

Chinese Culture and Democracy - Chalk and Cheese

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*'Economic freedom creates habits of liberty. And habits of liberty
create expectations of Democracy...Trade
freely with China, and time is on our side.'*

George W Bush, November 1999¹

Gordon C Chang, a Chinese-American author shot to fame in

2001 due to his famous book 'The Coming Collapse of China'. Far more than the contents, the book's greatest draw was its title. Its appeal was so strong among China watchers in the West that many readers swallowed Chang's arguments hook, line and sinker. Chang's ethnicity assured the authoritative appeal and as an American educated individual, he knew precisely how to present his case to a Western audience that was raised on ideals of democracy and capitalism.

Gordon Chang's inspiration for the book were the seminal events in China and the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991. Years of student protests had culminated in June 1989 Tiananmen Massacre that was telecast live on television. Over the next two years, the USSR unravelled and was reduced to a Russia that had 80 per cent of its former territory but half of its GDP and less than half of its population.² These events confirmed Western perceptions that democracy and capitalism were the enduring political and economic beacons for mankind. The Soviet Union had collapsed, and it would be just a matter of time before China metamorphosed into a democracy.

There were other compelling indications to suggest that this was indeed the case. Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and other South East Asian nations such as Singapore and Malaysia had burgeoned as a result of their capitalist systems. In stark contrast, years of Communist rule had left the masses in China - and those in Laos and Vietnam - at the bottom of global economic indices. This triumph of capitalism led the American Social Scientist

Francis Fukuyama to make confident predictions in his book 'The End of History and the last Man'. He speculated that the worldwide spread of liberal democracy and free market capitalism of the West and its lifestyle may signal the end point of humanity's socio-cultural evolution and become the final form of human government.³

When one takes a look at the history and future of world geopolitics, today may appear very similar to yesterday. The same would be said for weeks and months, and a little less convincingly so in the case of years. But when it comes to decades, the changes become far more pronounced and discernible. The world today is clearly a changed one from 2008 and markedly different from the one in which Fukuyama propounded his theory in 1992.

For much of the latter half of the 20th Century, China remained insulated from the rest of the world. This was attributable to the barriers posed by Communism and language. Both these obstacles are becoming less daunting in the 21st Century. The narrative on China was once driven by a handful of people who had served in China or in East Asia either as journalists or diplomats. This was also the time when Western focus - and their best resources - were directed towards the more pressing challenge posed by the Soviet Union.

Today, however, there is far greater clarity on developments within China. The media coverage of the 19th National Party Congress was instructive of how less an enigma China is today. Theories and speculations about the eventual outcome of the Congress largely proved accurate, thus confirming that there is an improved understanding by the rest of the world of what is happening within China and how it perceives its place in the world.

As China welcomes the year of the Earth Dog, certain aspects are becoming increasingly undisputable. The Communist Party of China is in absolute control of the economy, the people and the military. Secondly, the process of reforms commenced by Deng four decades ago was directed at the economy. Political freedom is nowhere on the horizon. Some of the steps initiated in the 80s to infuse freedom have been rolled back.

China has never been farther from becoming a democracy over the past 40 years than it is today. Why does China successfully beat the trend of economic development linked with Democracy? How does it remain an exception to the failure of Communist states elsewhere? This article seeks to answer some of these questions, through threads that lie in Chinese history, the Oriental culture and possibly, a flaw in our world view.

A Unique Historical Legacy

China has the distinction of having achieved political unification earlier than any other nation in the world. In 221 BC Qin Dynasty focussed on integration of Chinese empire and it continues to be the heartland of Han China even today. Differences among the ethnic groups in this vast region were ironed out in a just manner under the patronage of the Emperor. While China's North-South gradient retarded crop diffusion, the gradient was less of a barrier than in the Americas or Africa, because China's North-South distances were smaller. China is transacted neither by a desert, as is Africa, nor by a narrow isthmus as is Central America. Instead China's East-West rivers - the Yellow in the North and the Yangtze in the South - facilitated crop diffusion and technology between the coast and inland areas. These two river systems have been joined by canals which has facilitated North-South exchanges. These geographic factors facilitated early cultural and political unification of China. In contrast, Western Europe with a similar area but a more rugged terrain and no such unifying rivers has resisted cultural and political unification to this day.⁴ Common language also facilitated unification. Of China's 1.3 billion people, over 800 million speak Mandarin. Some 300 million speak seven other languages similar to Mandarin and to each other.

Another distinguishing factor is China's value system that is based on precepts of filial piety. While geography facilitated trade, cultural exchanges and movement of people within the empire, the analects of Confucius provided a literary foundation for common education and value system across the vast Chinese empire. The emphasis on education and ideals of meritocracy were founded on a common syllabus that transcended all corners of the Empire. Proficiency in learning the analects by rote was essential to rise in status and prestige. Confucius laid emphasis on four main relationships - ruler and minister, father and son, elder brother and

younger brother, and husband and wife. In each, the former was expected to protect the latter, while the latter was required to be obedient to the former. The benevolence of one party was to be reciprocated by deference by the other in each of these dyads. Social order was threatened when people failed to act as per their prescribed roles.⁵ People in the privileged classes were, therefore, viewed with awe and respect by the masses.

This unquestioned subservience to higher authority has contributed significantly to China remaining a unitary state over the centuries. This is not to suggest that social upheavals did not occur. The Chinese empire changed hands under various dynasties. It was believed in imperial times that a ruler would come to power after he received a Mandate of Heaven due to his virtuosity. His successors would constitute his dynasty. Over a period of time, his successors would become less mindful of the welfare of their people and the dynasty would gradually lose their mandate of heaven. Indications of this would become visible through tangible events such as floods, famines and solar eclipses. In time, the decadent dynasty would be replaced through rebellions by another dynasty, thus continuing the Dynastic Cycle.⁶

Some of these political upheavals failed too. More people died during the Taiping Rebellion than during the First World War.⁷ Mao's infamous social engineering experiments resulted in seven crore peace-time deaths.⁸ Yet, Mao's official legacy is supposedly 70 per cent Right and 30 per cent Wrong!⁹ The kind of human tragedies these events translated into are uniquely Chinese in scale. However, the common thread in these upheavals was that they occurred under the stewardship of the top echelons of society. The common man never enjoyed any degree of freedom in deciding what was good for him or for the collective good of the people.

It may thus be seen that the average Chinese citizen does not necessarily fancy or crave for political freedom or human rights as people in democracies such as India would take for granted on a daily basis. The primacy of filial piety in Confucianism is ingrained since childhood into a natural unquestioned subservience to higher authority. Resultantly, the Chinese people have remained largely reverent of individuals at the helm of affairs irrespective of their conduct, be it the emperors,

the Great Helmsman or the red-tied leaders of the Party of the 21st Century.

The argument goes that the advent of economic freedom and modern technology notwithstanding, the Chinese are simply not attuned to seeking political freedom from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) just as the divine right of emperors to lord over them was not questioned. It was also suggested in the late 1990s that the CCP was simply another dynasty in the Dynastic Cycle which would eventually be replaced by a new dispensation, arguably a democratic one.¹⁰ It was a very convincing viewpoint then. But few would hedge their bets on it in 2018.

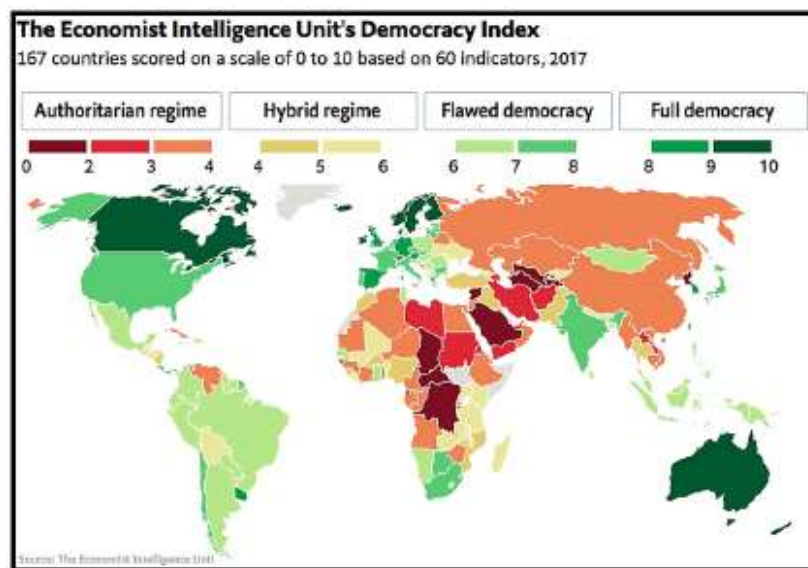
Evolution of Socio-Political System

Another contributing factor is the evolution of socio-political systems in Asia. The 1648 Treaty of Westphalia introduced the concept of modern nations that enclosed within its borders a population with commonalities of ethnicity, history or religion. The degree of political control within these physically defined borders was as strong at the fringes as it was in the centre.

Oriental societies, however, have historically adhered to a different system. Political control in Asian empires was strongest in the capital and reduced in direct proportion to the distance from the imperial capital. Local kings and chieftains would swear allegiance to and accept suzerainty of the power that was closest to them. When distances increased, the Emperor was content with seeking a formal acceptance of allegiance instead of full control. This was true of Chinese, Mongol and Indian emperors. A famous Chinese saying goes 'The Mountains are high and the Emperor is far away'.¹¹

With specific reference to China, the repeated triumph of conservatism over reform is one of a number of interlocking strands that link present-day China with a heritage going back more than two millennia.¹² In general, Asians have largely submitted to whichever power centre was able to exercise maximum sway over them. Cut to the 20th Century, the Asian political landscape offers an interesting mosaic of polities. There are the Communist states of China, North Korea, Laos and Vietnam; Authoritarian regimes preside over Iran, Cambodia and Myanmar; Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria are undergoing tumultuous

times for now; Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, UAE and Brunei are governed by monarchs; Pakistan, Bangladesh, Philippines and Indonesia have had long spells of military rule in their recent history and their militaries continue to flex political muscle in the chaotic democracies that they currently are; South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Singapore are democracies but their single-party domination does not fall within the classic definition of a democratic framework.¹³



It may be seen, therefore, that Asia does not have flair for classic democratic framework, despite India being a bright exception. Indeed, China is now employing its vast array of hard and soft tools to actively promote the Chinese model and provide hope to Authoritarian rulers that active modernisation can be achieved with Authoritarian rule. The Chinese state and its agencies have been actively involved in undermining the democratic process and rule of law in countries as far away as Zimbabwe, Angola and Ethiopia.¹⁴

The Chinese Version of Democracy

The lexicon of democracy can also be interestingly employed. The Chinese Communist Party emphasises on 'Democratic Centralism', a euphemism for the concept of debate within its own ranks, and unquestioning adherence to final decisions.¹⁵ As Mao Zedong put it, in practising Democratic Centralism, "Our aim is to create a political situation in which we have both centralism and democracy, both discipline and freedom, both unity of will and personal ease of mind and liveliness". The Party claims to have always been committed to its mass line of 'from the masses, to the masses'. It claims that in essence, the mass line is an approach to democracy, and democratic centralism represents the application of the mass line to the political affairs of the Party and the state.¹⁶ One school of thought argues that the Western insistence on democratic values loses face in light of their aversion to enfranchise a bulk of their own populace on grounds of skin colour or gender until late into the 20th Century itself. The Chinese notions of democracy are distinct from those outside China. They have instituted elections in certain lower levels of governance. They believe that their system is directed at the collective well-being of the Chinese people and they have succeeded to that effect more than 'Democracies'. The Party is convinced that the current Chinese system is ideal for the unique socio-cultural landscape obtaining in China. Liberal democracy in China would be like pasting a fake western painting on top of an authentic work of calligraphy.¹⁷ Those who prescribe Democracy for China do not bode well for it, the argument goes. It is also argued that when it comes to the comity of nations, China is most democratic and believes in equality of all nations with none of the hegemonic tendencies that Western nations displayed during their heydays in the 20th Century.¹⁸

Exporting Democratic Centralism

As the centre of the world shifts decisively back to Asia, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the 21st Century will be an Asian one. Globalisation, educated work-forces and huge markets have driven this change and China is at the vanguard of this change. China has already arrived. Just as New York's pop-culture and fashion were benchmarks for humanity for most of the

last century, Chinese perceptions and biases will have a major impact on the world in the near future.

Many of these trends are already visible in varying measures. The Chinese will first seek to equate Mandarin with English as the *lingua franca* of the world. Mandarin is already introduced as a subject in Japan, South Korea, Pakistan and many parts of Central Asia.¹⁹ China has opened up its universities for foreign students at rates that are cheaper than those offered by the US or the UK. Such programmes ensure a steady outflow of youth who are conversant with Mandarin. Confucius Institutes are being established around the world to encourage the spread of Chinese culture.²⁰ In the year 2017, there were 525 Confucius Institutes in 146 countries around the world aimed at spreading Chinese culture and language.²¹ It is now highly fashionable in Western countries to speak Mandarin, as a result of plethora of Mandarin courses and institutes.

A future world order imagined to be dominated by the Chinese would be based on tacit presumptions of centrality and hierarchical superiority that are inherent in the tributary system. As in the past, China's relations with the world will be based on bilateralism. There can be only two protagonists, the tamed barbarian bearing tribute and the benevolent Emperor ready to reward his homage with valuable gifts. The one thing rigidly prohibited was the ganging up of chiefs of various barbarian bands. The Emperor would never receive them as a group since tributary rituals were inherently bilateral. Evidence of this behaviour is clearly visible in Chinese strategy with ASEAN nations in the South China Sea disputes. Chinese behaviour with equal powers would be to entangle them in webs of material dependence that reduce their original vitality and strength. When the formerly superior power has been weakened enough, withdraw all tokens of equality and impose subordination. The Chinese also believe that long-unresolved disputes with foreign countries can be resolved by deliberately provoking crises, to force negotiations that will settle the dispute.²²

The Chinese also harbour very strong racist tendencies. Perceptions among the Chinese relating to matters of skin colour are strong. White people are respected as superior, and treated with considerable deference. In contrast, darker skin is

disapproved of: the darker the skin, the more pejorative the reaction.²³ People from East Asian countries are also considered inferior, as is visible in the treatment of Filipino and Indonesian maids in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia by Chinese or the Chinese diaspora.²⁴

Conclusion

There were an estimated 138 million civilian deaths during the 20th Century under Totalitarian regimes. Of these, 110 million deaths occurred under Communist regimes while Authoritarian regimes accounted for the remainder 28 million. In comparison, Democracies accounted for only two million deaths which included deaths in colonies and due to war bombings.²⁵ Democracies have, thus, been very effective in protecting rights of individuals. But China is proving that this argument cannot be further extended to assuring economic growth. The Chinese state looks upon any mention of 'Mínzhǒ' (democracy) as sacrilege. It is employing its massive internal security budget to impose its own version of human rights on the Tibetans, Uighurs or anyone who disagrees with the Party's political views.²⁶ The Great Firewall of China is yet another tool in imposing the concept of 'Socialist Consultative Democracy'.²⁷

In summation, the Chinese have resisted the widespread notion that modernisation and Democracy are intricately linked to each other. As a confident China emerges at the world scene, not only would it seek to abrogate the rules-based order that acted against its interests over the last 150 years, but it will also hardsell the Chinese economic, social and political model in order to advance its own interests. China remains immune to the immigrant problem faced by Democracies of the West or the scourge of Islamic fundamentalism. It is the lone beacon of economic growth amidst social stability, so what if human rights be damned.

Dealing with the Chinese model is the major challenge for India today. India has been forced to play catch-up with China on the economic, military and strategic fields. China's head-start allowed it to chart its own insulated course.

It is time we accepted that China is not going down the liberal democratic path anytime soon. The more pressing issue at hand

is how to prevent nations across the globe from walking wide-eyed into the Chinese world order. That is the challenge that confronts the world today.

Endnotes

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