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DEMOCRACY IN CHINA

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Abstract

Political regimes tend to be perceived as “good” or “bad” according to the culture bias of the beholder, and China is no exception. The recent decision to remove the constitutional limits to Xi Jinping’s mandate made many people upset in the West; but China requires an understanding of its culture before any political and/or economic analysis can be taken seriously. The Chinese culture is characterized by high Power Distance, Collectivism, high Masculinity and very high Long-Term Orientation as value-dimensions described by Geert Hofstede. In order to understand what is going on in China, one needs to begin by understanding the mentality of high Power Distance cultures. It also helps if one can bring oneself to realize that the time perspective of most Chinese leaders is much more extended than that of their counterparts in Europe and in the United States of America, especially the latter.

Key words: China, Democracy, Power Distance, Culture Bias.

The press in the US and the UK keep bitching about the lack of democracy in China and in other parts of the world, notably in Africa, Asia and the Middle East (Welch, 2011). When totalitarian regimes (supported by the US, by the way) were overthrown in Tunisia, in Egypt and Libya, the press was quick to label it as the “Arab Spring” and hail a new era of democracy coming to Northern Africa (Connolly, 2013). As other popular revolts began to appear in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, again the press interpreted that as movements demanding democracy. Soon there were articles asking whether China would be next, or how long until democracy would begin to be demanded also in China (The Economist, 2018).

None of those article authors seemed to be aware of the most important factor underlying all these different situations: culture. All those authors looked at the situations through their own culture biases, failing to be aware of that. And all failed to comprehend what was going on in North Africa, as they also fail to understand what goes on in China.

Even though Geert Hofstede published his first research studies in the 70’s (Hofstede, 2010), many people still do not understand the implications and continue to ignore the influence of culture values in politics and in the way societies organize themselves. It may come as a surprise to those authors that other cultures do NOT share the same values as the US and the UK.

High Power Distance Cultures

A few years ago I was facilitating a workshop on managing across cultures for a group of people coming from several different cultural backgrounds. We were well into the discussion of the five dimensions of culture identified in Hofstede’s research, and we were specifically dissecting “Power Distance”. An American lady asked what could be done to remove the present rulers from power in China, in order to change the culture to a lower Power Distance Culture. Obviously, she didn’t get it...

Power Distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations accept that power is distributed unequally in society”

(Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, Power Distance (PDI) in a society is not determined by its rulers, but rather it is determined by the values of the majority of the people in that culture.

She still didn't get it. She argued that the rulers in China, enjoying absolute power, were manipulating the culture to ensure that it continued to be "high PDI". That is the mistake often made by people brought up in "low PDI" cultures, or should I say, the chain of mistaken assumptions usually made:

1. High PDI is "evil"
2. High PDI is created and maintained by the individuals in power
3. "The People" want their culture to change and become a "low PDI" culture

What this American lady failed to realize was that, in fact, high PDI is not "evil" per se. It is only perceived as such by people coming from a different culture. Conversely, people from China (or any other high PDI culture) might look at the US (or any other low PDI culture) and say: "How terrible! People show no respect for authority! What an evil, chaotic society!" They might even add "how could we overthrow their incompetent leaders and replace them with someone who earns the respect they deserve and restores the natural order of things?"

It seems that it is difficult to accept, in low PDI cultures, that it is not the dictators who define their power, but rather it is the acceptance of others who defines it. And yet, the fact that people accept a strong leader, with a lot of power, does not mean that they are happy with their **current** leader. They may very well protest and rebel against the current regime, and replace it with a different leader. However, the new leader will be empowered by the people to enjoy a high level of authority, just as the previous one. People in a high PDI culture are not necessarily longing for it to change into a "low PDI" one. Most often than not, all they want is a change in leadership, not a change in leadership style.

Understanding the "high PDI" mentality

People in high PDI cultures believe that some people have much more power than others, and that is just a fact of life. It is readily seen in all kinds of situations, beginning with the family (where the elders hold more power than their children) and extending to work, schools, public institutions, everywhere. Leaders, managers, bosses, teachers, all are authority figures. They have "ascribed power", through their positions, which is seldom challenged, rather than "attained power", which can be challenged (and frequently is) in "low PDI" cultures.

Along with that ascribed power, they have privileges and responsibilities. The people in that culture believe that these things go together: power, privilege and responsibility. Figures of authority have power and they are entitled to privileges. It is only fair, since they also have the burden of bearing huge responsibility. All decisions are made by authority figures. All responsibility lies also with these authority figures. They are in charge of taking care of their people.

"Até amanhã, se Deus quiser... João Francisco e a mulher. E os filhos que tiver!"

This old regional Brazilian saying, from the South, means literally: "Until tomorrow, if God wills... João Francisco and his wife. And the children they may have!" João Francisco was an army General in charge of protecting the border between Brazil and Uruguay. For almost 30 years (1893-1923) he not only did that but in fact ruled the region exerting extreme power (Caggiani, 1988). He was known for taking no prisoners in the many fights that broke out among Uruguayans and Brazilians who disputed the demarcation of the border line, the revolutionaries who challenged the local governor, and cattle rustlers who smuggled sheep and steers from one country to another (often these three groups were the same people). Such was the respect people gave him, that this expression became popular: nothing would happen without him willing it (and also his wife and kids). In high PDI cultures power is assigned to

the position and to the family members around it. Family members do not need to earn that respect; it is their right simply from being part of the power holder's family.

The "great responsibility" that goes with it means that anything that goes wrong is basically the power holder's fault and he/she has to fix it. The power holder is responsible for everything. The power holder is also responsible for taking care of the people who are loyal to him (or her). If someone is sick, or has an accident, the power holders need to take care of the situation. If the accident was caused by a reckless driver, it is up to the power holders to punish the person who caused the accident. If the roads were in bad conditions, it is the responsibility of the power holder. If the driver didn't have a driver's license, it is the responsibility of the power holder to ensure that people without a license are not allowed to drive. The power holder needs to have police on the streets, constantly controlling if people have the proper driver's license, etc. If a building collapses, it's because the power holders should have ensured that it was being properly built by people with the proper license/authorization.

This creates a rather comfortable situation for the people, which helps to explain why these societies continue to function in this way. People with no power (or with less power) have no responsibility (or less responsibility). There is always "someone higher up who is actually accountable, not me!" And those "higher up" guys are entitled to privileges, in line with the responsibility they bear.

Years ago I proposed an "egalitarian" health care plan in the company I worked for, in Brazil. The existing health plan, which had five levels of increasing coverage as one went up the hierarchy, would be replaced by a plan with only two levels. The proposal was shot down. Why? Because "people expect to get more privileges as they go up the corporate ladder! How can you propose to take that away from them? This is what motivates them in their career progression." Having fewer privileges in the hierarchical structure was perceived to be something de-motivating (Lanzer, 2017).

China will never become the UK

In China, a high PDI culture, people have "ascribed power," rather than "achieved power". Such ascribed power lies not only at the top of hierarchies: it begins with the first levels of hierarchy, such as policemen on the streets, teachers in classrooms, first-line supervisors in factories and offices. It is often in these lower levels of hierarchy where one finds the most common abuse of power. These lower-level power holders are the most sensitive to challenge and the ones who most often avoid such challenge by abusing the power they have. They are the stalwarts of a high PDI culture, not some evil creature tucked away in a palace at the top of the civil service hierarchy. Power in China is not exerted by a handful of people at the top; it is exerted by hundreds of millions of people in every rung of the societal ladder.

If Theresa May magically replaced the Prime Minister of China, she would be totally powerless to turn China into a British democracy. This would not be because her fellow cabinet ministers would oppose it; this would be because hundreds of millions of Chinese would oppose it, from the bottom up.

Changing the culture would mean giving responsibility to the millions who currently have little or no responsibility at all. It means they would have no one else to blame but themselves, for the big and the small things alike. It would mean removing the privileges that every middle manager has fought so hard to get. It would mean changing everybody's role in society, not only in government, but also at work and in the homes. The complexity and reach of such a change is beyond imagination.

Will China ever become a democracy? Well, yes, it might... but not a democracy as described in the US or UK, with only two political parties who are in constant conflict

alternating in power. A democracy in China is more likely to resemble the democracies you see in Latin America, in Africa or in other countries in Asia: dominated by one political party and a coalition of supporters, who remain in power for decades before a different party with its own coalition of supporters takes over and reigns for the next couple of decades. It will probably be a democracy in which rulers enjoy more power, privileges and responsibility, than their counterparts in the Northern Hemisphere.

Right now, the paradox is that China has never been so democratic in its entire history (which, by the way, is four times longer than the UK's history and forty times longer than the US's). Never before have so many people in China enjoyed so much individual freedom of expression, equality of income and distribution of power... It may still seem very hierarchical compared to the UK, but it has never been less hierarchical than in the past ten years.

It is likely to continue to move, very slowly, towards even greater egalitarianism. Just how slowly? Chinese slowly. The time perspective in the Chinese culture is longer than perhaps any other culture in the world. It is especially the opposite of what you see in the US and UK, where people think in terms of weeks, rather than decades.

When the Chinese say "the US Dollar should be replaced as an international currency by a basket of currencies managed by the IMF" (8), they don't mean "by the end of next year". They mean "over the next 20 years".

When they say "China is ready to help Africa resolve their financial issues" they don't mean "by the end of next quarter". They mean "over the next 20 years".

The Chinese do have the ambition to rule the world, eventually. But they intend to do it peacefully, without firing a shot. They will do it through the power of their economy, their values, and their culture. When do they expect that to happen? Very shortly: by the end of this Century.

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