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A Great Schism in the Chinese- Speaking World

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As the dust finally settled on the US presidential election that shook the world, Biden was sworn in as president, and Trump, who tried everything to cling to a second term, slunk out of the capital city of Washington, DC in disgrace. Looking back at the debates and rifts on the internet over this period of time, it is a bit hard to know where to begin.

Some observers see the Chinese intellectual community as divided into two camps, “pro-Trump” and “anti-Trump.” Although I did not make many comments during the 2020 election campaign, I was clearly classified as a member of the “anti-Trump” camp. Of course, this is not inaccurate because in the few statements I have made, I have clearly expressed the hope that the Democratic Party would win the 2020 election. Moreover, I have a long history of negative impressions of Trump. As early as January 20, 2017, the day of Trump’s inauguration, I wrote this short comment on my WeChat account.

Last night, I watched the entire CNN broadcast of Trump’s inauguration and frankly, he is a disappointing figure. He was flamboyant and self-absorbed, his comportment and language seemed coarse, and he even had a look of disgust and disdain for everything. Until he was

actually sworn in, I was worried that he might just throw in the towel suddenly, stand up and walk away. Vice President Pence and the people around him seemed to be on a mission to persuade him with all their might: “Please, just play along and it will all be over soon.” As for the content of the speech, it was also lackluster, full of empty promises and populist, isolationist delusions, and was one of the bleakest presidential inaugural speeches I’ve ever watched. I doubt he will be able to complete his four-year term.

Interestingly, even in my circle of up to 5,000 followers, the comment did not receive much critical response at the time. In fact, most comments were favorable. Now that I think about it, it was clear to the Chinese government that Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate running against Trump, had demonstrated a hardline stance against China as secretary of state and during her campaign. Meanwhile the businessman and so-called “political savant” Trump, on the other hand, gave rise to a transactional vision that nothing is impossible. Therefore, it is not clear that the intellectuals and other private citizens wanted Clinton to be elected any more than the government did.

Four years have passed, and the impression of Trump held by the Chinese government and the Chinese people has shifted considerably. The Trump administration captured the hearts and minds of more and more Chinese as it took a fiercely confrontational stance toward China on a range of issues, including the trade deficit, sovereignty in the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang. These “long-suffering” Chinese people love the US president who has been so hard on the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government and wish he could come back for another four years. Accordingly,

they are angry at Trump's rival, the Democratic Party, and its candidate, Joe Biden.

The dispute and rift triggered by the US election was so intense and tragic that fellow activists who used to fight for freedom, constitutionalism, and human rights in China are now divided into two distinct factions, the most serious split in half a century. Not only that, but a cursory observation shows that the "pro-Trump camp" is the majority of the people who used to be considered liberal intellectuals. Not long ago, a group of pro-Trump scholars published a book called "Trumpism" 《川普主义》 (subtitle: Conservative Traditional Values: Reshaping the Glory of America) (保守传统价值 重塑美利坚荣耀) to stake out their positions as self-appointed "conservatives." This group is growing and is quite vocal.

Here I would like to explain some of my own views and reflect on three key points that are being debated.

The Two-Party Political System in the United States

Since the very beginning, the Western modern party system has based on coalitions and competitions among different interests. Each political party defended the interests it represented while recognizing the legitimacy of other parties' existence and seeking compromise amidst competition. The word "party," which has "part" as its root, is used in English to refer to political parties because they serve only as advocates for some interests. This understanding of party politics has been a feature of the United States throughout its history beginning with its founding. What began as a struggle between two parties, one that favored federalism and one that

avored states' rights and the rights of individual citizens, has over the past century and a half entered a period of stability in the modern bipartisan system. The two parties have gradually developed relatively definite differences on major social policy issues such as taxes, the role of government, affirmative action, abortion rights, and immigration. Beyond these differences, there is a deep and broad consensus between the two parties on more important values such as democratic politics, private property protection, judicial independence, and freedom of the press. It is through this process of consensus and conflict that the two parties have moved society forward in a stable manner.

So much of the denunciation of the American left on the Chinese internet has to do with the Chinese experience, so that when Chinese hear "leftist," they imagine it as leftist in the Chinese context. In response to a friend who strongly supported Trump, I said:

[I]n the debate that has emerged in the Chinese media, some people who support Trump have described the battle between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party as a war between good and evil, seizing on certain extreme claims to generalize and discredit the entire Democratic Party. On the other hand, they have deified the Republican Party and even described Trump as the "Chosen One," a secular president who has become the savior of the United States and even the world. What a great irony for those who speak of democracy. It is perhaps an even greater irony for those who identify as Christian to have this living person as the object of their worship.

However, in his response, my friend still expressed his extreme dislike for the Western left with this reply:

America as a beacon nation, with its federal republic, is not secure. Totalitarianism, like a virus, will persist in the polity and in society because it appeals to the inherent evil of human nature. The Western left has long gone too far in terms of political correctness, becoming absolutely dominant in universities and the media, and not even allowing others to express dissenting points of view. . . . In this situation, parity and even-handedness are unattainable. The decadence and multiple crises of Western society are related to this. The Chinese left is of course even worse, playing on the thick legs of power. But there is one thing they share with the Western left at the ideological level – advocating socialism, decrying the market economy, criticizing capitalism, clinging to Marxism, etc.

Such a response equating the Western left with socialism is a gross distortion of Democratic Party positions.

Christianity and American Constitutionalism

Some Chinese Christians as well as scholars who seem to have converted to Christianity rejoice over Trump's constant assertion of his evangelical Christian faith and praise his exclusion of immigrants from Islamic and other non-Christian countries. They express a strong belief that the constitutional government of the United States of America as well as the philosophy of conservatism is rooted in the Protestant Christian faith. Further, they believe that only the establishment of this Christian faith can bring about a constitutional form of government in other countries as well. This has become a consensus opinion among the authors of the aforementioned book "Trumpism."

I have been personally interested in the history of Christianity and its relationship to the rule of law in the West for forty years, beginning in my third year of college. The subject of both my own undergraduate and master's thesis was medieval church law and its impact on secular law. I am certainly aware of the deep connections between European constitutional institutions and Christianity (or Catholicism). For example, the separation between ecclesiastical and secular authority that prevailed in medieval Europe is one of the historical sources of the modern constitutional separation of powers. Meanwhile, it was this emphasis on "render unto God the things that are God's, render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" that is the source of the separation of church and state in modern constitutional government. The reason the American Founding Fathers adopted the First Amendment to the Constitution, which barred the establishment of a state religion, was because they had seen religious persecution in Europe and colonial North America and were extremely concerned about the dangers of combining secular power with religious beliefs.

As for the American constitutional system, especially the separation of powers, federalism, and the various standards of liberty and human rights protection established by the Constitution, some are the genius creation of the Founding Fathers, while others are the result of the long evolution of Western civilization, of which Christianity is only one source. Other important roots include pre-Christian Greek political philosophy, Roman law, and the gradual development of judicial independence and legal professionalism in English legal history. Although some of the legislation and principles of ecclesiastical law permeated English equity law because of the status of some judges as members of the clergy, overall, the English law inherited by

the United States was still dominated by secular elements. John Adams said it best: “Let us study the law of nature; search into the spirit of the English constitution; read the histories of ancient ages; contemplate the great examples of Greece and Rome; set before us the conduct of our own British ancestors, who have defended for us the inherent rights of mankind against foreign and domestic tyrants and usurpers.”

Not only that, but at a time when the United States is becoming more and more racially and culturally diverse, a constitution that applies to a nation of such diverse immigrants must be inclusive beyond Christianity. The Statue of Liberty in front of New York Harbor has seen many people of all faiths and skin colors enter the country over the past century or so, from South American or Irish Catholic, to Jews persecuted by the Nazis, to Muslims from India or Indonesia, to Buddhists or atheists from China or Vietnam, and so on. Many of them acquired US citizenship without having to change their faith. Among the children of these immigrants were Presidents Kennedy and Obama, Louis D. Brandeis as the first Jewish justice (Ruth Bader Ginsburg was the first female Jewish justice), as well as members of Congress, federal judges, and senior administration officials from a colorful array of ethnicities. Who in America today would dare to openly claim that only White Anglo-Saxon Protestants are the mainstream?

Furthermore, in the twentieth century, well-functioning constitutional and rule of law institutions were established in countries where Christianity was not the dominant faith, or even where there were few Christians. Japan is a good example. Although the current Japanese Constitution was written under MacArthur and was considerably influenced by the US Constitution, such influence was not in itself

associated with the Christian faith. Moreover, the fundamental concepts underpinning contemporary Japanese constitutionalism are not entirely imported from the West. The separation of “unity” from “governance” developed over more than seven centuries during the pre-Meiji era and the tradition of local autonomy began under the Shogunate system. Taiwan’s successful transition from authoritarian to democratic institutions over the past thirty years provides another real-world example. While it is unhistorical to ignore the connection between Western constitutionalism and the Christian faith and church, exaggerating the role of religion leads to the desperate conclusion that China’s dream of constitutionalism can only produce “long and unending regret.”

The Deterioration of US-China Relations: Causes and Future

In terms of US-China relations, the Trump era represented the end of a four-decades-long policy of engagement with a view to promote reform. The administration, the House, and the Senate all launched hardline initiatives to which the Chinese authorities had difficulty responding. Such a precipitous deterioration in US-China relations can’t help but cheer many of those who have been frustrated in their pursuit of China’s political transformation, and they eagerly awaited the continuation and intensification of such blows. Naturally, they feared that if Trump was not re-elected, the great work that has taken off during his tenure will be undone and everything will return to the chaos and hopelessness of the previous situation.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully evaluate the effects of the deterioration of US-China relations in recent years, except to point

out the paradoxical fact that as the US government has intensified its crackdown on China in the Trump era, what has happened within China is a steady deterioration in the human rights situation. The revision of the Chinese Constitution to remove term limits for the president, the creation of a Supervisory Commission that overrides and suppresses judicial authority, the more severe crackdown on the country's activist lawyer community, the increased control of the ruling party over civil society organizations and businesses, the serious regression in education and journalism, the pervasive digital surveillance of the entire population, the introduction of the Hong Kong version of the National Security Law, the targeting of Muslims in Xinjiang and elsewhere – the list is endless.

Of course, all this cannot be blamed on Trump and the US government, but rather is a manifestation of China's internal logic. It also can be said that the most crucial driver of the US government's reversal of China policy is not the US side, but the Chinese authorities. The long-standing strategy of appeasement followed by the West, including by the US, has completely failed, and the use of a big stick or even a gunboat has become inevitable. A fundamental difficulty is that, whether appeasement or a big stick is used, external pressure often has a reverse effect when there is no institutional and socialized force within a country that can check and balance the authorities. Especially when the target country is much larger than Iran or North Korea, it is wishful thinking to expect external sanctions and demands to trigger domestic changes.

On the other hand, what may mollify Trump fans in China is that since taking office, while Biden has reversed many of Trump's decrees on domestic and foreign affairs, he has continued

various pressure policies toward China. The new secretary of state, the national security adviser, and the defense secretary all have expressed a clear attitude of maintaining a tough line on China. And unlike Trump, the Biden administration has placed more emphasis on coordination with Europe and traditional allies on China policy, while focusing on more precise strikes with a "scalpel" rather than a "machete" when it comes to China sanctions. It remains to be seen what the future of such a strategy will be, but at least it will save the Chinese party and government from some unrealistic illusions.

The rest is up to us Chinese. Mencius was right: "Before others can destroy your family, your family must first destroy itself. Before outsiders can destroy your country, your country must first destroy itself." The converse is true: Before outsiders can save your country, you must first save your country yourself.

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