

Is China So Difficult to Understand by the West? Why? Why Not?

Mainstream and Organic

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Whenever the topic of US-China Relation comes up in a conversation among Americans with varied background, inevitably the discussion moves to interpreting current events involving China and the U.S. The fact that more and more people are interested in China-US affairs is a good thing, but very often one only heard these interpretations in a third person voice, namely quoting the media or hearsay. If there were Chinese Americans present, they were expected to engage in the discussion but expecting a first person opinion or knowledge. Unfortunately not all Chinese Americans, especially second or third generation Chinese Americans, who may have physical Chinese features but rarely they can express their opinions convincingly in a knowledgeable manner with a first person tone. Nothing wrong with this phenomenon except the discussion tend to end with puzzles and question marks to the issues in discussion. This is not a good thing. The end result is that China is hard to understand by the West.

Occasionally in group conversation, you have Chinese people who possess reasonably good knowledge about China but then they have not been in the West long enough to understand why China is so difficult to understand by the West? Or they don't have a reasonably good knowledge about the West, especially the views of mainstream media which dominate the mass. Or they have a language handicap in English to deliver their opinions in a convincing sound bite manner. Therefore, these Chinese people, being American citizens or residents or recent immigrants and very much wanting to express their opinions, can not convince their friends to accept why China is not so difficult to understand?!

Of course, it is not any single person's fault the title questions exist among Americans or westerners and to some extent for many people in the entire world. China is a large country with more than 3.7 million square miles of land not counting her islands and seas. China has the biggest population in the world, evolved from many races over thousands of years. This population consists of a principal language, a central Chinese culture and an uniquely blended Chinese philosophy but it also contains multiple dialects, different customs, rich variation of cuisines, all sorts of religions (despite of an atheist constitution limiting promotion of religion in contrast to a religious American constitution but being challenged to remove its regions base by some people), long economic and political history and very different life styles expanding many centuries. This characterization of China alone is enough a challenge for Chinese to understand China completely and you sure can appreciate what is like to Americans.

In a digital world today with Wikipedia, Weibo, Twitter and abundance of search engines in the Internet cloud, there is no lack of raw data and information about China and the U.S. but what is missing is some honest interpretation of facts with no bias. Unfortunately, to the title questions, the five millennia of Chinese history (a huge literal challenge) and the recent centuries of anti-communism ideology (a constant intellectual brain-rinse) have created obstacles or biases preventing turning the zillions of data and information (including the Chinese classic literature, 文言文) to fair and honest knowledge about China. Hence, the metaphors such as a rising China, an awakening lion or a flying dragon have been created and interpreted

to represent a mystical China and a future threat to the West,

Many people don't believe that, especially the Chinese Americans who have a good understanding of the Chinese history and culture. What can or shall the Chinese Americans do regarding the title questions then? I would like to take an optimist's view to say, it is simple, or at least not difficult, to do a logical analysis on the title questions and tell anyone who cares to listen to your answers. Here is my version of the analysis for the readers of this column with the hope that it will draw many plausible versions to demystify 'China' and prove that China is not difficult to understand.

China Is Not A Mysterious Country

China is not more mysterious than Japan or India. Americans often say that on a personal level, Chinese is not difficult to get along or become close friends. Generally, Chinese are hard working employees, devotees to children, considerate in personal relationship or being a boss and generous when becoming close friends. Yes, they may have some English language handicap or they may appear to be more reserved or conservative but they are more than willing to receive an extending hand of friendship, nothing mysterious at all. China as a country is not mysterious either recognizing the facts mentioned above: big country, large population, multiple dialects, religion neutral, different inheritance and long history of prosperity but century of misery due to the invasion of the West including Japan. There is no real mystery if one logically analyze China from the above aspects. Yes, China has too many philosophies, some with opposing assumptions, for example, one believes that humans are born 'good' with a kind and compassionate heart, but environment and upbringing will contaminate and lead them to be evil; another believes that humans are born 'evil' with all bad traits such as being barbaric, selfish, greedy, etc, only education and good upbringing will make them good people. Is there anything wrong with these philosophies? Anything really mysterious? No, one simply has to understand both may be true. The Chinese people brought up in Chinese families exposed to multiple philosophies do develop a central a universal philosophy though, that is, be kind to oneself, others and the environment. Yes, love the environment is deeply ingrained in Chinese philosophy. On this point, It is nice to see that the U.S. and China signed a climate Change agreement recently.

Let's continue the analysis by asking what about China's economic, political and legal system? Aren't they different from ours and threaten our systems. Here is my view below.

Economic System

I would say China's economic system might be different from the western economic system, but it would not be not mysterious nor threatening. West civilization evolved late but fast, more materialistic than spiritual, easily visible and admirable; hence since 19th century, the West had developed a superiority attitude, which formed a bias and persisted in The United States throughout WW II as the U.S. emerged as the superpower in the world. China, despite her prosperous past in her long history, suffered greatly in the 19th century owing to the West invasion. In the seven decades of 20 th century, she became extremely poor owing to her treacherous revolution to establish a republic and her experiments with socialistic communism. However, In the recent four decades or so, China has adopted reform and pursued the western style of economic development as manifested by her advance in infrastructure, technology and modernization of life style. Capitalism was employed in this reform process, but as a concept, capitalism has not been foreign to Chinese at all in their history. Money bank (錢莊), Pawn shop (當舖), and private enterprising had been in practice in China for at least a couple of

millennia resulting in examples of wealthy merchants richer than the emperor. The fast development in the recent few decades may be envied by many other countries; but it is actually costing China a lot in compromising her deep traditional culture and going backwards in spiritual civilization. Corruption has always accompanied with money and riches. Corruption was tolerated for the sake of harmonious peace in ancient Chinese history by emperors who would only take some cleansing measures when corruption had become so severe choking economy or hampering people's survival. Therefore, one should not be surprised that China had launched a serious anti-corruption program after recognizing that many of her successful state enterprises were deep in corruption.

Political System

Politically, China has long been an imperial system. With her advanced economic and cultural development, the Chinese emperors firmly believed that China was in the middle of the world, geographically centered to lead the world, hence the dynasties in China practiced a foreign policy of 'suzerainty' (招安) or 'tributary relation', rewarding any suzerainty with gifts and aids even marriage with Emperor's daughters. This policy worked most of the time except some ambitious foreign leaders exploited the situation. The three dynasties, Jin (金), Yuan (元) and Qing (清) are the result of such foreign invasion. This part of history was the principal motivation for Japan to try to conquer China after Japan had succeeded in her westernization process. The Chinese revolution against a corrupt and weak Qing dynasty was a treacherous route interrupted by the Japanese invasion (WWII) and the Western powers' intervention mainly Russia backing a communist revolution group (Mao Ze-dong) and the United States backing a revolution group (Chiang Kai-chek). Mao eventually won and established the People's Republic of China in the mainland while Chiang's Republic of China retreated to Taiwan. Mao succeeded in revolution but failed in experimenting with communism leading to a break up with the Soviet Union in 1968. The subsequent reform in China initiated by Deng Xiao Ping had led to the four decades of rapid economic development moving China's economy to be the second largest in the world, which lent tremendous credit to the unique Chinese one-party governing system. Democracy is practiced within the party and the exclusion of other political party assures the unity of the nation. The current leader, Xi Jinping, rose to the leadership position only after serving the party and the country successfully in many challenging positions. Now he is facing the challenge of sustaining China's economic growth while dealing with a complex world with several hostile and envious neighbors. Obviously, the 'suzerainty' foreign policy failed in the past, could not be employed again. So it is no mystery that China is learning from the United States in conducting herself. This explains China's assertive attitude regarding any territorial dispute and her desire to be recognized as a great nation. China's proposal of two-great-nations relationship with the U.S. should not be interpreted as a threat but a sincere desire to work with the U.S. together to maintain a peaceful world. Unless the U.S. believes that she alone and only she alone can maintain the world order, otherwise, engaging China in a two-great-nations relationship appear to be a win-win policy.

Legal System.

The legal system in the West is a corrective system, assuming innocence then correct mistakes or criminal acts with legal actions. This system seems to have philosophical roots in 'people are born good' discussed above. This legal system is by no means perfect, for example, regarding freedom of speech, an abuser of freedom of speech, making slanderous attack on someone else, may be prosecuted, convicted even punished, but the end results often is still unfair to the innocent with his reputation ruined by the bad publicity associated with the trial.

Another example is sex crime committed by an sex offender, in protecting the offender's right for a trial, the victim's privacy and human dignity often get destroyed. These type of examples give a bad impact to the society. Whereas in the East, the philosophy of 'people are born evil, education is needed to drive away the devil' seems to exist in the legal system in China; 'assuming innocence' is balanced with a bit of 'assuming evil', hence there are more restrictive and preventive laws limiting people's freedom especially in the area of sex crime, pornography, and freedom of speech, etc. Again, there should be no mystery why the Chinese society appeared to have less liberty.

Religion

A Christian society or nation worships one God; various denominations of Christianity more or less have a common root. China, with a long history existed before Christ, is basically an inclusive society when comes to religion, hence Christianity, Buddhism, Islamism, Taoism, etc all exist in China. Since China is rich with philosophy, some people will regard religion like philosophy or vice versa, for example, Taoism is often contrasted with Confucianism. Chinese had long recognized the power of religion, its ability to do good as well as its ability to do evil, hence, in China religious freedom is curtailed to protect the rights of non-religious population as well as to maintain stability in society, assuming promotion of religion especially at the expense of other religion or even at the rights of atheist can cause instability. In view of the problems with Islamic terrorists today, perhaps one would not interpret China's laws regarding religion mysterious or too repressive.

Media

Media rights are sacred in the U.S. in contrast with China where there is tight control in newspaper publications, radio and TV broadcast. With the same logic as in the legal rights and religious rights, China believes that media can do good as well as do evil causing instability in society. It is understandable why China is ultra sensitive to society stability since she had suffered nearly a half century of instability, punished with unequal treaties and lost territories to foreign countries. (for example, Hong Kong, Macaw, Okinawa, Taiwan etc.) This concern of instability is deep in the minds of the Chinese communist party. The fact that Hong Kong students are agitated to demand direct nomination of the Hong Kong Chief Executive by the citizens* (*the nomination of the U.S. Presidency evolved over decades into a state by state primary election system endorsing candidates nominated by two major parties instead of a national direct nomination by citizens has its reasons) and the fact that terrorist activities are infiltrating into west China's Muslim populated states, naturally make the Chinese government nervous* (*the U.S. National Security Agency is seeking power to monitor the U.S. Citizens' communication data like phone records and right to demand media and Internet companies to turn over their customer privacy information is actually based on the same logic). Therefore it is not difficult to understand why there are stronger media controls in China. Putting these political oriented security concerns aside, the media freedom enjoyed by hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens through the Internet is actually amazing as exhibited by the activities of weibo and blogs in China so long they are not targeted to cause instability of society.

From the analyses above, I can say the title questions are not difficult to answer. One can find other similar explanations. The U.S. Media has a legacy or a bias against communist countries always painting them an evil face. However, since the end of Cold War, communist regimes had taken up transformation including Russia. China is particularly unique in her transformation incorporating modern capitalism with her ancient philosophy. I hope the above

analyses can serve as a building block for you to build a platform to deliver your answers to the title questions to any doubting Thomas in the West.