

Fragile Social Consensus in China

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The joke runs that social scientists, especially in political arena, spend half of their time predicting what will happen, and the other half explaining why it did not happen. Although unjust, it reminds how dangerous it is to prophesize. Martin King Whyte is very aware of it as said again and gain in his excellent book *Myth of the Social Volcano*, with the sub-title *Perceptions of Inequalities and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China*.¹

As stated clearly in the introduction of this book (pp. 5-6), “The analyses are based on a survey of representative sample of Chinese adults who were interviewed in the fall and the winter of 2004”. So many things may have happened since. The author is aware that he cannot say more than what was observed during the survey, with only “speculations” toward the future. That is why he refrains to give definitive answer to the question whether his analyses of survey data indicate “potential source of future political instability”. Statistics at best indicate trends with highly problematic control of cause-effect relations. Social scientists are not policy decision makers.

What has Whyte found in his survey? A reader may be tempted to jump to the last chapter of the book where the author summarized his findings. Doing so he would deprive himself of a wonderful reading, since Whyte has written a work of highly academic value, but explained in such a way that the reader (even the non-expert) follow step by step the process of the research, presenting all the difficulties encountered, the way to overcome them, and the rethinking of “common sense first impression”.

Now the leading conclusion of the survey is simply expresses in two lines of the chapter titled “Conclusion” (p. 197): the survey of 2004 does not support the idea of a social volcano in China; political instability is not clearly on the horizon. Why? First, Chinese people do recognize inequality, often viewed as too large, but that is not conducive to a rejection of social order as unjust (p. 30) They advocate rewards for individual merit, the action of the government being to ensure equality of opportunity for hard work.

When this is accepted, it may be easier to discover that severe conflicts among competing groups with unequal status are not apparent. Dissatisfaction at the level of family or small group does not spill over on society when the prospect of promotion and benefits are sufficient reasons for struggling within a competitive market society. At least, Whyte can say that “the most disadvantaged groups...are not the most angry

¹ Stanford University Press, 2010, 250 pp.

about current patterns inequalities”; nor are the opposite (p. 115)

As explained with figures, “objective status advantages and subjective status disadvantage are both associated with support for government leveling” (p. 131) Which means that the government must insure equality of opportunity, and not egalitarianism, with measures to help rather than restrict success of those who do well. The gap between the preference of Chinese people for equal opportunities and equitable differentials, and actual inequalities so far appears acceptable (p. 138). The insistence on hard work and merit encourage some optimism for oneself in the context of obvious general improvement within a fast growing economy.

Concerning social stratification and class-conflict, Whyte remarks that it is difficult to find some kind of wide social constituencies in front of current inequalities (p. 161) Chinese society does not appear to be divided into groups with clear common views and opinions. Best educated Chinese have more critical attitude but only toward some measures; low status in urban area generally express more negative opinions; high-status urban groups and rural residents are more positive. These are very broad and general tendencies, with disparate patterns, and surely not the emergence of particular groups or locales departing from a general consensus.

That some people may be classified as disadvantaged is an accepted fact or result of the reform. It does not mean that optimism is the share of the winners and pessimism the fact of the others. Again, hard work, and individual and family efforts (p. 178) are vectors of success. To be more concrete, it can be said that anger is more a trait of low-status urban groups in interior cities, and not in the countryside. The simple worker there may be the true loser because of closed horizon, boring expectations, and the end of the great illusion.

Very often, Whyte stress what is repeated in the first pages of the concluding chapter: “...our survey data indicate that the conventional wisdom is misleading or simply wrong in most respect.”(p. 181) What is intriguing here is the mention of conventional. Actually, is there anything like that? Or do we project something observed elsewhere as a theoretical frame? The danger always threatens, and it is the responsibility of social scientist to avoid it, and help to reject as much as possible assumption, unless they are presented as such for the sake of research by comparisons, which seems somehow inevitable.

One of these assumption would be that more access to information from outside China would lead to a more critical attitude inside the country; the survey proves the opposite, and the researcher was puzzled by this finding...But Whyte refers to other studies and reveals that many young well-connected to the Internet tend to be nationalist rather than critics of the status quo (p. 189) The so-called conventional wisdom is fragile indeed, and surely not a firm ground for meaningful research. But

than does not solve the problem of explaining what's going on in China. It opens to speculation, reasonable and with reliable indicators.

Accepting inequality and some form of social injustice does not immediately equate to accepting a political regime. At least at the intellectual level; in practice the two attitudes seem to be linked. That is why the book of Teresa Wright *Accepting Authoritarianism State-Society Relation in China's Reform Era*² complements the one by Whyte. In a systematic review of past and present situations, Wright presents the position of five key social group in China today and shows why they are, at least for now, rather defendants of authoritarian regime. Each group in fact profits from a system, generally speaking, and would be afraid to loose more on a turbulent political scene.

Private entrepreneurs (ch2) are so embedded in the existing political system that they have no reason to rock the boat. The government has helped them to reach their status, but with a kind of dependence, and strong attraction to join the economic development of the whole country and be participant in the effort of the Party. Now that they are at the top of the unequal distribution of wealth, they may know that political upheaval could threaten their position and material comfort. Even though local variation are obvious, with more or less dependence from the state, changes seen as a questioning of the status quo would probably be resisted even in more liberal surroundings.

Professionals (Ch. 3) are a second group which considerably profited from the state-led development policies, and so would naturally maintain their position in a social and political status quo. Take accountants as an example. Their profession was privatized in the late 1990'. Since then, their status, and their remuneration, raised considerably. Even though independent from the state, their commercial interest and personnel career drive them to be closely connected with the Party.

The Rank-and-file state sector workers (Ch. 4) were seen not so long ago as a threat to the regime because of measures to drastically slim state-owned enterprise (SOE) surplus labor force. But the anger of the laid-off people seems to have tampered down, at least publicly, after 2002. Researchers have shown that limited concerns, new ways to express grievances, some satisfactory answers from the authorities, and lack of horizontal organization have efficiently reduced public bursts of anger. The laid-off SOE employees just want now to enjoy some aspects of the socialist era, especially to insure them a decent way of living, merited by their participation in the economy of yesterday.

As for the rank-and-file in the private sector (Ch. 5), all the progress made to give them legal tools and mechanisms to alleviate their plights when malpractices

² Stanford University Press, 2010, 253 pp.

from bosses and excessive demands were made on them. Ultimately, they had to rely on the present regime. Added to that, their status as migrants or unskilled urban workers made them clearly conscious that too much trouble could result in the lost of their job. Legal channel, even if not always efficient, appears a safer way. At the time of the publication of the book, it is still the case, but the author adds "...support for continued CCP rule among rank-and-file private sector workers is tenuous at best." (p. 134) Which means the government must attend more carefully to their grievance to maintain, if not a declared support, at least enough calm and order among them. One issue to be tackle quickly would be the loss of land in their village of origin by many migrants, because of confiscation by local authorities planning industrial development.

Last but not least, the farmers (Ch.6). Many collective protest actions were recorded all over China by peasants, often because of illegal and excessive taxes imposed by wealthier and politically well connected village leaders. The government has responded rather quickly with new rules for the governance of villages, giving more say to local inhabitants and reforming the tax system. Nevertheless, even in tax and land requisition disputes, peasants, less economically dependent on government dictates, manifest often enough their dissatisfaction.

At the conclusion of this chapter, Wright reports that although a vast majority of peasants have not engaged in any form of protest, some are more vocal and speak of mobilizing the masses. Who are they? And could they succeed beyond their vicinity to really challenge the government of the whole country? The author says that the government so far has managed to satisfy their demands, but not enough to establish the desired harmonious society.

It should not be forgotten, Wright emphasizes, that this wide acceptance of authoritarianism appears in the post-Mao era. Of course, younger generations increasingly have not the experience of "before reform", and forget at a rapid cadence what they may have been told by parents and grand-parents. Wright mentions in her concluding chapter that references to the past to appreciate changes will not work in the near future, if not already, among youth.

Of course, all this reminds easily the famous article of Albert O. Hirschman and M. Rostchild "The Changing Tolerance for Inequality in the Course of Economic Development", cited by Whyte foot-note : *World Development*. 1973, 12:29-36 First, tolerance when still in the tunnel; then, other reactions after revelation of enduring inequalities and injustices because of many societal bias. Some would say that it is the challenge of middle-class emergence foot-note: see for instance, Randall P. Peerenboom "Middle Income Blues : The Esat Asian Model and Implication for Constitutional Development in China", in St. Balme and M. W. Dowdle eds Building

Constitutionalism in China. Palgrave and Macmillan 2009, pp. 77-96; . Such an assertion may not see all the facets of the phenomenon.

Younger generations, according to surveys conducted in the late 1990' and cited by Wright (p. 176) already manifest less support to the regime and more openness to liberalization and democratization. But also, she notes, as Whyte did, that a new wave of nationalism informs their mentalities. They want to remain strong and proud, and refuse to let their country, clearly now a major actor in local and world affairs, be weakened by intestine political disturbances which would saps their reputation and strength. Something new is emerging which favor confidence in oneself. And that must be preserved and developed, even at the cost of some kind of authoritarianism.

Which will proved to be the weak link in an apparently rather temperate society? “Weak”, in the case, means in fact audacious enough to refuse the apparent consensus which, some say, advantages the great majority of the people. Perhaps, even if one does not agree to all his analysis, the title of one of Rana Foroohar' article in Newsweek (June 28 and July 5, 2010, p. 30) is on the point: “ Beyond a Boom—China's recent labor unrest is less a sign of instability than a country moving toward a very different future” And, of course, since it is so different, it cannot been foreseen, but carefully observe in its evolution.

Observation also of values openly declared, or more secretly advanced. Value judgment, are inevitable anyway; certainly, Chinese people have their own; already researchers have published academic works on the subjective perception of what is going on in the transformation of China. Refusing a status quo includes values; accepting it too; the respect of and the balance between all the values at stake have something of a mystery, despite possible manipulation, positive and negative, by various agencies, among which government is a heavy one, but the only one.

Can the observed acceptance of authoritarianism be explained, as Stefan Halper suggest, by a radical difference between Western and Chinese political thinking: “Whereas the Western ruler has a responsibility to insure the people have right of (political debate), and the people a duty to exercise those rights...(in Confucian societies) the ruler has the responsibility to protect and support while the people have a duty to obey.”³ Such a statement seems to be more of a stereotype style, containing some truth but discarding other possible cause of accepting authoritarianism in China as in other post-socialist countries.

It is clear that the great majority of American, as recalled by Wright at the very first lines of her book, most American firmly hold the axiom “No economic freedom without political freedom”. If it is not an eternal truth, what could replace, or qualified

³ Halper, Stefan, *The Beijing Consensus – How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-first Century*, Basic Books, 2010, p. 250.

such a belief? The Washington consensus is shattered, but not crushed; the Beijing Consensus, so far efficient in China and appealing to other nations, still needs time to be confirmed. Harper's point of view is obviously American; John and Doris Naisbitt's *China's Megatrends* foot-note Harper Business, 2010 wants to understand the situation from inside, but with very little attention to dissidents' opinions. Both are part of a debate which cannot be concluded, since there is no end of history.

However a book of a completely different kind, gives other helpful insights: *Factory girl*, by Leslie T. Chang, with the revealing sub-title *From village to city in a changing China*.⁴ L. Chang narrates very individual and personal trajectories of factory girls. No generalization, but many incidents reported are typical. Will these migrants become vectors of future changes in Chinese society? Could a comparison between the factory girls before 1949 and those of today show similarities and differences of their possible long term influence on Chinese social changes?.

What people seem to aspire after is often enough security, some chance of success at least to keep dreams alive. Is it a pessimistic view of humanity? Or realism? So far the CCP has been the backbone of Chinese society; fear of chaos, or of loss of acquired new standard of living, is the best propaganda for its continued power. It appears that many young people would agree that, for the present, and pragmatically not looking too far in the future, joining the Party is a good decision to insure one's prospect of career and the average well-being of the majority of citizens. The invisible hand, after all, may be a visible one, if it achieves the same goal of better interest for more people.

Yet, who knows what may happen here or there in society? So far horizontal links among Chinese people are sufficiently discouraged to prevent large scale mobilization of this or that social group. No regime has the promise of eternity. That does not mean that the CCP will collapse in a foreseeable future, or gallantly retire declaring that its mission has been achieved. Any how, today there is not much in the offer in China to rebuild the country on other political agenda.

Everything appears incremental, with the hope of paying enough attention to cracks in the wall, in order to make repairs on time. Too many repairs finally change the house appearance. We probably just begin to discover new features, but not a new architecture. Large surveys as the one by Whyte, wide description as in the book of Wright are useful. They capture moments of overall changes. They do not say that this or that crack will be fatal to the regime. But they indicate that change certainly continues and that it belongs to Chinese people to map out further steps.

⁴ Spiegel & Grau, New-York, 2009.