

Why the West Produce more Disenchant Individuals than China?

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1. Introduction

In this article I look for answers to the question, how the recent aggressive divides within populations of nations with democratic traditions have come about. This will require looking at the British Brexit vote as well as toward the election of president Trump in the United States. Traditionally, church and nation have been home to a collectively defined truth, but have lost that function in part due to the continued advance of individualism: The isolated person can confirm the reliability of *scientific facts* on his or her own in a laboratory or behind a telescope, whereas the human being looking for *collective consensus* needs a gang, a club, a church or a nation. The loss of the scrutiny of assumed “facts” with regard to collectively held truths is dangerously replaced by demagogues as individuals who use widely held articulations of dissatisfaction to attract consent in a populist fashion. The demagogue will appear to replace the consensual collective, but in fact uses large numbers of isolated and disenfranchised individuals, for his or her selfish political goals.

Is there a Remedy? Political leaders must identify as *bone fide* members of an acceptable collective. What are the chances that this may happen? A look at the vast society of mainland China has the potential of enabling the Western observer to take a fresh look at the political and religious traditions of the Occident. How can the evolutionary progress toward increasing individualization and rationalization in Western societies be balanced against the disadvantages or threats these developments carry with them? This article poses the question, if and how Chinese culture succeeded in arriving at its specific balances. The demands in China on the individual in the context of his or her kinship unit are agonizing by Western standards. They would be unbearable for the Chinese individual unless they were balanced by freeing the person from additional duties outside the family in areas which in the West are called “the public sphere.”

This causes the ambivalence in the kinship sphere of highly efficient family care in cases of disease or old age versus overburdened individuals as care-takers, and in the public sphere the unwillingness or inability to engage in social or political activities. The absence of a functioning public sphere, however, precludes establishing and defending the rule of law and the principles of a parliamentary democracy. As a consequence, in China the Communist Party has become an indispensable institution. The article leads to the question if this is what may be happening in Western countries: There the individual person is hardly overburdened by family duties, but a new type of social stratification tends to destroy society-wide solidarity: Individualization helps create global identities among the intellectual elites while leaving elderly and country people with the fear from loneliness and with no source of identity to rely on other than to turn back to their respective nations. Along with this goes the erosion of law abiding and polite conduct in the course of what traditionally has been due democratic process.

2. The Absence of a Functioning Public Sphere

The Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the strong support for the party of Marine Le Pen in France, the recent presidential election in the United States, and many other development in the West require at least a hypothesis about what is going on. There individualization helps create global identities among the intellectual elites who are in contact with like-minded individuals anywhere in the world. At the same time the changes may cause a new type of social stratification in Western societies: Over against increasing globalization among the upper social strata, modernization may leave less prosperous elderly and country people with the experience that they cannot establish personal contacts globally, with fear from loneliness and with no source of identity to rely on, other than to turn back to their respective nations whom they may have served with much devotion when they were young. This particular problem does not confront China today: China has problems of a different kind.

The Chinese kinship group wields a level of authority, which a Western family will hardly ever attain. Accordingly, the most widely felt day to day restrictions of individual liberties do not originate from political but rather from kinship conditions. In the West the family is as finite as the life of the individual, imbued with the potential of failing, disintegrating and sometimes ending in divorce. In China by contrast, the family is immortal, with individual persons serving as agents to carry it through the ages and if need be, to lead it out of tragedy and return it to a splendid come-back. It is plausible that in China under those historical conditions the government and the economy have the task of enabling and supporting kinship, not improving the lives of isolated individuals.

In the Occident individualism has led to *various forms* of family life, whereas in the Orient society is based on a firm and *unified* kinship tradition served by individuals. Rather than adjusting the behavior style of the person to the requirements of kinship, government, commerce, and religion as in the West, in China there is the tendency to adjust the requirements of each of that segment to the needs of families. According to a famous quote from Confucius, in a case where a father is known to have stolen something, his son is not expected to be among his father's accusers.

This leads to a question of ethics: How to find a convincing balance between altruism and selfishness? The renowned Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong deplored the lack of responsibility of people throwing garbage into the water next to their dwelling place in Suzhou near Shanghai, an activity which on the surface appears as a selfish disregard for the environment. Fei wrote: "If we want to discuss the problem of selfishness, we have to take into consideration the pattern of the entire social structure" (Fei, 1992: 61). This confronts us with these questions: What is peculiar about Chinese society? What must we take into consideration in comparing selfishness there with selfishness in the West? How do the two cultures generate altruism and how do they channel it into certain social contexts in order to produce a sense of responsibility in public?

Our Orient-Occident comparison in this article is intended to balance the evolutionary progress of Western societies toward increasing individualization and rationalization, against the disadvantages or threats these developments carry with them and ask how Chinese culture succeeded in arriving at its specific balances. In the Occident the demands on the person resulting from kinship obligations are limited if compared to Chinese conditions. Because of that, investing time and devotion to public service can more forcefully be expected in Western countries than in China as a duty supported by ethics and religion.

In general, what we are faced with worldwide in the various periods of cultural history with regard to the tension between individual and society, are either balances or problems resulting from imbalanced conditions. The agonizing demands in China on the individual in the context of his or her kinship unit could continue to be a crucial component of Chinese culture through the ages because they were balanced in a special way. Yet in China, at least till now, the balance has consistently tipped in favour of the private world and against the public realm. The latter was (and is to this day?) typically perceived as the *private sphere of interest* of a ruling dynasty. This observation is consistent with a number of types of largely ritualized social behavior: In China people in general tend to be good husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, daughters and sons, but they will not form an orderly line at a bus station.

The absence of an objectified public sphere in a culture impacts measures intended to protect the environment, but there are other significant consequences: Such absence of an objectified public sphere precludes the successful establishment of the *rule of law* and of a *parliamentary democracy*. To the extent to which such conditions do in fact prevail, our hypothesis about the rule of law and about parliamentary democracy would apply not merely to China, but to portions of the Muslim world and to other (including Western?) cultures as well. A religious foundation for acting in the interest of the entire human race can also be a convincing point of departure for saving the environment.

3. Demands on the Individual by the Kinship System

Individualization occurs in China as well, but there it is based on a very special socialization experience in early childhood. Although roughly 50% each of the population are city-dweller versus country-dwellers, the family pattern is largely unchanged by urbanization: China is dominated by the three-generation-household, with normally the husband's parents living in the same home with their married son and his children. Where financial considerations make that impossible, the husband's parents will look for housing in the immediate neighborhood of the young couple. This has the consequence that a newborn child is taken care of by four people, the baby's parents plus the grand-parents from the father's side.

The mother's continuing in, or re-entering, the labor market is therefore not conditional on finding day-care or similar arrangements outside the family, because four adults can take turns caring for the infant. The quality of that care tends to lean in the direction of what Western people call over-protective socialization: The small child is not to be let cry but instead pampered in very thinkable way. The period of early childhood socialization may be the necessary emotional basis for the abrupt change that occurs when children start going to school, because the Chinese school system cannot use the soft pedagogical approach of the West, having to teach not just the few letters on the keyboard of a computer but rather convey a familiarity with at least 2000 Chinese characters before a person can even read the newspaper.

While in China upon the birth of an infant the mother-in-law and possibly the mother of the young woman too will be available to assist with advice and active Intervention, in the West increasingly kinship ties no longer function even in emergencies: The respective government has to come to the aid of weak or failed individuals. But individualization can be sustained only, and a sound and stable family structure can be successful only, provided it enables individuals to become bearers of the identifying core of their *traditional culture*. The centrality of kinship in the Chinese culture is demonstrated by pointing to the fact that every Chinese name starts with the family name referring to membership in the kinship unit as crucial. Even in the early history of China "the political and economic organizations were wholly assimilated to that of blood relationship" (Li 1996: 67, quoted by Gassmann, 2006: 14).

To illustrate demands on the individual by the kinship system I present the following case from contemporary China: The young woman has successfully completed her Master degree at the university. Having returned to her home after many years of absence on a college campus, she re-joins the three generation family of her parents, her father's aging parents, and herself. She intends to work hard to prepare for the entrance examination in order to be accepted into the Ph.D.-program of a different university in China. Then her father and her father's parents fall ill at the same time.

Her mother takes care of her sick in-laws in the family home, but her father must be hospitalized, and she must join him as care-taker in the clinic. She must go back and forth between the hospital and the home to bring food to her father which her mother cooks. Even during the night she must be with her father in the hospital. Nobody asks, if she would like to do all that or not: It is simply normal behavior in a Chinese family context, it means following the rule of etiquette. If her father's parents were well, she and her mother would take turns in the hospital, but in the given case, that is not possible. As a result of course she cancels her application for admission to the Ph.D.-program.

Fei Xiaotong writes that it is necessary to look into "the pattern of the entire social structure"^[1] in order to understand selfishness and altruism in a society. The behavior of disposing of garbage in – what in Western contexts would be called – the public sphere appears selfish, the service provided for an ailing family member in the hospital appears altruistic, but do these terms really fit the respective situations?

In the West the demands on the person resulting from kinship obligations are limited by comparison. There is the day-care center, the nursery school, the hospital staff, and the retirement home to relieve the individual from sacrificing too much emotional energy, time, and money for his or her relatives. To still arrive on a balance that would preclude rampant selfishness in the West, one would expect various kinds of services to be performed by individuals outside their kinship context, as in religious, government, or non-government organizations by which they would compensate for the freedom awarded them by their families. Nothing of the kind can reasonably be expected of the average Chinese, given the enormous involvement required inside his or her kinship group.

I suggested in a conversation with a Chinese colleague that selfishness in one situation and altruism in the other ought to be balanced against each other. My colleague replied that it was an interesting idea, but one that did not really reflect the realities of Oriental culture. This is so, because what I called "altruism" was basically not an ethical preference of an individual but it was merely compliance with ancient custom by following the rule of kinship etiquette.

Accordingly, the "performer" deserving recognition and possible admiration, was primarily not the *individual* but instead the *social unit* representing the tradition, in the case under discussion, the Chinese family. Just as in the hospital we ought to admire the system rather than the individual, in the garbage context we might also want to blame the system for not having been able to produce a generally accepted rule of behavior toward the environment, at least not yet.

Yet, as it turned out in my conversation with my Chinese colleague, *selfishness* as observed by Fei and *compliance* with kinship etiquette by the young woman at her father's side in the hospital are incommensurable, they are not located on the same ethical level.

Fei reflects about the garbage thrower who as performer in the public sphere is exposed to conditions of modernity. He or she is thus confronted with a largely uncharted territory of ethics in which there is room for spontaneous selfishness and also for deliberate altruism. That is totally different, however, in the kinship context. I asked, if what I at first perceived as "altruism" could be compared to flying into London, and after having recovered from the shock of left-hand-traffic, to then admire the Britons for being so considerate and altruistic as to drive on the side of the street required by their traffic rules. Not a good comparison was the reply. Apart from the fact that in London you will surely get killed in the street if you try to insist on right-hand-traffic, obedience to what the traffic system requires cannot be compared to the Chinese kinship system.

There, it is a matter of following the rule of etiquette. In addition, In China it is the law to take care of one's parents, and – maybe most powerful of all – it is the ancient conviction that the individual's life is a gift from his or her parents, and in addition, that bringing up the child through the stages of infant, toddler, pre-schooler, and student is an admirable performance into which the parents and frequently grand-parents invested unquantifiable measures of love, time and money. A young and healthy Chinese may declare: I cannot take care of my ailing father! But then he has the ancestors, the tradition of his or her culture, the gossip of the neighbors, and the law against him!

Does that mean, if a Chinese person neglects his or her parents, the police will be on the doorstep? That is the least interesting consideration: It will happen in very rare cases only. According to Chinese tradition even the most capable official cannot repair any damages, which members of a kinship group do to each other inside their family. So what chances does the reluctant care-taker of parents have to refuse? Maybe there is no realistic chance to do that. He or she may claim: I do not have the money to do anything, or, I must take care of my children and therefore have no time and energy left to take care of my parent.

These two would be the only excuses remotely possible in China's kinship society. However, such conduct would create the prediction that such a person's offspring will do unto them what they did unto their own parent. It will destroy much of their reputation and social prestige. According to the research of Marcel Granet, in China the central concept of family life is – and has been for millennia – *filial piety* (孝). It is the foundation "of domestic and even of civic morality" (Granet, 2013, 310). Though my Chinese colleague rejects this comparison, I tend to believe that in China refusing to move into the clinic with your sick father to take care of him while he is hospitalized is like trying to drive on the wrong side of the road.

It appears that a very sound emotional base from early childhood serves as the resource for a highly demanding educational system, and thus produces the potential for very successful individualization there. But the widespread self-confidence and emotional energy, particularly among student-age Chinese, is immediately domesticated and guided in the direction of serving the clan. Hardly any Chinese of marital age selects and marries a partner without the consent of the parents from both sides. This is in part a necessary anticipation of living together in a three-generation household. The traditional worship of the ancestors from whom one descends in the male line, endows the kinship unit with a degree of authority that far exceeds that in the West. The ambivalence of that condition can be seen as follows: On the one hand the Chinese family has the potential of protecting the individual from loneliness and from fear of being left without any resources; on the other hand family obligations of various kinds reduce the possibilities of developing one's unique characteristics as individual.

4. The Impact of Religion

Young and modern Chinese increasingly see the option of combining loyalty to their relatives, dead as well as alive, with overarching religious belief systems as they are known and taken for granted in the West. But still in China one's own ancestor is the divine person in the beyond, whichever shape or imagery human imagination attributed to him or her, is worshiped as the giver of life. According to Yutang Lin unquestioned loyalty to one's relatives is the case "first of all" because of "the Chinese family system, which was as well-defined and organized as to make it impossible for a man to forget where his lineage belonged" (Lin 1936: 32). The vitality of the Confucian ethics guarantees that.

Respecting the ancestors as immortals endows the ancient Confucian family traditions with a degree of religious power that surpasses ethical traditions of other cultures. As a result the individual Chinese person lives under considerable restrictions with regard to shaping his or her individual life, restrictions that are unfamiliar to the average Western person. This is particularly obvious if compared to a Western person whose family life has largely been secularized.

In the context of gradual modernization and individualization Buddhism opens up more options for contemporary Chinese than Confucianism does. Daoism too has potentially an effect as religious source of independence and by reducing the impact of the Confucian family rituals. According to Daoist belief the individual does not depend on personages in heaven, not on gods, saints, or even ancestors, but rather his fate is in his or her own hands. He or she must thus learn how to make good use of the potential awarded them. However, the effects of Buddhist or Daoist influences appear marginal against the overall Confucian background of Chinese culture. Neglect of the ritual obligations towards living family member as well as to ward the departed is sinning against one's ancestors. Whereas in *Christian* cultures marriage and childbirth are attributed religious meaning — if at all — from sources located primarily *outside* the kinship system, i.e. in congregation and church, the *Chinese* tradition provides religious orientation directly from *within the clan*, which reaches over into the beyond.

On the one hand the effect of religious familism in China results in ethical exclusivity: If I am Chinese, my primary ethical orientation is toward relatives and friends. Since that usually also effects the conduct of a public (and party) official, the results are threatening to public order. On the other hand, there is a promising ambivalence inherent in the familistic ethical system: It is expected of everybody to place his or her kinship group first, but because these prescription, which basically are rules of exclusivity, become general and apply to every Chinese, they create —as it were in the background — a quasi universalistic attitude, which, however, is of course limited to fellow Chinese. It may be looked at as universalistic as long as the only persons that matter in this world, are the Chinese. On a higher lever of global thinking, the effects are therefore again those of exclusivity.

There is a similar ambivalence in Western ethics. Religious intolerance has been in the background of much of Christianity's early missionary history in spite of the fact that in its original and most ancient form Christianity propagates universalistic claims, including love for non-Christians.

5. Kinship as Culture

The ritualized behavior required by Chinese kinship reality was expected from the imperial family all the way down to the simplest peasant household. Its unifying effect has for centuries counteracted the development of class struggles in a conflict society: The primary source of inequality was, and is, the position in a kinship group, not in one of society's classes! This made a revamping of Marxism necessary to meet the political needs of China. Whereas an egalitarian society can produce social order based on the notion of universal brotherhood, a hierarchical tradition cannot do that, but must rely on obedience of the weaker plus responsibility of the stronger, as is typical for the interaction among members of different generations in the family.

Confucius saw for himself and for his disciples that there was a scholarly task at hand, to construct — or rather re-construct again and again out of familiarity with cultural history — the normative knowledge that is needed to lead a cultured and ethically spotless life. Since the family is the central social structure of Chinese society, the field of application of that normative knowledge is the family. From this principle originates at the same time the way the country has been governed.

We looked at European literature, where typically the clash between a normative family order and an individual's wishes lead to the demise of the Clan. In China groups of relatives will go through phases of flourishing and declining, but their clan will not die. In the West, by contrast, increasingly kinship ties no longer function even in emergencies: The respective government has to come to the aid of weak or failed individuals whose relatives cannot help them or who do not have any relatives.

This observation leads to the insight, that individualization can be sustained only, and a sound and stable family structure can be continually successful only, provided it enables individuals to become bearers of the identifying core of their traditional culture. Unless individualization is based on that foundation it becomes a threat to peace. Could there be the promise that the Western countries combine their progressive tradition of believing in the blessings of change with some Confucian reflections about evaluating past experiences as a source for guidance?

In general, the human condition implies a two-directional social orientation, inside toward the closest members of one's own small group, and outside toward members of other groups. As we compare China to the West it seems that on a very broad level of generalization we are dealing with two different solutions for coping with the challenge of that duality of social contacts:

- a. In China solidarity can be based on the principle that everyone is embedded in a kinship group following the same rules, everyone is subject to the same obligations and ritual standardization. Thus Chinese individuals potentially experience equality on the basis of the shared background of kinship duties. This gives the Chinese culture considerable flexibility to differentiate and develop multiple special forms of social conduct in the occupational world and what in the future will evolve as a public sphere.
- b. In the West the family experience of individuals varies greatly and produces life situations for adults — and even infants — with little significance attributed to kinship relations. In addition there is a retreating religious sphere, based in some cases on a God, who does not have a family around him. In traditional China, by contrast, even the most sacred being, the emperor, used to live in a family context. The conflict within Western culture between individualism and family-mindedness is reflected also in the fundamental thesis of the book by Cherlin (Cherlin, 2010) about current problems in the kinship system of the U.S.A.

The Chinese kinship system surprises the Western observer by the absence of diversity. Compared to the wide variety of family types in the West, families in China prescribe and allow largely the same pattern of behavior. This must be taken into consideration as a source of solidarity and mutual understanding to counteract the absence of a tradition of public service.

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