

On China's Dilemma

Dr. Li Wenliang passed away, sparking public outrage over both the government's cover-up of the epidemic and restrictions on free speech. Even as people called for freedom of expression on social media, authorities continued extensive post deletions. It seems we cannot change anything.

While some government leaders speak of severely punishing those who concealed information and promoting transparency, we know the death toll reported by the National Health Commission and GDP figures are inflated. The Chairman said not offending hundreds of corrupt officials means offending 1.3 billion people. Yet we face obstacles even mourning Li Wenliang, with articles and videos deleted and trending topics removed.

Police, TV anchors - they're all just doing their jobs, following orders from above. The Chairman appears helpless, as do party central leadership, officials at various levels, grassroots civil servants, and the people. Are corrupt officials really this powerful and widespread?

Similar issues abound - no one is specifically wrong, yet injustice and evil persist. Individuals often face violence, lacking respect and freedom. When one can't even warn family in a WeChat group, how can we hope to live with dignity in this society?

In this land, no one has it easy. Common people work desperately due to high costs of living. Party leaders are overwhelmed with affairs. Even the President had it hard - during the Cultural Revolution his family was persecuted and his father denounced.

I believe China's current predicament stems from this land's history, system and people collectively.

Going back to late Qing and Republic era (1840-1949), our imperial dynasty was functioning well despite internal corruption. But others came to invade, first claiming to want trade but forcing open our doors with cannons and corrupting our people with opium.

Were they righteous? Was fascist imperial invasion righteous?

Later came Lin Zexu, Li Hongzhang, Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong and others. By 1946, the KMT and CCP discussed joint governance at the Chongqing Conference, but it fell apart. Chiang Kai-shek never intended to cooperate with Mao, only wanting total victory. So did the CCP choose one-party rule, or was it pushed there by history? Did Mao want such power? He was originally kind, but hardship and war's cruelty made him ruthless - he had to become worse than the villains to win and survive.

So when one gains such power, can they avoid corruption? Stay upright and kind? Is lying easier than doing real work? Is building a Huawei harder than running a P2P finance scheme?

At the highest position, Mao's instinct was to preserve his power and prevent others from taking it. One method was cultivating mass worship and high prestige. Another was watching out for other prestigious fig-

ures, launching political movements when needed, using party comrades, intellectuals and student supporters to help eliminate political enemies under righteous pretexts. Hence we saw anti-rightist campaigns and the Cultural Revolution - when small groups couldn't eliminate enemies, larger ones had to be mobilized.

Was this what he wanted? His position was too high, too dangerous. When threatened, survival instinct takes over. He had to focus on survival and maintaining position. Stalin was even more ruthless in eliminating political enemies and dissidents.

So to understand China's governance issues, we need only grasp one principle - self-interest explains most chaos and confusion. Research directors seek promotion and wealth. Provincial and city leaders seek promotion and wealth. Corrupt grassroots officials want money from their small authority. Village officials embezzle relocation and poverty relief funds for personal gain. Don't listen to what they say, watch what they do.

So in that era, Mao said the good people in the party had all died. Good people lack ambition. Yang Jiang said, "I compete with no one, I disdain competing with anyone." Good people mostly share this attitude. Only when pushed to the brink do they fight back. So in our society, rural and urban, those who argue and resist do so because good people have been pushed too far.

First, many kind people don't want official positions - they just want work to support themselves, to be part of the silent majority living their own lives. Many capable people disdain officialdom, unwilling to pay their dues, preferring to rely on ability in the market economy rather than compete with brown-nosers.

When they become civil servants, working basic jobs in government or public institutions, they gradually understand but still won't curry favor with leaders or form cliques, won't use their small authority for money, won't seek higher positions for wealth. So many stick to basic positions, doing their work, enduring difficulty.

Yet some corrupt officials use their power for great profit, forming cliques, bribing leaders, flattering superiors, forming alliances, and getting promoted.

Where there are people, there are politics and struggle. So common people and those at basic levels often face less intense struggles, with many kind people content with their lives. But higher up, there are more ambitious, selfish, hypocritical, sophisticated self-interested people. Some reformers get defeated climbing up because there are too many bad people - to survive and keep position they must do bad things, or else be eliminated or stuck forever.

Government, companies, schools share similarities - political struggles are most intense in government, then companies, then schools.

Students also struggle. Why be bad? Being bad is more comfortable than being good. Without law and moral judgment from others, everyone would be bad.

At school, students who honestly attend class and study lead boring lives. Bad students have more fun and freedom - fighting, dating, skipping class, forming cliques, smoking, drinking, living freely. Without teachers, good students would be bullied: "We all skip class and smoke, why act superior? Your act makes me look bad."

So good students learn to stay quiet, accept bullying and rule-breaking. Otherwise they can't survive. Without forming cliques, how can one person fight a group? Girls often prefer bad students too - how cool and free, smoking, drinking, having late night snacks; studying is so tiring. Bad students are more direct and domineering, boldly flirting with girls, moving on quickly if rejected. Good students hesitate to confess feelings, getting hurt when rejected.

Isn't the world just like this? Bad students early on understand - there's no fairness or justice, only strong and weak; laws are made by the strong. What good comes from being just and kind - does God give you a medal, does the government give you money? When bad students act badly and good students have no choice, they too turn bad, at least to avoid being bullied, becoming more ruthless and angry so others won't bully them. Whoever you always forgive will always bully you. Whoever speaks of kindness, doesn't care about fame and fortune, has no desires - they're fools.

Who forced me to treat kindness and justice like garbage today? Are people born bad? Society forced me. Living, studying and working in this land forced me.

With such high housing prices, I secretly work part-time jobs besides my main job - am I selfish and ungrateful? Do I have a choice? I just warned family about human-to-human flu transmission, but was labeled a rumor spreader - did I intentionally break the law? When everything in the city is expensive and hard to make money, I return to develop in rural areas - do I have a choice? When those bad people take bribes and form cliques to get promoted, when everyone forms cliques, I have to go along - do I have a choice? When other companies bribe to win government projects, does my company have a choice, can we win on ability alone? No matter how great your ability, what can you offer that's more attractive than glittering millions?

So the party high-level also has various factions and behind-the-scenes power struggles. The Chairman anti-corruption campaign caught some, but can it catch all corrupt officials? Can all bad people be killed? With so many historical privileged families, complex relationships, gang connections - can it all be sorted out? Can legitimate interests be separated from illegal gains? Can extremely evil gangs be distinguished from lesser evil ones?

Human instinct is self-interest. To fight so many people's instincts, make so many give up their interests - how difficult! When they fall, won't other corrupt officials just take their place?

In all dynasties throughout history, which didn't have corruption, which didn't end up full of corrupt officials? Fighting human nature is so hard. It's like asking common people to donate their meager savings

or not marry and have children. Those officials already have these powers, their personal power and interests, family interests all deeply intertwined - these rights are like common people's rights to eat and sleep, can people give them up?

Even if I'm not corrupt, in such a position with such power, don't my family members have corrupt thoughts? Must I cut ties with them all? If I cut ties with family, can I still find allies, can I still protect myself?

Common people also learn to endure and accept, step by step until now, only resisting when it becomes unbearable and survival impossible. So today, you can live quietly and honestly, but once you want free speech, want to do something different, want to criticize and overthrow bad people, want to fight the existing rules to death, want change - that becomes incredibly difficult.

All party comrades share common interests - preserve the party, preserve their existing power and interests. They have no choice, position determines politics.

The people's interests are having a good social environment to live and work, living relatively happy, free lives.

These two sets of interests don't align, hence frequent conflicts. So the government uses media to blind people's eyes, appropriately satisfying public desires to appease the masses.

History of reform shows only in very bad times do people reform. One book says a regime's most dangerous time isn't at its worst, but when it tries to reform.

5000 years of Chinese society, 70+ years of this regime, can't be changed overnight.

So everyone endures what they can. Until one day, no one can endure anymore, corruption reaches extremes, then they want change. Or when most people can't endure, can't survive, then they fight to death with the extremely corrupt minority.

History proves revolution in China is brutal. Under Mao's leadership, from 1921 to 1949, it took the CCP 28 years to seize national power.

In these 70 years, government and people have progressed in many ways.

Like with speech control - before, saying one opposing word would get you exposed by neighbors and overthrown. Later you could speak privately but not publicly. Now in the internet era, though posts get deleted, given monitoring difficulties, private chats and small group discussions are possible. The range of permissible content keeps expanding.

With technological progress and market economy leadership, people find material life has greatly improved. People's knowledge and culture keep rising, phone apps and various information content are provided by other progressive people, material wealth is great, spiritual life is quite free.

People got used to rich material life and free internet technology, then suddenly hit the brakes, showing us society still has many shortcomings, still making mistakes in major accidents. Having gotten used to freedom, we suddenly find such unfreedom, and start complaining about government. Government finds people aren't so easy to serve anymore, people's demands are getting higher, people want more freedom.

However, the political system seems largely unchanged these decades. There's still much corruption.

Like WeChat and Alipay apps versus government and social security fund websites - WeChat etc. greatly consider users, while government department sites just need to be usable.

Competition breeds progress, monopoly breeds corruption. This seems an eternal truth. If we could freely choose which country to live in, I think governments would make maximum effort to change. But most of us have no choice - our ancestors and parents all lived here, we might leave but family and relatives cannot.

Competition-driven work is so hard - making a WeChat-like app is so hard and troublesome, not humanly possible, only those full of passion will pay the price. For government websites, being usable is enough, citizens have to use them anyway, why put in so much effort? Just satisfy the leaders.

Western thinkers say power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely. So I wonder, is individual power too great in China, is government power too great? Indeed it is. Could China split into many small countries forming a Chinese Federation? Each province becoming a country with autonomous management. Then establish organizations like international ones - UN, WHO, Interpol, IOC for cooperation. Meaning greatly weakening central organization power, maximally devolving power, letting provinces fully self-govern. Like the EU.

But such reform is too big - how to divide? It would hurt too many interests, too many people's benefits, changes in all aspects too great - how to separate nuclear tech, military power etc?

Such a Chinese Federation could also cause much instability - what if two small countries fight? What if stronger provincial countries try to reconquer all China? Unimaginable.

So looking back at history, China's changes are very violent and unpredictable. Each power faction's plans are complex. The future is unpredictable.

As "1587, A Year of No Significance" says, Ming Dynasty was also corrupt and declining - Chief Minister Shen Shixing, Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng, official Hai Rui, general Qi Jiguang, philosopher Li Zhi all wanted change but couldn't change. The ancient imperial system reached its end. Though Qing Dynasty followed, events in 1587 already indicated everything.

Individuals are so small in society. As individuals, we seem powerless. Now it's not just China's game anymore, dynasties rising and falling. After experiencing Western values of freedom and equality, after enjoying internet freedom and equality, we seem unwilling to bow to outdated systems. More broadly, human history is one of disasters, but also continuous progress and development.

Looking at our lives today, our material goods and services exceed those of billionaires 10 years ago and ancient emperors - countless quality apps and content on phones. But seeing our gap with the West, we seem sad - we can't criticize government, can't get truth, often deceived, often disrespected, often must sacrifice for collective good, have no one person one vote.

After darkest night comes sunshine. Even in Nazi concentration camps, while alive we retain one freedom - choosing our attitude. Our system causes intense competition, leading some to lose humanity, become ruthless. But I think most people are still kind.

So I think we should cherish what we have today, while continuing to pursue basic human rights like freedom, equality and respect, praise justice and kindness, get angry when needed, fight when needed, stay close with the masses, go with the flow, believing in a better future.