



China

Introduction to the Book, *China*(Part IV)

By Hong-Yee Chiu

This book is divided into four major segments. While the last part deals with the main theme of this book, the purpose of the first three parts was to set the proper backdrop. Although discussions are centered on China, stress is placed on the differences with the West.

IV. Irreconcilable Differences Between China and the West

The Conflicts between China and the West on the Ideology of Religion.

One among many irreconcilable differences between China and the West, especially the United States, is the precepts of religion. In the United States, the influence of religion, especially Christianity, is immense. Up until only four decades ago, prayers were still mandatory in public schools (outlawed by a Supreme Court decision in early 1960s). The legalization of abortion in 1973, up to this date, is still a controversial subject to which many fundamentalist Christians and the Catholic Church have vehemently opposed. Some more liberal Christians have not expressed opposition. Traditional Chinese view is similar to the more liberal Christians. In ancient China, Confucian scholars usually did not discuss this topic.

A popular Chinese classical fantasy novel, *Journey to the West*, depicts an epic journey in the Tang Dynasty taken by Tang Sen (Tang Monk, whose status in Chinese Buddhism is similar to that of Augustine of Hippo and Aquinas in Christianity) to India in search of a set of Buddhist sutras. In chapter 53, author Wu Chengen, presumably a Confucian scholar who never made the grade in civil service

examinations, described an episode in which Tang Sen drank water from a mythical river and became pregnant. He had to engage the aid of water from a mythical well, whose function was similar to the abortion medicine RU-486 to abort his pregnancy so that he could continue his journey to India. According to the descriptions of Wu Chengen in this novel, abortion medicine seemed to be widely available during his time (around the middle of the conservative Ming Dynasty 1368–1644). However, the abortion issue is but a small tip of a giant iceberg of immense differences between China and the Western world in the precepts of religion.

The Chinese traditional view has placed all gods and goddesses—including Christianity’s God—under Tian, the abstract Heaven. Under this view, all religions are treated alike. However, it has been a general policy that personal faiths do not need to be established upon religious organizations. People can simultaneously have faith in different deities from different religions, and no governments interfere with individual religious beliefs since antiquity.

However, because the power of religious organizations is immense throughout all dynasties, there had been no lack of insurgencies sprung from religious organizations. As a result, no dynasties would tolerate any unsanctioned

religious organizations. Temples, synagogues, churches of all sorts, mosques, and other types of houses of worship were not forbidden, and in some dynasties governments even financed the constructions and operations of churches (such as an early Zoroastrian temple and even a Jewish synagogue in the Tang Dynasty). Nevertheless, it has been a general policy of the Chinese that houses of worship must not engage in any activities unrelated to true piety. This precept certainly precludes any interference of national policies by religious groups.

The Chinese tradition had always placed the sovereignty of the emperor above any theocratic power. With the emperor gone, the current Chinese policy is to place national welfare above religious dogma. In fact, the current Chinese constitution specifically prohibits interference by religion on national policies (such as the population policy, including family planning and abortion) or education (such as opposition to the evolution theory, or the practice of the Amish to restrict education to a certain level).

In the West, it has been different. After the First Ecumenical Council, the Roman Catholic Church had effectively seized political control. The most important part of the theology of the Church had been to attribute the highest glory to God, to the extent that some offered their sole purpose of living for the glory of God. To maintain this faith and to exert effective control, local churches directly under Church control



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were established in all locations, and people were required to attend their churches on Sundays. The most important function of this weekly gathering was to strengthen the faiths of the people. Inadvertently churches also acquired the control of people's lives.

Although theocracy had long been abolished, a concept or a precept has since replaced it establishing religious organizations as an integral part of religious freedom. At present the powers of churches or church organizations are still immense to the extent these organizations can even exert influence on national policies.

In the West, free worship without discrimination or retribution was possible only in the twentieth century; prior to the twentieth century, countless people had been persecuted (seen in the witch hunt) for worshipping God the wrong way, or for acknowledging the wrong deities. Even in the mid-twentieth century, there was still a case of a witch trial with conviction in Britain near the end of WWII.

The concepts of religious freedom are thus one of the irreconcilable divides between China and the West.

Conflicts in the Concepts of Democracy.

In the last chapter, Western-style democracy is first cursorily scrutinized, followed by a discussion on the current Chinese system.

General election is considered the backbone of Western democracies. Key personnel are elected through popular votes. The basic assumptions are that general election allows people to express their desires, and the collective—average—wisdom of the entire voting populace is greater than individual wisdom. Yet the collective wisdom of the entire voting populace may not be much higher. The average wisdom must be ordinary (this is the definition of average). In addition, most people have no active interests in politics, hence their opinions usually are derived from those with the loudest voices, such as those who want to be

elected, hence there is a tendency to follow blindly. There have been plenty of historic examples of this occurrence¹. If a country consists of a collection of minorities, the tendency is for the majority to vote for laws most advantageous to them (oftentimes to the disadvantage of the minorities). The most prominent example occurred in the United States under guise of a self-declared campaign for liberty, equality, and fraternity. Laws had been passed since the inception of this country to discriminate against minorities. During the first ninety years after the founding of the United States, enslavement of the blacks was not only legalized, but also strictly enforced. During the next hundred years or so, with strict laws on segregation, the blacks were treated as second-class citizens. For the first 150 years, women were withheld rights to vote or attend colleges. Of course, these laws exemplifying “tyranny of the majority” had been abolished, but no one can guarantee it will never happen again in the future (in different forms).

Along with inconsistency in democratic practice, Western politics’ shaky foundation rests on short durations of election campaigns—the most active phase usually lasts only a few months. Since the majority of the electorates are usually ignorant about the candidates, it is necessary to use media to “educate” or to “convince” the general public about the worthiness of the candidates. This requires an immense amount of money. Part of the monies comes from donations from interested electorates, but the majority comes from industrial or commercial entities whose *raison d’être* is to make profits. Candidates who receive money from these entities must repay, not in terms of monies, but in terms of passing laws that allow these commercial entities to derive more profits from the public—the electorates. Of course, this is equivalent to bribery, but the citizens are used to this kind of *quid pro quo* and do not consider it a bribery.

The manipulative force behind Western politics spreads all throughout the system.

Political parties may share the same ideals in democracy, liberty, and so on, but in order to establish their identities, or brand names, each party selects a set of controversial issues (such as abortion, welfare of the impoverished, and tax reduction) as the basis of its party platforms. In this way, the electorates has to choose sides, and the country has thus become effectively polarized. Indeed, the degree of polarization has become so extreme that national elections are often decided by a relatively small number of so-called “swing votes.”

While citizens are led to believe that the future of the country is in their hands, in reality the power of the elected leader gives him control over all. In the area on the formulation of national policies, his power is even greater. An elected leader is surrounded by his handpicked officials who tend to agree with him, and if he happens to have a majority vote in the Legislature, the tendency is also to follow the presidential directives. In other words, he can rule as he sees it.

Chinese, Corporation Style, Political System.

When describing the Chinese political system, likely there will be a blanket comment such as, “A repressive, authoritarian and dictatorial government.” However, this is an oversimplification and a very subjective opinion based on a narrow definition of democracy.

There are several arguments that would dispute this opinion of Chinese government. First, even during imperial rules in China, there was already a rudimentary form of democracy not seen in many other countries in the past. Most officers from the highest ranking prime minister and low level magistrates of prefectures were selected from the general population through the civil service examination. Thus, commoners were given a chance (through competitions) to participate in the decision making of national policies and in the operation of the government.



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Second, the power of an emperor to make policy decisions was not as great as might have been thought. Every important decision must be openly discussed in a diversified court. A consensus was usually required. Thus, an emperor's court already had an element of democracy (because the officials were come from the general population) and collective leadership.

With the emperor gone, the highest hierarchy of the current Chinese government is

the Politico Bureau. Important decisions are arrived at through a consensus of the members of the Bureau. Such a management structure is very common in the United States and elsewhere; it is the corporate structure. The equivalent to the Politico Bureau is the Board of Directors. In principle, the board members are elected by stockholders in open stock holder elections, but invariably the Board already has selected a set of candidates whose names are printed on the ballots, and the number of candidates matches the number of vacancies. Since there is no way to launch an effective campaign, the stockholders essentially have the so-called Hobson's choice—vote for the recommended candidates or none.

There is, however, a difference between the two. In the corporate structure, when a company becomes public, members of the Board of Directors are usually the founders and the chief investors. They make the decision to select the next layer of managers, which, with the approval of the Board, selects the next layer below, all the way to the grass root level, such as receptionists. The Board of Directors becomes a self-perpetuated entity with very little chance of a total change of makeup. The control of the company is from the top down to the lowest level.

The Chinese system operates in a somewhat different way, from the bottom up. In order to enter politics, one must join a local chapter of the Communist Party (incidentally, there is no longer any communism left in the party). Party members then vote for the local leaders. These local leaders then vote for the officers of the next higher level. Usually the order of the hierarchy is: villages, prefectures, provincial, and then national (there might be more levels in-between, but this is the general idea). The standards of selection are usually based on the education level and competence in carrying out the necessary tasks. In fact, this mode of selection can be regarded as an advanced form of the traditional civil service examination system to select government officers. Indeed, the highest level of the hierarchy—members of the Politico Bureau, the president, and the chairman,

for example—are all selected from the general population in this manner. In addition, decisions making at all levels is usually based on consensus rather than on the opinion of any single person. It is a from-the-bottom-up structure.

Because all members of the highest hierarchy are elected through this process, and their tenures interspersed, each time the presidency or chairmanship changes hand, continuity is maintained. This might be the reason that during the past thirty years, the Chinese policy of reform and the incremental approach have not substantially changed.

The Chinese system seems to work well, at least in current times. According to a 2005 Pew studies of national attitudes, the degree of optimism in China is highest, around 76 percent, with India in a close second at 75 percent, and that of the United States at 48 percent. That of Russia is 45 percent. The lowest is Pakistan, at 40 percent.

The Chinese system differs from that in the West in that the qualification of the electorate is limited to party membership (around 10 percent of the population), which most people can join if they wish. The election process is informal and is distributed over the entire country and over all levels.

Just because the Chinese system differs from that in the West, it should not be categorically concluded that there is no democracy in China. To be sure, there is no Western-style democracy in China, but the Chinese have their ways of “democracy.”

Is There a Perfect Political System?

At present, there are no two identical political systems in the world. Each system has its merits and its deficiencies. Thus, it seems that a perfect political system is just an illusion and is as unattainable as a completely fair election system (Arrow’s Principle). The ultimate aim of democracy is to produce a government that places the welfare of the people above all and treats all

people equally. Under this view, general election is not a cure-all. It resembles more of a balm.

When Western powers were forced to retreat from Africa after WWII, all former colonies became independent countries, and governments in these newly independent countries were all elected through general elections under the supervision and auspices of the United Nations and the departing colonial powers. Decades later, almost none of the countries could be considered democratic (the only exception is perhaps South Africa). With this dismal rate of success, it seems that general elections cannot be depended upon *solely* to produce even a rudimentary democratic government. Other factors, such as the quality of the civilization, are a necessary ingredient to the whole of government. However, this is a land mine that I do not wish to step in any time soon.

Concluding Remarks.

Since China abandoned the Marxist ideologies and moved back to the roots of her civilization, within one generation she leaped to become an influencing power of the world. After



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much trial and error and several wrong turns, China finally developed a political system out of her old traditions. This system is different from those of the Western countries, but it seems to

work in the current environment. China still faces many problems, but generally speaking, China has been successful so far. If we can recognize the fact that a perfect political system does not exist, then the best attitude seems to follow the wisdom of common Americans: if it is not broken, do not fix it. In the future things might be different, but at present, the best advice would be to follow the famous dictum of Rudyard Kipling: *East is east, West is west / And never the twain shall meet.* That is to say, East and West should agree to disagree, even in their differences.

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He established the theoretical foundation of the formation of neutron stars and the crucial neutrino processes in supernova explosions(1964). He coined the word "quasar" (1963).

¹ For example, prior to WWII, Germany, one of the most educated countries in Europe, elected Adolf Hitler as their leader through a general election which had been generally considered fair.