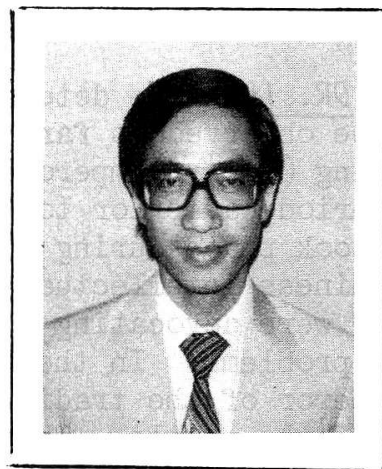


Democracy and Contemporary China

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. MICHAEL LUK, LECTURER,
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TRIPOD: Can a concept of democracy be found in traditional Confucian political philosophy, Dr. Luk?

DR. LUK: Traditional Confucian philosophy developed along two lines. The first placed emphasis on monarchical authority, based as it was on the classical Confucian concept of social relationships. This was an unilateral view of moral responsibility with officials responsible to the emperor, sons to fathers and wives to husbands. Of course, those on top were expected to exercise moral responsibility for those on the bottom, but, in actual practice, this was more the ideal than the reality. On the other hand, there was in traditional Confucian thought an emphasis on the importance of the people, the masses. This second line of approach, the authority of the people, was developed into a very complete political philosophy by Huang Zongxi (黃宗羲), a well known scholar of the late Ming and early Ching period. Later, Liang Qichao (梁啟超) enlarged on this concept and taught that there definitely were people-oriented elements in traditional Confucian philosophy. One may conclude from this that traditional Confucian thought does, indeed, embrace elements of democracy. To borrow the familiar Western description of democracy, we might say that traditional Chinese political philosophy does contain the idea of 'government of the people' and

'government for the people', but it is lacking in the element of 'government by the people'.....lacking as it does any concept of individual human rights. In the Chinese political arena, duty and responsibility reside with the people; right and privilege reside with the ruler.

TRIPOD: During the late Ching period and that of the early years of the Republic, democratic ideas were quite widespread among Chinese intellectuals. Could you describe for us how they developed, and what influences they had on political changes?

DR. LUK: The deterioration of China's political life could already be observed as far back as the reigns of the Jia Qing (嘉慶) and Dao Guang (道光) Emperors, during the first half of the 19th Century. This period was prior to that when the rapid spread of Western political ideas took place during the second half of the century. Even at that time Chinese intellectuals, such as Gong Zizhen (龔自珍) and Wei Yuan (魏源) were advocating a more open approach by the ruling powers to social problems. In the most delicate and tactful terms, they reminded the Emperor of the traditional Confucian teaching regarding the importance of the people. They pushed for an 'opening of legal channels' to overcome the difficulties that stood in the way of fostering a better life for China's populace. In doing this, they based their arguments on Chinese traditional teaching that 'the ruler who wins the hearts of his people will surely prosper'. Thus, their appeal was based on elements of democratic thought found in traditional Chinese political philosophy; however, that philosophy had not yet reached the level of allowing for direct people's participation. Also, the traditional concepts of loyalty to the Emperor, and the Three Cardinal Guidelines (三綱) of Confucian philosophy, did work to curb the development of democratic ideas. Yet, the Chinese emphasis on the importance of the people, the demand on political authority to win their approval, did pave the way for the spread of Western democratic ideas which was to come later.

During the 1870's and '80's, some Chinese intellectuals made a careful study of Western political systems. They divided them roughly into three types: the people-centered state, as found in the United States; the monarch-centered state, as exemplified by Russia and Prussia; and, finally, joint rule by monarch and people, as found in Great Britain. Unfortunately, these intellectuals critiqued these political systems from a Confucian point of view without first absorbing or digesting the democratic ideas on which they were based. This led them to assume that the parliamentary system of Great Britain offered

China the best possible way to attain the Confucian political ideal.... a government where ruler and people were united in one mind and one heart. They sought to 'open up legal channels', by which they meant bringing pressure to bear on the ruler that he might be led to a more realistic understanding of the people's problems, devise policies to foster their welfare, as well as appoint officials who were acceptable in their eyes.

As Western democratic ideas became more and more widespread during the 1880's, Chinese intellectuals held a variety of differing points of view about authority. Most favoured an equality of shared power between Emperor and people. Zeng Guanying (鄭觀應) and Liang Qichao, the two leading intellectuals of that period, suggested the formulation of a constitution that would allow China to establish a constitutional monarchy, leading to an ideal stage complementary to the Confucian concept of giving importance to the people. This kind of reform, obviously, had democratic nuances and fit the requirements of Western political policies. These intellectuals were convinced that the strength and wealth of the West rose out of just such a parliamentary political system. They believed that China could, then, attain stability and prosperity by the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Not only would such a system further the people-oriented concept of Chinese tradition, but it could also provide China with that political ideal so long sought after by the Chinese sages of the past. It was the demand of the reformers during the 'Hundred Day Reform' that a modern parliamentary system, which satisfied the requirements of traditional Confucian teaching, be set up. What followed shortly afterwards, however, was another form of the democratic ideal. The democratic ideal as outlined by Dr. Sun Yat Sen in his Three People's Principles was largely in accord with Western democratic political ideology and there was little emphasis on traditional Confucian political theory. The demand for democracy reached its zenith in the 'May 4th Movement' when the people demanded democracy not only in political life but in China's social life as well.

TRIPOD: Certainly, the widespread demand for democracy at the beginning of the Republic gave rise to grave difficulties and dilemmas. Would you say a few words about this situation?

DR. LUK: In their efforts to gain a proper understanding of democracy and how it might be applied to the Chinese situation, Liang Qichao, Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀) and Sun Yat Sen experienced within themselves uncertainties, doubts, and many questions went unanswered. They all

agreed on the value of democracy and that a democratic system could bring prosperity and a new strength to the country. But they also realized that there were serious reasons why China, at that time and in those circumstances, could not establish democratic rule. The educational level of the people was not high enough for the kind of mass participation democracy demands. Then, too, China was sorely lacking in the kind of political traditions which are the necessary instruments of a democratic society - China had no political party system, no proper mass media to speak of, and no system of universal education. Finally, there was a growing alienation of the masses from the reformers. The reformers felt an urgent need for change; the masses saw reform as unnecessary. As the reformers pressed for change, the masses cast them in the role of 'enemies of the people'.

The most crucial internal problem facing the reformers was one of means. How was the democratic ideal to be attained? Should it be a gradual implementation through first educating the masses and then waiting for their own political maturity to bring about the reforms, or should they apply the policy of intervention, the use of dictatorial methods to spur the people on to accomplish such reforms? The intellectuals were caught in a dilemma...for a small minority to impose its views on the majority, is this not in itself contrary to the democratic ideal? This conflict spilled over from the writings of the intellectuals into their day to day political activity, for they, themselves, were the leaders, leading the reform movements. Liang Qichao can serve as one example of how practical circumstances altered theory. He had expended great efforts to further the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, only to realize that the educational level of the people was of an insufficient standard to bring it about. He, then, opted for an enlightened despotism. It was Sun Yat Sen who suggested a three stage process in establishing democratic rule: military rule, political tutelage, and, finally, constitutional rule. What this meant in practice was that a revolutionary party would form a national dictatorship that would work to educate the masses to assume the final stage which was to be self-rule. A number of foreign scholars, such as Goodnow, agreed with his strategy. They, too, felt that China needed a strong leadership class to rid it of long-standing weaknesses and the bad habits of the past. In order to be effective, a strong administration could ill afford to give much attention to the opinions of the masses. It was this desire for strong, centralized leadership to counteract the encroachment of foreign countries that led many Chinese into the ranks of the Nationalist and Communist Parties. They wanted to eradicate corruption, ignorance and poverty. After China was liberated from these problems,

they would then determine the second phase....how best to apply democracy. On the eve of the 1911 Revolution, when the Manchu was overthrown, the revolutionary leaders believed that they could attain a democratic system with which to replace it. They learned from bitter history that it was not to be. What followed the revolution was the Warlord period and the political situation only got worse. Corruption increased, the livelihood of the people deteriorated further, and no progress was made in the fight against ignorance. This state of affairs, the recognition that the revolution had led to even greater division within China with the Warlord's usurping power, compelled many intellectuals to seek the goal of reform by use of anti-democratic and strong arm methods. Sun Yat Sen had established the Chinese Revolutionary Party in 1914. He now began to build the conceptual framework for a one party system to rule the country. In this he was influenced by the October 1917 Revolution in Russia. At a later date, the stage was set for Hu Hanmin's (胡漢民) often quoted statement: "There is no party outside the Party."

The Communist Party in its initial stage was deeply influenced by this political situation. Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀) initially intended to save the country through educational and cultural endeavors. He edited the magazine THE NEW YOUTH (新青年) which was committed to the new cultural movement in the hope of opening up the minds of the people. But after the May 4th Movement he switched direction and opted for a policy of intervention. During this period the well-known philosopher Bertrand Russell on one of his visits to China made the observation, that if China had but 10,000 youths armed with modern knowledge, a high standard of virtue and a spirit of self-sacrifice, they could lead the masses to save their country. The newly established Communist Party fully agreed with Russell's view. They set some directions and were determined to become that elite group of national saviours. This minority believed it had to lead the reform by use of dictatorial means. In the 1920's, there was a continuing debate in THE REPUBLICAN DAILY (民國日報) on dictatorial power and universal justice. Participants argued whether it was the authoritarian use of power or the drive to bring about universal justice that had made the Russian revolution successful. Some felt that the success of the October Revolution was the result of that aspiration for universal justice, but others felt that the authoritarian use of power also had a part to play in its success. They all agreed that justice could be protected through a proper use of authoritarian power. Leftist intellectuals resolved then to follow Russia's lead, and they emphasized the need to organize a vanguard Party. Their ideology happened to

coincide with Dr. Sun's idea of ruling the country through a one Party system. This indicates the strong tendency toward dictatorship which existed in Chinese political thought during the 1920's. While repeatedly insisting that the ultimate goal of revolution was democracy, they continued to apply strong dictatorial, un-democratic methods to attain that goal. However, strong dictatorial power once applied, its withdrawal is difficult. And yet facts do show that dictatorial methods can be very efficient. When after the confusion of the Warlord Period, the KMT in the 20's applied a strong policy of one party rule, it cannot be denied that the situation in China improved. China, both politically and economically, began to move ahead. Similarly, when the CCP, after 1949, began to apply strong methods to rule the country, political order was restored. During the '50's, great progress was made, especially when compared with the previous years of chaos.

The KMT had a very precise plan for applying dictatorial methods to attain democratic goals. It suggested going step by step from military rule to the period of political tutelage, and, finally, to constitutional government. But in the development of history the transition from one period to another is never really clear or precise.

TRIPOD: How, then, did the Communist Party go about establishing a Socialist Democracy?

DR. LUK: The CCP viewed democracy from an economic angle. They judged that without economic equality one can never achieve political equality. Therefore, the CCP did not pursue democratic rule after the Western style, but rather, regarded its primary responsibility to create a socialist economy. When economic equality was attained then class alienation would disappear automatically. Then the proletariat majority would control everything. This will give rise to a kind of democracy which will be more democratic than a capitalist democracy. In this process of creating a socialist democracy, the CCP, being the pioneer Party, represents the dictatorship of the proletariat. They apply a strong hand in reforming the economic system. At the same time, they demand uniformity of ideology. Thus, from the western viewpoint, the CCP is seen as using very undemocratic methods in seeking democracy.

TRIPOD: What kind of dilemma is the Chinese leadership now facing, and what options are open to them?

DR. LUK: The present Chinese political leaders have two very

difficult responsibilities. The first is to attain democracy, and the second is that they must assume leadership of a country of vast and complex affairs. They must constantly evaluate the existing situation and often make choices in light of both of these responsibilities. When the country is in a period of recovery, after passing through difficult times, they choose to organize the people under their leadership to take care of the needs of the moment rather than to relax discipline. In such circumstances attainment of democracy is not judged to be their first priority.

Lord Acton, an English historian, once remarked: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." This is true on both personal and social levels. When power is centralized, it takes on the characteristics of self-perpetuation and expansion. Gradually, it corrupts the one in power and leads to bureaucratism. This can also explain the existence of bureaucratism in the political life of both the CCP and the KMT.

TRIPOD: Someone once remarked that if China, in pursuing the policy of the Four Modernizations, does not have the fifth modernization - western style democracy - to guide and motivate it, there is little chance that modernization will succeed. Do you agree with this statement?

DR. LUK: I do not agree. There is not that much of a relationship between modernization and democratization. In Russia, there is no Western-type democracy, but her industry, science and technology have been developed to such an extent that she surely plays a dominant role in today's world. She is behind capitalist nations only in her consumer economy. If China does not pursue a Western-type of consumer economy, she will not need the Western-type system as a supportive base. She will still be able to attain her goals of modernization in science and technology, national defense, agriculture and education.

TRIPOD: What is the significance of the democratic centralism now employed in China and what are the limitations she has to face?

DR. LUK: Democratic centralism, as it is practiced in China today, allows a greater degree of openness, but its leaders would never allow for setting up a capitalistic type of democracy as practiced in Western countries. There are some crucial reasons for this. First of all,

because Chinese Communist Party theory reiterates that it is the vanguard Party, representing the proletariat. Since the founding of the People's Republic the CCP has followed this policy in carrying out the People's Democratic Dictatorship. They have divided the masses politically into two large camps - the people, and the enemies of people. The people are further subdivided into peasants, workers, petty bourgeois and bourgeois, with the CCP as representing the peasants and workers in leading the masses. No matter how much openness China may attain through the modernizations, politics in China still centers on communism. Therefore, recently they have been advocating a policy known as the 'four insists' - insist on socialism, insist on people's democratic dictatorship, insist on CCP leadership, and insist on Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong thought. These 'insists' underline the fact that the foundation of their political theory has not changed.

The second crucial problem China's leaders face is ideology. In the political structure of Communist China, we see on the one hand the movement towards greater centralization of power, on the other hand, political consultative conferences are being set up on the grass roots level. This means that, ideologically, there is a certain degree of openness in giving the people a chance to express their views. Generally speaking, the ideas expressed at the consultative conferences are not permitted to touch the core of Chinese politics, e.g. to seek removal of restrictions imposed by the Party, or to set about the organizing of any opposition parties.

In traditional Chinese society, the restrictions mentioned above also existed. The old Chinese society, which honored Confucianism and denounced all other ideologies, is also an example of controlling the whole society through one ideology. But in the past, no one stood up to oppose the respect paid to Confucianism. If we talk about theory being changed into action, then Marxism-Leninism is more domineering than Confucianism.

In the recent past, the Party secretary and the leading cadre were the top people of each commune. They controlled many affairs and people. Whenever the people expressed dissatisfaction with this system, they would be considered by the government to be lacking in political awareness, unable to understand the true spirit of proletarian dictatorship and appreciate the superiority of this system. As Dr. Sun had divided the people into three categories: those with foresight, those with hindsight, those who act unconsciously or unwittingly, so, too, did the Party view the people according to their awareness of Marxism - Leninism. At the time of the Cultural Revolution, those who were not

satisfied with the dictatorship of the proletariat were regarded as an anti-revolutionary element. Because of their strong anti-revolutionary ideas, they were declared enemies of the proletariat and they became the targets of subsequent purges. The method of 'raising the matter to the level of principle' (不斷上綱) was used as a device to deal with them. Chaos and cruelty abounded. At present, the Communist Party is learning a lesson from past mistakes. They listen more now to the ordinary people; mistakes are now forgivable and can be corrected by education. Moreover, the majority of the opinions expressed by the people are seen by the Party as reasonable. Nevertheless, the Party members still insist, as they have for the past 30 years, that Marxism-Leninism is the only correct political line.

TRIPOD: Considering the relaxed economic policies, what are the prospects for democracy in China today?

DR. LUK: Recently, because of the drive for the Four Modernizations, China has had to open up more to foreigners. She has been brought into a situation of frequent contacts with the capitalistic societies of the West. Whether the Party leaders like it or not, Western ideas of freedom are infiltrating into China. What is socialist economy? What is socialist democracy? Will the economic system which now prevails in China, e.g. market economy, individual economy, economic zones, etc., bring about a change in the Chinese economic model? These questions have been the focus of many recent debates. Although communist theoreticians frequently reiterate that a market economy is part of a socialistic economy, still, Lenin in the past and political leaders at the time of the Cultural Revolution have warned that a market and an individual economy can indirectly lead to the revival of a capitalistic class. We have to ask whether or not the present phenomenon, as encouraged by the government, is in keeping with the theory of a socialist economy. If the newly established policy runs into contradictions with the Party line, will the Party line be sacrificed? These are the questions that have to be faced by present Chinese political leaders.