

A Chinese water-cooler.

From Christopher, greetings on this journey we call life!

As some of you know, one of my present projects is a politics doctorate at the University of Oxford. I'm looking into China: specifically, the rise of an urban consumer class and how that growing population group thinks about political change. It's a topic a lot of people are curious about, so I thought I'd take a page or two to sketch out my thinking.

For months now I've been following the Chinese blogosphere for political mutterings. Here's a sample of voices that make me go *hmm...* (translated by yours truly)

'For decades our country has been tangled in struggles to determine who holds power. The workers? The rich? In fact, it doesn't matter: whoever holds power becomes the new elite, and sustaining that power becomes their new mandate. Greatness is not to achieve power; it is to work out how to limit it.'

'On the road to democracy, the biggest obstacle is people.'

'You know a country is well-governed if: its politics are stable; its people are united and work to improve the general welfare; and its growth is sustainable.'

'We all agreed to the one-child policy to help lessen the population burden on the state. But if the government cannot even support that one child, what logic is there in further obedience?'

'The values of Earthlings and aliens may be different, but I suspect Westerners and Asians—some lifestyle habits aside—value things more or less the same.'

'A government should be like a wife: she should make sure there's food on the table; she shouldn't just ask for money, but earn her own money, too. Of course, you're always happy to advance money to a good wife, but a good wife herself keeps a frugal eye on the future. And a bad wife—well, you can always choose divorce.'

'China needs a Putin-like figure—someone with the guts to set forth a stronger policy at home and clearer attitude on the international stage.'

'Everyone gives our police a hard time for not taking care of the people. Not me: I feel for them, actually. After all, their main job is to project the regime—not us—and lately they've had to work overtime at that.' (*Isn't Chinese satire great?*)

What do I take away from all this? Mainly that political chit-chat in China is much broader than we've been led to expect. This isn't the stuff that slipped through the Great Firewall's cracks. These aren't conspiratorial whispers in smoke-filled karaoke dens. These are the voices of big-name bloggers and national news portals, followed by tens of millions. It's mainstream. It's everywhere, everyday, water-cooler banter.

In our own media mainstream, it's now routine to preach that China's urban consumer class are 'pragmatists'. In brief:

- 1) All they want is a stable, secure environment in which to expand their wealth further.
- 2) While China's economic miracle continues, they're happy to ignore politics altogether.
- 3) Once the economy stumbles, they'll become ardent democrats (like us).

In my research I call this three-part proposition the 'pragmatism premise'—or, in my less scholarly moments, 'crap'. (1) and (2) are based largely on the presumption that silence is consent. Since 1989's Tiananmen tirade, upwardly mobile urbanites have gone quiet—so they must have nothing to say. This logic is flawed. Silence is silence. It can be a front for consent, dissent, neutral disinterest or a calculated patience for the opportune moment to speak. Silence confirms nothing about what China's urban consumers are thinking.

(3) is based on a long tradition of Western thinking about politics, which bestows upon rising consumer classes weighty expectations for democratic derring-do. Since Aristotle, the 'middle' class has been seen as democracy's primary advocate, playing Robin Hood between the poor and the rich. During the Cold War, we built up the idea that the middle class would drive regime change in the non-democratic world. The richer people get, the more diverse their personal agendas become, and the harder it is to satisfy them under a single authority. Ergo, growth breeds democracy. It makes sense to us. Unfortunately it's not true (think, e.g., Saudi Arabia). Actually the weight of evidence is against the idea that economic growth causes democratic revolution—but it's such a good idea we've stuck with it anyway. You'll find it lurking in pretty much every editorial on China's political future.

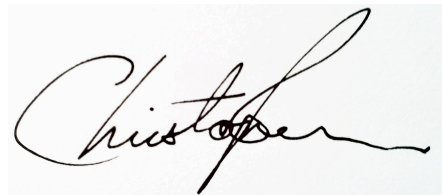
Does the pragmatism premise describe *any* people in China? Yes, absolutely. And if you go to China looking for the pragmatists, you'll find them.

But keep looking. Ironically, in some ways China's political discourse is far more diverse than the free-speaking West's. For us, 'liberal democracy' is the only dish on the menu; China is an ideological buffet. There's Confucianism—a native ideological tradition that over 2,500 years has sunk into people's heads more deeply than any political program. There's Socialism, a recent import whose newbie disadvantage is offset by a massive Communist Party organization dedicated to peddling Marxist-Maoist philosophy. And there's our friend Liberalism. It first arrived on the Chinese scene in the late 19th century. In the 21st, as China widens its doors to ever-increasing flows of goods, services, capital, and people from liberal-minded countries, you can bet our ideas transfer, too.

For China's urban consumers, these traditions offer a rich but boggling range of political futures—and we haven't even talked about how the rise of religions (Buddhism and Christianity, especially) plays into this yet. I don't see any 'pragmatic' consensus. I don't see apathy, either. I see discussion and debate, and a dizzying contest to spin meaning out of each day's top news stories. I see a cacophony of citizen expression pushing the Party-state to pass endless incremental political reforms (which we rarely hear about) or to suppress the problems it can't or won't fix (which we always hear about).

To sum up: We've so over-simplified our lens into how China thinks that we've filtered out the real conversation. That's a problem wot needs fixin'...and, well, I'm trying!

I hope this letter finds you, and finds you well.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light blue background. The signature is cursive and reads "Christopher".

nb: I'm filing epistles online at <http://kutarna.net>