
Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

Contributed by David West
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Ideas about communism, as held in the west, are somewhat different from the ideas about communism as held in the east.

I would like to mention some of the positive things that I am experiencing as I have lived and worked in China for the last five years.

There are people here who, quietly under their breath, bitch and moan about the government, but bad news stories are kept out of the media, so there is never a huge rumble of dissent. Some dissenters are dealt with extremely harshly, especially if they attempt to incite others to dissent,

But:

I experience far more freedom here than I ever did in Europe. With the exception of an annual visa requirement, and the payment of minimal tax, the government, or any of its agencies or officers never interfere in my life.

Every government officer I meet, although very few, is always polite and helpful. The police department is called the Public Service Bureau (PSB), and as far as I can see, that's just what they do - they perform a public service. When I omitted a photograph from a police registration document, the policeman came to my house to save me the trouble of having to go to the police station again - I almost wept!

Whenever I feel that something seriously needs improvement, I am reminded of the words of one of the Beatles' songs: "It's getting better all the time" and that is very true in China, where the rate of change is like watching a video on fast forward.

I feel certain that no other government in the world could provide sufficient stability for one point three billion people to live in a harmonious manner.

The people are not stressed out, swallowing pills by the dozen, visiting a psychiatrist or reaching for the bottle every day.

OK yes, I live in the city, and I have only little experience of the countryside, but for the most part, the people are reasonably happy with their lives, although they are all trying hard to better themselves.

As yet, there are no noticeable signs of depression.

The government here has different ideas and different priorities compared to other governments. The number-one priority, over and above all ideas of finance or anything else is the need for the harmony of the people. Anyone who attempts to upset the harmony of the people is severely dealt with. Sometimes there are protests, but not publicised too much. Many of the protests are against western countries who try to interfere with the harmony of the people. The

Chinese are proud people, and above all else they love their country.

If we examine what has been achieved here over the recent past, compared with what has been achieved in most western countries, we see that all Chinese people have seen improved standards of living, while most western citizens have experienced decreased standards of living.

Overall, I would say that the Chinese government is doing a better job than most western style governments.

So, what is it with this democracy thing.

Winston Churchill described it best: "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter."

If we listen to the average Chinese person, we do not hear much complaint about the government -- everyone is too busy bettering themselves. No one is starving, although there are a few well-fed beggars.

The many westerners who live here, while they do have complaints, generally find life here more satisfying than in their home country. It takes a long period of living here to identify and dispose of the ingrained western ideas in order to even allow Chinese ideas to get a look in, but when one is eventually able to be a little more objective, then it appears that this might just be a better way of being governed. The main difference is that the senior politicians appear to be truly concerned about the people as much as they are concerned about themselves.

If we compare two recent disasters, being the floods in New Orleans, and the earthquake in Sichuan, then we see that in New Orleans, the government operated as if it had little concern for the people, whereas in Sichuan, the leaders were on site with their sleeves rolled up and directing the rescue effort within 6 hours of the event, almost before the news was being broadcast. The people affected by the earthquake were poor people too, but the amount of concern shown for them, and help given to them, by the government and the people was of entirely different proportions to the happenings in New Orleans.

The New Orleans disaster caused a great rift between the people and the government, whereas the Sichuan disaster caused a great coming together of the people and the government. This is the Chinese way.

We see that the government has taken the middle path. It has abandoned some of the more onerous aspects of old style communism, and replaced them with some of the better aspects of new style capitalism. The system is now called "Socialism with Chinese characteristics". What is the point of everyone having a vote when most don't bother, and of those who do, they are either ill-informed or lied to.

If we were to compare the promises made and kept by Western governments with the promises made and kept by the Chinese government, I am certain who would come out on top, by a huge margin. The politicians here are under great pressure to help the people to live in harmony, and any politician discovered to be corrupt, or of poor character, soon disappears from the public eye. Yes there is serious corruption here, and it is being dealt with, but it is not of the same kind of corruption as the two-faced politicians who are working for two masters, as in the west. The senior politicians here are highly respectable people.

There are no ulterior motives behind the public face -- the government makes its best efforts to represent the people, and does not appear to have Western financiers pulling the strings.

There are very many cultural differences between westerners and the Chinese, who themselves are very different from any of their neighbouring country folk.

Many of the peasant class Chinese are still quite ignorant in polite circles, but in the cities, led by Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, behaviour is daily becoming more respectable, to the extent that now there is certainly much less antisocial behaviour in a Chinese city than there is in a western city.

I had occasion to walk down a dimly lit street at about 2am one day, and I could see six men spread out across the road approaching me. Western thoughts did pass through my mind. As we neared within speaking distance, one of them said to me, in English, "Hello", and smiled. I replied and smiled back, and we went on our way -- the Chinese way.

Over the last five years, I have heard many complaints from Chinese students about the amount of homework they receive, and the resultant lack of sleep or free time. At the start of the current term/semester, after the recent one month break for the Chinese New Year Spring Festival, the central Education Department issued a directive to reduce homework, and to cease all Saturday school. "It's getting better all the time". The people do have a voice, and it does get listened to.

Further confirmation is provided in Daniel A. Bell's new book, China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society, in which he provides an insider's account of Chinese culture and, along the way, debunks a variety of stereotypes.

In England during the Cold War, I was taught that communism was a dirty word, but from what I have seen of democracy in recent years, I think the word communism has had its slate wiped clean.

As I complete this article, the world sits with baited breath awaiting the speech of Wen Jiabow, the Chinese Premier, at the 2009 National People's Congress. The world's stock markets have shown an increase in value in anticipation of Wen Jiabow announcing a stimulus package for the Chinese economy, based on investments in infrastructure and small business start ups. Social harmony is at the top of the agenda.

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Editor's note: I believe some of the positive aspects of modern urban life in China according to the author will disappear when the global economy's crash intensifies. Overpopulation is overpopulation, although ancient agricultural techniques still practiced to an extent have provided a basis for feeding large, dense populations. Over the last few decades China's changes have seemed to me from the viewpoint of an environmentalist/energy analyst to be disastrous and unsustainable, with now more cars sold in that country than in the U.S. The failure to keep the bicycle supreme was a big error. The growth of the country's economy has recently made it the biggest greenhouse-gas emitter. Despite all that, I've not known much about the country, and I believe that David West has provided insights and a viewpoint that few outside China could learn about.

David's prior article in Culture Change was "Let's not look upon the demise of our financial base as a bad thing"

David West was born in Nottinghamshire, UK, and has lived in Asia for the last 20 years.

After starting and running a successful computer business in Manchester, David drove to Thailand in search of a more meaningful life, and found it.

He has written two books, Running a Small Business, and Find Yourself, and now teaches English to students in Kunming, China.