

Common Sense

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Informed by his dual identity as Chinese citizen and Hong Kong resident, Leung remains rooted in the cosmopolitanism of the latter, while possessing an intimate understanding of events and conditions on the mainland. While Leung's Hong Kong origins have provided a convenient excuse for his many mainland critics to dismiss his writings out of hand, they also make his writing all the more accessible to foreign readers unaccustomed to the excessively circumspect style of traditional Chinese non-fiction. This collection represents the first steps towards a mature public discourse in China.

What's More Important for Urban Control Officers: Appearances or Livelihoods?

At a time when almost all Chinese cities proclaim that they want to bring themselves in line with international standards and give themselves a civilised, modern image, they have – probably without realising it – fallen behind again. Jane Jacobs, the ‘godmother’ of urban design studies who died in 2006, devoted her classic work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* to demolishing the theory (ubiquitous in the early 20th century) of the ‘modernist city’. In fact, this thinking has long been consigned to the rubbish bin throughout Europe and America, yet it is still the guiding principle behind the way Chinese cities are designed and run.

As Jacobs describes it, the ‘modernist city’ is clean and bright and criss-crossed with highways, interspersed with appropriately sited parks and decorative features. The entire urban development looks as if it has been laid out to enable a deity to look down from on high and take it all in at a glance. Work is done in areas designated for work, people live in the areas designated as residential, all commerce is restricted to its allotted space, and there are clear demarcations between the functions. With no mixing, there is absolutely no danger of confusion.

Such a perfect city may exist in heaven, but on earth is to be found only in planning exhibitions. As soon as it becomes reality, things inevitably go wrong. This is followed by decay and dilapidation, and the end result is a whole series of ungovernable problems. Why? The answer is very simple: this city is the dream of town planners and architects, and conforms to the desires of those who want to exert overall control from above. However it also happens to ignore the basic needs of ordinary people. Indeed, any social changes which may already exist or arise in the future have been eliminated here without so much as a thought.

What are its citizens’ basic needs? The answer is itinerant unlicensed hawkers. The goods they sell are cheap, and provide the bargains that many people are looking for, especially people on a low income who want to scrimp and save so as to spend more on health and education. Hawkers are good at gauging where the market is going, and whatever goods are popular, they will sell them. They give people what they want. And they are quick on their feet too – there when people are arriving and leaving their offices, there where the crowds are thickest. In other words, hawkers cannot be legislated out of existence precisely because there is a market need, and a human need, for them.

What are the social changes I have referred to above? An ever-widening gap between rich and poor; ever-increasing levels of unemployment; and an inequality be-

tween town and countryside which can never be redressed and drives more and more migrant workers into town. This is the way in which Chinese society is changing. In these circumstances, the existence of itinerant hawkers is inevitable. After all, poor people have resorted to grubbing a living buying and selling things for thousands of years.

There used to be no distinction made between hawkers with or without a license. Licensing is something set up and administered by the government. In a relatively mature market economy like Hong Kong, tightening up on licenses and hitting unlicensed traders is a way of safeguarding big chain stores and businesses which pay exorbitant rents. In mainland China, however, over and above simple profit-sharing, many municipalities are also concerned with high-sounding (but ill-thought-out) principles such as protecting public order and 'cleaning up' the city. As far as public order is concerned, we have never seen a serious study of relationship between unlicensed hawkers and public order, so we cannot say whether an increase of the former causes a deterioration in the latter. But it is only common sense that if you cut someone off from their livelihood, it may push them outside the law.

As for 'beautifying' a city's appearance, that's quite simply a matter of aesthetic taste. What gives us the right to use violence to prevent a section of the population from making a living, stand in the way of the natural demands of the market, and paper over the ever-increasing gap between rich and poor, and town and country, all in the name of more orderly, more beautiful cities?

I recognise that many of the problems which Chinese cities currently face cannot be resolved at the local level by city councils. But I also know that using Urban Control Officers to get rid of unlicensed hawkers is not the solution, in fact it simply aggravates the situation. UCOs are the embodiment of the 'modern city' mentality so popular in China, yet they are the most hated by its citizens, even to the extent of being attacked or killed. It is not entirely their fault - they are at the sharp end of law enforcement, but their work depends on outdated concepts of social control. There are precedents: historically, too many cities have been planned in a way which was completely misguided from the outset. Then, when the raucous cries of unlicensed traders and their like fill the streets, messing up the design, contravening the regulations and sully those beautiful blueprints - devoid of any trace of human beings - which adorn urban planning exhibitions, the city chiefs are prepared to use heavy-handed tactics to expel the intruders and restore their city's pristine appearance. The same cycle keeps repeating itself, with the problem becoming more acute every time, until the point is reached when city life breaks down.

Recently, there have been a string of attacks on Urban Control Officers, and complaints against the violence with which they enforce the rules are a daily occurrence.

There have even been fatalities. Such incidents are extremely distressing because to a greater or lesser extent, every one of these victims has met their death in the name of a concept which is both totally abstract and completely meaningless: 'keeping up appearances'.

September 2006

There is No Third World on Our Map

Although the Chinese have always liked to say ‘The proletariat of the world should unite’, in fact we have very little interest in other peoples. For example, when the World Trade Organisation [Sixth] Ministerial Conference was held in Hong Kong three years ago, huge number of workers and peasants from all over the world, together with many, many grass roots organisations representing the disadvantaged, were here for all to see. But when I suggested that the head of news at a certain large media organisation should go and interview them, the response was non-committal. It was only when a group of Korean peasants clashed violently with the Hong Kong police that its reporters rushed to the front line, intent on capturing the most exciting pictures, as if the city streets were a war zone.

What is popularly known as the Anti-Globalisation Movement really took off in 1999 with the ‘Seattle revolt’, and has not looked back since. Wherever the rich countries call a summit meeting, wherever the multinationals meet in conference, there the demonstrators will be, with their slogan ‘We are everywhere’. Whether it is a world economic forum, a world trade conference or a summit of the G8, the protesters are always out front, fighting to get into the media spotlight, even marching to stop the conference happening. They come from different backgrounds, and have different agendas but most scholars see them as bringing together the international post-Cold War left, and as being the newest force to challenge the hegemony of neo-liberalism, the capitalist way of life and American-led neo-imperialism.

China is not only the last major country to be ruled by the Communist Party, it also has a wealth of experience in standing up against imperialism and working with other Third World countries. Yet at international anti-imperialist jamborees over the last ten years, there has scarcely been a single Chinese to be seen (with the exception of a small number of delegates from Hong Kong). Not only that, we do not even have any idea of who these people are – indeed the official media in China and its audiences are not much interested. Within China, we may oppose rich and powerful élites, but on the international stage, we are more elitist than anyone. We are only concerned with the most traditional great power politics and the most conservative foreign policies.

For example, at the G8 industrial summit held in Hokkaido, Japan, in 2008, the question which most engaged the attention of the Chinese media was would China be able to join, as if entering these troubled waters was proof of China’s elevated status. No one gave a thought to the hypocritical arrogance of such a conference. When I did a search on the Chinese-language internet, I found that it was all about the frills and spills of the demonstrations. There was almost no detailed analysis of what the protesters were saying or why they were protesting.

The most in-depth reports of this year's G8 Business Summit covered what the conference had achieved, and criticised the G8 nations' unwillingness to tackle global warming and inability to deal with soaring oil prices. The Chinese media largely ignored the voices opposing the G8 summit. In this way, our shallow criticisms may actually be clouding the issue and blinding people to the real problem, which is not whether the G8 Summit responded to the global crisis, but how it made that response.

For example, generally the media focuses on whether the USA and other big exporters of agricultural goods, have increased their overseas aid, as if simply by raising aid figures to high enough levels, they have met their responsibilities as wealthy countries. If the increase is inadequate, everyone criticises them for being mean. But this stance means that instead of being able to make an independent criticism, we are being led by the nose and accepting the agenda imposed by the G8. If only we listened to the voices of NGOs and the protesters, we would soon discover that this so-called 'aid' is a trap. America has consistently undermined the principles of fair trade, boosted its own agriculture and pushed down food prices. As a result, it has nurtured many fat agribusinesses and ruined countless numbers of small farmers in the Third World.

What America does is 'aid' only in name: it first purchases its own farm produce, then dumps it on other countries. In this way, its own big farmers continue to enjoy an alternative kind of national subsidy, and farming in poor countries is so weakened that it is unable to compete. It is questionable whether this kind of aid will ever be able to provide an answer to the current global insufficiency of grain production. In other words, even if America acts with extreme largess, it does not mean that it is genuinely helping the starving people of the Third World.

Since the Lhasa Incident, arrogance and bias in the Western media has become a hot topic in China. For some reason, however, when it comes to the G8 Summit, if the issues have nothing to do with respect due to China but everything to do with problems facing the world's poor, our official media and our hot-blooded netizens suddenly lose interest in the bias of the Western media. In fact they are perfectly happy to follow in the footsteps of the West!

To summarise, it is a good thing that China didn't join the G8, otherwise even those snippets of information about the protesters might have disappeared altogether from the Chinese media. These demonstrators often poke fun at world leaders by parading effigies of them. If they had ridiculed Chinese leaders, that would have been denounced as a national humiliation and as wounding the feelings of Chinese people.

Any criticism of the G8 as the ruthless rich should now probably be re-written, not because these countries have suddenly become bountiful but because we have become the same as them.

July 2008

I To Oppose a Policy or a Country

How quickly time has passed. In a few days' time, it will be nine years since America's 'accidental bombing' of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia. It led to crowds of hot-blooded young people holding impassioned demonstrations outside the US Embassy in China. Where have those youths gone now? Where is that shaven-headed student with the eye-catching bomb painted like a bullseye in the centre of his forehead? What do they feel when they think back to those days? In the last nine years, there have been several waves of protest amongst China's youth: two against America, one against Japan and, just recently, a protest against the French supermarket chain Carrefour. This last erupted in cities across China, fuelled by anger over pro-Tibet anti-China sentiment during the Paris stage of the Olympic torch relay. One day, perhaps, these demonstrations will have become so much a marker of status in these students' collective memory that when they gather together, they will not need to start by saying how old they are. It will be enough to say 'I was one of the anti-Japanese protesters – and you were one of the anti-French lot, I suppose...' in order to establish seniority.

For many young people, therefore, 'anti-x' (x being such-and-such-a-country) protests have provided a common background for the last nine years. The question is: what kind of common background has this been? Just what does 'anti-x' mean? In the last two days, the Chinese government has extended an olive branch, with its offer to meet a private representative of the Dalai Lama. The French government has also sent its ex-premier, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, to China to mend diplomatic relationships. These signs that the tension is relaxing provide a breathing space and allow us to pose some fundamental questions.

A characteristic of modern nationalism is its capacity to extend the boundaries of national influence. Not only is anything which ever happened on what is now national territory counted as national history, and everyone living there, its citizens; natural features and creatures which have no quarrel with anyone can all be incorporated into the nation, and linked to its people in a mystical relationship. Take North Korea's Diamond Mountain, for instance. Not only is it a magnificent, lofty peak, it also symbolises the Korean 'national spirit'. And everyone knows that the pandas of Sichuan are a 'national treasure'. From human beings to the smallest living creatures and plants, all share a kind of 'national spirit' which is easily felt but difficult to define. Not only does this over-arching 'national spirit' permeate everything, but every bit subsumed within it can represent the whole. There is a symbiotic relationship between the abstract concept of the 'national spirit' and the myriad individual parts of which it is made up. All in one and one in all.

So when, in France, someone tried to snatch the Olympic flame, many (Chinese) people automatically assumed that was not just the opinion of a section of the population, but that France as a whole, which had allowed this to happen, was in the wrong. When the city council of Paris decided to make the Dalai Lama a citizen of honour, the fault lay not only with the city council – the entire French people were responsible. When the French media censured Chinese government policies, this logically turned into a confrontation between France and China.

Anti-French protests were a natural outcome of this logic. Chinese netizens' anger was no longer focussed on organisations which supported certain policies, still less a city government or a few media reports, but on France and everything that that covered. Anyone with a French passport, anything that came from France, mysteriously represented the country. Opposing France meant opposing all those individuals and elements which we did not like, and vice versa.

Having been baptised in the waves of anti-American, anti-Japanese, anti-French and even anti-Korean protests, many young students from mainland China have absorbed this kind of all-in-one, one-in-all nationalist logic. Of course, this phenomenon is by no means limited to China – we can see it all over the world. Americans and Koreans are just as likely to take Chinese who live and study abroad as representing the whole of China, so that when a group of over-excited Chinese students kick American or Korean reporters' asses, they assume that the entire Chinese people want to invade their territory. The case of China is different, however, because of the number of anti-movements we have been through in the last nine years. They have become a sort of collective social ritual, whose participants, through constant repetition of the words and actions of protest, have acquired an extremely simplistic mindset and imagination. Isolated opinions are rapidly elevated into grand principles and come to represent those sacred tenets, 'country' and 'people'. This then necessarily determines the way they behave; in other words, the more they adopt this view of the outside world, the more they root themselves in this kind of nationalism, seeking out and affirming everything which is Chinese. Put even more simply, they condemn every aspect of the opposing country, and affirm everything of their own.

Once we get to this point, so-called patriotism comes to mean loving everything to do with your country. So when the news of the death of Mr Bo Yang came out, it was not surprising that some people rejoiced that a 'traitor was dead'. After all, someone who could say that his country had problems, as he did in *The Ugly Chinaman and the Crisis of Chinese Culture* (Allen & Unwin, 1993) must surely be a traitor!

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