

# CHINA HERITAGE QUARTERLY

China Heritage Project, The Australian National University

ISSN 1833-8461

No. 29, March 2012

originally published at this URL:

[http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=029\\_elliott.inc&issue=029](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=029_elliott.inc&issue=029)

## ARTICLES

### The Historical Vision of the Prosperous Age (*shengshi* 盛世)

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The [June 2011 issue](#) of *China Heritage Quarterly* brought together a number of historians who addressed the topic of '*Shengshi Zhongguo* 盛世中国 Flourishing China, myths and realities'.

The remarks published in that issue were developed on the basis of a roundtable organised for the annual conference of The Association for Asian Studies (AAS). That forum, held in Honolulu on 31 March 2011, resulted of the best kind of intellectual discussion—one initiated over good food and wine. That earlier exchange had taken place following a workshop on knowledge production and Chinese Studies organized by our colleague Wen-hsin Yeh at the Berkeley campus of the University of California in May 2010. Wen-hsin closed the discussions with a meditation on writing Chinese history today in the international academy, its prospects, its limitations and its possibilities. She encouraged participants to contemplate the trajectories of historiography as the Chinese academy (and its officially funded research) grew in prominence and volubility; she asked us to consider too how our own practice as researchers and educators would embrace what should, by all accounts, be the intellectual rise of China, one concomitant with its burgeoning global economic status.

Mark Elliott participated in that AAS forum from the floor. An important scholar in the study of Chinese and Inner Asian history, and noted for his contributions to 'New Qing History', Mark offered a number of important observations on the topic. In response to that discussion and at the request of this journal, he kindly agreed to expand on those earlier remarks. We are delighted to offer his essay on the 'Prosperous Age' or *shengshi*, here as part of the continuation of a conversation between Australia-, US- and Canada-based historians related to the uses of history today.

In 2012, our earlier discussions have expanded on the basis of a preliminary re-reading of Joseph Levenson's remarkable trilogy, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, a work that was conceived of and written between 1949 and 1967. Our re-reading, a project that will continue through 2012-2013, will be a topic in future issues of this publication.

—The Editor

The trope of the 'prosperous age' (*shengshi* 盛世) re-introduced into Chinese political and academic discourse over the last decade has received considerable attention of late, including in *China Heritage Quarterly*. In this essay, I would like to continue to explore some of the implications of the concept of the 'prosperous age'. Specifically, I would like to consider the implications of using ideas from traditional Chinese historiography such as *shengshi*, originally conceived in a very different intellectual and cultural environment, to describe a contemporary nation-state. While it is true, as Geremie Barmé points out, that: 'In China's modern history, [...] enlightenments, rebirths and revivals have often been hastily announced and hailed in a mood of anxious exuberance', still, the move to *shengshi* would seem to be difficult to reconcile with the teleological interpretations applied for most of the last century to the history of modernizing China. Indeed, in a number of ways, the emergence of prosperous age discourse is an unexpected development. After all, it is not as though *shengshi* is the only way in which the remarkable economic growth of the past twenty years of the People's Republic of China could be framed. Given what we know about the sensitivity of the Chinese Communist Party to wordplay, and given also the unexpected re-emergence of such a phrase, one can only conclude that *shengshi* has been revived for a reason. So why choose this particular idiom? What consequences follow from this choice? Thinking about these questions may help address the larger problem Barmé raises in the June 2011 *China Heritage Quarterly* Editorial: How does, or should, the articulation of a Prosperous Age in official, popular and academic Chinese culture affect thinking about Chinese history, and its place in world history since the end of the last celebrated era of *shengshi*?

### Where China is Going: *shengshi* 盛世, *fuxing* 復興, *jueqi* 崛起

First, let me briefly review what I see as the main points made by previous contributors to this discussion. In the June 2011 issue of *China Heritage Quarterly*, Geremie Barmé provides a useful back-of-the-envelope definition ('an age of good rule and social quietude that would be hard won; an age that usually followed a period of corrupt government, turmoil, disunity, the collapse of moral standards and social chaos'), and describes the broad context in which the notion of *shengshi* has surfaced, specifically with reference to the compilation of a new history of the Qing dynasty that began in 2002. While Barmé notes that 'to declare a particular period or an era to be a Golden or Prosperous Age before it is over may be ill advised', Klaus Mühlhahn suggests that *shengshi* is a way of enunciating future 'transformational goals', and he draws attention to the persistent search by Chinese thinkers for normative models of change that would guide the country to achieve its twin objectives of wealth and power (which it has, by some measures at least, now done). The importance of more immediate political goals is stressed both by Yeh Wen-hsin and Timothy Cheek. Cheek points out that references to the great *shengshi* of the Han, Tang, and Qing dynasties summon into being a political genealogy that links the past with the present and thereby confers legitimation and prestige on the present political order. Moreover, as Yeh notes, the *shengshi* idea assumes the presence of a sage ruler. From these accounts, one must presume that another part of the attraction of the concept, for the Chinese leadership, at any rate, is the power of *shengshi* to confer legitimacy upon state authority. By asserting that the present age is a *shengshi*, the idea seems to be to endow whatever policies have led to this moment with an aura of infallibility. The result is a formula of legitimation that runs syllogistically something like this:

Major premise: We live in a *shengshi*.

Minor premise: If Party policies were incorrect, a *shengshi* would be impossible.

Conclusion: Party policies must therefore be correct.

The logical inference of this *argumentum ad consequentiam* is that it is because Party policies are appropriate that we live in a *shengshi*. Abandoning, or disputing, the current direction of state policy is thus to endanger the present *shengshi*. More than that, it is to quarrel with History. Agreement, then, on the fact of a *shengshi* is a potentially powerful political tool.

At the same time, as Yeh points out, to turn to *shengshi* for political justification (what she calls a 'naming' project) is at the same time somewhat risky:

*Shengshi* as a label has been loaded over time with a considerable amount of ambiguity.

*Shengshi* is something for the rulers to proclaim, and from which intellectuals would seek to dissent.

A similar point is made by Gloria Davies, who reminds readers that the use of *shengshi* even in the Qing was often ironic, meant more to put people on their guard than to raise a celebratory cheer. Her reference to Lu Xun's description of the early Qing 'prosperous age' as the 'secure enslavement of the Chinese people', moreover, has been echoed in some of the chatter on the Internet, where the effort to identify the Qing prosperous age as the forerunner of the present one is vigorously rejected, though on not necessarily very attractive terms.[1] Davies concludes,

What is clear is that despite its currency in mainland public discourse today, *shengshi* is a fragile idea. It is part of the official lexicon and an assertion of prosperity that remains inaccessible (or formally resistant) to robust debate. Hence, as a term, it remains unexamined, untested and offers little beyond a suggestive symbolism. Indeed, what the rhetorical flourishing of *shengshi* reveals, more than anything else, is the nervousness of a government that, in failing to make public opinion bend fully to its will has resorted instead to deafening self-congratulation.

Little wonder that, as the numerous examples in popular discourse listed in the CIW-Danwei Online Archive [entry on \*shengshi\*](#) in *China Heritage Quarterly* show, there has been hesitation in many quarters surrounding the appropriateness of invoking the *shengshi* paradigm.

This hesitation is also evident in some of the *shengshi* discourse that appeared in 2011. In discussing *shengshi*, many commentators chose to foreground a comparison with the Qing dynasty, in particular the reigns of the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors, often pointed to as the last period of national economic, military, and cultural splendor before what is held to be the present *shengshi*. Given that this was the centennial year of the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, the turn to the Qing precedent is not surprising; but the characterizations of the Qing *shengshi* do offer a few surprises. For example, according to Yang Nianqun 杨念群 of Renmin University's Qing History Institute 人民大学清史研究所, while the Qing uniquely constituted a true *shengshi*, yet, 'The damage to cultural character caused by prosperous age unification is extremely severe, and the room for free expression is extremely small; just look at the Kang-Qian prosperous age, and you can instantly see that it would be wrong to blindly praise *shengshi*.' [2] Similarly critical is Ding Li 丁力, a columnist for the often critical *Economic Observer*, who writes that when Lord Macartney led a mission from the British crown in 1793, the Qianlong court was 'fast asleep in its "prosperous age",' oblivious to the sounds of the outside world waking up to modernity. [3] It should be noted that both of these statements appeared in publications aimed at popular, not scholarly, audiences. In the first case, *shengshi* is affirmed in the fact of national unity, but the imposition of autocratic orthodoxy appears to be held up as a warning; in the second case, we are told that talk of *shengshi* is mere myth-making, indulged in by regimes that neglect the changing world around them at their peril. Both cases offer pause to reflect on the open intellectual ground upon which the *shengshi* edifice has been erected.

Caution is also seen in comments by top Party leaders in 2011. On 1 July in his remarks celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, for example, the Guangdong Party Secretary Wang Yang 汪洋 emphasized the importance of remaining vigilant in a time of peace and prosperity. [4] He was echoing the words of Hu Jintao, who himself in a speech that day listing the successes of the reforms since 1979 was quick to point out the challenges that remained, chief among which were avoiding a '*shengshi* mindset' (*shengshi xintai* 盛世心態), easy enough to fall into given the country's stunning accomplishments of recent years, but which he said leads to complacency. [5] The ambiguity of *shengshi* may be one reason why Hu avoided mention of it altogether in his speech commemorating the 10 October National Day anniversary. Instead, Hu stressed the need of the Communist Party today to complete the historic mission of 1911—the 'great revival of the Chinese people' (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴) by pushing forward with its commitment to socialism, patriotism, and peace. [6]

Though it is perhaps more obviously forward-looking than *shengshi*, *fuxing* 复兴 is likewise a phrase with an ancient pedigree, typically used to describe revival or recovery, often from mishap or disaster. It is the standard Chinese translation for the Italian Renaissance (*wenyi fuxing* 文艺复兴)—well known, of course, as an intensely retrospective philosophical, architectural, and artistic movement – and elsewhere is used to describe processes of rebuilding or regeneration. It is also closely related to the idea of *zhongxing* 中兴, or 'restoration', a period of retrenchment and rebuilding occurring a few generations after a dynastic state is first established, a time of revived confidence and fortune. Like *shengshi*, *fuxing* is a word rarely seen in Party propaganda before 1990. It came into greater vogue after its use in the title of a television series, called 'The Road To Revival' (*Fuxing zhi lu* 复兴之路), which premiered on CCTV in October 2007 to coincide with the Seventeenth National Party Congress. Clearly intended as a patriotic reflection on China's 'peaceful rise' as a 'great power', the series offered a justification for the historical choices made under Communist Party leadership since 1949, which, following the same logic as that for *shengshi*, have led to the realization of the 'national revival' of the present day. Publicity for the six-part series ran like this:

For the dreams of a nation, we set out from the seas of 1840; in an unchanging pursuit, we have inscribed glory upon the record of time. Under the gaze of the whole world, China's choice of path is laid forth, as the experience of national revival is captured in full historical perspective. The Road to Revival: 'Using history to sense the future'.[7]

Moreso even than *shengshi*, *fuxing* has become firmly ensconced in media use, with very wide application in cultural, social, and political spheres. A Google search of the term from January 2001 to December 2006 turns up 281,000 hits; from January 2007 to December 2011, over 2,800,000 hits.[8] Among the earliest is a reference to a 2001 speech by no less a figure than former Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin, who proclaimed that the Communist Party was leading the 'grand revival of the Chinese nation'.[9] *Fuxing* turns up perhaps most frequently in remarks by President Hu Jintao, who referred to the 'great restoration of the Chinese nation' four times in the speech he gave in July 2011 at the ninetieth anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic,[10] and in many other addresses, including, as already noted, one on the 100th anniversary of the 1911 Revolution, in October 2011, in which *fuxing* is touched on no less than twenty-three times.[11] By then, audiences had become quite accustomed to hearing the phrase in official discourse and in popular media. A year later the television series was followed by the publication of a three-volume book under the same title.[12] Continuing the 'Road to Revival' boom, a 'song-and-dance epic' with the same title as the television show debuted at the National Theatre in September 2009 to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, and received, perhaps not surprisingly, rave reviews in the press. Explicitly modeled after similar stage extravaganzas as 'The East Is Red' (东方红, 1964) and 'Ode to the Chinese Revolution' (中国革命之歌, 1984), the five-act 'Road to Revival' roadshow embarked on a national tour that lasted two years, stopping in scores of major cities.[13]

**Fig.1 N-gram showing frequency of *fuxing*/revival in Chinese published books, 1900-2010.**



In all these instances, apart from the 'Chinese nation' as a whole, what, exactly, is being revived, is mostly left unsaid. Presumably this blank is filled in by each person according to his or her understanding of what has gone wrong with the nation and needs to be put right: military weakness, poverty, political instability, cultural uncertainty, spiritual emptiness. In some contexts, it would seem that the term is another way of saying 'modernization' or 'national strengthening' along the lines proposed by Deng Xiaoping or, indeed, by Sun Yatsen. In other contexts, it seems to furnish the platform for the next historical stage after 'socialist reconstruction', and a further development after 'peaceful rise' (*heping jueqi* 和平崛起). The explanation of this 'revival' provided in 2007 by the government spokesman assigned to formally open the chatroom linked to the 'Road to Revival' series[14] consisted of the following words:

'Renaissance' can be said to be a bright theme for twentieth-century China, and is the blueprint that must be implemented on the 9.6 million square kilometers of our land in the twenty-first century. Renaissance is the common goal of the Chinese people and is the sacred mission consistently pursued by members of the Chinese Communist Party. [...] One billion people all thirst for a renaissance—in these circumstances, there is no reason why the "Road to Revival" chatroom should not succeed.[15]

Another commentator wrote:

Experience has shown that socialism and China's national rejuvenation are inseparable, that socialism is a strong driving force and the only possible road for China's national rejuvenation, that only socialism can save China and only socialism with Chinese characteristics can develop China, make the country strong and powerful, make its people rich and realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.[16]

Despite these efforts to channel 'proper' thinking about *fuxing*, however, the discourse on 'renaissance' remains open to a wide variety of interpretation. One internet commentator, writing on a Chinese-language site based in New York, asked rhetorically whether this was a 'great national renaissance' or a 'Deng Xiaoping restoration' (*minzu weida fuxing* or *Deng Xiaoping zhongxing* 邓小平中兴). It is too soon to tell, the writer notes, but in either case it points to the imminent arrival of a *shengshi* (and then, inevitably, decline).[17]

In both cases, *shengshi* and *fuxing*, we see a vision of history that is fundamentally at odds with that embraced by the Party for most of its history, when 'revolution', not 'restoration', was the order of the day. This new vision may also partly explain why the 'rise of China' (*Zhongguode jueqi* 中国的崛起) framework—which has also emerged in the last decade, predating the *shengshi* narrative—is seen to be insufficient. Apart from the fact that talk of the 'rise of China' or its 'peaceful development' (*heping fazhan* 和平发展, seen as less aggressive in tone than *jueqi*) focuses mainly on China's international position and is thus most often directed at foreign audiences, one obvious difference between the *jueqi* and *shengshi*

narratives would seem to be that *jueqi* (peaceful or otherwise) suggests movement, a 'rising up' toward a crest or crescendo that lies yet ahead, a promise in the future, whereas *shengshi* suggests arrival, or stasis. *Shengshi*, in other words, represents a culmination of *jueqi*, with implications of duration, stability and (relative) permanence. Another difference is that *jueqi* lacks the same echoes of classical ideals as *shengshi*.

Since when, one might ask, has the Party found it necessary or advantageous to turn to classical precedents to justify its policies? True, the slogan of 'Seeking truth from facts' (*shishi qiushi* 实事求是) slogan embraced by Deng Xiaoping had its classical origins, but so far from stressing this point, in his famous speech in December 1978, Deng insisted that: 'Seeking truth from facts is the basis of the worldview of the proletariat and the basis of Marxist thought.'<sup>[18]</sup> No mention was made of the appearance of the phrase *shishi qiushi* in the *Hanshu* 汉书 or its role in the thought of the Ming scholar-official Gu Yanwu 顾炎武. Similarly, in the case of another such formulation, that of *xiaokang shehui* 小康社会 (the 'well-to-do' or 'moderately prosperous society'), which also derives from the classics (in this case, the *Classic of Poetry*), no reference was made by Deng to its origins; indeed, with an emphasis exclusively upon its economic side, it is arguable that the original meaning of *xiaokang* has all but been lost, at least for the vast majority of people. With the appearance of 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) rhetoric of the 2000s, there were no obvious classical precedents to call upon at all.

In contrast to all these, the invocation of *shengshi* represents something of a departure from previous political discourse in the People's Republic. For one thing, it reveals a stark divergence from prior positions that labeled the imperial past as 'feudal', 'reactionary', and thus wholly to be rejected, positions that now seem as antiquated as do calls for the proletarians of all countries to arise and throw off their chains. For another, it posits the present age, not as an unprecedented achievement of the new, revolutionary socialist order, but as the return of a long-lost era of prosperity and glory, the recovery of China's former place of precedence in the affairs of the world. It satisfies in this sense, not just the cravings of national pride, but a deep sense of nostalgia, too. To proclaim a *shengshi* is to acknowledge—or really, to seek actively—a connection with the distant age of Yao and Shun, and of the Han, Tang and Qing dynasties. For *shengshi* is not just any other political slogan; it depends for meaning emphatically and exclusively upon reflection upon the past and upon the imitation of established cultural patterns, which long predate the current regime. It is as retrospective, as culture-bound, as if the Party had begun talking about possessing *tianming* 天命, 'heaven's mandate'. Another way of thinking about this is to say that, unlike the majority of linguistic tropes deployed by the state, *shengshi* is what Richard Dawkins would classify as a meme, 'a unit of cultural transmission or imitation'.<sup>[19]</sup> As such, it is a living structure, 'like a gene', with an independent existence over which no single person or body exercises complete control. Rolling it out in the name of political expediency is a little like rolling the dice: who knows what combination will come up?

## The Qing Legacy and Cyclical Risks

What we might playfully call the 'rise of *shengshi* (*shengshide jueqi* 盛世的崛起) appears to reflect two related intellectual shifts. One is a growing preoccupation with searching for political legitimation in historical precedent, especially the Qing. The other is a shift away from a linear view of history, and a return of sorts to a cyclical view of change.

The beginnings of a more nuanced, more positive view of the Qing period began a generation ago, when the strict Marxism that bound all discourse, academic and otherwise, was loosened, resulting in a flourishing of serious scholarship on all aspects of Qing economy, society, politics, and culture. A minor renaissance of Manchu studies, long dormant, also took place beginning in the 1980s.<sup>[20]</sup> The result was a refurbished view of the Qing, which went from not-quite-a-dark age to an age of enlightenment, with strong, dedicated, and far-seeing leadership, a thriving economy, a cultural high tide, and a demographic boom. The new vision of the Qing was there for all to see on the most popular television programs of the 1990s and 2000s—*Yongzheng wangchao* 雍正王朝, *Kangxi diguo* 康熙帝国, *Qianlong wangchao* 乾隆王朝, *Huanzhu gege* 还珠格格—all of which pivoted on life at the Manchu court.<sup>[21]</sup> Throughout, however,

the underlying periodization of *gudai shi* 古代史 (pre-1842) and *jindaishi* 近代史 (post-1842) remained in place, and the usual categories of feudal, semi-feudal, semi-colonial, etc., were for the most part unchallenged. A bright line continued to divide the study of the Qing from that of the post-1911 period.

In the last several years, however, that line has become progressively less distinct. This owes in some measure to historians writing in English and Japanese, who have steadily chipped away at the idea of a sharp divide between imperial and republican China and who, like Prasenjit Duara, have raised new questions about the nature of the transition between empire and nation. It owes also to questions raised by scholars associated with the 'New Qing History', regarding the connections, not just between (a now more fully theorized) empire and the modern nation-state, but also between 'Qing' as a political entity and 'China' as a national idea.

These twin challenges to traditional historiographical models have engendered significant attention, some agreement, and not a little opposition. One outcome of this is that scholars in the People's Republic have begun to re-examine the connections between the Qing order and modern China, and to investigate the various ways in which the modern Chinese state, far from representing a radical break from the past, inherited more from its imperial antecedents than orthodox historians have for a century been willing to admit.[22] The recent publication of two volumes focusing on the New Qing History and 'national identity' in the Qing is testimony to the liveliness of the debate.[23] The Qing inheritance is stressed most forcefully in the areas of territory and polyethnicity, where the connections between the project of 'national unification' (as the Qing conquests are usually referred to) are most obvious. The identification of the Qing empire with 'China'—which can easily shade over into the essentializing of contemporary national space[24]—has come to be a preoccupation of a number of scholars, whose underlying motive, it would appear, is to remove any ambiguity as to the legitimacy of sovereignty claims.[25]

That is, instead of a bright line drawn at 1911 dividing empire from republic, we now see a bright line drawn directly from empire to republic. The People's Republic has become the successor state of the Qing, and, in the absence of any other sustaining ideology, increasingly has come to rely upon this equation for its legitimacy. If there were any doubts as to the absolute sincerity with which this connection is made, these would have to be set aside in view of the enormous sum of RMB \$600 million (nearly USD \$100 million) budgeted in 2002 by the State Council for the production of a new, authoritative *Qing History*, due out in 2012. This project, to which thousands of scholars have been recruited, has all the hallmarks of an endeavor of dynastic legitimation (complete with patronage networks, intergenerational tensions over interpretation, real estate transactions, etc.)—and means that the study of Qing history has become more than usually politicized.[26]

The implications of the claim on the Qing legacy by the People's Republic are complex and vast. Especially at a time when 'patriotism' is advanced as a signal republican virtue, to search for roots in the Qing, which arose and fell amidst intense ethnic antagonism, is to stir the coals of Han nationalism at the risk of disturbing the delicate balance of feeling between the majority Han and minority nationalities such as Tibetans, Uyghurs and Mongols.[27] But as for *shengshi*, the connections to the Qing are quite plain, since, as already mentioned, the last *shengshi* came about then. The temptation is understandably hard to resist. If *shengshi* is the treasure room at the heart of the Chinese memory palace, the inner sanctum in which rulers have historically aspired to be enshrined, then for China's present regime, the link through the Qing is the key that opens the door to a *Wunderkammer* fabulously furnished with cabinets engraved with near-mythical names: Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong (1662-1795CE); the Zhenguan and Kaiyuan reigns of the Tang (627-741CE); and the reigns of emperors Wen, Jing, and Wu of the Han (179-49 BCE). It is not so much that *shengshi* has returned to the present; it is we who have found a way to return to *shengshi*, to a cherished and embellished conceptualization of the past, and of history.

## Conclusion

Echoing the point made by Geremie Barmé in his June 2011 Editorial, I have proposed here that invoking the *shengshi* meme suggests a return to a cyclical view of history, with its pattern of 'rise and fall', and in which the past is the ultimate standard of success, an ideal to be revived, imitated, and, if possible,

recovered. This leaves us with the task of trying to determine where a cyclical view of history fits in 2011-2012. After Spengler, belief in such a view has found favor mainly in popular historical writing; few serious historians, wherever they may be, take cyclical change seriously as a theory of history. Moving to this model, if indeed this is what the appeal to *shengshi* is about, would be a radical departure. It would be to abandon the Enlightenment belief in linear progress (in which the past is left further and further behind as mankind advances into an ever-brighter future), a notion that underlies not just Marxist theories of history, but Whig and Rankean schools of historical thought as well.[28] It would also be to return to a 'Chinese' conceptualization of historical time, that is to say, a method that is wholly self-referential, and exclusive of the rest of the world, and which sees Chinese history as somehow being 'exceptional'. In this aspect, it is a stance that is at once profoundly conservative and deeply ironic. The irony, of course, is that this is exactly how Hegel and Marx understood the operation of Chinese history.[29]

Looked at synoptically, the appeal to *shengshi* poses a daunting set of problems. One has already been mentioned, which is that the arrival of *shengshi* presages the beginning of the end; framing the political moment in these terms is also to acknowledge the fragility of that moment and the inherent transience of power. A second is that it definitively sets aside *geming* 革命, 'revolution', in even the most abstract sense, as the goal of the Chinese Communist Party; for how can there be revolution if there is no idea of progress? This was the gist of the protest by the 'Children of Yan'an' (*Yan'an Ernü* 延安儿女) earlier that year, when they called on the Party to remember Mao's promise to break free of the grip of the cycle of dynastic rise and fall through revolutionary democracy.[30] Though they did not target the contemporary use of *shengshi* per se, those involved in drafting the memorandum that was submitted to the Party leadership were perhaps justified in their concern that cyclicity was coming back into fashion, so to speak, not only for what it might portend in terms of their hopes for the future of the revolution, but for what it might portend in terms of the future generally. For if we indeed have gone back to a belief in the recursion of dynastic cycles, then quite apart from any concerns of a 'jinx' linked specifically with the proclamation of a *shengshi*, the inescapable conclusion is that the present regime has not broken free of history, after all. With that, it is hard to disagree.

## Notes:

[1] Yang Nianqun's cautiously positive appraisal of Qing rule, mentioned below, is vehemently criticized by comments on the site, the majority of which adopt an openly racist tone toward the idea of rule by Manchus or Mongols:

One can perhaps accept something of the idea of the 'unification' under Kangxi and Qianlong, but to talk about stuff like a Kangxi-Qianlong 'prosperous age' is to make a mockery of the term *shengshi*; it's a bald-faced lie. There was no Kangxi-Qianlong 'prosperous age', only a 'sacrificed age'. Without civilization, where are there true people? Without true people, where can a prosperous age come from?

康乾之治是大一统稍微可以接受，讲康乾盛世云云，简直是亵渎了'盛世'这个名词，有公开撒谎之嫌；因为根本没有康乾盛世，只有康乾牲世，没有文明哪来真正的人？没有真正的人哪来的盛世？

Others rejected the *shengshi* idea on the basis of a 'new left' critique of inequality and corruption. A good example of such thinking could be found on the online essay, "盛世中国" 触目惊心的数字—中国人民生活'在'国人民生的'被幸福中', which appears to have begun circulating in February 2011. Accessed on 27 December 2011, at: [http://club.china.com/data/thread/1011/2723/04/61/8\\_1.html](http://club.china.com/data/thread/1011/2723/04/61/8_1.html).

[2] Interestingly, for Yang, 'The only recognized prosperous age is one in which the basic situation is that of a polyethnic community.' He adds, 'In fact, the damage done to cultural character by the grand unity of the prosperous age is extremely severe, as the room for free expression is quite small. If you look at the "Kang-Qian" prosperous age, you can see that one cannot blindly promote a "prosperous age".' (盛世唯一被认同的就是一个多民族的共同体这样一个基本格局。事实上，盛世大一统对文化个性的摧残非常严重，自由发挥余地非常小，看看'康乾盛世'就知道了，不可盲目的捧盛世)。See, '史学家杨念群：康乾盛世是唯一真正的大一统', *Guiyang Daily* 贵阳日报, 24 November 2011. Accessed on 22 December 2011, at:

<http://history.huanqiu.com/miwen/2011-11/2202875.html>.

[3] '那时的清廷还沉睡在中，春梦不觉晓，听不到处处的鸟啼。' Ding Li 丁力, 'Xinhai geming bainian ji' 辛亥革命百年纪, *Economic Observer* 经济观察报, 9 October 2011. Accessed on 22 December 2011, at: <http://www.eeo.com.cn/2011/1009/213026.shtml>.

[4] '不要让太平盛世麻痹忧患意识.' Accessed on 27 December 2011, at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-07/07/c\\_121635519.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-07/07/c_121635519.htm).

[5] '在举世瞩目的光环下，某些群体容易滋生"盛世心态"，固步自封.' Accessed on 27 December 2011, at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2011-07/06/c\\_121631382.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2011-07/06/c_121631382.htm).

[6] Text accessed online on 27 December 2011, at: <http://news.qq.com/a/20111010/000126.htm>. Interestingly, in talks given in March 2011, both Du Qinglin and the now-disgraced Bo Xilai touched on the idea of *fuxing*, and linked it directly to *shengshi* ('共创中华民族伟大复兴的盛世伟业'). Accessed at: <http://www.cqmqjsw.org.cn/displaynews.asp?id=524>.

[7] '为了一个民族的梦想，我们从1840年的海面出发；为了一个不变的追求，我们在岁月深处写下光荣。全球视野下展现中国道路之抉择；全景历史中浓缩民族复兴之历程。电视政论片《复兴之路》——用历史感悟未来.' Accessed on 16 March 2012, at: <http://finance.cctv.com/special/C19478/04/index.shtml>.

[8] A more restricted search for the term *Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* for 1985-1989 predictably turned up very few hits (9); for the period 1990-2000, rather more (897); for the period 2001-2006, yet more (16,200), and for the period 2007-2011, 438,000.

[9] Geremie Barmé suggests that Jiang's remark may have provided encouragement to scholars then considering the possibility of a new official 'dynastic history' of the Qing. As he writes, 'For as those attuned to the revival of interest in late-imperial Chinese history are aware, issues revolving around national unity, power, territorial integrity and global sway are today discussed in terms not of revolution but rather of empire.' Accessed at: <http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/editorial.php?issue=026>.

[10] Full text accessed on 16 March 2012, at: [http://www.china.org.cn/wap/2011-07/06/content\\_22931612.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/wap/2011-07/06/content_22931612.htm). The official English translation accompanying the Chinese consistently gives 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' for the phrase '*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*' 中华民族伟大复兴.

[11] The title of an official news release commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of the 1911 Revolution invoked this same phrase: 'Bravely Advancing Along the Road to Revival' (沿着复兴之路奋勇前进--纪念辛亥革命百年). Accessed on 14 March 2012, at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-10/08/c\\_122128077.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-10/08/c_122128077.htm).

[12] *Fuxing zhi lu*, Beijing: Zhongguo Minzhu yu Fazhi Chubanshe, 2009, 3 vols.

[13] 'Road to Revival' debuted in Beijing on 30 September 2009, accessed on 14 March 2012, at: <http://english.cctv.com/20090930/101495.shtml>. A film of the stage show was aired on CCTV as well. The deployment of such mass cultural performances offers a fascinating example of the ways in which tried-and-true propaganda tools are continually re-circulated. Another recent revival, of cult hero Lei Feng, is another such instance.

[14] The chatroom may be found at: [www.fuxing.bbs.cctv.com](http://www.fuxing.bbs.cctv.com)

[15] '复兴应该是20世纪中国的一个鲜明主题，也是21世纪在960万平方公里的土地上注定要实现的蓝图。复兴是中国人民的共同意志，也是中国共产党人一直追求的神圣使命。[...] 亿万人民都在渴求复兴，在这种背景下，《复兴论坛》没有不成功的道理。' 《国务院新闻办网络局彭波：中国亿万人民渴求复兴》，8 October 2007. Accessed on 16 March 2012, at: <http://finance.cctv.com/special/C19478/20071008/103925.shtml>.

[16] Zhao Yao 赵曜, '社会主义与民族复兴', *Qiushi* 2009 no.23: 13. The translation is that from the journal's English-language edition; see 'Socialism and National Rejuvenation', Seeking Truth 2.2 (1 April 2010), accessed at: [http://english.qstheory.cn/politics/201109/t20110924\\_112495.htm](http://english.qstheory.cn/politics/201109/t20110924_112495.htm).

[17] Xiang Lanxin 相蓝欣, '民族伟大复兴还是邓小平中兴', accessed at: <http://opinion.dwnews.com/news/2011-10-20/58233786.html>. Xiang, director of the China Center at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, notes later in this article that imperial-age 'feudal' thinking was the consistent target of Party propaganda during the Revolution, and used to denigrate political positions it opposed as old and conservative after 1949. But, he says, in the early twenty-first century, the Party no longer knows what it stands for. Whereas the two-character term *fengjian* 封建 (i.e., 'feudal'), can be used to cover everything before 1949, it requires thirty-one characters for the Party to

define what it is about today, viz., 马克思列宁主义、毛泽东思想、邓小平理论，三个代表重要思想以及科学发展观.

[18] '实事求是，是无产阶级世界观的基础，是马克思主义的思想基础.'

[19] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p.192. The idea being that, once propagated, a cultural idea is reproduced *through imitation* and thus achieves currency; with time, it can be expected to adapt and mutate. While critics of memetic theory fault it for being pseudoscientific, in this case it is precisely the pseudoscientific nature of the assumption that transmission of cultural notions like *shengshi* is as straightforward as injecting a virus into a cell (i.e., all it takes to persuade people of an idea is to pronounce it) that recommends its application to discussion of the *shengshi* trope.

[20] Representative of this trend would be work by Zhou Yuanlian 周远廉, *Qingchao kaiguoshi yanjiu* 清朝开国史研究 (Shenyang, 1981); Wu-bing-an 乌丙安, et al., eds., *Manzu minjian gushi xuan* 满族民间故事选 (Shanghai 1983); Yang Xuechen 杨学琛 and Zhou Yuanlian, *Qingdai baqi wanggong guizu xingshuai shi* 清代八旗王公贵族兴衰史 (Shenyang, 1986); and Wang Zhonghan 王钟翰, *Manzushi yanjiu ji* 满族史研究 (Beijing, 1988). In addition, two new journals, *Manzu yanjiu* 《满族研究》 and *Manyu yanjiu* 《满语研究》 (Harbin) began publishing in 1985, and a new institute of Manchu studies was established at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences in 1991.

[21] *Yongzheng wangchao* (1997), a CCTV production based on the novel by Eryue He 二月河, featured forty-four episodes and won close to 17% of the national television audience when it was screened, making it the most popular of the dramas ever aired by the network at its 8pm timeslot. *Kangxi diguo* (2001, fifty episodes, also based on a screenplay by Eryue He) and *Qianlong wangchao* (2002, forty episodes), built on the popularity of the original Yongzheng drama. *Huanzhu gege* ('Princess Pearl', 1997-2003, 112 episodes), set records by capturing over 50% of viewers with its romantic retelling of aristocratic life in the eighteenth century.

[22] Cf. Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光: 'The theoretical premise whereby the traditional empire and the modern nation are divided into two separate periods does not accord with China's history, nor does it accord with the history of the concepts of Chinese national consciousness or state development.[...] The modern nation-state emerged precisely from the traditional centralized imperial state; within it remains the consciousness of that imperial state. These histories are thereby entangled.' Ge, *Zhaizi Zhongguo* 宅兹中国, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2011, pp.28-29.

[23] Liu Fengyun and Liu Wenpeng, eds., *Qingchaode guojia rentong: 'Xin Qingshi' yanjiu yu zhengming* (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Chubanshe, 2010); Liu Fengyun, Dong Jianzhong, and Liu Wenpeng, eds., *Qingdai zhengzhi yu guojia rentong*, 2 vols., Beijing: Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2012. For a neutral appraisal, see Liu Fengyun, 'Xin Qingshi yanjiu: butong fanxiangde zhengming', *Zhongguo shehui kexue bao zaixian*, 2 June 2011, accessed on 28 December 2011, at: <http://www.csstoday.net/Item/2999.aspx>.

[24] In his important new book, the Fudan University historian Ge Zhaoguang cautions against such assumptions: 'Speaking in terms of historical meaning, to talk about such-and-such a 'country' [*guojia*] is inevitably to talk about such-and-such a dynasty, such that one can recognize that "China" [*Zhongguo*] historically has been a mobile "China". Not only in the sense that each and every dynasty has various events of division and unity, but, even more so, in the sense that the spatial frontiers controlled by dynastic central governments have been subject to change.[...] One cannot use the political boundaries of modern China to reflect on historical China.' *Zhaizi Zhongguo*, pp.31-32.

[25] A good example is Huang Xingtao 黄兴涛, 'Qingchao Manrende "Zhongguo rentong" ', *Zhonghua dushubao*, 76 (27 October 2010), in *Wenhua zhoukan* supplement 13, p.1. See also Guo Chengkang, 'Qingchao huangdide Zhongguo guan', *Qingshi yanjiu* 2005.4: 1-18.

[26] Zhao Ma, 'Writing History in a Prosperous Age: The New Qing History Project', *Late Imperial China*, 29:1 (June 2008): 120-145. See also note 9 above.

[27] As the case of the 'slapping incident' involving the Qing historian Yan Chongnian 阎崇年 makes clear, for some people being a patriot means supporting the cause of Han chauvinism, even when this runs counter to officially promoted notions of ethnic equality among the diverse peoples who make up the *Zhonghua minzu*. See James Leibold, 'More than A Category: Han Supremacism on the Chinese Internet', *China Quarterly* 203 (September 2010): 539-539.

[28] Postmodern historical thinking of course dispenses with any notion of progress, which it sees as just

one more 'hegemonic meta-narrative', but then it eschews belief in any sort of historical patterning at all. [29] According to Hegel, the lack of the development of an awareness of the spirit (i.e., freedom) doomed China (and the entirety of East Asia) to stasis and slavery: 'Given this abstract definition, we can say that world history is the record of the spirit's efforts to attain knowledge of what it is in itself. The Orientals do not know that the spirit or man as such are free in themselves. And because they do not know this, they are not themselves free. They only know that One is free; but for this very reason, such freedom is mere arbitrariness, savagery, and brutal passion, or a milder and tamer version of this which is itself only an accident of nature, and equally arbitrary. This One is therefore merely a despot, not a free man and a human being.' G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, H.B. Nisbet, trans., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p.54. Except for dissenting famously on the role of 'Spirit', Marx accepted this view of Asian history as well.

[30] See Geremie R. Barmé, 'The Children of Yan'an: New Words of Warning to a Prosperous Age 盛世新危言', *China Heritage Quarterly*, June 2011, at:

[http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=026\\_yanan.inc&issue=026](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=026_yanan.inc&issue=026)