

China

1. Introduction

In the last few months, there has been, in the press in Western countries, what it seems to me can only be described as increasing hysteria being talked up about China. It is striking that, rather than just hot air from Trump and his associates, substantive changes are being made by the Americans,¹ which will make it increasingly difficult for American companies, and others, to trade with China, and to enjoy the benefits which all of us have got used to from such trade. The issues are complicated, not least because there are many features of the Chinese government which are unfamiliar to those in the West, and some of the things which they have done – and are continuing to do – seem to be highly problematic. However, what is taking place seems to me to be being badly handled, and the expectations of some people in Western countries about how China might be expected to change, unrealistic. While there is a risk that we are turning our backs on opportunities which, if explored properly, might work to the benefit of all of us.

I am – to say the least – no expert on China. But I was fortunate enough to visit China just over a year ago, to give lectures to students there; to deliver a paper at a university in Beijing, and to participate at a conference on political philosophy, in Changchun. I had, while I was there, the chance to talk with many Chinese colleagues, and prior to going, and when I returned, I did a fair bit of reading on the history of Chinese political thought, and on aspects of contemporary Chinese politics, economics and society.

2. A Visit to China

Let me start with some personal impressions. I was lucky enough, in late May 2018, to have the chance to give some lectures in the history of Western Political Thought, to some Chinese undergraduates and MA students. I was met, at the large airport of the city that I visited, by the academic who had invited me, and his delightful family. I was impressed by the long ride through wide roads from the airport through the city, which – a bit like the main road to the airport in Singapore – had trees and flowering shrubs by the side of the road. I was taken to a hotel which belonged to my friend's university, which was located inside its gates. The hotel was large and modern, and offered television and Wifi.

2.1 Censorship

The television that was available was – understandably - just Chinese programmes, although these included a 24-hour English-language news station, which was a bit like watching CNN or the BBC's World Service. The programmes had sophisticated commercial advertising – e.g. for beauty products - which was very similar to advertising in Western countries.² The News Programme featured some serious discussion, although those invited to take part tended to be people – from a

¹ The issue of *The Economist* of August 15th, 2020, spells a number of these matters out in detail.

² It also advertised 'Dove' chocolate. I tried this as after a couple of weeks in China I was desperate for something sweet. It tastes nothing like the American original.

variety of backgrounds – who broadly shared the view of the Chinese government. (This came adrift at one point, when they were broadcasting from Russia, and had among the participants people from some Russian think-tank, whose views were odd, to say the least.) The general tenor of English-language Chinese news presentations, on both television and in the government’s English-language media, was sober and informative, but at the same time one-sided. There was, for example, coverage of the protests that were, at the time, taking place over the law which was being introduced, which would have allowed for the extradition of people from Hong Kong to the mainland. The issue was discussed in sensible, and fair-minded terms. But those who were protesting were taken to task because, it was said, the current situation allowed for people who, say, had committed a robbery in Macau, to hide from justice in Hong Kong. No reference was made to what, at the time, was the key issue: that people in Hong Kong feared that, if the measure was passed, it would allow for the extradition of people from Hong Kong to the mainland, and would, as a result, extend the kind of control over freedom of expression which took place on the mainland, to Hong Kong.

I also had personal experience of Chinese internet censorship. China has an impressive internet system. However, while in Western countries, almost anything can be found, and the system has become a vast mix of information, misinformation and commercial services, and has become an exemplar of a certain kind of freedom, in China the system is highly sophisticated, but tightly controlled.³ It was not that I had any interest in accessing discussions on topics which in China were controlled. But I wished to be able to read my electronic subscription to *The Times*, and also to *The Economist*. I was never able to access *The Economist*; I could sometimes get access to *The Times*, but doing so had an odd effect on how – both in China, and subsequently – I was able to receive the site. I also needed, for the purpose of lecture preparation, to do internet searches. This was a problem. Google does not work (or, rather, you can use Google to reach many websites if you have the URL for them, but can’t use it as a search engine). There are Chinese search engines which you can use in English; for example, Baidu. But using it, is like using an erratic version of Bing – and brought home to me, once again, just how good Google is. (When I was talking with graduate students about their research in philosophy, it was striking how much they were hampered in not having access to Google in locating academic material. This was not a matter of censorship: what they were looking for was not controlled. It was just that the poor quality of their search engines meant that they had simply failed to locate material that I was able to pull up in seconds.)

I had, in advance, signed up for a VPN, and had got the one, Express VPN, which has the reputation of working best in China. Its performance was very patchy where I was located, and quite often I was not able to get onto their servers, at all; although it worked much better in Beijing. (Indeed, I was struck that the degree of control seems to differ markedly, depending on where in China one is located. I was told that, at a leading Beijing university, it was possible, sometimes, for their students to use Google as a search engine. Similarly, I was accommodated at a hotel there owned by a business-orientated university. The television, at that hotel, showed Bloomberg’s news and financial affairs program. The only experience of censorship that I encountered was that it got some way into a news story about Hong Kong before there was a break in transmission, which was restored when that part of the programme finished.)

³ See for example James Griffiths, *The Great Firewall of China* (London: Zed, 2019); it looks as if a Chinese translation has been published in Taiwan.

All of this came over as a nuisance rather than as being like Big Brother. (Although it did appear to me that in the city in which I was staying, a photograph was taken of every car at every road junction with traffic lights. I also don't know of the extent of recording of individuals' movements.) My understanding, further, is that a lot of information of all kinds is widely shared using social media. It is, here, interesting, if one reads Fang Fang's *Wuhan Diary*.⁴ This was an account, written by a distinguished contemporary Chinese writer, resident in Wuhan, of her experiences in Wuhan during the pandemic. She wrote in passing that while she suffered from intermittent censorship – in the sense of social media entries being taken down from time to time - it was possible for her to communicate a great deal without interference. What she wrote there also seemed to me striking, in terms of what she said about how significant informal networks seem to be in China. She regularly reported on all kinds of information that she obtained from a network of friends. While all kinds of relief were provided by way of people organising themselves informally, using smart phones. (Indeed, in this sense, the informal sector in China seemed to work better than the often centralized, and over-regulated, informal sector in Britain.)

2.2 Religion – and the state

One of my personal interests, but in no sense an area of expertise, is Chinese popular religion. I first became interested in this when visiting San Francisco. I recall seeing a statue of Mazu, the Southern Chinese god worshipped particularly by sailors and fishermen, in a store-front temple in the China Town area, there. This led, in turn, to my looking out for popular religion in other places with Chinese populations. A Buddhist friend of mine was not very happy that I asked him to take me to a tiny, smoky, traditional temple in Hong Kong, which was a long way removed in its feel from the more elegant Buddhist temples he was used to. Later, when I visited Singapore, I arranged for a graduate student working on traditional Chinese religion to take me on a tour of Taoist temples. I was particularly interested to note the way in which there was, there, something of a cult of the dark gods of the underworld, who were being given offerings of the black Irish bottled beer, Guinness, and cigarettes. I was fascinated, on my trip to China, to find that Taoist temples were in active use.

In some cases, the temples were in quite heavy use, with ceremonies being performed, and the selection of sticks from a box shaken in front of an altar, which were then exchanged for paper at a counter, which was, then, in turn, taken to a priest for interpretation. But there was another impressive complex, which seemed deserted other than for my friend, his family and myself. It is my understanding that the government has, over recent years, incurred considerable expenditure on buildings which represent Chinese religion. I was also, in Beijing, taken to a well-maintained Confucian temple – at which, apparently, sacrifices are made an exam time, in the hope that this will help students get good marks. It is interesting that the government has taken considerable steps to identify itself with things Confucian – including naming its institutes which offer lessons in Chinese language and culture in foreign universities⁵ 'Confucius Institutes'. It is also striking that there is a system of nationwide examinations, at the end of people's schooling, which are the gateway to admission to universities – and in which each region is allocated a certain limited number of places

⁴ Fang Fang, *Wuhan Diary: dispatches from a Quarantined City* (New York: HarperVia, 2020).

⁵ They are comparable to the British Council, the Alliance Française, and so on.

in the top universities in Beijing. One might see this as a modern echo of the old Chinese system of recruitment of scholars to work for the Imperial Bureaucracy!

Indeed, there is a sense in which it seems to me that a lot of people in the West mis-read the Chinese government, when they stress its being Marxist. It is perfectly true that Chinese universities have Institutes of Marxism, and that legitimation is offered of the Chinese government in terms of ideas drawn from Marx's work.⁶ But – as someone who has taught Marxism in the context of the history of political thought, over many years – what is taken from this seems to have little to do with Marx or, indeed, with socialism. (Indeed, while I was in China, the only people whom I met who had a political interest in Marxism, were – and understandably enough – people who were somewhat critical of the government.) Clearly, one could argue that the eventual goal is socialism, once a high level of material well-being has been achieved. But – as was discovered in the Soviet Union – a problem facing those Marxists who achieved power in an undeveloped society, is that Marx's work, as such, does not offer any suggestions as to what they should do.⁷ China has now adopted a system of market-based economic organization, and that is certainly bringing well-being. But how compatible this will be with any form of socialism, is another matter.

The Chinese response seems – after disastrous experimentation under Mao – to have in the end been something that looks like Singapore,⁸ or a kind of modernized version of Plato's *Republic*, but without elections; arrangements which are legitimized by way of Leninist ideas about the Party. The key current themes seem to be nationalism, the Party, and the need for the personal leadership of Xi Jinping. There seems, also, to be a broad expectation that there will not be public criticism of the Party's views, but that it, in its turn, will deliver modernisation and affluence. And this, indeed, is striking: large Chinese cities certainly make most other places look shabby and down-at-heel, while the degree of sophistication in respect of, for example, the electronic payments system, is striking. (I found people selling fruit on the street equipped to take payments from a mobile phone. Indeed, I was the only person whom I saw using bank notes.) One has, indeed, a striking market economy, combined with sophisticated state and Party control.

The character of the Party is somewhat baffling for outsiders. It seems as to operate as a kind of shadow administration of everything, so that, alongside the formal structure of, say, a university, there is a parallel – but in some respects more important – Party structure. In addition, there seems to be a large amount of tedious bureaucracy, and a tendency – as was found in the early stages of the coronavirus problems in Wuhan – towards timidity about accepting and reporting to the centre any bad news. That being said, it is striking how effectively some things work. While there was delay in response to the coronavirus, not least because of the lack of freedom of speech, what in the end was done was remarkably effective, and has shamed the responses in most of the rest of the

⁶ It seemed to me, while I was there, that for foreigners, to think more in terms of Hobbes' idea of a sovereign, might be helpful.

⁷ Compare the brief discussion in Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945 etc), chapter 13.

⁸ On which see my 'Singapore: Plato's Other Republic?', in G. Moore (ed.) *The Open Society and its Enemies in East Asia*, London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 132-44.

world. I was also impressed by the particularly effective system of baggage security scrutiny in a local airport.⁹ The construction of a high-speed train system has also been effective, as have been other forms of superstructure – although there are well-known problems of pollution. In broad terms, however, there seemed to me to be – in the cities – the reverse of Galbraith’s concerns about ‘private affluence, public squalor’.¹⁰ Although, at the same time, there have – in the cities – been remarkable gains in private well-being.

Some Chinese people to whom I spoke were justly proud of what had been done, and contrasted it with the chaos and incompetence currently being exhibited in Western democracies. Certainly, from the perspective of the UK as things are here currently, there is a case to answer. But the defender of democracy can, after all, reflect that democratic regimes were not subject to the horrors of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and – as A. K. Sen has argued¹¹ – it is striking that it is within colonies and undemocratic regimes that people have in general suffered most from famines.

3. Dealing with China

My personal conjecture is that, in dealing with China, foreigners need to keep several things in mind.

The first, is that people in China – and right across the world – have benefitted immensely from the economic liberalisation that took place in China, and from the kind of unleashing of Chinese talent and enterprise to which this led. Current moves against trade with China risk putting this in jeopardy, to the detriment of not just the well-being of all, but also the kinds of freedoms that come with an extended market-based economy.

Second, it is important to bear in mind that China has an old and distinguished culture, and that for centuries it considered itself the centre of civilization. The various humiliations that it suffered from European powers in the Nineteenth Century, and the horrors of the Japanese invasion in the Twentieth, have made their mark. While foreigners may regret the treatment of Tibet and of the Uighurs,¹² as well as signs of expansionism into the South China Sea, and also the character of China’s pursuit of reunification with Hong Kong and Taiwan, it is well worth recalling how, say, Britain behaved towards Ireland, and its and America’s attitude towards the rest of the world when they were in positions of power. It seems to me, here, particularly important that, if there are concerns, they are raised in a private, courteous and diplomatic manner. Given that China has suffered the humiliations that it did in the relatively recent past, and given the role that notions of

⁹ It detected, in succession, that my shaving foam made use of a flammable gas, and that I was carrying souvenirs which had the metal lead in them, which their machines thought might be gold.

¹⁰ See J. K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

¹¹ See A. K. Sen, *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theories_of_famines for a useful survey of some of the discussion of Sen’s work.

¹² Where there has been a limited amount of terrorism, directed at the Han population.

'face' have in Chinese culture, for leaders to be lectured in public by foreigners hardly seems a sensible way to go.

Third, it seems to me also important to bear in mind just what would and what would not be sensible expectations to have. If people are concerned about the risk of disorder when there is a challenge to the ruling system (which, after all, was a very familiar feature of Chinese history); if there is no tradition of well-conducted democracy; if democracies in some other countries seem to be chaotic and ineffectual, and if ideas about government have been shaped by ideas from Lenin and the Confucian tradition, to demand – or even expect – a striking shift from the current system looks unrealistic. At the same time, there seems no reason why, if it were stressed that there was no wish to challenge the existing system, it should not be possible to introduce a greater degree of freedom of opinion, and also why there could not be, provided that it was developed in a manner that was not problematic for the operation of the social system,¹³ a stronger notion of individual legal rights. Such ideas, however, seem to me to be things that need to develop within China, and that foreigners hectoring the Chinese government about such things is counter-productive. I would also have thought that, if it was made explicit that this was not intended to challenge the hegemony of the party, a degree of social pluralism would now be possible.

Fourth, there are issues concerning the conduct of commerce. Objections have been made to the kind of costs, in terms of the obtaining of intellectual property, that have been standard features of the conditions imposed on foreign companies if they wish to operate within China. There have been concerns voiced about the possible relaying of data by Chinese IT companies to the Chinese government, and so on. However, one needs to keep in mind the way in which the US – which has been in the lead in all this – has regularly tried to impose features of its own legal system onto other countries, has used its key role in the global banking and credit exchange system as a political weapon, and has used or threatened economic sanctions as a weapon against virtually everyone. Also, as Edward Snowden disclosed, it keeps extensive data on just about everyone. In addition, the US government's recent behaviour towards Tik Tok and Huawei almost beggars belief.

In the face of all this, I would have thought that the obvious way to go involves two courses of action. The first, is to build up and to strengthen multilateral international organisations within which such issues can be raised in a quiet, diplomatic and technical rather than a noisily political manner. In such a setting we could all raise issues, and seek out solutions that are of mutual benefit. The second is that, alongside this – and it would surely be something in which China would be interested – we can seek to develop international financial institutions, which would set out to offer an alternative to the current dominance of the US in this area; something that, as I have indicated, seems to me to be being regularly abused. One might, in this way, be able to tempt China away from the 'wolf warrior' diplomacy into which it is, today, seen to be moving. But one might also, by similar means, try to re-instruct the US and British¹⁴ regimes into their previous habits of diplomacy

¹³ See, on this, my 'Postmodern Politics'.

¹⁴ The decision, by the British 'Conservative' administration, in September 2020, to introduce domestic legislation in contravention of an international agreement that it had recently signed (see <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/09/09/britain-threatens-to-flout-international-law>) was a low point in the sad turn in British politics relating to Brexit.

rather than noisy populism. It would seem to me also likely to bring benefits to China, internally. For it would bring with it, and extend, ideas about the rule of law. And this might bring greater security to everyone, and lead to its being less common for wealthy and powerful Chinese to feel that they had to try to move their assets and their families abroad.

4. Conclusion

All of what I have written, here, is conjectural. I don't know how sound – or otherwise – what I have written about China is, and whether, if it is, what I have suggested would represent the best kind of policy response by those overseas to China. But it seems to me that it is important that we aim at cooperation and mutual respect, and eschew jingoism, colonialist attitudes of superiority and – to put it bluntly – racism.

We have, I believe, a lot to learn from China, and we each have a great deal to gain from mutual cooperation.

At the same time, China itself faces problems. In addition to the obvious issues of pollution and environmental degradation, and its continuing contributions to climate change, China looks to me to be facing various internal difficulties. At one level, their movement of population from the countryside to well-run cities has been remarkable. But there are still a huge number of poor people left in the countryside, and also problems about those who are working in cities but don't have residence rights (and privileges) there. It also looks to me as if there are massive problems relating to old people. They have often remained in the countryside, while their families have gone to cities to work. But the pension system for them seems inadequate, and there are likely to be massive problems as they age, and as China faces the problem of the care for people with dementia. In a recent article, a Dutch healthcare expert working in their embassy in Beijing, wrote:¹⁵ 'The Chinese Government elderly care policy is governed by a 90/7/3 formula, meaning it aims for 90 per cent of seniors to remain at home, 7 per cent to stay at intermediate facilities and 3 per cent at nursing homes.' How this will work in urban households which depend on two incomes, and thus upon adults working outside the home, is not clear, and one can only wish the Chinese well in dealing with such a difficult problem.

One underlying issue, however, is this. I have noted the parallel between contemporary China and Plato's *Republic*. In each case, there may be advantages to rule by those with knowledge. But one must also bear in mind that all knowledge is fallible, and a weakness of Plato-style regimes is that they tend not to be readily open to learning from their ordinary citizens when they have got things wrong. It is striking that China abandoned the one-child policy.¹⁶ But my understanding was that they did this without an explicit acknowledgement that they had been in error. It might well be that, in the light of the problems to which I have alluded, there could be real gains to an admission of

¹⁵ See <https://www.eurobiz.com.cn/china-and-its-elderly-care-system/#:~:text=The%20Chinese%20Government%20elderly%20care,per%20cent%20at%20nursing%20homes>

¹⁶ Which, it is worth mentioning, appears never to have been fully applied in the countryside.

fallibility, and to greater freedom of discussion, if there could be reassurance that this would not lead to the chaos which is so-much feared.