China's Hidden Democratic Legacy

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Summary: China is finding it ever more difficult to straddle the divide between its anachronistic political system and its booming market economy. A reconsideration of the country's political future must come soon. Fortunately, China can find guidance in its own history: a previous generation of reformers who sought to balance the imperatives of modernity with the best aspects of Chinese tradition.

A STARTING POINT FOR REFORM

Ever since Deng Xiaoping began to undercut Mao Zedong's revolution in late 1978, halting and then attenuated political reform has been the hallmark of China's ruling Communist Party. Notwithstanding the tectonic events of 1989, this high-wire act between too much and too little political and economic reform has kept China relatively stable for almost a quarter of a century. But it has also left the People's Republic of China (PRC) in a state of extreme contradiction, its newly adopted market economy straining against a political structure borrowed from Stalin's Russia. Whether the PRC will be able to continue straddling the widening divide between its economic system and its anachronistic political system is the most crucial question that China faces -- especially if the current boom turns to a bust.

No one knows where, in its very energetic way, China is expecting to go. But it is becoming more and more difficult to imagine that it can continue to transform itself into a more stable, cosmopolitan, and global country without a clearer sense of its ultimate political destination. The Chinese Communist Party has so far prevented the sort of directed, public discussion that could lead to such a vision. As Beijing University professor Jiao Guobiao said recently, "[Chinese intellectuals] are supposed to act like children who never talk back to their parents." But China's leaders cannot forestall debate forever.

When the time for national discussion does finally arrive, what process might the Chinese people use to decide how it should advance and what it should become? Where should contemporary Chinese intellectuals, politicians, and leaders turn for ideas and potential models? In short, how should China go about the task of politically reinventing itself? Fortunately, China is able look to its own past for ideas, if not answers.

THE FIRST (AND LAST) LIBERAL AGE

All too many discussions of democracy in China have foundered precisely because they were viewed as overly U.S.- or Eurocentric. Indeed, when it has come to the prospect of importing political ideas directly from the West in the recent past, China has frequently evinced something akin to a tissue-rejection mechanism. (Ironically, the one "ism" that did successfully seduce the Chinese -- Marxism-Leninism -- was imported from the West.) This sensitivity toward "foreign borrowing" means that, to be successful, Chinese democrats are advised first to draw on indigenous wellsprings of democratic thought.

Since 1949, the PRC has been an authoritarian state that has, aside from a few spasmodic moments, systematically limited free and open discussion. It is important to remember, however, that China's modern political history did not begin with the victory of communism in 1949. In fact, in the first decades of the twentieth century -- when, after the fall of the last imperial dynasty in 1911, the Chinese last found themselves searching for a new political beginning -- China was a fermentation vat of free thinking, political inquiry, open discussion, self-criticism, research, and writing. Then as now, China found itself in a period of profound transition. The national conversation that began in the final years of the Qing dynasty during the 1890s and lasted until the Japanese occupation in the early 1930s has clear relevance for the challenges of China's current need for political self-reinvention.

This "Chinese Enlightenment" was started by the likes of Kang Youwei, Yan Fu, and Liang Qichao, three classically trained scholars. In searching for ways to reform their country's imperial systems of education and governance -- to bring back China's fuqiang, or wealth and power -- they turned outward, breaking with Confucianism's tradition of insularity. They became the first generation in China to embrace foreign ideas and institutions, including the notions of constitutional monarchy, republicanism, and democracy, which where considered every bit as unorthodox and heretical by the imperial establishment as they are by the Communist Party establishment today.

In the face of new ideas challenging Confucian traditionalism and accompanying calls for reform and revolution, the Qing dynasty fell, plunging China into a period of chaotic change. Intellectuals began to search urgently for new cultural and political answers, creating an environment charged with inquiry, iconoclasm, and intellectual vigor. Listening to some of these century-old voices, it becomes clear not only that China has a legacy of vibrant discussions that focused on reinventing its system of governance, but also that many of the leaders and thinkers who led those discussions were of towering intellect and sophistication, which are all of enormous relevance to China's current predicament.

In criticizing the emperor's unilateral power at the end of the Qing dynasty, reformer Kang Youwei called for complete reform. He was one of the first Chinese thinkers of consequence to declare that change was the most basic and dynamic force in history and that China would perish if it did not find a way to break the embrace of traditional thinking that clung to the past as the only model for the future. In addressing the young emperor Guang Xu in 1898, Kang boldly proclaimed, "Today it is really imperative that we reform. It is not because we have not talked about reform, but because it was only slight reform, not a complete one. We change the first thing, but do not change the second, and then we get everything so confused as to incur failure, and eventually there will be no success. ... The prerequisites of reform are that all laws and the political system and social systems be changed and decided anew, before it can be called reform." Still speaking to the emperor's face, Kang added, "Most of the high ministers are very old and conservative, and they do not understand matters concerning foreign countries. If Your Majesty wishes to rely on them for reform, it will be like climbing a tree to seek fish."

When Emperor Guang Xu was deposed, Kang paid for his boldness with exile, like many contemporary Chinese dissidents who languish abroad. His advocacy of constitutional monarchy had threatened the whole autocratic system of imperial rule by challenging the idea of tianming -- the mandate of heaven, the notion that imperial rule was sanctioned by cosmic forces, just as the monarchs of Europe were once believed to be sanctioned by the "divine right of kings." Kang's clarion call for a new kind of polity was radically different from anything that Chinese had heard for millennia, as bold as today's calls for democracy are in confronting China's Marxist-Leninist political system. "It was like a cold shower for me, or a blow right to the head with the Zen master's staff, suddenly depriving me of my defenses, leaving me dazzled without knowing what to do," wrote another reformer, Liang Qichao, after meeting Kang. Liang was left feeling "shocked and delighted, embittered and remorseful, frightened and uncertain."

In his turn, Liang, a classical scholar who had become interested in foreign ideas while traveling in Japan and the United States, soon also became convinced that the Chinese government's relationship to its citizenry was in need of a radical reformulation. "Treat the people as slaves, guard against them as against brigands, and they will regard themselves as slaves and brigands," he wrote darkly of the Confucian political hierarchy, which demanded obedience of inferiors to superiors.

At first, such iconoclastic voices went mostly unheard, especially by a mass audience. But as this intellectual ferment grew, China's mass media also started to come of age. In the six months following the May 4th Movement (the 1919 populist movement in favor of "science and democracy"), some 400 new publications, with names such as The New Atmosphere and The New Learning, were started to spread the gospel of reform. As Columbia University scholar Andrew Nathan has noted, "the new political press soon surpassed the commercial press in numbers, circulation and liveliness." Liang and his activist colleagues welcomed this fluorescence. "Government is entrusted by the people, is the people's servant," wrote Liang. "So a newspaper regards the government the way a father or elder brother regards a son or younger brother -- teaching him when he does not understand, and reprimanding him when he gets something wrong."

In trying to formulate the proper relationship between China's incipient new press and a new form of government, Liang hoped that the beginning of the twentieth century would prove a time when "as many doctrines of the world as possible" could be freely brought into China as a way of "jolting it into modernity." In his 1899 introduction to his Notes on Freedom, Liang quoted John Stuart Mill: "In the progress of mankind, there is nothing more important than freedom of thought, speech, and of the press."

It was through free speech, an idea that was just being introduced to China, that Liang hoped to educate "a new citizenry" for China's new republican future. He wrote, "A free society and a republican nation demand only that the individual have the power of free choice and that he bear the responsibility for his own conduct and actions. If this is not the case, then he does not possess the ability to create his own independent character. And if society and the

nation do not possess independent character, they are like wine without yeast, bread without leaven, the human body without nerves. Such a society has absolutely no hope of improvement or progress." Genuflecting to the American Revolution, Liang even opened one chapter of an essay with Patrick Henry's well-known cri de coeur: "Give me liberty or give me death!" He went on to proclaim elsewhere that "liberty is a universal principle, a necessary condition of life, and is applicable everywhere."

But, like Kang and many other classical scholars who became enamored of reform, Liang was also deeply fearful of abandoning the entire corpus of traditional thought, culture, and political institutions -- lest China lose its bearings and its sense of self and become lost and unstable. Indeed, it is a familiar Chinese story: reformers who understand that the future requires bold new thinking and action but that moving too quickly risks uncertainty and chaos. There thus was, and still is, a deeply conservative strain in most Chinese political reform movements.

MERGING EAST AND WEST

What distinguished these pre-Marxist Chinese intellectuals was their interest in combining foreign ideas with Chinese elements to develop a new synthesis. At heart, they were pragmatists, not idealists. Although they were drawn to the French philosophes and the experiment launched by the American Founders, they also read the English and Scottish utilitarians. Liang and his counterparts struggled to synthesize these strands: the imperatives of individualism, freedom, and democracy and the need for a strong state that could restore Chinese unity and pride. (Of course, a similar tension was present at the U.S. Founding between John Adams, the Federalist, and Thomas Jefferson, the Republican idealist.)

As postimperial China disintegrated, Liang focused much of his thought on how to create a new kind of effective government power without hobbling it with too much democracy. Ultimately, in his brand of syncretic liberalism, societal and state interests almost always ended up triumphing over those of the individual. Human rights were viewed not so much as "natural" (much less as "God-given," as the philosophes and Jefferson had believed) but as something that an intelligent government would want to confer on its citizens in order to motivate them to constructive action.

Liang's intellectual framework, especially as it developed in his later years, came to form something of a template for "liberal" political thought in China. In fact, one of those influenced by Liang's thinking was the Cantonese medical doctor Sun Yat-sen, a nationalist dedicated to curing China's humiliation by forming a new government that was both strong and essentially republican.

Although Sun lived abroad for many of his formative years, his ideas for remaking China came to play an important role in the debate about how China would be governed without an emperor. He disparaged China as a semicolonized "heap of loose sand," "one of the poorest and weakest nations in the world," and in danger of "being lost or destroyed" by foreign domination. If his fellow Chinese wished "to avert this catastrophe," he admonished, they must "espouse nationalism and bring this national spirit to the salvation of the country." Sun was an advocate of outright revolution against the Qing dynasty rather than piecemeal reform leading toward a constitutional monarchy. He envisioned Chinese republicanism developing in three progressive stages, by a process he called "guided democracy," which he spelled out in his classic, The Three Principles of the People.

But although Sun believed that China's salvation would come from greater democracy, it was "the liberty of the nation," not individual liberty, that he most ardently sought. Indeed, he feared that too much individualism and democracy would only exacerbate China's plight. So it was not surprising that he, too, called for strong executive leadership, a provisional constitution, and training of the people in local self-government during a period of authoritarian "tutelage." Like Liang, he was hardly an advocate of unrestrained (much less "inalienable") individual rights. He wanted a process that would lead to a strong China, one that could defend itself and stand up to the predatory powers that sought to dismember it. He was a democrat (and went on to become president of the short-lived Chinese republic), but democracy, for him, was a tool for helping China cast off the bonds of foreign imperialism, not a goal in itself.

The Chinese intellectual most profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment and Jeffersonian ideals was the U.S.-educated scholar Hu Shih. He venerated Liang and, like him, tried to determine what aspects of the Western liberalism he had come to know while studying in the United States in 1910-17 were congruent with the salvageable parts of traditional Chinese culture. Hu came out of the New Culture and May 4th Movements animated by the

writings of Liang and Kang. Such movements were fed by the the eruption of popular sentiment against foreign domination that was triggered by the Treaty of Versailles and that had generated among intellectuals the belief that China's survival as a nation demanded both political and cultural reformation. But during this period of growing Chinese nationalism, Hu remained deeply enamored of the American political experience and championed the ideas of freedom, democracy, science, progress, the sanctity of individual rights, and the need for a system of law to protect those rights. "The rights of man cannot be guaranteed, and a system of law established, by an ambiguous mandate," he wrote. "Government by law means that no action of government officials shall go beyond the law." Even after China's republican experiment collapsed into warlordism, Hu urged his country not to give up on democracy. Unlike Sun, he held that democracy was not something that should come only after the citizenry had been prepared for it in a period of authoritarian rule; rather, he proclaimed, "The only way to have democracy is to have democracy."

At the same time, Hu steadfastly rejected the idea of total revolution espoused by those enamored of Marxism and Leninism. He came down instead in favor of a gradualist process, driven by foreign borrowing when needed, a commitment to individual rights, and a belief in the need for a strong constitution to protect those rights. But this commitment to gradualism did not mean that Hu thought it possible for China to reform itself through what he called "lazy evolution." He advocated "conscious reform," which presupposed clear analysis, well defined goals, and an Enlightenment belief in the universality and inherent quality of individual rights (rather than only in their utilitarian value as a tonic for national weakness). This belief soon divided him from many of his fellow intellectuals, who were seduced by Marxism.

What strikes one about Hu's elegant prose today is not only his intellectual curiosity, erudition, and honesty, but also that he wrestled with many of the same questions that face the current generation of Chinese reformers, who, unlike him, have been denied the latitude to discuss them publicly. Hu confronted these questions head-on, ignoring the straitjacket of orthodoxy while disparaging the notion that China might be incapable of facing the challenge of reform. He was a rarity in China: an independent intellectual who was also an idealist and a democrat.

CONTEMPORARY ECHOES

Dipping back into the intellectual ferment that marked the first half of the twentieth century and comparing it to the stilled public dialogue today, it is easy to feel wistful for a time in China when debate was common, ideas and discussions mattered, and thinkers were open to the world and able to speak freely. Kang Yuowei, Liang Qichao, Hu Shih, and Sun Yat-sen were only a few of scores of well-known, politically engaged intellectuals who peopled China's first and last "liberal age." As they absorbed foreign ideas of every kind and tried to graft them onto China's own past traditions, they wrestled with almost every political question imaginable, especially how to reformulate the relationship of citizen to state.

A more recent Chinese "democrat" in this tradition is the astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, vice-president of the Institute of Science and Technology of China during the late 1980s (just before the student demonstrations of 1989), the most politically open and intellectually vibrant period since the May 4th Movement 60 years earlier. Fang rose to prominence in 1986, as he traveled from university to university fearlessly speaking out about the bankruptcy of China's one-party political system and its need for scientific rationalism, freedom of expression, political tolerance, human rights, democracy, and openness to the outside world. Calling for a new program of intellectual and political reform, he launched a comprehensive critique of Communist Party rule.

Fang's uncensored speeches electrified students. Soon, they were passing dog-eared copies of hand-transcriptions around the country. But Fang's meteoric rise as China's first "establishment dissident" alarmed leaders in Beijing to the point where they sacked him from his job, expelled him from the Communist Party, and then sent him into exile. Like other banished reformers, he is now relegated to the margins of China's political discourse and largely ignored.

But as China grapples to find alternatives to the PRC's Marxist-Leninist-Maoist legacy -- as one day soon it must -- intellectuals and political leaders should be encouraged to remember that China has another legacy to draw on: a cadre of founding father-like intellectuals who envisioned a path to openness and democracy and even articulated it in their native language. Their forgotten speeches and writings lie in Chinese libraries and archives awaiting rediscovery, just as the classics of Greek and Latin antiquity lay sequestered in medieval monasteries awaiting the Renaissance.