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those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it - Santayana

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Asian Values

1. People Power and Democracy with Asian Characteristics

In February 1986 the streets of Manila stirred with the call of "People Power", driving Ferdinand Marcos and his celebrity wife Imelda into exile; after election data entry operators resigned en masse claiming that the vote numbers they entered into the computer were not being reflected in the announced results, and then the military defected to the opposition. Less than fifteen years later, the same call arose against Joseph Estrada, with quicker timing and a lower level of turmoil, again after high level military defections following a senate corruption enquiry which seriously discredited him.

Given the chaotic conditions of her ascension to power, we shall never quite know whether Mrs Aquino did attain an electoral majority, though this is highly likely, or exactly how many votes she received. Nor will we ever know whether, given a genuinely impartial judiciary enquiry, Mr Estrada would have been properly convicted of impeachable offences. One can be reasonably confident however that both changes of government in the Philippines reflected the will of the people, and so are this sense democratic, though the particular form of the exercise of this popular will is far from the standard West European and North American model.

Similarly, the changes of governments that occurred in South Korea from Roh Teh Woo to Kim

Yong Sam and then Kim Dae Jong, in Taiwan from Jiang Jing Kuo to Lee Teng Hui then Chen Shui Bian, and in Indonesia from Suharto to Habibi then Wahid/Megawatti, each followed a process different from the Western model. In fact, the process is much closer to Roman imperial succession in the Antonine age: a reigning emperor would adopt an able lieutenant as his heir, who will upon the death of the predecessor be proclaimed by the senate and the praetorian guard, representing the civilian and military power blocs, as Principes, the first citizen of Rome.

The use of the analogy is by no means a negative one: the Antonine emperors, from the great general Trajan to the stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, were all good rulers, and presided over a golden age of peace and prosperity. While they exploited the wealth of the empire, much of which was regarded as the emperor's personal property, they were careful to share their largess widely and in ways positive for posterity. As Augustus says, "I found Rome a city of bricks, and left it a city of marble", in much the same way Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew would characterize his own achievements in turning a rundown British colony into a technocratic metropolis.

"Democracy" being one of the sacred cows of our modern age, all governments aspire to be popularly elected, and the immediate promise of every African, South American or Asian coup leader would be "I will hold election soon". But democracy takes many forms, and permits many kinds of secret or open manipulations. Just as the leaders of China use "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" to describe their partial adoption of capitalism, "Asian Values" was the expression used to justify Asia's unwillingness to fully adhere to the Western democratic model. It is not our purpose here to either endorse or decry this, merely to better understand what "democracy with Asian characteristics" actually means.

2 Confucius Says - Hierarchy and Enlightenment

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3 Singapore and Modern Confucianism

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4 Karl Marx and Bubble Economics

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5 Crises of Faith - From Taiji to Fa Lun Gong

section{The failure of Taiji}

Tiananmen Square used to be known for two things: the morning crowds doing their Taiji shadow boxing, and mass rallies for the latest political campaigns. The slow, carefully regulated movements of the body prescribed by Taiji (which means literally "universal supreme") are supposed to give the practitioner enhanced control over both body and mind, and conceptually relate to the art of soft defense philosophically embodied in Taoism and physically used in Judo. "Playing Taiji" is also used to denote bureaucratic buckpassing and subtle ways of saying no.

Tiananmen Square used to be a place where people go to exercise Taiji in the morning, but on the night of 4 June 1989 the square rang with the rumble of tanks and machinegun shots: after a monthlong occupation of the square by students protesting against authoritarianism and corruption, and after all peaceful means to clear the square failed, the army moved in. After the bloodshed, many commentators have written about the bankruptcy of communist ideology. Without wanting to defend communism, I would suggest that the behaviour of the ruling Chinese regime actually has little to do with communism itself, but is merely the continuation of traditional feudalistic practices in a modern form.

Communism includes many strands of ideas, and out of these, three may be singled out for attention: 1. The element of Marxist Political Economy: Marx hypothesized that the political processes of a society are determined by its underlying economic processes. Technological developments produce changes in the economic structure, and consequently lead to changes in the political and social structures. History is therefore driven by technology and economics.

Though Marx's own study of history, economics and politics had many critics, there seems no reason to doubt that a close connection does exist between economics and politics, and even the most ardent capitalists are in some ways good followers of Marx. For example, any comment along the line "the recent events in China show that economic liberalization must be followed by political liberalization" is merely repeating a Marxist truism. In contrast, in attempting to achieve a capitalist style economy without significant political reforms, Deng Xiaoping was acting contrary to basic Marxist theory. Mao, who believed that a cultural revolution was needed before China could be modernized, was a closer follower of Marx.

2. The element of Marxist Social Utopia: Marx forecasted that in due course, the proletariat would rise up to implement a new social structure in which the private ownership of capital would be abolished, and eventually there will be a utopian society of plenty in which everyone will, without coercion, work to his best abilities and take only according his needs. Marx was, unfortunately, rather vague about how to make this happen and how long it would take, and his own organizational efforts were generally political as well as financial failures, but this has not stopped old and new communists from continuing to profess belief in this utopian prospect. Liberal capitalists are usually not utopian: if they believe in utopia, usually they do not wish to

impose their choice on other people, while most right wing capitalists would leave paradise in the hands of God. On the other hand, the pro-democracy protesters of China displayed a highly utopian attitude, and were, in this sense, better Marxists than Deng Xiaoping, the great pragmatist.

3. The element of Leninist Party Organization: It was Lenin who invented the practical organizational tactics that allowed a group of Marxists to successfully take over a nation. In this scheme, a tightly knit and highly disciplined party structure is first established, to which members are required to devote their total loyalty - personal loyalties and loyalties to common humanity are not only secondary, but indeed suspect and dangerous. The party organization is superimposed onto the government bureaucracy, military command, legislative bodies, trade unions and other community organizations, so that those in control of the party achieve control of all aspects of society.

Because the party controls the economy, it can then claim to have abolished private ownership of capital and therefore begun to implement a communist society; and because the party controls the important elements of the whole society, it can indeed make an attempt to change all aspects of the society towards its version of utopia. We thus have the curious phenomenon that academic theory and utopian idealism have, in time and with excellent logic, led to totalitarianism.

But whereas in the Soviet Union, the Party developed into a privileged elite that manages to incorporate, besides bureaucrats and officials, engineers, scientists, agriculture specialists, academicians and other higher elements of society, in China the party discipline is frequently undercut and superseded by a network of personal loyalties established during the days of the revolutionary army. Thus, although Deng Xiaoping was never Party Chairman, President or Prime Minister of China, for ten years he has effectively wielded supreme power because he has placed into senior positions of the Party and Government, a large number of his former subordinates in the Fourth Field Army, of which he was Political Commissar during the Civil War, and other loyal followers acquired from his work as Secretary General. When the 38th Army showed reluctance to crack down on the demonstrators, Yang Shangkun was able to bypass the Defence Ministry and the General Staff and directly call up the 27th Army, commanded by generals personally loyal to him, to move into Peking. Going back a little into the past, during the Cultural Revolution a small clique around Chen Buoda and Jiang Qin, without any top Party or Government positions, was able to launch a movement that nearly destroyed both the Party and the Government, merely by issuing edicts in the name of the semi-retired Mao. During his thirty years of rule, Chiang Kai Shek was given numerous different titles and positions, but his control had always been effected through his network of military officers and other officials established when he was the Principal of Wampoa Military Academy. Of course China is not the only country where such personal loyalties rule supreme over loyalties to organization, ideology or principles. The politics, civil service, commercial companies and even the universities of Japan are permeated with such oyabun-kobun (roughly, patron-client) relations, in which the oyabun provides patronage and career assistance to the

kobun in return for the latter's loyal support. The faction-ridden Liberal Democratic Party system provides a well known manifestation of this system and any observer of the Recruit scandal would have noticed many examples where loyalty to the superior easily overrode party discipline or national interest.

In short, what holds forth in China and much of Asia is a deeply entrenched practice, developed from the age of feudalism, of loyalty to a person rather than to more abstract entities. In traditional feudalism the king divides his territory to be ruled by various lords, who consequently owe him allegiance and will support him with their own followers when called to do so in a war; the lords in turn install knights and petty noblemen, who would then lease out their shares of the land to yeoman farmers or have serfs to cultivate it. The relation of master to servant (or lord to samurai) is both economic and military. In its modern form the network of loyalties is maintained but separately from the ownership of land. Whereas in Japan, the oyabun-kobun relations are established largely in the civilian sphere, the fact that the current rulers of China got in through successful wars meant that the most important relations reflect previous military command chains, which made the Chinese system nearer to traditional feudalism.

Once we start looking at the situation in this light, it becomes much easier to understand many aspects of China. For example, every government in China, regardless of its initial ideology, tended to become corrupt very quickly. For, under feudalistic thinking an official appointed to govern a territory would regard it virtually as his personal property, and would see nothing particularly wrong in lining his own pockets with wealth extracted from his office. A good official is not necessarily the honest Confucian who upholds justice and rejects bribery, or the hermit Taoist who stays away from the palace and refuses appointments in order to remain clean and honest, however much admiration such figures may receive in the literature; but someone who deploys such wealth beneficially, by sharing it with his subordinates and his superiors, and making sure that his territory is well maintained and prosperous. For example, a good official would use his personal wealth to purchase grain in times of poor harvest to feed his people, or spend it for public works. But it must follow that in good times he is entitled to build up his wealth using his office, provided of course that he does not become too greedy or too seriously pervert the course of justice.

Given a strong and competent central government, the behaviour of these local officials may be closely monitored and unsatisfactory ones may be replaced. When the central government becomes weak through neglect, incompetence, external wars, or natural disasters, local administration tends to become very chaotic and corrupt, and an ambitious official, especially one that has control over both military and financial affairs of a region, can easily build up a private kingdom. The history of China is replete with such warlord periods interspersing with periods of unity.

Commentators have often complained that China has not achieved rule of law. In fact, under feudalistic thinking this is impossible, since it requires a subordinate to disobey if a superior

gives an order that is contrary to the law; in other words, he needs to have a higher loyalty to an abstract principle than to a person. To the Chinese people, laws are made by men, and can be unmade by them. While some lip service is paid to such abstract concepts as "an emperor must rule with the mandate of heaven", it is seldom implemented in practice, but only used as a last resort to justify rebellion when things become really desperate.

It is also not possible to achieve democracy when people think feudalistically, since a democratic system separates official positions from the persons holding them, and seeks to fill the positions with persons that meet popular approval. Such a concept is obviously contrary to the feudalistic view of office being a personal property given to an official by his superior. Indeed, most Chinese find it curious that no American President that lost an election would ever call in the army to arrest the winner and hence retain office. The idea that the generals and soldiers would disobey any such commands because of their belief in democratic principles is not really comprehended.

One should point out however that it is equally wrong for Americans to believe that, because the 38th Army refused to crush the demonstrators, its soldiers must support democracy. A simpler and more personal explanation is that, most of the officers and men of this army are from the Peking region, and they were unwilling to shoot their friends and relatives in the Tiananmen Square. The soldiers are simply following their usual Chinese way of thinking, namely to be loyal to those with whom there is a personal connection.

To show how deeply entrenched feudalistic thinking is in the Chinese culture, one can point out a number of curious behaviours of Hong Kong and overseas Chinese and the demonstrators themselves. First, following the crackdown, it was widely rumoured that Deng was already dead and Yang had usurped his power in order to bring in the army. This was nothing more than the syndrome of "the emperor is wise and divine, but his ministers are evil." In so readily accepting such rumours, the Hong Kong and overseas Chinese have shown their own true colours. Similarly, those people who believed that the 38th Army would move in to crush the 27th were merely praying for victory of the good warlord over the bad.

Second, the demonstrators centered their most vociferous attacks on Premier Li Peng. Yet, it is known to everyone that Li is no more than the frontman of hardline elders, and could not be described as the main culprit for the undemocratic practices. He is personally not corrupt, though perhaps not all that capable either. It made little sense to single him out for attack, and in doing this, the demonstrators were merely following the very old trick of attacking the boss indirectly through his underlings - the emperor is not to be criticised, only his courtiers. It is also necessary to point out that the same trick was used frequently in the past: for example, before Liu Shaoqi fell, Peng Chen was used as the target. Thus, the demonstrators showed that they were, after all, good students of the same school.

Third, the erection of the Goddess of Liberty very much reminds one of the old practice of putting up a statue of ill defined significance and worshipping it, in the hope of achieving

peace and prosperity, just as outside every Chinese home there is a shrine to the God of the Earth which needs to be regularly worshipped, even though no one can ever say what the god looks like and what its powers are. Indeed, the statue put up by the students was highly reminiscent of the goddess Kuan Yin, originally a female reincarnation of Buddha but generally regarded in China as a separate deity, namely the patron of women and giver of mercy. Obviously, few of the demonstrators realized that the original Statue of Liberty in New York carries a message of welcome to refugees and poverty stricken immigrants, and has no direct relation with democracy itself.

In short, whereas the current rulers of China have shown themselves to be less than perfect communists, the protesters have not shown themselves to be very good democrats either, and have been rather muddled in their ideological thinking. Those who ask for freedom frequently want the limitation of certain freedoms, such as excessive profit making by enterprising individuals. Those who ask for democracy seem to have little idea of whom they want to elect and what kind of policies they want the elected officials to implement. They extoll Hu Yaobang, who in his life was neither particularly democratic or liberal, could boast of virtually no significant achievements, and impressed the world only with such pronouncements as "Chinese people should eat less rice and more bread." Like the Goddess, he was only being used as a cult figure of ill defined but anti-establishment significance. Thus, the main features of the conflict do not seem to be those of communism versus democracy; instead, both sides are steeped more or less in the far older culture of feudalism.

Because 80% of the Chinese people are peasants and most of the soliders are from the countryside, while the pro-democracy movement is mainly one of the cities, the ruling regime, by virtue of its feudalistic control over the rural areas and the Army, has prevailed. Further, the very old modes of thinking its opponents themselves displayed do not give one confidence that there is sufficient understanding of democracy, freedom and capitalism for reform to succeed. For China, democratic enlightenment is yet to be.

section{Fa Lun Gong}

Ten years later, China had n become the new home of the Asian economic miracle. Its trade surplus with USA is not far behind that of Japan, and Made in China goods flood world markets, affordable even to struggling East Europeans and South Asians. All the major cities are booming. The exiled leaders of the June 4 movement, who escaped earlier in the evening while encouraging their followers to stay and die, were all but discredited. Hongkong was successfully returned under the One China Two Systems policy.

But a new protest movement had arisen, gaining sudden prominence when several thousand followers of Fa Lun Gong (Law Wheel Power), a form of Qi Gong (Air Power) or breathing exercise, suddenly appeared one day outside the Zhong Nan Hai compound, the residence complex of the top leaders. Before long, the organization was denounced as an evil cult and a nation wide ban was declared on its activities. Many were arrested, and in January 2001 five of

the cult followers tried to commit suicide in Tiananmen Square by setting themselves on fire. Supposedly a movement for good health, Fa Lung Gong has become highly hazardous to one's physical well being.

What is Qi Gong? It is believed that by taking a particular posture and doing a carefully regulated regime of breathing, a person can cause some form of energy movement inside the body, thus increasing health and strength. Many practitioners claim that the exercise made them feel more relaxed and happier, which sounds realistic in today's fast paced, highly stressed environment. This could also have some carry-on effects on their physical well being, but claims beyond the level are made, and this is where problems arise.

These additional claims relate to two other long standing practices: the meditation exercises of Zen monks, and the more recent Gongfu stories that talk about numerous forms of "inner power" (Nei Gong). In both, the meditative posture and inner efforts are supposed to bring on some communion with the force of nature, to promote enlightenment in one, and develop fighting power in the other. Fusing these two into one, there is much folklore about the legendary fighting power of Shaolin monks, and the celebrated "One Finger Zen" story: "A great Zen master answered all questions about enlightenment by raising a finger. One of his disciples began to imitate him. When the master saw it, he chopped off the disciple's finger. As the disciple ran away bleeding, he looked back at the master, who raised a finger; at that moment he was enlightened" was confused with the Gongfu claim of being able to disable a person by poking a finger at his critical points.

This then got fused with another Chinese tradition: Tao priests claim that by drawing talisman figures and incantation, they could move spirits and invoke natural forces, whether to bring rain during a drought, shift mountains to build roads or canals, etc. If Qi Gong can invoke the forces of nature to strengthen one's body, it should also go the other way, allowing one's body to control nature. With that kind of thinking, the claim that Fa Lun Gong would build a Law Wheel inside your body, which you can turn to do all kinds of wonderful things, would not seem to be far fetched.

So we can understand Fa Lun Gong being adopted by poorly educated people unfamiliar with modern scientific ideas; we can even understand that some of them are easily incited by local leaders of Fa Lun Gong practice groups into sit-in protests against critics of the groups and then against officials who try to restore order and enforce laws against trespassing and illegal assembly. What is more puzzling is why so many educated people, in particular students and faculty in US and other overseas universities, would suspend their disbelief and use the world wide web to propagate the claims, even endorsing them as scientific. In fact, without such overseas endorsements, it is unlikely that the claims would have enjoyed the widespread acceptance in China among the politically conscious groups.

It is said that the economic liberalization of China has destroyed the ideological system, leaving a vacuum for something new. While that might explain what happened to some party

members, does anyone seriously believe that Fujian peasants and Chinese students in Stanford used to find comfort in Marxist sociology and Mao's theory of revolution, and once these are abandoned by the Chinese establishment, have to turn to superstition? The peasants have probably believed in one kind of superstition or another all along, and something that promises not only surviving doomsday and afterlife in an oriental heaven (in parallel with the Christian heaven for caucasians), but also good health without medical bills in this life, must be quite appealing to them. The intriguing question is about the Chinese living in the west.

The vacuum they face is not so much in ideology, as in culture as a whole. What part of Chinese culture can an overseas Chinese hold onto in a meaningful way? The answer is: curiously little.

Take the example of Confucianism. For it to have survived that long, and to be able to continue its well entrenched status in East Asian political systems, it must possess some real strengthes. Yet, almost all connotations of Confucianism are negative in some way: authoritarian, morally conservative, resistant to change, obscure, comical... Lu Xun is generally acknowledged as the greatest modern Chinese writer, but while his contribution in exposing the dark side of traditional Chinese society is undeniable, it is far harder to see what constructive ideas about organizing the modern Chinese world he could be credited with. Now if a Chinese cannot explain to a westerner what is so great about Confucius or Lu Xun, what can he say to get across the grandeur of Chinese culture? How does a parent convince a child that their cultural roots are worthy of an effort to retain?

New migrants frequently suffer from discrimination and exploitation, and for them, psychological comfort lies in the twin thoughts (a) I make sacrifice for the next generation; and (b) one day I will go home and it would all be worthwhile. But if one feels that the next generation would be culturally unrecognizable, and home has nothing attractive to return to, then the pain becomes hard to bear. It is in this light one must view the incomprehensible willingness of well educated academics to believe that breathing with half closed eyes would not only keep them healthy without medicine, but also survive the total destruction of world war three. The very outlandishness convinces a believer that a Chinese invention can be superior to anything anyone else has to offer.

Yet, the commentaors are after all correct: with China adopting capitalism and economic incentive as official doctrines and state enterprises dying away, some opposition ideology emphasizing equality and concern for the down trodden will need to emerge. One cannot but be impressed at how quickly health consciousness and mystical beliefs got mixed up with economic discontent and civil protest, which rapidly escalated, cumulating into the large scale, supposedly peaceful but nevertheless menacing demonstration in Beijing. While the Chinese leaders might encourage free enterprise, accept the disintegration of the state economic sector, and allow some artistic expressions, well organized movements that seek to be alternative power centres claiming the right to direct the life and ideas of their followers, are quite another matter. No crises of faith can be allowed to become crises of control, which they threaten to be

in the absence of a system of orderly establishment-opposition dialogs. As before, when Taiji fails, the iron fist.



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