



Foreign Policy Research Institute

FOOTNOTES

Vol. 16, No. 01

The Newsletter of FPRI's Wachman Center

April 2011

Understanding Chinese Society By Thomas B. Gold

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http://www.fpri.org/education/1103china_india/

There is a curse attributed to an ancient Chinese philosopher which goes, "may you live in interesting times." (I learned recently that this curse was likely made up by an unknown foreigner and not a Chinese after all.) Yet, as I prepared this presentation about Chinese society, I could not help keeping my eyes on the unfolding political events in the Middle East, and North Africa as well as post-earthquake/tsunami/nuclear disaster Japan, and asking questions at the very root of Sociology: what makes social order possible? How do societies hold together, if they do, in the face of inconceivable and unprecedented breaches of their accustomed ways of doing things? How do the leaders of these societies think about and try to plan for, to quote a popular business book, "Black Swans" – highly improbable events?

So I thought I would start this presentation on "understanding Chinese society" with an exercise of trying to put myself in the shoes of China's leaders, who just completed two big political meetings—the National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference—where they defined how they see themselves and the tasks ahead. They, too, were also observing and analyzing the turmoil in the Middle East, North Africa and Japan while keeping an eye on their own rapidly changing society.

What conceptual tools do China's leaders draw on to understand their own society? I see three main components:

The first is the Chinese tradition, which is both this-worldly and practical. There are two streams of note. One is Confucianism which stresses the middle way, harmonious society, knowing one's role in society and performing it well, hierarchy, mobility through education and self-cultivation, and enlightened officials who also serve as moral exemplars. The other, harder, stream is Legalism, where the ruler relies on severe laws and harsh punishments to maintain power and order. There is no idea of an impersonal legal system or concept of everyone being equal before the law.

The second component is a Leninist one-party dictatorship. This is not just a typical military strong-man dictatorship, but is a system led by the Chinese Communist Party, (in theory) a disciplined, centralized and enlightened (through the study of Marx, Lenin, and Mao) vanguard committed to leading the masses to socialism and then communism.

Third, the leaders see China as a developing country with a large rural population, much of which is still poor and concerned with ensuring the basic necessities of life. In this view, "human rights" means food, shelter, clothing, a job and health care.

So putting this together, as China's leaders see it, theirs is a large, populous developing society without a tradition of Western-style democracy, but rather a population which requires and looks to a strong central authority to provide order, set an

example, and take care of their basic needs.

As they look around the world, what do they see?

They see the former socialist bloc which experienced state and economic collapse, where the communist parties lost power. The parties lost legitimacy and were undermined by the rise of civil society from below, as well as contagion and interference from the West. They now see long-time dictatorships in the Middle East and North Africa being overthrown by mass movements (the “Jasmine Revolution”) led by youth using the Internet and social networks. It is the twenty-first century version of the movements which brought down communism in Eastern Europe (and almost China) from 1989 to 1991.

What lessons do they draw from this? They cannot lose legitimacy; they cannot permit their people to organize outside Communist Party control, especially using the new tools of telecommunications. They must demonstrate the Party’s commitment to modernization, an improving standard of living and effective leadership. Besides words, they need to keep the economy growing to provide jobs and incomes so people will be busy working and consuming to improve their material lives, and have no interest in—or time for—politics. They have to control the Internet and other sources of information about the turmoil going on outside. And finally, they must not allow the growth of social forces outside Party control which might challenge its monopoly on political power.

At the March 2011 meeting of the National People’s Congress, the chairman of the Standing Committee, Wu Bangguo, stated: “On the basis of China’s conditions, we’ve made a solemn declaration that we’ll not employ a system of multiple parties holding office in rotation.” He ruled out the possibility of separating executive, legislative and judicial powers, adopting a bicameral or federal system. “If we waver, the achievements thus far in development will be lost and it is possible the country could sink into the abyss of internal disorder.”

Outsiders do not often realize or fully appreciate that China is far from monolithic and, with the rapid economic development of the past 30 years, has become an increasingly complex and difficult society to manage.

There are many forms of inequality and diversity. To tick off a list:

- **Geography:** China is huge with a wide range of climate and topographical conditions.
- **Natural Resource Endowment,** especially as regards water (the North is dry, the South is wet) and the presence of valued minerals, many of which are deep in the interior regions.
- **Levels of Development,** particularly between the coastal areas and the interior.
- **Urban, suburban and rural residence.** The *hukou* system still provides advantages to those with official urban residence permits.
- **Income and wealth as a result of the reforms.** Much of this has derived from corruption. You see conspicuous consumption at the same time as beggars living on the streets, even in the frigid Beijing winters.
- **Guanxi** (connections) to powerful officials and families, as well as connections to the outside world.
- **Links to modern technology,** such as the Internet and cell phones.
- **Real and virtual links to the outside world.**
- **Age:** This is more than just a “generation gap,” because of the dramatic lurches and shifts in development strategies since 1949. Different age cohorts have been raised with different sets of tools and expectations. People in their 50s and above expected the Communist Party to take care of them while younger groups have been raised to be entrepreneurial and take initiative. Many older people have had trouble adapting to the new society’s norms and engaged in noisy protests in the early 2000s.

Many of these forms of inequality intersect, with ethnicity and gender being prime axes.

The Chinese government no longer tries to homogenize the population but to “harmonize” what it acknowledges are differing and legitimate interests. However, “harmony” has become code for old-fashioned suppression of perceived challenges, and, in popular cynical parlance, to “be harmonized” means to be subject to coercion. The leaders, especially with the events of early 2011, have become particularly concerned with order and not letting what outsiders see as minor protests spiral out of control.

Another important area of diversity in Chinese society is ethnicity. Officially, there are 56 ethnic groups, with the Han comprising 92 percent of the population. The other 55 groups vary widely by their numbers, standard of living, physical and cultural (such as language and religious) similarity to the Han, geographical location (such as remote areas or close to cities), whether or not they have cross-border brethren (such as ethnic groups in Central Asian countries as well as China; Mongols,

Koreans, many of the groups in the Southern border regions); whether or not they are part of global diasporas (such as Koreans and Tibetans), and whether or not there is a strong separatist movement among them, in particular, the Tibetans and Uighurs who also enjoy a degree of international support.

March 2011 marked the fifty-second anniversary of the Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule and the flight of the fourteenth Dalai Lama to India, and the third anniversary of violent and violently suppressed demonstrations in Tibet against what many see as harsh Chinese rule. This also includes what is seen by some as a strategy by the Han to encourage Han migration into Tibet so that the Tibetans and their culture will be increasingly marginalized and rendered powerless. This happened in Inner Mongolia and is occurring in Xinjiang. The new Beijing-Lhasa railroad is seen by some as an instrument to speed up this process as well as to facilitate the extraction and removal of valuable resources from Tibet and the movement of troops in.

At the March 2011 meeting of the Tibetan parliament-in-exile in Dharamsala, India, the Dalai Lama announced that he would relinquish his political role while retaining his spiritual one. He planned to pass the political role to a new leader to be elected at the conference. He has tried to build effective institutions to survive after he has gone. He also declared that he might break with the traditional lengthy process of selecting a new Dalai Lama through reincarnation. The Chinese leadership said this was all a trick by the Dalai Lama to install someone while he is still alive to prevent Beijing from managing the succession, as it did in 1995 with the second most powerful figure of Tibetan Buddhism, the Panchen Lama. Bizarrely, the atheistic communist government has declared that the new Dalai Lama must be identified through traditional reincarnation, which they hope to manage.

There is a very active Tibetan diaspora, and the Dalai Lama, winner of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, is an internationally revered figure, which puts the Beijing leaders in a very difficult spot as they continue to condemn him.

Another notable minority nationality is the Uighurs, one of several Turkic Muslim groups in far west Xinjiang, the area of the Silk Road. They do not have a charismatic leader on the order of the Dalai Lama but there is a foreign-based independence movement. The Chinese have made efforts to connect this with fundamentalist Islamic terrorism, and some Uighurs were captured in Afghanistan and remanded to the U.S. prison in Guantanamo. There has been sporadic violence in Xinjiang as well, with July 2009 witnessing a particularly bloody episode.

Finally, turning to education, this has traditionally been seen as a route to upward mobility in China, with no barriers to students of any age who work diligently. From the dynasties through the present, China's education system has been based on rote memorization and regurgitation of approved texts. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the education system became a literal and figurative battleground, and intellectuals were violently persecuted. With the adoption of the Four Modernizations at the end of 1978 as the guiding strategy for development, education received new emphasis and investment as the third priority after agriculture and industry, but before national defense.

China now has nine years of compulsory free education. However, this has not yet become universal and there remain problems of funding, particularly in the rural areas where officials charge illegal fees. The system has become increasingly stratified, with key schools at every level offering superior facilities. The government has dramatically expanded higher education and many universities, and some high schools, have links and exchanges with institutions abroad and are beginning to offer programs in English to attract foreign degree-seeking students.

While education provides a channel for mobility, the same sorts of inequality found elsewhere also exist in China. Students from families possessing more wealth and income, are able to provide better nutrition and health care, an environment for study, tutors, extracurricular enrichment activities, access to the Internet, foreign contacts and even study abroad, which all serve to reinforce existing inequalities. None of this is unique to China.

While Chinese students score extremely high on standardized tests and are doing well enough to test into top universities abroad, there is great concern that the traditional pedagogy—stressing memorization and teaching to the test—is not producing the kind of innovative and creative graduates able to lead China's economy into the top ranks. There are now problems of tightening labor markets even for college graduates in China. This has resulted in the so called “ant tribe” of job seekers. There are an estimated 100,000 of them in Beijing alone.

In conclusion, China is a diverse society characterized by increasing complexity and dynamic change. It is in the process of a difficult and dangerous transition with no clear end point or guidelines. The leadership watches the events unfolding in other countries with which they share many characteristics, and are concerned to maintain control and order, even if this attracts condemnation from abroad.

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