

# China: what do we know about it?

*Discussion at The Park*

Wednesday 20 July 2016 7:30pm at *The Park Tavern, Macclesfield*

## **An Introduction:**

The contemporary China expert, Rana Mitter, offers "three main viewpoints [of China].

"**First**, rather than being a closed society, China has almost always been a society open to outside influence, and 'Chinese' culture and society cannot be understood in isolation from the outside world. In other words, China cannot be treated as a special case of an isolated society, but rather as part of a changing regional and global culture.

"**Second**, it is too simple to say that China has moved from a 'traditional' past to a 'modern' present. Rather, the modern China we see today is a complex mixture of indigenous social influences and customs and external influences, often, but not always, from the West. Society did not change overnight in 1912 with the abdication of the last emperor, or in 1949 with the Communist revolution, but neither is the modern China of today essentially the same as when the emperors were on the throne a hundred or two hundred years ago.

"**Third**, our understanding of how modern China has developed should not come only through following elite politics and leaders and their conflicts. Instead, we should look at continuities as well as changes in how the Chinese have come to modernity, and the impact of change on society and culture as a whole."

## **Questions:**

1. Is there anyone in our circle who has visited China, either socially or for work? If so, what is your key overall impression of the part(s) of China you experienced? After this, going around the circle, each is invited to make an opening remark. (As this is a big topic, please make these remarks brief.)
2. China is a big place, with a very large population and a very long recorded history. What can we share about the scale of the place and size of its population? Do we know any key events from Chinese history before, say, 1900?
3. Mitter maintains that China has not lived in sustained isolation. What influences has China had on *our* civilization over the centuries before 1900? What about the impact of Chinese culture on us, over the centuries? And the impact of Western culture on China before 1900?
4. What do we know about the changes that China and its people experienced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century? What were the main events of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese history, of which we are aware - in culture, in politics, in economic policy?
5. Thinking more recently, and possibly helping with question 4, what were the main effects on China of the periods of government by these successive leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): Mao Zedong (1949-1976); Deng Xiaoping (1976-1989); Jiang Zemin (1989-2002); Hu Jintao (2002-2012) and Xi Jinping (2012- )?
6. China appears to have a Communist regime but a capitalist economy. Is this an accurate summary of the state of China? Can it last? Does it offer a viable alternative model to the Western way of running society?
7. Another China expert, Martin Jacques, famously described China as a "civilization State" not a "nation State". Overall, Mitter's book asks - is Chinese society modern; is China's economy modern; is Chinese culture modern? In the light of our discussion so far, do we have any comments on these cultural points?
8. This is obviously a very big topic indeed. Have we learnt about anything in this discussion that we wish to return to at another time?

## **Further Reading:**

(a) These notes are based mostly on *Modern China: a very short introduction* by Rana Mitter, 2016, Oxford University Press. A superb and tiny book that fits in your back pocket!

(b) *When China Rules the World* by Martin Jacques, 2009, Allen Lane.

(c) *China's Future* by David Shambaugh, 2016, Polity Books.