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Series Editor **Brian Job**

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A Canadian on the margins of China's Big Parade – the PRC at 60

By **Jeremy Paltiel**

As a self-aware yet somewhat insecure China pulls out all the stops as it celebrates the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, a Canadian observer argues that Canadians have yet come to terms with the role and impact of today's China. In centuries past, Canada was explored and developed by entrepreneurs seeking a shorter transport route to China. Today's Canadians need to rediscover our ties to China in their daily mindset.

Night after night, China's television news shows footage of troops drilling for the Big Day and the Big Parade. There are even live updates of the rehearsal on Tiananmen Square. On practically all the other channels, the usual fare of old movies is dominated by stories from the latter stages of the Chinese Civil War and the events leading up to the Communist victory in 1949. Programs are interspersed with segments on major milestones over the past six decades against a recurrent backdrop of bright red and golden yellow. There are flower beds planted in the pattern of the Chinese flag, ochre mounds from the Gobi desert set off with four shining golden stars and car parks arranged in red and yellow. Also apparent are the security "precautions." Beijing residents have been told not to watch from their balconies, and regiments of uniformed and plain clothes government forces are everywhere. The Chinese, never known for restrained aesthetics, are once again putting their Technicolor dreamscape in the service of the state. The PRC is 60

years old, and the era of economic reform and market opening now constitutes half the lifespan of the People's Republic and the socialist state. What is a Canadian to make of it all?

On one hand, a China expert with a long memory is likely to reflect on the fact that the party-state has never been shy about self-congratulation. Even in the worst days of the Cultural Revolution, the People's Daily declared that "the heavens are in turmoil, the situation is excellent." But this time it is different. When the Chinese media reports on President Hu Jintao's visit to New York, the standard fare of China's leaders holding court in the Great Hall of the People to visitors from around the world has been transposed to the headquarters of global capitalism, where President Hu receives in audience the Presidents of France and Bolivia. He, without a thread out of place on an immaculately tailored blue suit with a tasteful tie, looks every inch the Chairman of the



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Board, earnestly declaiming peace and development and modestly offering to cooperate in the solution of all global problems through dialogue and trust. Meanwhile, the New York Times' resident oracle of globalism, Thomas Friedman (whose books in translation are hawked from street corner vendors from the backs of cargo trishaws), proclaims that the next 'Chinese threat' is brewing across the board domination in green technologies.

Yet Chinese are fully persuaded that they are at the top of the world. One glimpses that in the fierce determination you see in the eyes of the soldiers at drill to get it right so they can be seen to be worthy. You can also hear it in the apologies of my department chair when the internet collapsed on campus the weekend before classes were to begin. "We are not like Canada here, we are still a developing country." It is also reflected in a million and one curses and complaints by China's put-upon citizens for the petty humiliations and frustrations – and corruption -- in daily bureaucratic hassles and bloody-minded officiousness or the infuriating consequences of shoddy workmanship and inadequate safety regulation. The precision drill of the parade, or the Olympics, are meant to compensate for deeper feelings of inadequacy, and to demonstrate that China can perform, and is worthy of the great power aspirations at the core of national identity.



The overwhelming image of the PRC on its 60th anniversary as seen from Beijing is the emphatic assertion of China's presence. Yet most Canadians simply do not get it. Our mental mindscape is formed elsewhere, and our bureaucratic gaze is directed to where it has been focussed since our founding, toward the United States and Europe.

I took a walk in the ruins of the Old Summer Palace, the *yuanmingyuan*, just across the way from Tsinghua University, where I teach. It was burnt down by and pillaged by British and French forces in 1860, with the British led by Lord Elgin, who was Governor General of (United Upper and Lower) Canada in the 1840s – before he became a hotel in Ottawa. The most visible ruins consist of carved marble blocks from the Rococo European palace with its playing fountains designed by Jesuit missionaries. It stands in ruins as a monument to China's national humiliation, but over the past few years, Chinese billionaires have been buying back some of the pillaged items on the international art market and repatriating them to China, and reproductions of these are on display. Elsewhere, Chinese diplomats and officials have served notice that they will not stand to be lectured to on human rights. "Those days are over," they proclaim definitively. My students in international relations express their interest in terms of an appreciation of interdependence, and a desire, indeed an expectation, as Chinese, to participate actively in global affairs.



It isn't that Canadians in the streets and in our halls of power are unaware of China's rise. A glance at the labels at the local Walmart, or even Holt Renfrew, will give you that. It is rather that as Canadians we cannot find the coordinates of China in our daily calculations of where we are and where

we are going. We file China under 'trade, human rights and immigration' and refer to it only when those topics are on the agenda. We either ignore issues of human rights, etc., or we fixate on idiosyncratic cases, losing sight of how to manage them forthrightly within the context of a full and maturing relationship. With difficulty, we have included China in a new file of 'globalism,' but that is a file we look at only if something overwhelming (and usually unwanted), intrudes on our daily routine. To deal adequately with the changed reality of today's China, it must rise to the level of what was on last night's TV talk show, and stimulate the daily conversations around the coffee-maker and the water cooler.



I was reminded of this when reading the recent book *Vermeer's Hat* by my friend and colleague Tim Brook: when "our" European forbears set out across the oceans to come here, they were looking for China. Brook reminds us that China is planted in our historical landscape. It was the business plan behind the building of the Canadian Pacific Railroad and the Grand Trunk Pacific, which became CN. Somehow we have forgotten that once China was integral to our nation-building project. One of the most important reasons why the Harper government has faltered on its China policy is because it, too, has forgotten its history. The Prime Minister should be reminded that his quest for Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic and the Northwest Passage stems from this historical quest for a passage to China. So, to paraphrase the French leader's statement on 9/11 for the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the PRC: *nous sommes tous les chinois*. Or better yet, *Women Dou Shi Zhongguoren*.



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