

From Confucius to "Animal Farm," the Hong Kong and Taiwan Experience

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
Tuesday, 24 September 2013 08:18

For many in Asia, the year 1997 was a memorable year--one that seems like it was only yesterday. It was the year when the United Kingdom (UK) "returned" Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was a festive time and many went to Hong Kong just to say they were present at the handover event. To add to the festivity, the rulers of the PRC, a government, which did not exist when the UK and the Manchu Qing made their original agreement, promised the people of Hong Kong that in twenty years time they would have universal suffrage. All was well and good. However, now as the year 2017 draws nigh, not only have the festivities died down but they have been replaced by doubt, discontent and protests. In the aftermath, the looming falsity of that PRC promise has taken on far greater proportions and a showdown is building. It is a showdown, which regardless of the outcome, is full of implications not only for the people of Hong Kong but also for all people in the region including Taiwan.

At issue is what ever happened to the supposed glorious return to the Motherland and why are the people of Hong Kong not buying into it? First and most obvious of course, is the fact that they can count; they are aware that nearly seventeen of the twenty years have passed. The clock is ticking and they are no closer to universal suffrage than they were in 1997. Some would even say they have gone backwards.

Second the people of Hong Kong are astute enough to know the difference between a promise, a hope and/or a wish. They also know of course that the re-writing of the textbooks used in their schools does not qualify as keeping a promise. Some prefer to call that, shall we say, an attempt at "brainwashing," and they are not buying it.

Third and more important, the people of Hong Kong know their history; they know the how, why and when, by which their city grew into the greatness that it now has. When Hong Kong became part of the UK after the Opium War, it was basically flatland surrounded by mountains, land with very little trade value. The center for trade had been and was for centuries between the neighboring cities of Macau and Canton. But Hong Kong would quickly surpass that Macau/Canton link. The people know that their rise had nothing to do with their being part of the "motherland," rather it came from being outside it, separate from it. This does not mean that they were or are necessarily enamored of the British. But unlike the majority of the people in China, the people of Hong Kong know that they are not frogs in a Chinese well. They have seen that their rise from a basically non-descript land to the great trading center that they are was due to their hard work and skill in being part of the UK trade network. Call it living in a bigger well or something else, their history has been to see a different sky. In the past century and a half they experienced a world and sky far wider than the barrel vision of a past under whatever dynasty ruled.

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At the same time, although the people of Hong Kong had seen a different sky, than their "former compatriots," they have always been close enough to China to see the numerous continuing problems there. They could see the corruption of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and why it lost China. They could see the foolishness of Mao's great leap forward; they did not have the idolization of Mao that the Chinese had; nor did their textbooks teach them to say Mao was only "30 per cent wrong." They have seen the foolhardiness of the Cultural Revolution; and they also watched how China switched to a more capitalistic bent, something that Hong Kong had been practicing for decades. They then witnessed what happened in Tiananmen Square when Chinese students sought some democracy, so they naturally ask what is China bringing to the table as it welcomes them back with their "one country, two systems" formula and the promise of universal suffrage.

The people of Hong Kong are conscious of "brainwashing" because they have seen it in operation in their former "neighbor" China. They can recognize how the long-standing tradition of legalism in China has always been able to manipulate the tradition of Confucianism for loyalty to the ruling Politburo. They can see the extreme irony in how the PRC spends huge amounts of money in setting up "propagandistic" Confucian Institutes around the world, while at the same time it is not practiced at home. Confucianism theoretically depends on each individual developing inner virtue from which in subsequent hierarchical fashion one is led to unquestioning loyalty to the state. Unfortunately, in the PRC after thousands of years of preaching a manipulated Confucianism, this past July, the government had to make it a law that everyone must visit his/her elderly parents. When a state resorts to legalism to carry out what is purported to be "natural and traditional filial piety," one knows that the hand is writing on the wall and that such a state would never trust or indulge its people with concepts of democracy.

The people of Hong Kong do not deny the virtues that are proposed by Confucianism but they know that the structure it rests on is a past paradigm that no longer holds true. Confucianism came from the paradigm of an agricultural society in which in the four ranks of man, the businessman is the lowest. Hong Kong (and most of China) has seen the opposite of that. Today, the businessman is king and tries to wield his power to seize and "develop" the farmers' lands. The legalists to keep power in the hands of a few are again manipulating loyalty to the unchanging hierarchy of Confucianism. Thus the people of Hong Kong know locusts when they see them, especially when they stream across their borders and take up hospital space, and force the housing prices in Hong Kong to rise. Hong Kong can see that China's nouveau riche businessmen are not just country bumpkins that eat on their subways and spit in their streets. These bumpkins are backed by Beijing professors who in effect tell the people of Hong Kong that by asking Beijing to honor its promise of universal suffrage they are the "ungrateful running dogs" of outsiders.

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In "Animal Farm" few of the animals recognized how after the "revolution," the ruling pigs soon altered the original seven commandments. The last of those seven commandments became this. "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others." The Cantonese are becoming well aware how in so many ways they are not in that more equal crowd. Hopefully Taiwan and the world can learn from their struggles.

Source: [Jerome F. Keating's writings](#)