Peaceful Evolution in China and the World Wide Web: Part II, Factionalism and Democracy

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1. Introduction.

In the first part of this editorial [1], we examined the notion of democracy within the Chinese and American political cultures. Here we argue that because the Chinese system contains an element also common to the American one, factionalism, it will inevitably evolve under the impact of the Internet to become more democratic in practice. However, it will not necessarily become more similar to the American system.

2. Factionalism in the Two Systems:

In the preceding editorial I stated that the Chinese believe the American multi-party system camouflages the control of economic elites and that, through the system of financing elections, these economic elites ensure candidates who support their perspectives are far more likely to be elected.

However, the Chinese perspective overlooks one virtue of the two-party system and a major defect in one-party politics: the dominant party, if lacking an opponent to call them on their mistakes and outright peculations, easily and, possibly inevitably, becomes arrogant and corrupt [2].

In the Chinese case, the ties of family, locale, and dialect often produce political groups similar to “machines” in American politics. These local elite groups often make it impossible for Chinese national policy to be implemented at local levels. At present, for example, the national government of China has clearly decided that the country must stop relying on an export-driven economy, and is providing funding to ease the transition to alternative domestic markets. However, elite groups tied to export-oriented industries often dominate local and provincial governments. These groups have misused such funding in an attempt to
This problem of the political influence of local elites is not new in the Chinese system. Prior to the modern era the imperial government had one inviolable practice in the elaborate Confucian civil service system: “The Rule of Avoidance.” The Rule absolutely prohibited posting a bureaucrat such as a local Magistrate or even a Provincial Governor-General to his home province, where he would invariably be corrupted or hamstrung by the local ties mentioned above.

It is true that the old society could become incredibly corrupt, but this was much more likely at the Imperial Court than in the Civil Service system itself. The Confucians usually avoided conspicuous spending and displays of wealth and emphasized an almost puritanical simplicity. What they wanted was power, and corruption was a hindrance to gaining and holding power.

Additionally, Confucians genuinely believed that good government flowed from basic Confucian principles and that factionalism—such as the interference of local elites—was not only an evil, but also a fatal flaw in policy. The Confucian bureaucracy, then, was intended to be a unitary one, not one torn by differing interpretations of basic values or policies. To be charged with factionalism at the Imperial Court would result in banishment, physical punishment, or execution.

In this regard, the Confucians had a very different perspective than did the American Founding Fathers, though Americans too, initially saw factionalism as an evil. This classic American sentiment comes from James Madison’s *The Federalist* No. 10, “The Utility of the Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection”.

Madison believed factionalism evil, but inevitable. It could be prevented—in his words—only by removing its causes, which lay in human nature: *There are again two methods of removing the causes of faction: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.*

The Communist Party agrees with Madison in that it also thinks factionalism is inevitable, at least at the initial stage in the policy-making process. Democracy, in the sense of a multiplicity of opinions and outright factionalizing, is permissible only while the Party is forming policy. This involves a period of closed-door Party discussions, replicated at lower levels of the system as various alternatives are examined. However, once policy is announced from the top, factional disagreements can be met much as the Confucians would; that is, with violence, if gentler methods of suppression fail. The Party, in short, attempts in Madisonian terms to quell factionalism by giving “…to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.”

This analysis may seem both antiquarian and overly theoretical. However, it is clear that Communism was able to supplant Confucianism in China because, in many regards, the two are very similar. This should not surprise us. Both systems had to be appropriate to the Chinese historical and cultural context in order to survive and become dominant. Confucianism itself repeatedly evolved to meet new historical circumstances; so has Communism.

The Confucians, like the Party, believed that good policy comes fundamentally from moral and ethical agreement. To disagree with the dominant policy was literally immoral. The most common basis for political attacks then, was to charge that the opposition was corrupt or dishonest or, in some manner, violating the Confucian value system. This avoided the charge of factionalism because it cloaked itself as a defense of
core Confucian values. Because shared values remain critically important within the current system, this political tactic will remain necessary and useful [9].

This means that changing the basic political line or orientation in either the traditional or contemporary Chinese system was and is very difficult. Creating the pressure to do so implies or requires factionalism. The safest way to remove powerful political opponents is still to catch them in corrupt behavior.

3. How the Internet Facilitates Chinese Democracy

This game of charging corruption, however, has always been a closed process. Officials, Confucians or Communists, could play it. The people could not—they lacked both information and influence upon policy. These discussions were closed ones, dominated by totalitarian forces, whether the Emperor or the Party Central Committee. These kept the discussions and factionalism safely within bounds. The people did, at various times, violently force new policies upon their leaders in a desperate attempt to force the government to deal with unbearable suffering at local levels.

To argue that the present Chinese system functions exactly or largely like the imperial system is, of course, naïve. There are countless new factors at play which the Confucians had never faced. It was their failure to find solutions to new problems, after all, which resulted in decades of turmoil and ultimately, the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949.

Now that government also faces new challenges. Looming large among these are the forces of globalization, including the Internet. The Chinese people, like all of us, now live amidst complex production chains, global markets, interdependent fiscal systems, and instantaneous digital communications systems.

There are many examples of the political use of the Internet in China. Here we will ignore the international aspect, wherein internal Chinese issues quickly become noted globally, and focus upon local internal ones. It is noteworthy that many of these are, as we would expect, related to moral or ethical issues, particularly those facing children and family—these are the issues to which Chinese leadership is particularly sensitive [10]. And in a country with 100 million blogs and 290 million Internet users, these issues immediately become nationally known [11].

Other issues which quickly go viral on the Internet in China deal with local groups who are not using the Internet so much to condemn national government or party officials, but instead to call attention to local incidents which violate national policies. These frequently include collusion between local elites and industries resulting in local harm to the environment or health, or misuses of political power to quell local labor disturbances. Sometimes these incidents seem relatively minor, but determined participants—outraged relatives of alleged victims, for example—can quickly make them a regional or national issue [12].

Some Internet issues, of course, amount to attacks on national policy, or are driven by local ethnic issues. These, if seen to be driven by foreigners, have frequently resulted in nationalist outbursts by Chinese both at home and abroad condemning foreign reports which are often felt to be politically motivated or outright incorrect, whether deliberately so or not. This reaction to foreign interference has produced a new and strident Internet-enabled nationalism among some so-called “Angry Youth” [13].

The Chinese government has tried, of course, both to stifle the spread of such information and to manipulate it to their advantage. However, the critical issue is not that there are attempts at suppression, but the fact that such suppression is now necessary. In even the recent past, local issues had to grow to a sometimes staggering scale or local abuses of power had to become truly outrageous before authorities were forced to
focus on them at all.

The Chinese government has few good choices in such situations. Local and national officials can and often do try to suppress news of the events, but if these do leak—and if they are of any scale or importance, they will, thanks to the Internet—then the government looks worse than it would have if it had dealt with such issues properly at the outset.

We do not have direct insight into internal Party discussions over such local questions, but it is easily inferred from the almost inevitable punishment of local authorities that bad policy is seen as just that, and condemned [14]. These events are certainly producing factional reactions in inner governmental circles, and the trend is clearly for the government to be more and more transparent and open. This is inevitable; a failure to deal with issues quickly becomes a factional issue. It could also result in being condemned as neglecting corruption at the local level, hinting at personal corruption. The government is still far, of course, from meeting the more extreme demands of idealists both at home and abroad for transparency and the rule of law. But the momentum is for becoming more open, and this trend is irreversible. The very fact that issues which could earlier be safely ignored now must be discussed internally creates a system that functions increasingly like a democracy, in the sense that various factions are heard, and conflicts are compromised.

This is not to say that China will necessarily evolve into a two-party system, or that it should. As Thomas Friedman recently pointed out in The New York Times, the centralized nature of one-party control, autocratic or not, gives the Communist Party the power necessary to “…impose the politically difficult but critically important policies needed to move a society forward in the 21st century” [15]. We must necessarily wonder, given the disarray of the American system and the stultifying partisanship of entrenched interests, if the American two-party system has the equivalent will and power to do the same.

We also think that it is ultimately in the interest of democracies in general and the idea of “democracy” in particular for there to be a wide variety of differing types of democracies in various stages of evolution. The recent crises in free-market capitalism have shown not only weaknesses in Western democracies (which are finding it difficult to act against entrenched interests) but the strengths in Eastern ones (which can do so because of a more unitary heritage).

4. Conclusion

Political systems, to be stable, must reflect history and culture in both their forms and functions. The American and the Chinese systems differ markedly, especially in form, but it is difficult to claim that the multiparty system is superior to a one-party system in which factions may be so prominent as to be recognizably consistent in membership and policy inclinations. Chinese history and culture is capable of producing a system democratic in function, is doing so at the present, and will inevitably continue do so under the impact of the Internet.

Endnotes


[2]It may be of course, that the minority party also becomes corrupt.

For an academic discourse on this issue, see James T.C. Liu’s “Some Classifications of Bureaucrats In Chinese Historiography” at: http://books.google.com/books?id=zy-sAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA167&lpg=PA167&dq=confucian%2Bfactionalism&source=bl&ots=rVhpXjyxK&sig=dFFIr2RETksGRakcEJY9NoYs&hl=en&ei=9mE5uSOA6KxmeOe68DgBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=2ahUKEwiLXx_6zNjwAhWC6bAKHc1cAg4Q6AEwAegQIAB

For a contemporary conservative statement which disagrees that factionalism is evil, or that Madison truly believed that it was, see: “Partisanship: The glue that holds the union together”, The Roanoke Times, Sunday, April 12, 2009: http://www.roanoke.com/editorials/commentary/wb/200701

Often policies which are truly departures from the status quo are allowed to be instituted in local areas which particularly favor them; if successful, they are then put into effect on a wider scale. In doing so, the architects of such changes are then usually promoted to more important responsibilities as well, and have often constituted a recognizable faction.

The incredible turmoil of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1968-78) was a prolonged period of just such factionalism. I believe the Tian An Men violence of 1989 to have been so pronounced precisely because it grew out of a serious factional split within the party when reformers attempted to rally around Zhao Ziyang and position him to succeed Deng Xiaoping. Zhao, I believe, attempted to utilize student and worker unrest and the conservatives met what they regarded as escalation (going outside the Party to pressure policy making internal to the Party) with escalation—armed violence.


See, for example, Ariana Eunjung Cha, “China Food Fears Go from Pets to People” Washington Post Foreign Service, April 25, 2007 at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/24/AR2007042402539.html


See, for example, Kathrin Hille “How China polices the internet,” FT.Com, July 17 2009: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/e716cfc6-71a1-11de-a821-00144feabdc0.html

It could be argued that they are being punished for failing to suppress information, not for implementing bad policy. I would argue that in practice the distinction is unimportant; the result is still pressure to mediate problems before they create bad publicity.

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2 THOUGHTS ON “PEACEFUL EVOLUTION IN CHINA AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB: PART II, FACTIONALISM AND DEMOCRACY”

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