

Pastoral Letter VIII, Thursday, May 15th, 2020

Understanding China Under the Surface

I distinctly remember the broadly shared perception of the United States from ‘south of the border’ during my involvements in Latin America in the 1980s and 90s. It was one of singular hegemonic power, projected upon the Latin American world since the imposition of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, when that region, from Mexico to Chile, became the sole reserve of American foreign policy: most of the time poorly thought through, and ‘executed’. It was not until, I lived in the US in the early 2000s that I came to realize that *Tio Caimán* (Uncle Alligator), as we used to dryly refer to American power, was not quite as cohesive as it seemed. The stars and stripes or ‘Old Glory’, as she is referred to, looked different from inside the U.S. than outside. Observing the U.S. from Massachusetts, from within, you could clearly see the unbridled tensions and disaffection between north and south, unresolved since the Civil War over 100 years ago, coasts and Midwest, Afro-Americans, Latins and ‘whites’, as well as Democrats and Republicans. It seemed then, and even more so now, that American society lived shattered, amid the multiple fault-lines that shapes it. It struck me then and strikes me now, as almost ungovernable, bordering on chaos. Covid-19 has re-exposed those fault line, if there were ever any doubt.

Because of *that* experience, I have had some doubts about the perception of China as a monolithic hegemony, although it seems clear that it is governed as if it were one. What lies beneath the surface? Where are the fault lines? Is there a range of obscured, interred critical thought, which can be raised in order to understand China better?

Recently, I happened upon a rare find: three books in English, analysing the Chinese situation, came to my attention: *Voices from the Chinese Century: Public Intellectual Debate from Contemporary China* (ed. Timothy Cheek, David Ownby and Joshua A. Fogel, Columbia University Press), *Rethinking China's Rise: A Liberal Critique* (Xu Jilin, translated and edited by David Ownby, Cambridge University Press), and *Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals* (Sebastian Veg, Columbia University Press). They are interesting, because each in its own way, reveals the friction within Chinese society: something that outsiders have little knowledge of nor access to. In what follows, I present some of the thoughts of people who are well known and little known; but who together, reflect that there is life still, struggling ‘for oxygen’.

Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, voices have been raised by Chinese people as to how they would like their country to be run. In 1956, Mao Zedong announced a brief ‘spring’ for free speech called the “Hundred Flowers Campaign”, the name of which reached back in Chinese memory to antiquity, that gave expression to the rise of Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism and other movements. It was however a trap, in as much as, those who spoke out were quickly grabbed by Mao's security services. What followed was a period of ruthless repression, that ended only with Mao's death and the purging of his allies in the late 1970s. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping, relaxed government control over both the economy and society, freeing up open-ended discussion about the country's future. That however, ended with the Tiananmen massacre, leading to what is referred to today as a “development dictatorship”, where economic growth is managed by a repressive state.

That said, there was another period where the windows and doors were flung open, perhaps more widely than the 1980s. That was at the turn of century, but 20 years ago, when a rich debate erupted over what lay ahead. Much of the debate involved establishment intellectuals, who were prudent enough to avoid irritating the Communist Party's right to rule, but who took advantage of the mood of the time with Deng's successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, to begin a sophisticated discussion about how China should be run and its place in the world. Perhaps the most amazing development in this period, was the rise of grassroots thinkers who took advantage of harder-to-control forms of expression such as blogs, independent documentary films, underground art forms, and social media. Taken together these two group of actors, created the most coherent discussion that China had seen since the May 4th Movement of 1919.

In regard to the first group – the established intellectuals – there are three schools: liberals leftists and new Confucians. The liberals argue for some sort of Western model: classical free-market economics with an

acknowledgement of fundamental rights. The leftists offer a revolutionary alternative for change, while maintaining the authoritarian state. The modernized Confucians, call for a return to what we in the West might call virtue ethics: a society of moral responsibilities and duties. Of the three, it is the liberals who predictably have the toughest time, as the Chinese government sees them as the most dangerous. One outstanding article in “Voices from the Chinese Century” is written by Rong Jian, a private entrepreneur who dropped out of university after Tiananmen. In his essay entitled, “A China Bereft of Thought”, he explains what happens to the production and dissemination of thought under an oppressive regime. He dismisses Confucianism as irrelevant, having lost its credibility and influence a century ago, with the collapse of the imperial system that it underpinned. At the other end of the continuum, he sees Marxism as something that was only dimly understood by the Communist Party leaders, and never really applied. Instead, Rong suggests that the Chinese revolution was singularly rooted in the mere search for power, unweighed by moral values and concerns. He makes clear that Mao’s successor, Deng Xiaoping’s abandonment of even the pretence of communism for his pragmatic policy of “crossing the river by feeling the stones”, was adopted as just another means of ‘anything goes’ as long as the economy develops and the Party remains in power. In like manner, Deng’s successor, Jiang Zemin, lacked the substance and principles to follow through on his own idea that different forces in society should be politically represented. Rong contends that what China needs is a marketplace of ideas, but what it gets is an overbearing state. He says, “This is a power structure unlimited in any way by institutional and legal restraints...we [will be unable to] find an enduring set of ideas, beliefs, meanings or values within this power structure.”

The second book, *Rethinking China’s Rise: A Liberal Critique*, by the historian Xu Jilin, from the East China Normal University in Shanghai, points out that China has headed down the dangerous path of “historicism” – the belief that universal values don’t exist and that everything is determined by national history. He counter-suggests what he refers to as “modern civilization”, which he reasons, is constituted by two elements: the defence of values and the pursuit of wealth and power. Perhaps it could be counter-suggested that these two apparent characteristics of the West, have presented their own problems, constantly rubbing-up against each other: values and free-markets are by no-means an easy fit. Notwithstanding, Xu’s case that China has only pursued the latter element of wealth and power and ignored the former, that of values, as many other authoritarian nations, is persuasive. What China has not grasped according to Xu, is the distinction between civilization and culture. The new world civilization, he argues, embraces common values for all humanity. In contrast, culture, is specific, but need not conflict with those common values. Indeed, he explains that the concept of rights can be located in Chinese tradition itself. Xu points to the domination of the Han Chinese over the other fifty-five ethnicities in the country, as a clear example of the predominance of culture over civilization. He points out that the Han-dominated state vision, fails to offer universal values that would appeal to the country’s non-Chinese ethnicities.

Turning from the Chinese intellectual elite to the non-elite, the focus of Sebastian Veg’s *Minjian: The Rise of China’s Grassroots Intellectuals*, presents a rounded description of the creation of this new class of thinkers, artists and film-makers. Less broadly philosophical than their elite cousins, these people have tended to focus, to specialise in specific areas in which they have expertise. That is not to suggest they don’t have wide-ranging knowledge, nor intellectual rigour, but they work to uncover pieces of neglected or lost history, revealing new insights. They also include women, in sharp contrast to the elites, where men overwhelmingly dominate, as well as minority voices, such as the currently imprisoned Uyghur, Ilham Tohti. Notable among film-makers is the work of Hu Jie; *Searching for Lin Zhao’s Soul*, which chronicles the life and eventual execution of a Christian activist during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. Clearly Veg admires the stubborn, creative minds of these grassroots journalists, artists, historians and film-makers, who carry on despite the dangers and costs.

Ian Johnson, the Canadian Beijing based journalist and scholar put it this way: “Many [of these people] remind me of the East German intellectuals, I knew in the 1980s who wrote books ‘for the desk drawer’, because they would end up there and never be published. But Chinese writers continue to write, and my gut feeling, is that one day their work will matter”. Geoff+