At Home and Abroad

by Justin Wong (November 2022)

Wangshi Garden, Wu Guanzhong, 1973

Ever since I was a young man I had the indescribable sense that life was drab. I had no way to articulate this feeling and nothing to measure it against. Aside from brief moments when I ventured outside of England, my country was all that I knew.

As I grew up, and I entered my twenties, this sense of

discontent was more readily felt, and there was this feeling that the new ways of society, despite the glitz of whatever these things promised on the surface, where vastly inferior to the old, at least in practice. Thomas Sowell was right when he said, “Much of the social history of the Western world over the past three decades has involved replacing what worked with what sounded good.” It wasn’t merely to do with the crash of 2008 that my generation were dealt a bad hand, and a poor cultural inheritance was as bad, if not worse than the economic inheritance we had to endure through no fault of our own. Both things stalled us, albeit in differing ways.

There was a sense that our collective being comprised of existence as distinct from living. The life for us became a parody of life. I had no way of knowing how to express these vague feelings. Although many of my generation were going through many of the same transformations and upheavals that I was experiencing, many of them were happy to go along with the changes, even if it meant their lives were less than life, that the mores of society weren’t conducive to our thriving.

Society was becoming more drug dependent, more hostile to marriage and the traditional family, the church, and the idea that anyone should own property other than those that came before us. In short, the social contract, that bonded disparate peoples across time into an unending whole, was shattered. In fact, in my lifetime, one saw being enacted, a conspiracy against the idea of nationhood.

My generation were the ones who were to pay the price for this, more so than our parents or grandparents. The reason why metropolitan Baby Boomers voted overwhelmingly to stay in the EU, is not because ideological beliefs, or notions based on principles, but economics. Since the introduction of policies of free movement, homeowners have seen the price of houses rise exponentially. The house I for the most part grew up in was bought for £109,000, that house is now worth close to £900,000. It is normal to see this growth in property prices,

particularly in London, which has enriched one generation at the dispossession of another. Despite this, many of my generation were overwhelmingly supportive of remaining in the EU. The idea of the EU seemed to fit into the dreamy, romantic political sentiments that comprise one's desires for the world in youth. The abolition of such things as patriotic borders, appealed to many, even if they weren't willing to acknowledge that the EU, and its policy of free movement was the cause of their economic situation, which helped to keep house prices high, and wages low.

It was in this dire situation, with low prospects for work, and high rents, that I looked further afield for work, meaning abroad. I applied for many jobs, as an English teacher, and was offered a small position in Jinan, China. I can't say that I had high expectations before travelling there, and if I was being entirely honest, I assumed that my time there would be difficult, if not for the contrasts in culture, between east and west. In some respects, I was right to have my reservations, and seeing as I didn't speak a word of Chinese, at least before my embarkation, I thought it would be difficult to live in climes so radically averse to my own.

When I arrived there, I soon learned of a community of foreigners, comprising of those who had newly arrived, and those who had lived there for years. As the weeks passed, and I familiarised myself with the country, as drastically different as it was from back home, I began to settle in. It wasn't merely as if I was comfortable in the world but embraced by it. All this was much to my chagrin. People there accepted me in a way people never did as people back home. In the early days of my sojourn, on the back of what seemed like an unrelenting winter, I was going through a hard time at trying to process how different the culture was. Numerous things were a contrast from life I knew up to this point. It wasn't just the hard beds, the polluted streets, the new cuisine, the customs, the language, the stares, but it was

evident people interacted with each other in a more open way. The sense of alienation that I knew in my life up to that point evaporated upon my arrival, when I discovered their culture valued community over individualism. People weren't so mistrustful, cynical, and world weary as they were back in the west. Chinese society had a sense of community that had been obliterated in England. In China, friends and associates met up in the evenings, to go out to restaurants and Karaoke bars. This was to be a conventional facet of life.

Even with this being so, much of this attitude of hospitability was born simply of me being a foreigner. Strangers were surprised of the emergence in their midst, of an exotic being, such as many had never before seen in the flesh.

On a particular afternoon our school was on a company retreat, and we were walking around a tourist site comprised of buildings that showed how China looked architecturally before modernity robbed it of history, when some natives spotted us sauntering through this reconstructed lost world. Amongst them was a woman who forced her baby into my arms so she could take a photo. It would be difficult to imagine this scenario back home. I don't know why this kind of thing could happen in China as if normal and be completely unimaginable in the place of my birth, but it was a cultural contradiction – a paradox of freedom.

According to a western paradigm of political governance, the Chinese were disenfranchised, politically speaking. The government, at least since the Revolution, has been run by the Communist Party. But even before this, it was never a country that embraced democracy, or had a history of democracy. This might explain why there was less hostility, how their lives meshed well with one another, socially speaking. There is another explanation to this, and that is that China, in spite of its respective Communist and Cultural revolutions that sort to upend the presence of any extant traditional and western

values, was a country still very much under the sway of Confucianism. An integral part of Confucianism is living in harmony, that people should eschew division in search of equilibrium. Confucianism, with its belief that people should aspire to social harmony, opposed to disunity, is at odds with democracy which functions through the creation of competing divisions.

There are of course numerous examples of injustices committed on its citizens by the Chinese government, though these injustices are not immune from democratic societies either. If China were to emerge as a democratic nation, which seems to be the aim of its western critics, it would likely undo much of the tradition, in making a people that strived to be harmonious, discordant.

I soon learned that politics in Chinese society is largely a taboo subject. People within Chinese society are not permitted to talk about politics, at least not in public. This is specifically as it relates to any criticism of the Chinese government. Democratic societies, and more specifically in America, has the opposite problem, talk concerns nothing else. On my arrival there, a fellow Englishman who was training me diligently told me, that if someone questions you as to whether Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Tibet are a part of China, you should say that these places are and were always a part of China, and that the Chinese government is merely recovering what it is owed. As could be guessed, these rules were not always upheld. I remember an American teacher I was working with, questioned a Chinese colleague of ours about whether it was right to assume that Taiwan was a part of China.

“Is Taiwan Chinese?” he asked her.

“Yes, of course, “was the stock answer she gave.

“Then why does it have its own president?” he said.

To this question, she more or less drew a blank, and walked

away from the conversation.

When I was teaching adults, they were more interested in politics, even if it required that they tread a fine line, between having opinions and not criticising the Chinese government. What I learned was that people were entitled to have their views about the world, but these views have no sway in society. The will of the people is unrepresented. In their society, private thoughts do not lead to public action. Although one's private opinions are not profound sources of division, nor do they upset the sacred harmony that binds together people.

As I spent more time in China, I learned that just because people don't vote for their officials, it does not mean their interests are unrepresented. One could say that the interests of the Chinese people are looked out for more than those in democratic societies governed by the will of the electorate.

I mentioned that in the United Kingdom, that the rise in house prices through mass immigration is one of the things that have dispossessed an entire generation from home ownership. Many of these policies were sprung on the populace spontaneously and without consent. The policy of immigration in China, as I learned through my stay, is very different. When I was living there, I soon found out that foreigners, although allowed to rent property there, were not allowed to own it unless they have been living there for some time. They were also allowed to start a business only in partnership with Chinese nationals. One got the sense that many of their policies were China First, where the government were attempting to deal with problems on a national level before trying to tackle the concerns of the wider world.

One of the reasons Britain left the EU was that people believed that the concerns of the rest of the world were being treated before the concerns of the electorate. One only need to look at China's past to know that it was equally

internationalist in outlook, funding coups and uprisings in in Nepal, Africa, and South America. Since the communist party took on policies of state capitalism they have embraced policies that are to the benefit of their development as a nation. As a result of this, many Chinese people have witnessed the material conditions of their improve exponentially, even if this means they are far behind the wealth of the average westerner. But this growth is palpable on the faces of most Chinese people. There is the sense they believe that tomorrow will be better than today, and the next year will be better than this one. The same sense of woe and dread witnessed on the faces of my countrymen, seems to stem from a recognition that we are in decline, not merely economically, but culturally and morally also.

Thinking back to my time in China, it was more of a pleasure of the intellect than a pleasure of the senses. Although I was abroad and thus far from home, it made me see the difference between what customs, traditions and manners were uniquely English, and what were common to all men. In Wordsworth's poem, I travelled among unknown men, he writes:

> *I travelled among unknown men,*
> *In lands beyond the sea;*
> *Nor, England! did I know till then*
> *What love I bore to thee.*

My life abroad made me reflect more on home than it led me to reflect on the country in which I sojourned. Through travels in a foreign land, I was able to see the weaknesses of my nation, but its strengths also. I liked the openness of the Chinese people, along with their sense of community, but I also missed the freedoms I took for granted. I soon found out that people were not permitted to stay in a hotel for a night,

nor board a train that took you out of the city without showing ID. At times, a pervading sense of paranoia underlined the most innocuous acts. On one occasion, I lost my debit card from back home, so I ordered another one to be sent to the school I worked in. When it arrived, I found out the envelope it had been sent in had been tampered with – the letter had been opened and resealed. I came to the realisation that liberty was a Western notion, which is rarely if ever found in the elsewhere, unless exported there.

There is a cliche that travel broadens the mind. In the renaissance era, Michel de Montaigne posited the belief that travel can lead to moral relativism. The traveller if sufficiently open minded, can doubt the customs and the ways they assumed to be paradigmatic, when they see that all cultures are unique expressions of humanity. The opposite was in fact the case and travel led to the belief in objective truth. Witnessing a contrast in cultures made me realise certain things work better than others. A world of mercy and justice can't be said to be of equivalent value to a society of repression and state violence, just because they inhabit different land masses. The traditional aspects of Chinese society as exemplified by family, community and duty are superior to our own, whilst ideas of liberty, the freedom of assembly, and ability to criticise power are superior in ours.

The more familiar I became with other foreigners who were from other Western countries, the more I found these feelings weren't limited to myself, that others felt the same way. Their time in China, like mine was a mixture of emotions, delight and despair, darkness and light.

I mentioned that the discussion of politics was a taboo subject, a prohibition such that was frequently broken. For us, these forbidden discussions were in some of the numerous foreign bars dotted across the city. As my time there progressed, the winter with its cold, dry temperatures gave way to a furnace like heat, omnipresent in all hours. The

night was as hot as day back home, whilst day was a blazing inferno. Sweat trickled from my body incessantly through wakefulness and sleep. On one such beer-soaked night, one so flush and humid you could swim through it, I remember having a conversation about the difference between east and west, or more specifically, China and the west.

I wasn't the only one privy to the fact that the capitalist/communist divide wasn't as clear cut as it was on initial assumption. In recent years, China had embraced state capitalism, but it was also obvious that many Marxist ideas had infiltrated the developed west, even if this didn't materialise into an outright communist revolution. The ravages of Marxism were ever-present in the west, with the erosion of marriage, the breakdown in law and order, and a more internationalist outlook in policy. Both civilisations were neither one nor the other, both contained differing aspects of each ideology. A friend I knew brought up a rather salient point, when he said, "America is the most communist capitalist country, whilst China is the most capitalist communist country." China and the west were both inversions of the other.

The west had taken on aspect of cultural Marxism, which were developments that were formulated by European intellectuals in the twentieth century, which has resulted in a general demoralisation of society and a destruction of its institutions.

I don't get the sense that this was necessarily the case in China, at least not in my time there. During Mao's cultural revolution, there was an attempt to purge Chinese society of traditional and western influences lingering after the revolution. It might be an ironic thing to say, but communist countries have not been as liberal as democratic ones. Sexual immorality has been seen as a disease of the republic, and not a facet of the Communist utopia. Divorce was difficult to come by. Homosexuality was only legalised in 1997.This is not a

rare occurrence in Communist dictatorships, Fidel Castro imprisoned homosexuals, sending them to concentration camps.

In the west, sexual morality was dismantled through the sexual revolution. This had Marxist, Gramscian underpinnings, the old had to be destroyed from within before it could be destroyed from without. Every convention to do with sex was questioned and revised to the point where there is now a denial of biological differences. This was under the idea that traditional norms of sex and gender, as well as everything else in society, is socially constructed, and could thus be redefined. The western world has been heavily propagandised through a pseudo-intellectual elite

Although there was the air of suspicion and paranoia in China, particularly by the Chinese government, I can't say that there was a sense that the Chinese people were heavily propagandised. The Chinese government were effectively a tyranny, the enslavement of the bourgeoise children in re-education camps during the cultural revolution shows the power they can wield, which has continued to this day in a different incarnation, with the Uighur Muslims. Propaganda is born more out of liberalism, than of Authoritarianism. Noam Chomsky said, "Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state." There is no need to propagandise the public when it can exercise force. Propaganda becomes more prominent in free, democratic societies, where the use of force is illegal. The method of control in democracy, is not physical but psychological. Force is a physical means to psychological end, whereas propaganda is a psychological means to a psychological end. Both attempt to foster attitudes and opinions, to advance an agenda. Many westerners can look in shock at the mistreatment of Chinese citizens by the Communist government who are being re-educated. The same opprobrium isn't given to our own re-education camps in the west, called Universities.

The extent of this propaganda the west has created radically

different attitudes to age old institutions, marriage chief amongst them. Younger generations no longer see the value in it as previous ones did. Despite China being officially communist, I noticed that there was a marked difference between the attitudes the Chinese have to marriage and family, compared to the average westerner. In my time at home, the spirit of free love seemed to infect the hearts of many of my generation. Sexual encounters were seen as experiences, ones that played no part in one's development into maturity, as they would in marriage. The thing sacrificed for this new freedom was love. I got the sense that this wasn't the attitude that most Chinese people had. Many women I went out with casually, frequently brought up the possibility of marriage, as if this would be the natural conclusion of where they wanted this arrangement to go, if it indeed was to go anywhere. People back home rarely referred to marriage as the correct institution for males and females to live and raise families together in, unless it was in strict religious communities. Such was the extent of our transformation.

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There is another point it is important I make related to what was just said, as it highlights the difference between life at home and abroad, between east and west. This happened to be a few months into my stay, when the winter I was telling you of, transformed into the warmth of a raging fire in the months of spring and summer. Such categories and ways of separating seasons were meaningless in Jinan, a city in China's northern climes. Seasons couldn't be said to be divided neatly into four separate parts of warmth, heat, coolness and cold as was the experience of the year's disparate incarnations in England. Rather the weather was either one of two opposites, fire and ice. It was in the spring and summer months that this story takes place. Although I frequently dined on Chinese food on the majority of the days of the week, there were times that I desired something else, a reminder of the food I ate back

home. I went to a pizza restaurant in the city. On one of the occasions, I went there, I saw a waitress who smiled my way, she was to me extraordinarily beautiful. Her passionately waving me goodbye as I left the restaurant was enough to make me return back, if not to see her face once more.

Upon my return I noticed that she was there once again, and seated me next to someone, who was a teenager. This boy as if out of nowhere began to speak to me. This itself was not cause for suspicion. The locals, noticing that I was a foreigner, frequently approached me to ask me questions. Although there was something in particular about where I was seated and the nature of this young man's questions that made me think he was a plant and the whole thing had been set up. He asked questions as to my origins, the questions as to my age, my marital status. Why should this be of interest to a young man who was still in high school? Though it was obvious, at least in some five minutes of my being there with him that the waitress who I had been enthralled with had placed him there to gather information on me. There was something sweet, diligent and devious as to this. I can only guess that after I left, that he relayed all of the information he gathered on me, back to her.

When I returned to this restaurant what was a week or so later, she greeted me, and gave me her name, and said that she would like to show me around town. Although there was a piece of paper that she gave me, the one with her number on it. I flipped it over and it had a poem she wrote for me in her rudimentary English. Why should such things happen to me in the paranoid place of my exile, and elude in the liberal place of my birth?

The relationship was short-lived and ill-fated particularly when the summer came to a close, and she had to return back to the rhythms of university life in a campus that was some miles outside of the city. Why did this happen there at that particular time and place, and not here at this one? Why in

the east and not in the west? Why under tyranny and not in liberty? This too is another cultural contradiction—another paradox of freedom.

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Justin Wong is originally from Wembley, though at the moment is based in the West Midlands. He has been passionate about the English language and literature since a young age. Previously, he lived in China working as an English teacher. His novel, *Millie's Dream,* is available here.

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