and China are, in some surprising ways, comparable. Both China and Ireland have evolved through long, and often turbulent, histories. Both have a valued ancient heritage which they are striving to incorporate into present-day practice. And both have moved, in a matter of generations, from a traditional culture to a modern (perhaps even a post-modern) one. And finally, both suffer from the complications of a newly rich society now seeking its own definition of what it means to be Chinese – or Irish.

China is a very old nation; but a century of turmoil has forced it to seek new definitions of itself and its culture. Likewise, we Irish are actively engaged in reinventing who we are. It is only recently, for instance, that one has begun to speak of the North of Ireland as 'Irish'. The fact that we can now talk about the North as part of Ireland encourages the inclusion in this series of such a personage as Lord

Macartney: born and bred in County Antrim – and a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin. The first essay here examines his role as head of the first British Embassy to the Qianlong Emperor of China in 1793. Another Antrim man was Robert Hart (1835 - 1911), who served as Inspector-General of China's Maritime Customs Service during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Hart was exceptional in that he was trusted equally by both his British and his Chinese masters. During his lengthy career, Hart imported some of the best of his own culture to China: in particular, his love of music. It seems that, in all respects, Hart was the model of a gentleman, in both civilizations: admired by Westerners for his deft diplomacy in complex international affairs and by the Chinese for his incorruptible, upright and mannerly presence.

It is thus significant that Robert Hart thought of himself not merely as British but also as Irish. More than that, as Richard O'Leary's essay argues, it was this very sense of Irishness which made it possible for Hart to be so effective an administrator in China. Being Irish, even today, is a complex fate. It was more so at a time when Ireland was beginning to assert its independence from Britain. If Hart identified himself as an Irishman, he also, depending on occasion, called himself English, British and an Ulsterman.

Although this example does not fit with any simple version of Irishness, it is exactly this sense of multiple – and, possibly at times, competing senses of identity – which is characteristic of being Irish. At this crucial moment in our national history, we have a President who was, like Robert Hart, originally from the North of Ireland, a graduate of Queen's University and both a British and an Irish citizen. And perhaps it is exactly this richly complex sense of identity that will now enable Ireland to enter the new century as a capable and effective member of the emerging world order.

That we have already begun to redefine our Irish identity as multiple and open is clear. Twenty years ago, such a figure as Oscar Wilde would not have been accepted as 'one of us' precisely because of a very restricted view of who was Irish and who was not. But now we can not only claim Wilde as Irish but even ask what part Wilde's Irishness played in his startling appropriation of Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzŭ in the old-fashioned Wade-Giles romanisation), a radical Chinese thinker of the 4th c. BC.

Yet vestiges of those old restrictions on what can and cannot be deemed as 'Irish' still remain. For instance, how many in Ireland today accept our hereditary aristocrats as being as authentically Irish as someone, say, from the Gaeltacht? Are they merely a relic of our colonial past that we would prefer to ignore? Or are we ready to appropriate as part of our national heritage the magnificent gardens in Birr Castle demesne? These gardens are the result of three generations of the Parsons family, otherwise known as the Earls of Rosse, who stem from one of the oldest Anglo-Irish families in Ireland, identifying and importing into Ireland some of China's most exquisite plants. That history, largely unknown, is recounted here in print for the first time by the Seventh Earl of Rosse, Brendan Parsons.

Or again, what does the history of Irish missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, tell us about ourselves in what is said to be a 'post-Catholic' Ireland? Can we acknowledge that the same 'heroism and zeal' which led these missionaries to prepare for self-sacrifice in China also fueled the 1916 Easter Rising – and its cult of heroic martyrdom? Is their vision of the missionary movement as reviving a glorious past also still part of our own vision of Ireland – as a country that may yet have a mission to the world, albeit now larger than that of spreading Christianity to the pagan world of early medieval Europe?

As these examples demonstrate, one way of connecting up these experiences is to seek to understand how relations with an *Other* – even a very alien *Other* – can become a new way of relating to ourselves. Accordingly, in this series of essays, China often offers a mirror to Ireland. Through its reflection, we will see how and why the Chieftains could go to Beijing in 1983 and, without prior practice, hold a jam session with Chinese traditional musicians. In the process, Hwee-San Tan will reveal as much about traditional music practice in Ireland as in China. But, as in a true mirror, the picture is not always flattering. As Fintan O'Toole shows, Irish workers' hostility to Chinese workers in mid-nineteenth-century America culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Instigated by a popular movement, this act – for the first and only time in American history – succeeded in banning immigrants from one specific country of origin.

What does this history imply, if anything, about the kind of welcome a new set of Chinese immigrants might face in Ireland today? How do current reports that four our of five Chinese students in Ireland say they suffer racial abuse square with our own perception of ourselves? As Ruadhan McCormaic observes in his essay, the Chinese immigrant community here is among the most fragmented and possibly the most stressed of all our new arrivals. Are we courageous enough to meditate on this mirror-image replay of our own history – this time on our own home ground?

As reflected in the mirror of China, Ireland appears as a relatively new nation still seeking to define its role in the world. We are known as a small, politically neutral country. For many, our fight for independence from Great Britain has symbolically absolved us from its imperial past. Like the People's Republic of China, we also call ourselves a republic. The fact that both nations lay claim to this definition of themselves

should give us some pause. The ideals of our republic are derived from the ideas that inspired American independence and then the French revolution. The big words which have enabled our own definition of nation – liberty, equality, democracy – resonate everywhere in our public debates and our private expectations.

But in China these big words traditionally have had little resonance. The Chinese word for 'democracy', for instance, was introduced from Japan only a century ago. Today in China an understanding of this concept is only just emerging, not necessarily in our sense, but in terms of encouraging greater accountability throughout the governmental system: that of the central government to the people and of those who are appointed to represent the people to the central government. But even as it gains in cultural resonance, 'democracy' cannot operate there as it does in the West in the absence of another Western concept – 'equality'. China is a top-down place: authority rests in a central government at the top of an intensely hierarchical society – and such has been the case for more than 2,000 years. There is no relation in China which is between equals, except arguably that between friends. All else fits into a hierarchical scale which is accepted as if ordained since time immemorial, whether within the family or its cognate structures in governance.

In what sense, then, is China a 'republic'? In the sense that the Chinese government asserts that it embodies the will of the collectivity and therefore strives (in the words of Mao Zedong) to 'serve the people'. But given the difference in the way these two worlds are governed, and the principles by which they are organized, it should come as no surprise that they also differ as to the nature of human beings and the multiple rights that modern Western thinking attributes to individuals. All members of the United Nations – China, as well as Ireland and the United States – are deemed to be supporters of the 1948 U.N. Universal

Declaration of Human Rights (which recently celebrated its 60th anniversary). However few, if any, of the citizens of U.N. countries actually read what is written in this document or learn from the history of how it came to be formulated.

For those who take the trouble to examine it, it is clear that the document falls into two distinct parts. The first part, comprising the initial twenty or so articles, were composed under the influence of Enlightenment principles which depend heavily on such ideas as Equality and Freedom, as now central in modern Western thinking about Democracy. These would include the right to equality before the law as well as to freedom of expression, of movement, and of assembly, among others. The last nine articles of the U.N. Declaration, on the other hand, comprise such social, economic, and cultural rights as the right to food, housing, education, work and social protection. Consequently, in public debates about 'Human Rights', Western diplomats routinely assume that they are speaking to the first twenty articles, whereas those from China focus on the government's commitment to fulfilling the last nine. Thus while both protest that their own nations are indeed supporting human rights while the other side is violating them, each is implicitly referring to a different set of defining articles. The result is a dialogue of the deaf.

The way such delegates talk past each other is perhaps not always deliberate but more a matter of acculturation. To the Chinese, the 'human rights' which guarantee a people food, housing, education and jobs are the fundamental values. Indeed, over the past six decades, the Chinese government has made amazing strides in feeding, housing, educating, and employing a massive and largely poor population. In relation to Tibet, the Chinese government points to the rapid modernization of what they consider an underdeveloped economy or to the special treatment accorded

to minorities in China in regard to university entrance or their absolution from the One-Child Policy which holds for the majority Han population.

From this perspective, it might be said that the West has been slow to give credit to the Chinese government for the giant strides they have made in feeding, housing and otherwise caring for their huge population. For in the West, social, economic and cultural rights are regarded by many not as rights but as 'hopes' or 'aspirations'. This is the stance of the U.S. Senate, which has consistently refused to ratify the U.N. International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (as all other developed countries, including Ireland, have done). Former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Jeanne Kirkpatrick was quite explicit on their status when she referred to social, economic and cultural rights as a 'letter to Santa Claus'; while her successor described the International Covenant as 'little more than an empty vessel into which vague hopes and inchoate expectations can be poured.'

Contrast this ideological orientation, widely shared by American elites, with one of Confucius's simpler, but profound statements: that 'It is a disgrace to be well fed while the people are hungry.' (*Analects* 8.13). Indeed, given the emerging global food crisis, an orientation towards the last nine articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights may now be imperative for all people of good will.

Above all, what this disparity of views illustrates is the way America tends to position itself as an extreme of Western views. If America represents one extreme on these issues and China another, then where does Ireland fit in?

Historically, Ireland should, at least in theory, be as sympathetic to the last nine articles of the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights as to the first twenty. During much of its colonial past, the majority of Irish people was not housed nor educated nor even fed by the British government. In

fact one of the Irish experiences to which Chinese students respond most sympathetically is to the Great Famine; for they themselves experienced a devastating famine which killed an estimated 20 to 40 million people between the years 1958 - 61. But when the Chinese learn more about the politics of the Irish famine, and particularly about the lack of response from the British government, they are mystified.

This is because, I believe, the Chinese have little sense of another big Western word, 'ethnicity'. For a long time, the whole case for Irish nationhood – and British prejudice towards the Irish – rested on the conception of a distinctive Celtic 'race' – as Irish ethnicity was then defined. Yet our insistence on our own difference baffles the Chinese. After all, as they are quick to point out, the Irish and the English *look* very much alike. But of course we now understand the case for Irish identity resides not on an assertion of a difference in race but of *ethos*: the sense that the Irish 'feel different' than the British. And in fact the Irish are different. To point to this difference, an Irish person may cite a distinctive language, customary traditions – and religion (which had been, in fact, the 'old religion' of England). Some would even argue that the Irish have a different – and distinctive – mentality and way of thinking.

Such a difference is invisible in the Chinese world because 'ethnicity' – as a name for a distinct ethos or mentality – is not recognized there. Thus the 55 or so minority cultures that inhabit the People's Republic of China are referred to as 'nationalities' – not as distinct ethnic groups. A 'nationality' is an official construct – a geopolitical one imposed by bureaucratic authority. In calling Tibetans, for instance, members of a 'nationality', the Chinese authorities are not allowing for difference of language or religion, but only for definition by official boundaries – moreover ones that have been redrawn quite arbitrarily over the years.

Two issues thus cloud understanding of the current situation in Tibet: a systematic narrowness in defining ‘human rights’ and a blindness towards ethnic difference. Resolution of these crucial issues requires education on each side – and patient diplomacy. But that crucial diplomatic work, recently restarted in the form of talks with the representatives of the Dali Lama, often seems impeded by a newly assertive Chinese nationalism. By many Chinese this nationalism is welcomed as a way of unifying a country battered by a century of revolutions, the last of which – the 1978 introduction of ‘capitalism with Chinese characteristics’ – has overturned much of the old Maoist rhetoric. Today the fading ideology of Communism is being replaced by promoting the ‘new China’. But what is this ‘new China’? The answer is only gradually emerging

Over here, this question echoes a popular 1970s parlour game asking ‘Where is the real Ireland?’ As we know, the answers would typically be divided between East and West, Dublin and Connemara. In those days, no one would have named the North. And yet, by the tortuous path which has led to a redefinition of ‘the real Ireland’, we have now come to include both North and South as well as East and West.

But even as we have come to this accommodation, Ireland is once again changing as, over the last decades, it has become home to people from 150 different countries, speaking almost 170 languages. Of this international community, a sizeable group are now from China. Many of these will return to China, but others will stay. And they will become part of a new generation – not only an Irish, but now a global generation, making their lives, as they will forge their identities, between and across whole cultures and civilizations. What then will it mean to be ‘Irish’? And where will they locate, if anywhere, ‘the real Ireland’?

Just as we now beginning to accept that there are many Irelands, each as ‘real’ as the other, one does not have to travel far to discover there is not one, but many Chinas. The north and south of China are as different from each other as the far west is from the east coast. Those 55 separate ‘nationalities’ recognized by the Chinese government speak a total of 236 different languages. These exist in a nation defined largely by the Han Chinese, who claim to make up 92 % of the population. The official policy is that minority groups should evolve in parallel to the dominant culture. The fact that recent developments are now encouraging the majority Han population to settle in Tibet means that Tibetans feel their own distinctive culture and traditions are being undermined by the majority culture. As Irish people, we know from our own history, and, in particular from that of the North, the consequences of such developments. And we can now say to China that, among these islands, it has taken about 700 years to begin to resolve the ensuing difficulties.

These are the kinds of reflections – and cultural parallels – that prompted the suggestion that China could benefit from an Irish Studies Programme. The Beijing Foreign Studies University where I have been Visiting Professor is a small elite university where the Chinese government traditionally trains its personnel for the Foreign Ministry. They already boast a prestigious American Studies programme, as well as British, Australian, and Canadian Studies centres. But in all of China there was, as yet, no other official Irish Studies Programme. When informed of the proposal, the Dean of the School of English and International Studies, Professor Sun Youzhong, was enthusiastic. His response was only matched in force by that of the current Irish Ambassador to China, Declan Kelleher, as backed by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. Working with the support of the National

University of Ireland, Maynooth, the Centre was opened in March 2007, only a year after it was proposed.

Teaching in this new Centre has been quite an experience. Although some students know Ireland as the land of literary Nobel Prize winners – and of *Riverdance* (which created a sensation in China) – many believed it was still part of the United Kingdom. Mostly the Chinese public is simply shocked by its size. After being told that the entire population of the Irish Republic would fit into the (northeastern) city of Harbin, one Chinese professor held up her hands as if measuring a child. 'So small, so small,' she crooned. 'Couldn't have any large problems.'

We may be a small country, I assured her, but our problems are large – global in fact. And it is these problems, and our efforts to resolve them, that make us valuable to China. Whereas Ireland's recent economic success is admired by the Chinese, they need to know that we are already paying the price: whether it is in cities that cannot drink their water or the love-affair with the automobile which has blighted urban as well as rural landscapes. In the cities of the new China, water resources and the effects of rampant car-culture are already becoming almost intractable issues. Among these essays, Pauline Byrne, an Irish city planner who has worked in China, meditates on the development of the new mega-cities in China. Here again the outcomes of overdevelopment in Ireland or of commercial pressures which are emptying our inner cities of residents or even the over-dependence on the construction industry as a driver of economic growth might prove instructive, if only as small moral tales on the perils of precipitate urban development.

From another perspective, Ireland might offer China some positive precedents. In terms of the environment, we have already provided China with a model they followed recently by taxing the use of plastic bags. The Chinese have even proposed to implement a universal smoking ban,

though its enforcement has been delayed due to popular protest. Yet if Ireland's example were followed, the health status of the ordinary Chinese, already choking in some of the worst urban pollution in the world, would improve noticeably. Again, in terms of the market economy, China has adapted the most brutal, most unregulated form of laissez-faire capitalism. Although there have been some notable shifts of focus by the Chinese government in the last year or so, it still has a lot to learn from European countries, Ireland among them, about how they can now seek to mitigating the worst effects of the collapse of an unfettered market economy on the most vulnerable in society: the very young, the old, the sick, the rural, the unemployed.

More immediate to the Chinese students is the history of Ireland's invention of itself out of a colonial past and its struggle for independence. Accounts of Ireland's experience of famine – and foreign colonization – are eagerly received by the Irish Studies students as vivid reminders of similar events within their own history. Starting in 1842 when the First Opium War gave Hong Kong to Britain, China suffered through a long series of what are still referred to as 'humiliating treaties'. These humiliations are still fresh in the minds of my Chinese students; so much so that, in teaching about Ireland, I have to be careful not to feed too obviously into the sense of victimage that is traditionally a driving force behind both Irish – and now Chinese – nationalism. Not only is it too easy to do so, it is untrue to the actual complexities of the situation. In teaching Irish Studies, it is more fruitful, I have found, to try to describe Ireland's history under British rule for what in fact it was: a regime in which the Irish were both administrators as well as victims; slaveholders as well as indentured servants; nationalists as well as loyal servants of the British Empire. It is well to remind ourselves that Ireland has always had

a complex fate which nationalist causes have often oversimplified for their own ends.

As is clear from these reflections, Ireland's new relationship with China will prove far more complex than merely one of exchange. While each has much to learn from the other, the two nations, so widely divergent in terms of scale, history, and culture, may also act as mirrors, reflecting their own cultures from fresh and sometimes disconcerting angles. Although this might be a disorienting experience, attention must be paid; for China is now becoming a significant world power, one with whom Ireland will need to deal every day. As entrepreneur Richard Barrett's essay illustrates, dealing with China entails going far beyond merely doing business; it must mean engaging with the culture itself. What else it may imply in terms of mutual enlightenment is yet to be explored. In this series of essays (originally written for the RTE Thomas Davis lectures), our speakers have been asked to look at specific links between Ireland and China: as a way of opening up new ways of encountering China – but also as a way of arranging new encounters with ourselves.