

"China's Snag"
by William R. Stimson

Many years ago I found myself in a biochemistry graduate course at Columbia University in which almost all the other seats were filled with Chinese. The professor graded on a curve. I had to work a lot harder for an A in that course than I ever had in any other. That's when I first discovered Chinese are smart. I wondered what happened to smart China? How come it got left so far behind in the dust?

I've lived in Taiwan for over two years now and I think I've found the answer – not from Taiwan, but from China, which looms menacingly over this free little country in such a way that anyone who lives here can't help but take note of the bizarre pronouncements that issue from it. These speak volumes about why China is so backward and has stayed that way so long – and don't bode too well for its future either.

Today, for example, a Chinese official rejected reconciliation with Hong Kong's pro-democracy camp, saying it must first stop opposing Beijing's policies. The official's actual words were, "The premise for communication is not opposing the central government's policies..."

In other words, "We'll let you talk with us if first you start saying what we want." How familiar such nonsense is to anyone living over here in Taiwan. The Chinese put it this way to us, "We'll negotiate with you over your sovereignty if first you accept our position that you are not a sovereign state."

Such wording says everything about China's backwardness because it's a veritable picture of the contract those governing the country have with their own people. It's certainly not a deal anybody else in the world – Hong Kong or Taiwan included – would be motivated to buy into, if they had a choice in the matter.

The way the leaders of China operate, though, is by not giving anybody a choice. This is the subtle logic to statements such as, "We'll negotiate only after you accept our position." They mean, bluntly, "You do as we say." These are the terms of tyranny.

China has a problem with this. Other countries around the world have moved forward and left primitive dictatorship behind. China can't seem to shake it off. Taiwan got a nasty taste of the Chinese affliction when the Nationalists came fleeing the Communists and imposed their brute tyranny here. They massacred Taiwan's intellectuals, confiscated land, and essentially grabbed everything in sight. "They're crooks," said the U.S. President when many millions of U.S. dollars given them to fight the Communists were discovered invested secretly in family business deals.

The miracle is that out of that mess Taiwan became the democracy that it now is and the economic success story. Everybody in the mix contributed somehow or other. There may be wildly differing opinions on almost everything, but anybody here can say anything they want. Taiwan is a happening place.

In contrast, China still operates under the old system. Its leaders are as corrupt, unscrupulous and thieving as so many of their predecessors stretching back thousands of years. For generation upon generation, a great, a superior, an unparalleled civilization has been trying to happen, only it's been parasitized by the smartest of its smart, who know only too well how to grab everything for themselves.

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Small wonder China has such a crazy mania for censoring information. That's the way a tyranny works, pure and simple. It keeps everybody a little off balance, so they're less likely to make trouble, or notice their rulers are robbing the country blind. Also, it provides a convenient excuse to get rid of whistleblowers. You can go to jail for exposing corruption.

Whatever money, mansions or fine cars China's rulers may be grabbing for themselves or their families is the least of their crime and of scant importance compared to the far greater evil they're guilty of. For too many thousands of years now, corrupt officials like them have taken away the Chinese people's future, the nation's pride, the culture's bounty and – worse by far – the ordinary Chinese peasant or worker's right to speak the truth and to reach out with the whole of their life and talent and engage the world in a way that is real and true. That is the ultimate disgrace that can be done by someone with a smart mind who has scratched their way to the top – to deprive someone on the bottom who has so little to begin with and so much to offer. In doing this, China's rulers, like their predecessors, have not just robbed China, but they've robbed the world of China. How sorely the world needs China's vast intelligence, resourcefulness and imagination - the genius of its ordinary people. When you look at all that little tiny Taiwan has done, you get a hint of what vast China is capable of.

Back in my graduate student days at Columbia University, I was so impressed with the smarts of the Chinese. But living now in Taiwan, just across the water from China, and listening to the jargon that comes out of that country, it strikes me – What's the use being smarter than everybody if you don't have the sense to use it towards a higher purpose? I'd rather be ordinary any day but live in a way that serves to set in place a system that has the foresight and breadth of vision to care less about low bullying stratagems than about a government by the people, for the people, and of the people – and about mechanisms of accountability that can at least periodically sweep

the crooks out of office, and out of business. The amazing power of freedom, decency and democracy, as the case of Taiwan amply demonstrates, is that it releases the potential of ordinary people to accomplish the remarkable and extraordinary.

China seems so arrogant and proud at how fast it's acquired all the things of the modern world, little suspecting it's got the glitter but not the gold. Without freedom, it's still stuck way back there in the dust.

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