

The last lecture on China: to next generation China Watchers

By *Chang Wang, contributor*

Editor's Note:

In fall semester of 2013, the University of Minnesota - for the first time - offered an Honors Seminar on China to undergraduate students with strong records of academic achievement. This seminar, entitled "Modern China: Law, History, and Culture," is taught by Professor Wang and attended by 12 Honors Students at the University. Wang is chief research and academic officer at Thomson Reuters and a licensed attorney. He also holds associate or adjunct professorships at six universities in the U.S., China, Italy and Switzerland.

This Honors Seminar on China introduced American students to distinctive paradigms and discursive patterns of law and politics in China, with the intention of fostering comparative analysis and critical thinking. The course focused on modern Chinese history since 1840, paying particular attention to traditional Chinese views of the role of law in society, as well as to the legal and political aspects of early Sino-Western interaction. The course also discussed substantive laws, high profile legal cases, and major political events in the People's Republic of China today. The course concluded by examining current issues in Chinese law from both sides, and by looking into China's argument for "Beijing Consensus" without Western-style rule of law.

The following article is Wang's final remarks to the class on Dec. 9, 2013. China Insight obtained exclusive rights to publish this lecture in its entirety.



Professor, Chang Wang

At the beginning of this class, I asked you to close your eyes and tell me the first image emerge in your mind when you hear "China." Today, during this last session, I am going to ask you to do the same thing again. This time the image might be the same, might be different. Is it clearer? Is it closer? I hope it is not just an empty chair.

As a lawyer, I gave you this disclaimer: this class is not about truth, it is about facts. I am sure that you now have sufficient background information, and are equipped with the fundamental tools of critical and comparative analysis that you need for further investigation and research, should you wish to become a China watcher.

You have read the Preamble to the Constitution of People's Republic of China, and compared its version of modern Chinese history with the version offered in Charter '08. You saw that the Party presented the narrative of 100 Years of Humiliation (1840-1949) as indisputable facts, which reminded us Croce's observation that "all history is contemporary history."

You read Confucius, Mencius and the Legalists. You learned to distinguish the "great man" that Mencius admired

from the "true gentleman" that Confucius praised. You learned, in horror, of the First Emperor's burning of the books and burying alive of intellectuals; you then read, with a forced smile, "The Madman's Diary" by Lu Xun.

We discussed the "Ti-Yong dichotomy" ("Chinese learning for fundamental principles and Western learning for practical application") advocated by Zhang Zhidong, providing the hidden rationale that underscores ideological narratives in modern China. You were advised to read with discretion the Chinese criminal statute, which linked almost every human action with a punishment. You probably were surprised and puzzled by the "hidden rules of Chinese society," including, but not limited to, the government's right to harm its citizen and citizens' lack of individual civil rights.

You learned about two occurrences that gave great hope to the Chinese people: first, there was the May 4th Movement of 1919, which served as the starting point of modern Chinese culture and introduced "Mr. Democracy" and "Mr. Science" to China. Second, there was the 1980s Cultural Renaissance, which ameliorated the trauma that the Chinese people had suffered during the Cultural Revolution; but endless civil wars, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Famine of 1959-1961, the Red Terror by the Red Guards and the Cultural Revolution, and, finally, the tragedy of 1989 (Tiananmen), crashed those hopes again and again, leading us to question the very nature of human existence and the validity of the law of karma.

You researched and did marvelous presentations on The Opium War; the Burning of Yuan-ming-yuan; the Boxer Rebellion; extraterritoriality in China;

Deng Xiaoping; Zhao Ziyang; Professor Fang Lizhi; the curious case of Ai Weiwei; the more curious case of Chen Guangcheng; and the most curious cases of Wang Lijun/Gu Kailai/Bo Xilai. You have proved beyond a reasonable doubt that you are not only able to locate and critically evaluate resources and materials on China's legal and political systems, history and current affairs, but you also understand the diverse philosophies and cultures within and across the society.

You found striking similarities between the Big Brother's routine to "correct" history in George Orwell's "1984," and the Chinese authority's systematic efforts to wipe certain unpleasant memories out of the collective consciousness of the people. Using history as a mirror to reflect present and future, we traced the common characteristics shared by all kinds of autocratic regimes: suppressive, vicious, pragmatic, hypocritical, vengeful and highly corrupt. Quoting Jorge Mario Pedro Vargas Llosa, recipient of the 2010 Nobel Prize in Literature: "A totalitarian government pollutes and destroys the whole society. Everything - including family life and love, no matter whether it is political or not - is polluted."

Despite tremendous hardship, Chinese people have always risen above the failings of their rulers and found ways to survive and try to make a better future for their children. Nevertheless, doing some simple math and realizing that China will be governed by the generation of the Red Guards for the next decade or two, sent a big chill down your spine. Are they the "same bunch of goons and thugs they have been for the last 50 years?" (Jack Cafferty)

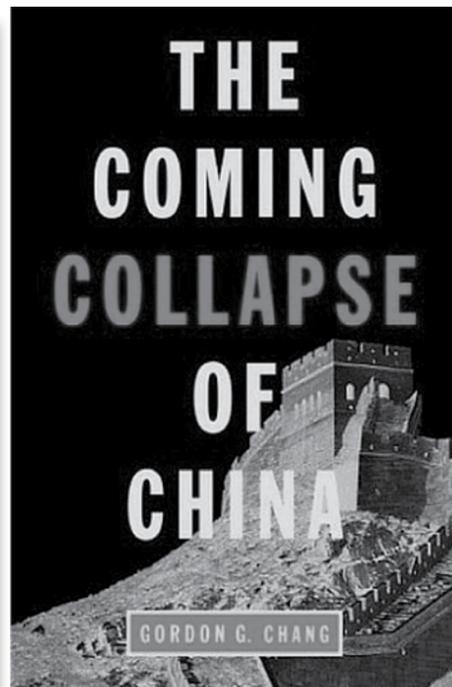
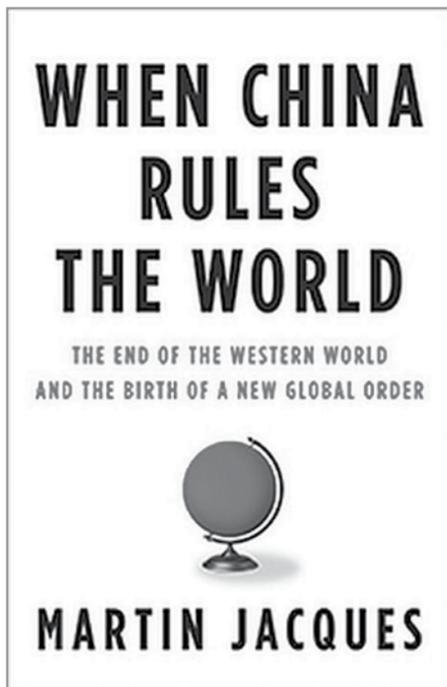
Also in this class, you have familiarized yourself with major players on

the stage of modern and contemporary China: Empress Dowager Cixi, Dr. Sun Yatsen, Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek, Mao, Madam Mao, Deng, and Liu Xiaobo. You have also benefited from learned academics such as John King Fairbank, Jonathan Spence, Jerome Cohen, Orville Schell, Perry Link, Pei Minxin and He Weifang, as well as from the insightful and amusing commentaries of Yu Hua, Murong Xuecun, Richard McGregor and Ted Koppel.

We read news too: Ambassador Gary Locke is leaving Beijing. The Chinese people should forever be grateful to him for bringing the PM 2.5 air pollution index to China, as well as for his uncompromising commitment to improve human rights. Good news, too, from the Third Plenum Session of the 18th Communist Party of China Central Committee: the notorious reeducation-through-labor program has finally been abolished, and the "one-child" policy has been loosened. However, these are just half-hearted attempts to correct past wrongs, without admitting the wrongs. It would be misleading to interpret them as indication of a larger agenda for political reform. Finally, none of us was really surprised by the denial of visa to Paul Mooney, or by Bloomberg's decision to spike an investigative report on the questionable link between power and wealth in China.

2013, just like the year of 1587 that historian Ray Huang researched, appears to be "a year of no particular significance": The Party, despite political and economic problems, remains firmly in power. The Great Firewall is high, the sky is gray, and the public forum quiet - "stability" is well maintained. Yet 2013 may be a year of particular

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significance for China, as all the signs point to either “the coming collapse of China” or “when China rules the world.”

Nevertheless, while our subject is unpredictable and different in many ways, history teaches us one thing: every autocratic regime dies, because “its political order suffers from the same self-destructive dynamics: leadership degeneration, corruption, rising social tensions, and loss of government credibility.” (Pei Minxin) No political force will be in charge forever, but the people will. When Chinese teachers tell children that Chinese civilization is the only “unbroken” civilization in the world, it is not entirely a lie – because resilience is a key feature of the Chinese character. No matter how long it has been eradicated (Yuan/Mongolian Dynasty), no matter how much damage has been done (Mao), Chinese culture always comes back and thrives. As Tang poet Bai Juyi wrote about the prairie grasses: “Wild fire could not burn them up to extirpate; Springtide zephyrs blow and they come to life again.”

Shrewd pundits observe the same set of evidence but come up with complete opposite prognoses: total collapse, or the new super power. Will a sliding door guide China one way or another? Will a butterfly effect lead to random chaos? Whether it’s headed toward triumph or collapse, China is undeniably undergoing tremendous change – and expecting even larger ones. At the 2013 Commencement of China University of Political Science and Law in Beijing, Professor Cong Riyun reminded the graduating class: “Black clouds are accumulating, thunderstorm is coming, make sure you choose the right position, and make sure you are on the right side of the history.”

It is a deceptively simple yet daunting task.

Bei Dao, the greatest living Chinese poet, wrote in 1975: “This universal longing/Has now become the whole cost

of being a man/I have lied many times/ in my life/But I have always honestly kept to/The promise I made as a child/So that the world which cannot tolerate/A child’s heart/Has still not forgiven me.” Ai Weiwei, the greatest living Chinese artist, put it in a different way: “When you try to understand your motherland, you already begun your journey to become a (thought) criminal.”

In an Orwellian, Huxleyite, or Kafkaesque time, a normal citizen would appear maverick. Chinese intellectuals, as a species, were exterminated in 1957 during the Anti-Rightist Campaign. In an age of no hero, I am too a domesticated fox, the end-product of selective breeding to achieve certain preferred behavioral traits, e.g., respecting and trusting the authority. Derailed outliers can be put on the watch-list and the no-fly list, gagged, smothered, smeared, or simply disappeared.

This class attempts to provide neutral, yet critical, analysis of China. Both sides of the arguments are presented to you for you to hear and evaluate. Sometimes you may feel that you and the Chinese are living in two parallel universes: some basic matters of fact, even those knowable by empirical evaluation, are disputed: e.g., the Korean War, the Great Famine, and the tragedy of 1989.

Frequent travel and extended stays help me appreciate both China and the U.S. even more. The more I learn about China and America, the more I realize how little I know about these two great countries. I consider myself most fortunate to be able to appreciate the beauty of the Chinese language and culture. At the same time, I am able to function in the American system of justice and fundamental fairness. I feel obligated to serve as a bridge between these two countries: I am a zealous advocate for the democratic values, separation of powers, and due process of the American system – and, at the same time, I am an evangelist for Chinese arts and intel-

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To learn more about being a host family, contact Richard He at (612) 987-8540 or email, rhe@chinainsight.info.



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lectual tradition. In fact, there are only two things can bring me close to tears: Chinese literature and American law.

Furthermore, living as an insider in two cultures gives me excellent vantage points from which to compare them. As a result, I take nothing for granted. I am less susceptible to prejudice, because I know how it feels to be discriminated against; I am less willing to accept presumptions, especially when making business decisions, because I know that any presumption is rebuttable if you change your point of view ever so slightly. And, finally, I am more willing to communicate, collaborate, and compromise – because I know how easily language can be manipulated, and how easily information and ideas can get lost in translation, leading to misunderstandings.

As we end our discussion and analysis of China, I would like share with you three quotes about China:

The first one is a paragraph from the preface to “My Life in China and America,” the autobiography of Yung Wing, the first Chinese student to graduate from an American university: “Would it not be strange, if an Occidental education, continually exemplified by an Occidental civilization, had not wrought upon an Oriental such a metamorphosis in his inward nature as to make him feel and act as though he were a being coming from a different world, when he confronted

one so diametrically different? This was precisely my case, and yet neither patriotism nor the love of my fellow countrymen had been weakened. On the contrary, they had increased in strength from sympathy.”

The second one is from the late Professor Fang Lizhi: “There is no such thing as democracy with Chinese characteristics, just like there is no such thing as physics with Chinese characteristics, or science with Chinese characteristics.”

The last one is from Professor Yu Yingshih, a leading philosopher of New Confucianism, who left mainland China in 1950 and spent most of his life in the US: “Wherever I go is China. Why do I need to go to that particular geographical location to find China, there is no China on that land.”

It is an honor to be your instructor of this Honors Seminar on China. It is a privilege to share my thoughts on the law, history, and culture of my country and my people with you. Hope our paths will cross again in the not-too-distant future, whether in the world of things Chinese or in the world of things American, or in a place where the two great countries and cultures meet. ♦

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