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Sacred Cows - A Study of Asian Values
Yuen Chung Kwong
Professor of Computer Science
National University of Singapore

Preface

The present book collects a number of articles I wrote on social topics over 12 years, now linked together by a common theme, that Asia need to fill the spiritual void left by the breakdown of Marxism as a valid opposition ideology. Without a well founded opposition inspired by coherent ideologies to engage in a sustained dialog with the government establishment, a democratic state cannot fully function. It is the absence of such validation that made it necessary for Asian governments to search for alternative justifications in terms of Asian Values.

Several chapters use my observations of the social system of Singapore, where I lived since mid 1983. This is not only because of greater familiarity, but also due to the greater transparency of its mode of operation. I have significantly profited from my working experience in Singapore, and hope that thoughtful Singaporeans would see the material as a positive contribution to its social discourse rather than sideline carping.

I wish to thank many friends and colleagues who sustained my interest in social and spiritual issues through discussion. Without this, I would not have been inspired to take my thoughts away often enough from my regular profession, which is Computer Science, to bring all the ideas into a coherent whole.

Chung-Kwong Yuen

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People Power and Democracy with Asian Characteristics

In February 1986 the streets of Manila stirred with the call of “People Power”, driving Ferdinand Marcos and his celebrity wife Imelda into exile; after election data entry operators resigned en masse claiming that the vote numbers they entered into the computer were not being reflected in the announced results, and then the military defected to the opposition. Less than fifteen years later, the same call arose against Joseph Estrada, with quicker timing and a lower level of turmoil, again after high level military defections following a senate corruption enquiry which seriously discredited him.

Given the chaotic conditions of her ascension to power, we shall never quite know whether Mrs Aquino did attain an electoral majority, though this is highly likely, or exactly how many votes she received. Nor will we ever know whether, given a genuinely impartial judiciary enquiry, Mr Estrada would have been properly convicted of impeachable offences. One can be reasonably confident however that both changes of government in the Philippines reflected the will of the people, and so are this sense democratic, though the particular form of the exercise of this popular will is far from the standard West European and North American model.

Similarly, the changes of governments that occurred in South Korea from Roh Teh Woo to Kim Yong Sam and then Kim Dae Jong, in Taiwan from Jiang Jing Kuo to Lee Teng Hui then Chen Shui Bian, and in Indonesia from Suharto to Habibie then Wahid/Megawatti, each followed a process different from the Western model. In fact, the process is much closer to Roman imperial succession in the Antonine age: a reigning emperor would adopt an able lieutenant as his heir, who will upon the death of the predecessor be proclaimed by the senate and the praetorian guard, representing the civilian and military power blocs, as *Principes*, the first citizen of Rome.

The use of the analogy is by no means a negative one: the Antonine emperors, from the great general Trajan to the stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, were all good rulers, and presided over a golden age of peace and prosperity. While they exploited the wealth of the empire, much of which was regarded as the emperor's

personal property, they were careful to share their largess widely and in ways positive for posterity. As Augustus says, “I found Rome a city of bricks, and left it a city of marble”, in much the same way Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew would characterize his own achievements in turning a rundown British colony into a technocratic metropolis.

“Democracy” being one of the sacred cows of our modern age, all governments aspire to be popularly elected, and the immediate promise of every African, South American or Asian coup leader would be “I will hold election soon”. But democracy takes many forms, and permits many kinds of secret or open manipulations. Just as the leaders of China use “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” to describe their partial adoption of capitalism, “Asian Values” was the expression used to justify Asia’s unwillingness to fully adhere to the Western democratic model. It is not our purpose here to either endorse or decry this, merely to better understand what “democracy with Asian characteristics” actually means.

Confucius Says - Hierarchy and Enlightenment

2.1 Introduction

Mention “Confucius” to a typical Western audience, and the immediate reaction is likely to be one of amusement - “Confucius says” followed by a pompous, sometimes ludicrous, occasionally smutty, statement is a frequently used way to tell a bad joke. The only Westerners to take Confucius seriously are students and Asian Culture scholars who make a study of ancient Chinese literature and philosophy, for whom Confucian ideas are valuable as part of our total cultural heritage, but even they would not usually regard Confucius to be socially relevant in a modern, Western context. “Confucian society” is thought to be some kind of morally conservative, highly hierarchical and tradition-bound society that modern nations evolved away from, and any remaining ones are in an ongoing process of dying out. On the rare occasion when Westerners think about Confucius at all, they might concede the importance of Confucian ideas to Oriental nations and individuals who have not yet fully converted to democratic and capitalist principles, but that is only because traditions take time to change.

This is an unfortunate misconception. The essential ideas of Confucianism are universal, in terms of time, geography and cultural context. They concern how leaders in a hierarchical system should conduct themselves in a way that maintains stability and maximizes consensus. For all the emphasis on democracy and equal opportunity, even Westerners work and live in hierarchical systems, and they can benefit from Confucian principles as much as Orientals.

It is also a serious mistake to assume an inherent incompatibility between Confucianism and democracy, or between Confucianism and capitalism. South Korea, with essentially no change in its government and social hierarchies, now has a democratically elected President who was once an imprisoned, tortured and nearly murdered political dissident. Whereas the more westernized Soviet Union collapsed after attempting economic modernization, the neo-Confucian China achieved much greater successes in its economic reform, again without undergoing significant modifications of its hierarchical structure. The success of the compact city state of

Singapore in establishing a prosperous, modern and technologically advanced, yet highly controlled, “Confucian” society, is well known and highly puzzling to Western commentators. The examples show that Confucian societies are highly adaptable, meaning that they usually resist fundamental changes in the short term.

Far from being exotic and antiquated, Confucian principles, when stated simply, sound too obvious and common: the need for moderation and compromise; the need to follow well established procedures; the need for leaders to constantly reflect on their own conduct, take advice and seek improvements; the need to educate the people one leads; ... The point is to follow these as a way of life, so that they come naturally. Confucianism is not a technology; it does not provide a toolkit that one pulls out when the right spanner is needed for a particular nut, or a book of sample answers to be memorized to tackle a particular question that comes up on the examination. Like the economic principle of Adam Smith (which too sounds very simple and obvious when stated by itself), Confucianism is a moral philosophy that has to be applied consistently, yet adapted constantly to particular circumstances.

This is an introduction to the life and ideas of Confucius, in particular about how his ideas arose from the material conditions existing at and before the time of Confucius. Whereas other spiritual schools, including later Confucians, speculated about heaven, Confucius was very much concerned with the material world. His advice about our conduct was strictly for the purpose of a better society and better human existence, rather than for something unprovable and unobservable. It is therefore not preachy to speak of the “Confucian way of life”, and adopting a Confucian outlook in conduct is something all of us can aim to achieve.

The available biographical texts about Confucius contain much material introduced by later writers with a different agenda. Taoists extoll some aspects of Confucius and his disciples to oppose vanity and overachievement, and Legalists about the need for rules and hierarchy. Confucians anxious to show how great Confucius was, made up naive and unlikely stories that presented his life as mythical rather than real. The fact that so many of the stories look ridiculous explains why it is so easy to dismiss the life and ideas of Confucius as comical, or as contrived by reactionary people as tools to preserve an old order. The present account will try to sieve facts from myth and show Confucius as a human individual, both a political thinker and a politician, rather than a figure of legend.

2.2 Social background

Confucius lived during the Eastern Zhou period, when the old feudal system devised by the founders of Zhou Kingdom had broken down, but before the free-for-all Warring States period had begun. New ideas for organizing Chinese societies were needed, and Confucius started the process which eventually established the numerous schools of thought that competed for the attention of princes, until one school, the Legalists, and one state, Qin, achieved the unification of China as a centrally governed empire.

To understand the logic of Zhou feudalism, two things must be remembered.

First, when the Kingdom of Zhou was founded, China was a sparsely populated land on which wild animals and nomadic tribes still roamed, and civilized government existed only in isolated towns. Second, money had not yet been invented, and the main way for a sovereign to reward a loyal follower or relative is to give him a piece of land and a tribe of followers. With both land and people, the tribe leader could then build a town surrounded by a protective wall, cultivate farming land around it, and call soldiers into battle in times of trouble. In short, loyal followers and relatives are made into feudal lords, occupying a network of mutually supporting towns, each dominating its surrounding territory.

Since money did not exist, taxes and salaried officials to collect them were unknown. Instead, the feudal lord extracted labour from his followers: the suburban land was divided into standard plots of 3 by 3 squares with 8 serf-peasant families occupying the surrounding plots and the centre part reserved for their lord; the serf-peasants were required to spend part of their time working the lord's land, as well as to take part in public works projects. The higher tribal members, the Shi (knight) class, were entitled to bear arms to fight for the lord, for which they received portions of land and serfs of their own. They normally lived in the town itself to perform garrison duties, and were mustered to fight in the field when needs arose.

The tribe of followers was regarded as the extended family of the lord, and the whole tribe was thought to have descended from a common, divine ancestor, who must be honoured according to a prescribed set of annual rituals, which were believed to bring down blessings to the tribe and were needed to ensure good harvests and good communal health. As head of the family, the lord was the tribe's link to the divine ancestor, and only the "right" person, chosen according to valid rules of succession, could fulfil this role properly. If the position was usurped by the wrong person, then the divine ancestor would reject the ritual sacrifices or would be unable to rest in peace, thus causing pestilences or natural disasters. A lord that fails to do his duties properly, by not governing well or showing insufficient ceremonial dedication, would have a similarly bad effect on the whole tribal community.

In this way, the religious practices, keyed to farming dates, provide an ideological underpinning for communal cohesion and legitimate succession. In the same way, the King of Zhou was the supreme head of the family of all Chinese people, and is owed allegiance by all the feudal lords. A similarly elaborate set of rituals for regular audiences between the King and the lords served to reinforce this relationship. Together, the various rules of behaviour form the Zhou Conventions (Zhou Li).

Different from the European feudal system, the traditional Chinese rule of inheritance provides for succession along the male line only, but it recognizes all biological sons as being eligible to succeed rather than only issues of the official wife, with precedence determined by the seniority of the mother. By inheriting from both the mother and the father, a European feudal lord could pick up widely flung territories with incompatible political traditions, producing numerous problems of government, while the Chinese system avoids this, and because a lord tended to have numerous concubines and hence many children, lack of heirs was seldom a problem. The

problem was rather the reverse problem of too many heirs; in particular, an old lord might have late life sons born by young favorite concubines, who would usually try to manipulate the lord into renaming a younger son as heir, instead of the previously named heir from the senior wife. This often led to succession disputes, in which powerful barons put in a hand to get their own choices to succeed. Often, princes of neighbouring states would be called upon to arbitrate, or appeals made to the Zhou King to reimpose order.

By the time of Confucius, the central feudal system had all but broken down. The prestige of the Zhou throne had been greatly reduced by the misrule of a number of tyrannical kings, and a major family feud coupled with a nomadic invasion had led to the total devastation and abandonment of the extensive territory around the Zhou western capital, so that the rule of the King was restricted to the much smaller territory around the eastern capital, and he could only command the resources comparable to those of a lesser feudal lord, such that he could no longer enforce baronial obedience. There was no longer a central authority to enforce a common code of feudal conduct for the whole of China.

At the same time, population increases in the baronial states and military conquests had extended baronial government well beyond single towns. With no central government, individual states fought each other frequently. Instead of small, rather ritualistic combats fought by little bands of town resident noblemen riding chariots, mass infantry battles with peasant soldiers became prominent, and each lord sought to govern over as much population as his land could support. As it was difficult for a lord to make use of the labour of serf-peasants living very far away from the capital, a levy on harvests became the main form of taxation, so that a lord controlled stockpiles of collected grain, and paying appointed officials with a ration of grain came into practice as an alternative to the allocation of land.

This is a very significant change. Previously, when a lord needed someone to help run the government, he would call upon some member of his family or some other nobility, because they were the ones already “paid” by the state with land; the state was a family business, in fact it was regarded as a family. Birth was the principal requirement for holding office. Once this ceased to be the only criteria, the natural thing was to use some kind of educational criteria for selection. In this sense, society was changing from aristocracy to meritocracy, and opportunities for upward mobility were being opened up. Instead of spoilt brats of nobility, who inbreed extensively and degenerate rapidly, fresh people with knowledge and trained skills could be recruited from a much wider field, and the content and mode of education became a significant social issue, since it fundamentally affects the future government and leadership of a society.

Thus, Confucianism was a reform movement undergone by a hereditary feudalistic society to adapt to new conditions. Confucius did not invent hierarchical societies or feudalism, since they existed long before him, but merely devised new ideas of personnel. However, he was in fact seeking to preserve the existing social order, and in this sense his aims were conservative rather than radical. Nevertheless, the process of education leaves room for an orderly, gradual evolvement of society,

and such a principle is as valid today as it was two thousand five hundred years ago.

2.3 The state of Lu

Confucius spent most of his life in the state of Lu, on the eastern side of China, strategically placed at the start of the Zhou dynasty to be an outpost of civilization among barbarians. The Duke of Lu was the direct descendent of the Duke of Zhou, the uncle of the second Zhou King and regent during the King's minority, who oversaw the codification of the Zhou Conventions. This gave the state of Lu something of a vested interest in traditions and feudal orthodoxy, and in the early centuries of Zhou's history, Lu maintained a close adherence to its feudal duties. However, an unwise move by King Xuan to side with a younger son in a Lu succession dispute led to a rupture. Had the Zhou Kingdom remained strong, it might have eventually reimposed the previous relation, but as its authority severely declined soon after, the state of Lu lost any incentive to resume its abeyance.

In due course, the same centrifugal tendencies appeared in Lu itself. Three junior branches of the House of Lu, Meng, Ji and Shu, were established in the reign of Duke Zhuang. By successively backing the "right" ducal heirs in several disputes, the lords of Ji managed to monopolize power for so long that it became virtually hereditary. Together with his Meng and Shu cousins, one Lord Ji divided up the peasants and soldiers to swear allegiance and pay tax to the individual houses rather than directly to the Duke, who was reduced to the nominal role of presiding over the annual rituals. An attempt to reassert ducal authority by Duke Zhao, around the time when Confucius was still a youth, failed and the Duke died in exile.

Retribution was swift however. Each of the three lords had a baronial town with the usual garrison soldiers and suburban peasants, but over several generations the lords themselves lived in the Lu capital running the ducal government, so that the governors they appointed to manage the towns usurped their authority. In their own households in the capital, their chiefs of staff too began to emulate their example of "kicking your boss upstairs", knowing that the men below had become accustomed to the idea of obeying the commands from the level immediately above, rather than from the nominal lords further up. For the period when Confucius was in his forties, Yang Huo, the chief of staff of the House of Ji, was the de facto dictator of Lu, while Lord Ji was virtually kept a prisoner. In doing this, Yang Huo was tapping into a widespread feeling that the three baronial houses were arrogant and exceeding their station in life, though his real purpose in cutting down the barons was to raise himself and other lower order supporters, rather than the revival of the higher authorities and re-establishment of the old feudal order.

But this did not last long either. Although Yang Huo held de facto power in Lu, the practising of the various state rituals was too deeply entrenched to change, and it continued to be necessary to regularly present the lords in public ceremonies and pay homage. Finding such obligations irksome, Yang Huo decided to replace the three barons altogether rather than nominally rule through them. In attempting

this, he overplayed his hand. Faced with such a serious threat, the barons and their still loyal and semi-loyal followers coalesced to counteract, and mobilized sufficient resources to defeat the Yang Huo faction. After being besieged in his own stronghold for a period, Yang Huo escaped to the neighbouring Qi state, leaving behind a government vacuum in Lu. Into this aristocratic vacuum stepped Confucius and his followers, to usher in a new chapter in the history of ancient China.

2.4 The early career of Confucius

Confucius was descended from the royal family of Shang, the dynasty ruling China previously to the Zhou takeover, during which the Shang king committed suicide following his army's defeat. His son was granted a much reduced domain as a vassal of the Zhou king, but soon rose in an unsuccessful revolt and died. His state was then given to his uncle with the title of Duke of Song. A branch of the Song ducal family was established at the town of Kong, which became the family's surname, and its baron participated in the Song government over several generations. However, in another one of those baronial feuds, the great-great-great-great grandfather of Confucius was murdered, but his son escaped to the neighbouring state of Lu. Little was recorded about the next couple of generations of the Kongs, but Confucius's father was mentioned twice in historical records as a military hero. In one incident, a group of Lu soldiers charged into the town of Biyang, but was threatened with being cut off by a gate being dropped behind them; however, the very muscular Officer Kong managed to hold the gate up with his arms, allowing his comrades to retreat from the town. In another, he was besieged in a town, but successfully broke out to escort a senior officer to safety before breaking back in to help with the defence, which held out long enough for the besiegers to give up.

After returning from the latter campaign, Officer Kong was already over sixty, but he decided to take a new wife, a young daughter of the Yan family living in the Lu capital of Qufu, apparently to have a martially capable son: he already had several daughters and one son who was lame. The wife had some initial difficulty at conceiving, but a visit to some kind of fertility shrine seemed to help, and Confucius was born when his father was well over 65. When he was 3, his father died, aged around 70, and his mother took him back to Qufu to live with her own family - possibly because, as a mere knight, his father's estate was non-hereditary and reverted to the state upon death, or perhaps because it was inherited by the elder son, who refused to provide for his stepmother and stepbrother. In any case, Confucius was said to have been raised in reduced circumstances, but claims of abject poverty seem to be exaggerated as he certainly was given some form of training befitting his knightly status in preparation for future state service.

The biography of Confucius mentions his early interest in religious rituals: after seeing adults engaged in acts of sacrifice in the temples, he would imitate the actions at home the way children "play house". This is not as comical as it might sound: the ancient Chinese ancestor worship was so closely linked with family life and farming practice that there was no idea of religion as a spiritual activity separate from

material living. It was not thought to be much different from getting together for meals three times a day. For the same reason, a separate priestly class did not really exist. There were officials responsible for the upkeep of temples, recording the worship activities, directing and prompting people to do particular acts in ceremonies, etc., but these were not regarded as particularly different jobs compared with other officials who upkeep palaces, barrack or even stables, record births, military actions or astronomical events, or manage proceedings of official banquets. These are all activities that require a particular type of training, which produces people who can read and write, remember procedures, and handle technical details; in other words, educated people rather than aristocratic warriors trained to fight and to bark out orders.

The biography also records Confucius starting his state service as a minor official in the household of Lord Ji, keeping records for storage and supervising herds, “his accounts were clear and his herds were plump”. The interesting point to note is that, neither meat nor milk were significant components of the Chinese diet at the time, and the herds of cattle were kept for different purposes: to pull plows in the field or carts on the road, and to be slaughtered in ritual sacrifice. Another description of his activities mentions that, whenever he went into the state shrine, he would ask many questions about the objects kept in the shrine and the ritual procedures followed. In some way or other, he began to distinguish himself to be worthy of more advanced training, cumulating in his being sent to the Zhou capital, where the central archives were kept, to learn more about historical writings and traditional rituals. The biography goes on to say that after returning from the Zhou capital, Confucius acquired more students. Lord Meng, who went on a diplomatic mission but found to his embarrassment that he was ignorant of the steps he had to perform in the official ceremonies he had to witness in the other states, told his two sons to learn from Confucius about such matters.

Does it mean that Confucius was making a living from students paying tuition fees? Not at all. Such commercial enterprise was impractical in those days, first because most students could not afford to pay - Confucius was quoted saying “anyone who presents me with a few strings of dry meat could become my student”, and most students would not be able to present him with much more than that. Further, with no mass media and advertising, it would also be difficult for a commercial school to reach out to customers. His school was a state supported enterprise, taking in students who were entitled to knightly training by virtue of their rank. There were some foreign students, but they came to Lu for training intending to remain in the state and become its servants, like Confucius’s own ancestor. He received an annual stipend of one thousand bushels of grain (or 64000 cups, but the figure was usually stated in the rounded amount of sixty thousand), which supported not just him and his family, but any student that did not have means of living while studying. It is quite possible however that the better off students would provide him with private gifts to supplement the official income. This explains the quotation “Since Lord Ji granted me a stipend of one thousand bushels, friends got closer to me; since Nan-gong Jingshu transported me in his carriage, my ideas spread wider; without these

two benefactors, my way would have lapsed”. That is, with a stipend to operate the school, he could support more students. Though the stipend came from Lord Ji, it was derived from the state revenue extracted by the Ji household, and Lord Ji was supposedly acting on behalf of the Duke. Similarly, Nangong Jingshu, the second son of Lord Meng who controlled another part of the state revenue, contributed towards the work of Confucius on behalf of the state in addition to a personal show of respect as his father asked.

In fact, even when his students were doing work for the state, they were entitled to draw from Confucius's grain allocation. A story in the text says Gongxi Hua was sent as emissary to another state, and asked for grain to be given to his mother during his absence. The amount Confucius approved was considered too little, and the student managing things for Lord Ji decided on his own to give out 50 times the amount, which annoyed Confucius into saying “You are making the rich richer...”. The story shows that Confucius actually controlled his one thousand bushel stipend only in a nominal manner. It was more like the budget of a government department or army unit.

It appears from some of the passages in old texts that more than one such training schools existed, and there was a level of competition between them. “Three times Confucius lost students to the rival teacher and three times got them back, but Yan Hui remained throughout”. The passage itself is almost certainly wrong, since at the time Confucius was running his school, Yan Hui was still a child, at most a teenager, but passages in other texts support the idea of rival schools. Several texts even claim that Confucius, once he became the Commissioner for Security, had the rival teacher executed for teaching anti social ideas, though Confucian scholars tended to disbelieve the story.

What was the content of the teaching? A number of ancient texts edited by Confucius or his associates indicate that in addition to historical records and ritual procedures, student learned poetry, divination, music, archery and chariot riding. Poetry and music were not only used in rituals and banquets, they also contained lamentations and curses people uttered against tyrannical rule; in other words, they met political purposes rather than recreational. Though no texts for archery and riding exist, the odd quotations in some texts indicate that Confucius practised both, and presumably they were part of the standard knightly training.

But Confucius was not content with pursuing a scholarly end making an indirect contribution to government; he aspired to be in government. Though the exact timing is unknown, for a while he was chief of staff for a nobleman in the neighbouring state of Qi, and was given an audience by the Duke of Qi on the art of government. The biography claims that the Duke wished to give Confucius a high appointment, but was persuaded otherwise by his chief minister, though the argument given in the text sounded more like a much later critique of the followers of Confucius rather than what a contemporary would say about him. In any case, he returned to Lu without achieving anything substantial in Qi.

The biography also claims that while Yang Huo was in power, he attempted to persuade Confucius into holding office, but the stories all sounded contrived,

invented after Yang Huo's downfall to show "we have always been against him". The first story says when Confucius was 17, shortly after his mother died, Yang Huo organized a banquet for the knights under the Ji command. Confucius tried to attend but was refused admission. This is highly unlikely since he would be in mourning and not participating in celebratory events. It was also unlikely that Yang Huo would be standing at the door checking the ticket of each knightly guest. A different version (more likely) says Yang Hua told Confucius about the banquet at his mother's funeral, including the information that Confucius was not being invited to attend.

The second story says that Confucius was deliberately avoiding visiting Yang Huo, who thought of the idea of sending a gift (a roast pig, a major item because roast pork was used for ritual sacrifice, and receiving a share of the pork after the ceremony was an indication of rank) to his house when he was not at home. Under the rule of conduct, if a recipient was not there personally to give thanks for the gift, he must visit the sender to do so. Seeing through the stratagem, Confucius deliberately made the visit when Yan Huo was not at home, but it so happened they met on the road. Yang Huo proceeded to scold Confucius for not using his talents, receiving an ambiguous reply, but Confucius stayed at his school work without fulfilling his apparent consent. This story was also a bit unlikely, since Confucius was already receiving a stipend from the House of Ji, then controlled by Yang Huo, and did not seem to object to it. In any case, men of scholarly dispositions were not what Yang Huo needed to recruit just then - discontented members of the three baronial houses willing to turn against their current masters were much more useful. However, if Yang Huo succeeded in carrying out his coup, then he would indeed be interested in indications of wide support, and getting Confucius on board would be more valuable.

The exile of Yang Huo meant that a large number of officials, particularly those of the House of Ji, were no longer available, and new appointees were urgently needed. Confucius had previously worked as a minor Ji official and had been running a school with a Ji stipend, and he had a large number of educated followers. It made sense to appoint them to fill the vacancies. So finally, Confucius could fulfil his aspiration and try out his ideas. But for reasons to be explained later, his power too would be short lived. Before we continue with the biography, let us first turn to his political ideas.

2.5 Confucianism

Confucius sees government as a process of education: people must be taught to know what is right and what is wrong, and rulers must be seen as teachers that set good examples for their subjects and be persons the people look up to. If such a relation is established, then the subjects would do socially correct things with minimal coercion, threats and penalty. This is not just more humane, but also more economical - police forces, courts and prisons are expensive to run, as modern governments know all too well, and have a tendency to brutalize the law enforcers as

well as the subjects (which is again all too familiar with modern as well as ancient governments).

Rulers must constantly reflect on their own conduct and see whether they are having the right influences on the people, and an essential part of this process is to listen to criticisms. Officials who pretend obedience, play tricks and tell the superiors what they want to hear are bad for the system; they are “base men” (xiao-ren) rather than upright, straight talking “noble persons” (jun-zi) that the ruler should try to surround himself with.

In the Confucian ideal, education, not birth, is the most important qualification for government; everyone with the right education and attitude to set a good example for the people, is fit to lead, whether aristocratic or not. In this sense, Confucius advocates meritocracy instead of aristocracy. Nevertheless, peasant boys and foot soldiers, being excluded from opportunities of education, are hardly likely to be appointed officials. Opportunities are open only to the knight classes, but even such a limited path of upward mobility would increase the supply of talent to fill government positions, especially as the expansion of commerce and industry, and the decay of the old estate system making land freely tradable, brought new needs to have officials to collect tax, monitor movements of people and goods, arbitrate disputes, and so on. The complex relations between states and powerful families also brought need for diplomats and spies.

Three expressions are frequently heard in Confucian writings: “ren”, usually translated into “humanity”, “li”, usually expressed as “rituals”, and “zhong-yong” or moderation, but “li” is actually broader, closer to “conventions” or even “procedures”, “ren” probably is more like “good government”, “benevolence” or even “statesmanship”, for the most humane treatment one can give to people is to provide them with a good ruler. When Confucius says “ke (restrain) ji (yourself) fu (cover) li (procedures), ren lies within”, he is advising rulers to channel their ideas and impulses through properly established conventions and procedures, in order to achieve orderly government. Even the desire to do good must be restrained by procedures, since public policies have side effects, and there are different interest groups to look after. Extremism is always harmful and overtaxing of a country’s resources on even a very worthwhile objective is to be avoided, and the ruler’s job is to set the “middle way” among the conflicting ideas and needs.

For the later Warring States rulers looking for quick results in increasing agricultural production and population to sustain larger armies and greater military conquests, the Confucian emphasis on stability and moderation looks useless. They relied on Legalism to serve them better. The Legalists said that all that personal character cultivation wanted by the Confucians was impractical nonsense, and you simply need to codify all the rules clearly and hire officials to enforce them, with high rewards for those who follow the rules well and show results, and severe punishment for those who fail. If even minor violations are punished severely, then people would live and act very carefully, and society will be orderly and well governed.

Just as aristocracy contains literally seeds for its own destruction, since a small number of inbreeding feudal families soon degenerated into sickness and incompe-

tence, legalism too contains its own seeds of destruction: rewards and penalties both inflate with time - holding office is risky because failures are severely punished, so that only constantly increasing rewards and coercive recruitment could bring people on board; and people, especially officials, who make mistakes would use various means to avoid punishment, resorting to trickery, cover up and bribery, which must be penalized even more severely with even more laws and more officials. Soon the whole society is spying on each other in the hope of getting rewards and avoiding getting caught by their enemies by reporting them first. Further, once punishment reaches the point when small offenses lead to execution, it becomes safer to take up banditry and rebellion, which gives people at least a fighting chance of survival rather than sure death. A disastrous social disintegration is the inevitable result.

This is why Confucianism soon made its return, though its advocates could only find justification by citing the need to govern in accordance with laws of nature, which is more of a Taoist idea, with laws moderated by an injection of humanity, and officials who are more than just rule-following automatons, but know what is “naturally” right. Doing less may achieve more, though not to the extent of “best government is no government” (which are again Taoist ideas). It is this hodgepodge of Legalism, Confucianism and Taoism that became the traditional government philosophy of China and much of east Asia.

2.6 Confucius the official

According to the biography, the first post held by Confucius was the Governorship of Zhongdu, while his student and righthand man, Zi Lu, became Lord Ji's chief of staff. This puzzled Confucian scholars, since governing a town, too small and obscure to be located, seems less important than Zi Lu's job. They should know better - Zhongdu must have been the capital of Lu State, since the three baronial towns of the great lords were known as the three Du's, and Zhong is “central”. Governing the capital city, where the Duke and the three lords all resided, would seem to be important enough a job. This is also confirmed by a couple of passages in the ancient texts. One says “after less than a year in office, Confucius's policies were being copied in other towns”. It would seem quite reasonable that other towns would take seriously decisions made for the capital city. Another says Confucius specified the thickness of coffin boards to be four inches inner and five inches outer, which would seem to be a national rather than local decision appropriate for the governor of the capital but not an obscure town.

The biography proceeds to say that Confucius was then made the Commissioner for Public Works, and then Commissioner for Security. Because in the Lu hierarchy, the former position was senior to the latter, and further, was in practice hereditary for Lord Meng, scholars assumed that Confucius was actually only Lord Meng's assistant, and was then promoted. It is however curious that he changed job so quickly within just a short time, because considerable activities were recorded for his term as Security Commissioner and it seemed to have extended over several years; nothing was recorded as Commissioner for Works, and not much more

for Governorship of Zhongdu. The time from the downfall of Yang Huo to when Confucius was Security commissioner was at most about a year.

The reasonable explanation is that he in fact held just a single job: as recipient of a state stipend, he did whatever public task that happened to be needed, and was broadly responsible for all affairs of the Lu capital, including both security and public works. Because decisions for the capital were also adopted elsewhere, his work was of both municipal and country wide relevance. If the official post for a particular function happened to be unoccupied at the time, then in a vague sort of way, he was said to be holding that position. Whether the job he was doing was senior or junior to the job he did earlier was basically irrelevant.

The major achievement of Confucius in office recorded in history was a diplomatic one. Just over a year after Yang Huo's downfall, the states of Lu and Qi agreed on a peace treaty, and the two dukes met to hold a signing ceremony. The Qi side added a last minute clause requiring Lu to contribute troops whenever Qi went to war; instead of causing problem by refusing a specific requirement as an ally, Confucius made the counter proposal that the new clause was conditional upon Qi returning certain border territory it occupied. This gives Lu not only an immediate benefit, but a future way out by quibbling whether the condition had been fully satisfied. There were some other stories about the Qi side wanting to kidnap the Lu duke using barbarian soldiers pretending to be dancers, an attempt somehow prevented by Confucius through his prompt action, and about Confucius ordering the execution of a barbarian singer from the Qi duke's entourage who sang mocking songs at the Lu duke. While such dramatic details are unreliable, there probably was some breach of protocol involving some of Qi's barbarian followers for which Confucius criticized the Qi duke and received an apology.

With the glow of diplomatic success, and his students occupying various key posts, Confucius then embarked upon an ambitious program to curb baronial power and revive ducal authority. He got the Duke to decree that the walls of the three baronial capitals were to be razed, and no weapons were to be stored there. This obvious attempt to destroy the military strongholds of the three barons, curiously, had a favorable initial reception, and both Lord Shu and Lord Ji acquiesced. The reason was: both had on past occasions lost control of their own towns, with their governors refusing to take orders and the soldiers obeying their immediate superiors rather than the higher boss (since everyone was by then confused about who the higher boss was: the Zhou King, the Lu Duke, or their own feudal lord?). However, the governor of the Meng capital refused. His town had not been rebellious in the past, and it was an important defense post in the north of Lu against Qi invaders. He also played the main part in mobilizing forces against Yang Huo's coup. Lord Meng was persuaded to feign ignorance about what was going on out there, while his governor closed the town gates against soldiers sent from the capital to raze the walls.

In the mean time, gossip began to reach the ears of Lord Ji that Confucius was not acting in the Ji interest but had another agenda, with events lending clear support to the talk. Despite the loss of their military stronghold, the House of Ji

continued to control the taxation and the men from the bulk of the state, and with a bit of time, Lord Ji could always find new ambitious men to replace Confucius and his followers, and they soon found themselves less and less in demand to perform the tasks of governing Lu. This was however a slow and gradual process, and there was no open breach nor official dismissal letter. There was no indication that the one thousand bushel stipend was taken away; in fact the one indication that drove Confucius into exile was his not receiving a share of the ritual meat after the annual rites, meaning that he was no longer in the rank of a state official.

The biography gives a rather weird story. The Qi duke, after his dealings with Confucius at the treaty ceremony, was said to be so impressed by Confucius that he feared Lu would become a strong threat to Qi. Qi officials then thought of a way to weaken the Lu government by corruption: they gathered a troupe of 80 dancing girls and sent them to Lu as a gift, whereupon Lord Ji and the duke spent all their time with the girls and neglected government business, including the distribution of the sacrificial pork. This seems to be a rather ludicrous story invented by people who knew nothing about how governments work. Cutting up roast pigs at the temple and sending them to important officials would be something the ritual officers did every year, whether the duke was busy with girls or not. There probably was an actual gift of dancing girls from Qi, but most likely given during the treaty ceremony in an exchange of presents. It is also possible that Confucius criticized the gift as inappropriate. Someone mixed the stories up, as often happens with Confucian biography.

Confucius failed because he was both too early and too late. He perceived, correctly, that chaos and inter-state conflicts occurred because there was no central authority to impose a properly worked out set of common conduct, but his idea of breathing life back into the old hierarchical system and reinventing the dignified but ponderous Zhou Conventions, could not be achieved because men, in particular powerful men, while continuing to go through the motions, no longer took seriously the idea of ancestor worship, which formed the social base of the system. The fear that violations of rules of hierarchy and legitimacy would lead to certain retribution by divine forces or central authority had long died away. His own example of upward mobility through education, becoming an official rewarded by salary rather than land, went against the permanent revival of feudal hierarchy.

With greater mobility and the development of industry, commerce and more efficient writing tools, China was on the verge of a knowledge explosion, and after Confucius would come the blooming of the Hundred Schools of Thought. People were starting to think more scientifically. Without the previous superstitious fear of divine punishment, legitimacy and hierarchy were merely what one tries to impose by power. When a central authority was successfully reimposed by the Emperor Qin, he used a much more ruthless system, which however crashed soon under the weight of its own harshness. The softer compromise system devised by the Han rulers brought back many of the ideas of Confucius, in particular the education and selection of officials through a centrally specified set of requirements, but he would not have seen these as the important ideas in his own time.

After a long exile which took him and his students through various states in which he received varying degrees of honoured reception without achieving power, conditions changed enough in Lu to permit Confucius to return as an elder statesman and scholar, and superficially at least his ideas won wide respect among various northern states, with his students and later followers holding offices and educational posts, and eventually, after a bloody Warring States and Qin Empire interlude during which the legalists held sway, the Han empire adopted a version of Confucianism mixed with elements of Legalism and Taoism, as the official state ideology. More than two thousands years later, East Asian is still viewed as being dominated by Confucianism.

2.7 Modern Confucian society

What are modern Confucian states like? As discussed earlier, a Confucian society places high value on education, both for selecting and training leaders, and as a tool for gradual changes, in fact taking an educational approach to the whole process of governing. The successful economies of Asia-Pacific are generally known for their good educational systems, their keen adoption of modern technology, and their technocratic leaders. MIT and Stanford graduates fill the top positions in governments and corporations all over Asia, and Berkeley is over 40% Asian (mostly ABCs, a slightly derogative term indicating that somehow they are neither model Americans nor model Chinese).

However, Western societies also emphasize education and meritocracy; yet they cannot be said to be Confucian. So what are the distinguishing features of modern Confucian societies? The first item has to be elitism and a belief in hierarchies.

Confucius said “The Conventions do not apply to commoners, and the Punishments do not apply to officers”, and a hundred years later Mencius said “Those who work with their minds rule, and those who work with their limbs are ruled”, despite making some apparently democratic remarks often quoted by approving Asian scholars. The two are just summarizing the common belief of the ruling class that it is “different”; that only members of the select are fit to rule. This attitude has not really changed today. What has changed is just the mechanism of selection. Instead of noble birth or learning from a celebrated master, high SAT scores and brand name degrees are now required. Upward mobility is present, but heavily prescribed.

In this, the neo Confucians are not far from the right wing Republicans of today’s USA or the Victorian British; indeed Republican businessmen are often great admirers of Singapore... Yet, the modern Confucian societies are not like 19th Century England nor the Contract with America picture of Newt Gingrich. So we have to look for some other fundamental cause.

One difference lies in the way parts of a system link to each other. The Orientals make connections with each other on concrete factors, whereas Westerners more on shared ideas. Hence the value of family, personal knowledge and past association in Asian systems, compared to the prominence of interest group lobbying in the West.

Whereas Chinese people consider it right that rich relatives should share their good fortune with poor ones, Americans give to charities and foundations. Confucius may be speaking along the Chinese line in “To promote talent, promote the talent you know” and “Be a good person; then a good family man; then rule your state; then rule the world”. Whether the importance of personal connections can be said to be part of his legacy is something for the sociologists to further analyze.

By using personal networking to identify potential heirs, the Confucian system has frequently led to suspicions of nepotism, an emotionally charged word from the time when Popes and Cardinals worked hard to promote the careers of their “nephews”, usually their own bastard sons, whom they could not openly acknowledge in violation of vows of celibacy. The word reeks corruption and immorality. The emphasis on paper qualifications and examinations, which are supposed to have unambiguous correct answers is frequently a way to counter this, for the system to be seen as open and fair.

Underlying the Confucian system, we could detect a certain optimism about our ability to know, choose and teach the right persons to join it, and there underlies an even greater optimism, that a ruling hierarchy can always remain the best governing group by absorbing the best elements of a society.

Starting again with the example of South Korea: nobody found it strange that a retiring president, the former military strongman Roh Teh Woo, selected the former opposition leader Kim Yong Sam to be his own successor (even handing over a huge slush fund he secretly kept); and in Taiwan the handpicked successor to Jiang Jing Kuo ended up actively promoting the downfall of the Nationalist government and helping to elect Chen Shui Bian. Neither the chooser not the chosen see different ideological beliefs as a significant factor against switching camp; persons, not ideologies, count. It seems always possible to avoid fundamental reforms by co-opting new blood.

In contrast, the western democracies choose to be much more pessimistic: no particular ideology is superior, and no group of people can be trusted to always strike a best compromise. There can only be different political parties of equal legitimacy competing for power, with some winning and holding power for short periods due to prevailing fashions and other changing factors, and a government system must be based on various checks and balances preventing anyone from becoming too powerful.

A mantra of democratic societies is that elected leaders are servants of the people. That is, the leaders promise to give the people what they want, to follow them as much as to lead. In contrast, Confucian leaders want to give people what is good for them: the leadership group sees itself as the best and brightest of the society, with the ideas and skills to make the society better. With their technocratic resources and command systems, they seek to re-engineer their society from the top down.

Social engineering programmes, even well thought out initiatives that address real problems, seldom produce the level of benefit the planners envisage for a number of reasons. The lower ranks are usually unfamiliar with the ideas involved, and, not

having generated the ideas themselves, do not have the same motivation to adjust to the new ways of doing things. Given that the benefits of new programmes are often overestimated, the people behind them tend to be too dismissive of the side effects and implementation difficulties of their policies, and are often not well prepared to cope. This accounts for the rather negative connotation of "social engineering", quite aside from its association with "central planning" and "elitism".

Organizations and social systems need room to experiment with ideas, but if new ideas are centrally directed, and the prestige of the leaders are associated with the success of new ideas, then the ideas cease to be experimental, since experiments are supposed to succeed or fail on their own merits. People responsible for implementation tend to "pull out all the stops", adding incentives for supporting new programmes to make their success easier, but that means participants may join in for the incentives rather than genuine sharing of the ideas, while programmes might succeed for other reasons than the quality of their ideas. The capacity for change by adopting new members into the system is therefore often accompanied by a curious weakness in idea adoption.

Perhaps Confucians are too naive and inexperienced in the realities of power. All the same, the optimistic perspective is refreshingly different, and promises something that deserves our serious attention even today.

Singapore and Modern Confucianism

3.1 Introduction

Singapore is a place that arouses deeply divided feelings among observers. Economically, it is one of the great success stories of this century, but it is also widely seen as an authoritarian state that limits freedom of speech and political rights. Even more importantly, its leader Lee Kuan Yew has set himself up as the proponent of an alternative model of economic and political development for the poorer nations, one that rejects western decadence while incorporating “Asian” values of studiousness, achievement through hard work, and deference to authority and group. That is, instead of humbly pleading guilty to liberal charges of sacrificing human rights for the sake of prosperity, he claims to have invented a superior ideology more applicable to the less developed part of the world than what North America and Europe wish to export. This elevates the polemic to a higher level of controversy, with western journalists constantly carping on Lee’s speeches and the actions of the Singapore government, hoping to detect chinks in their armours, while they answer in kind through their various public relations channels. In the end, neither side has been able to strike a knockout blow, and a standoff has ensured.

This is not a simple standoff between good and bad; between democracy and dictatorship; not even between East and West. Lee’s stance is discomfiting to the Western liberals precisely because it cannot be neatly labelled and then dismissed. If he were just an ignorant Asian dictator, on route to his inevitable downfall like, say, Ferdinand Marcos, then his ideas would pose no threat to the orthodoxy of the western nations. The fact is however that his policies achieve economic prosperity while ignoring many of the sacred cows of standard political thinking, a situation that cannot be taken in without a serious and painful reassessment of one’s basic tenets; in fact, something that threatens the currently fashionable ideological paradigm. Considering that the great Soviet Union has collapsed like good old capitalists said it would, is little Singapore going to defy the most well proven liberal thinking?

But what exactly is Lee’s so successful ideology? There is nothing special about

a belief in education, hard work, family, social hierarchy, and so on. These are not the particular inventions of Lee Kuan Yew, or even particularly Asian. Lee's invention is much more original. It is a unique combination of Leninist organizational tactics with capitalist industrial and commercial technology implemented among a population with an Asian social background, resulting in a strictly controlled and paternalistic corporate entity that has delivered material wealth to its members. In this article, I wish to analytically examine the various facets of this structure.

3.2 Lenin

Few people would profess to be communists today. As everyone knows, communism brutalized and impoverished nations; perhaps even more importantly as no one likes to fail, it failed. Yet, we would do well to remember that the idea once attracted some of the best and the brightest, both in the East and the West. For example, Anthony Blunt and Kim Philby, both highly intelligent and capable members of the British aristocracy, took up communism at Cambridge and willingly spied for the Soviet Union over several decades.

To both radical intellectuals and disadvantaged classes, communism offered Marx's highly seductive and supposedly scientific analyses of the shortcomings of capitalist societies, promising the inevitable arrival of the proletariat utopia in which money and exploitation will be unknown. With such ideological inspiration, and with highly effective organizational techniques initiated by Lenin, communist parties triumphed, however briefly, in Russia the largest country in the world, and China the most populous, despite the backward development of capitalism in these countries and their weak working classes, while failing to make headway in the more mature capitalist economies that are supposedly more ready to move to the next stage.

The cases of Russia and China demonstrate that, for the purpose of achieving power, the political economy of communism is less important than its organizational technique. If you do the second well, you can succeed despite the low applicability of the first. For over half a century Communism was the favoured ideology of all revolutionary leaders, most of them of middleclass rather than proletariat background, because it provided a ready-made set of propaganda and organizational tools. Communism might die, but Leninism lives on. The ideological buzzwords change, and photos of Yeltsin replace those of Gorbachev, but the same machinery of control can remain in operation.

Lenin's revolutionary machinery, the Bolshevik party, was a network of individuals whose total loyalty was devoted to the organization: personal feelings and common humanity were not only secondary, they were suspect and dangerous. Given such an "iron discipline" organization, the trusted individuals were placed into all the important parts of society. Army units had their political commissars, and civil service units, collective farms, factories, schools, trade unions and sports clubs all had their party secretariats. Among other things, the party achieved control over all parts of the economy; hence, private ownership of property ceased to exist, and

a nominally Communist society came into being.

Since all aspects of life were under control, moulding a new man fit for the communist utopia was realistic to contemplate. This seemed to be a very attractive scheme to highly power-conscious revolutionaries out to make a better world. The only drawback is: it did not work.

But perhaps the failure was simply due to its trying to achieve too much? The communist utopia envisaged a society of selfless individuals, who do not own and do not desire private property, and who, without coercion, would work to their best abilities and take only enough that satisfies their needs. The concept of economic incentive is eliminated. The consequence was that, with the suppression of market forces and individual initiatives that encourage the production of food and consumer goods, the old Russia and old China found themselves unable to deliver material wealth to its populace, and hence, unable to provide adequate rewards to enforce conformity.

However, there is no reason why a Leninist control structure cannot be imposed on a capitalist society that fully accommodates market forces and individual economic initiatives: you can still build up a network of trusted individuals and place them in the key positions of all organizations. It simply takes a higher and more refined level of knowledge and skill to carry this out, instead of the crude and brutal methods used by the communists. This was successfully achieved in Singapore, a success which many other nations, whether communist, feudal, colonial or already capitalist, seriously admire and are keen to emulate.

3.3 PAP and the communists

Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of Singapore's ruling People's Action Party, started his involvement in politics while studying law at Cambridge, by getting together with other Singaporean students sharing anti colonial sentiments. As a young barrister, he made his name by his legal defence of trade unionists and student activists arrested for sedition against the British colonial government, while at the same time impressing the British as a promising native leader who was both capable and well educated, thus offering good prospects of effective post-independence government along a generally pro-western line.

These were good credentials for an aspiring leader, but to successfully capitalize on such assets, he needed a mass organization that could appeal to the majority Chinese population, who were mostly poor and illiterate. They not only spoke no English; even the Chinese they spoke was provincial dialects rather than the official Mandarin. Cambridge trained barristers were not their idea of anti-British, anti-colonial leaders.

To overcome this problem, Lee and his British educated associates went into coalition with other activists whose main motivations were Chinese chauvinism and communist revolution. The partnership suited both sides well, with one side well versed in the thinking of the colonial powers and familiar with the legal/parliamentary tactics used in the overt struggle for independence, and the other side undertaking

the street organization, mass campaigns and underground work.

Everyone realized that Lee was riding a tiger: it was only a few years earlier that the Chinese communists of Malaya were engaged in a guerilla war against the British, who had the support of the feudal Malay rulers, and a little earlier against the Japanese. They were defeated only after strenuous efforts through the implementation of the “strategic hamlet” policy that effectively cut the guerrillas off from the rural population, a policy which the Americans were to repeat without success later in Viet Nam. The communists still had an extensive underground network in both Malaya and Singapore, and could easily mobilize a large population of sympathizers in trade unions and schools.

But Lee succeeded in caging the tiger, though the fight was very close indeed. Shortly after self government was granted by the British and Lee was elected Chief Minister, his People’s Action Party split into two, with the anti-Lee left wing taking virtually the whole organizational machine out of PAP to form the new Barisan Socialis (Socialist Front), and Lee’s government survived in the Legislature by just a one vote margin (including one vote from a sick member who had to be dragged out of hospital to take part in the division). However, the Barisan soon destroyed itself by its inept campaigning against Singapore’s move to join Malaysia in 1962, and by its illogical attempt to emulate the Cultural Revolution that took place in China in the late 60s, while its power bases were successfully weakened by selective detentions of key members, the establishment of rival trade union organizations, closure of propaganda channels, and the redirection of student energy towards career goals and other non-political pursuits.

So working with the communists gave Lee Kuan Yew the political start he required, but perhaps even more importantly for the future, it gave him and his associates a useful lesson on their effective organization methods, whereby a small, tightly linked minority can direct a much larger, and not necessarily sympathetic or comprehending, majority. The question is whether the methods can, on a long term basis, be applied to a country without resulting in the kind of dead hand totalitarian society that was, even in the 60s, already quite obviously on the verge of failure in both Russia and China. In other words, whether one could invent a new, better kind of Leninism for the capitalist and technocratic society. To do that requires an amenable cultural base that was found to be already in existence among the populace.

3.4 The mandarins

Almost alone among all the feudal societies, imperial China has had many intellectual admirers. While Europe was still ruled by petty princes governing small fiefdoms and engaged in incessant wars, a unified China was achieving high levels of stability and culture, with a government of scholars rather than warriors. The imperial examinations were particularly praised: Hardworking and patient men who spent a life time practising calligraphy, poetry and essay writing were rewarded with government offices on the basis of their examination results. This gave suit-

able members of the lower class the chance to join the elite, rather than as potential troublemakers outside the system. It is no accident that two of the most famous leaders of peasant rebellions, Huang Chao and Hung Xiuquan, were both unsuccessful candidates in the examinations before starting their dynasty-wrecking careers.

The idea of achieving status, wealth and happiness through good scholarship is deeply engrained in Chinese culture. Chinese folktales and operas are full of stories of a young man marrying his dream girl after passing his examination - perhaps simply because of the increase in his eligibility; or in longer and more romantic stories, by using his position to rescue his girlfriend from prison, bandits, a rich man's house hold, etc. Poems blatantly say things like "In the book there are houses of gold; in the book there is beauty like jade..." Even the more downmarket gongfu stories usually have the hero (or sometimes, heroine) achieving greatness after developing his/her fighting power by learning from a superior master or by coming across a wonder instruction text, nothing other than scholarship of a more physical kind.

In Singapore and other former colonies, there is a second important tradition: promising native boys (girls were not usually acceptable in those days) were selected for education in the ruling country and then appointed to the civil service at home, so that they could help their colonial masters to govern their own people. These two traditions form the cultural basis of Singapore's meritocratic policy: Rulers must be well educated, and usually they must be educated in elite universities of the west, where they can absorb the ideas of liberal democratic government and modern capitalism, and form personal connections with future leaders of the host nations as well as others. Good scholastic achievements of this kind are the prerequisite to higher things in later life.

To directly implement this policy, the government of Singapore, including the armed forces, education service, economic development agencies and government controlled corporations, recruits a large number of 18-year old high school graduates on the bases of their Cambridge A-level examination results and interview performances, as government cadets to be sent to universities in Britain, US and other countries on a kind of indentured labour contract: In return for the payment of tuition fees, living allowances and other expenses during the study, they are required to work in the Singapore government sector for a number of years; otherwise, repayment of the "bond" with interest is required, normally beyond the ability of the average indentured cadet. That is, there is a high penalty for leaving the system.

At the same time, the reward for staying with the system is also very high. A returned cadet's job performance is carefully watched by his superiors and by the original sponsoring agency, and good performers are given fast promotions and are often placed into important positions very early. A rising star often commands power well above his official position, because he/she would usually have high level patrons whose direct access can be used to facilitate matters, and he/she also commands deference from his/her peers who would be reluctant to offend a person on the move up. This produces a situation of "positive feedback", where good perfor-

mance leads to greater power and influence, and then even better performance.

Despite these, the government has been constantly concerned about the difficulty of finding good candidates for high public positions. A somewhat paradoxical Newtonian dynamics seems to be at play with every action generating a reaction. A promising government cadet is immediately attractive to private companies, especially multinational subsidiaries in Singapore, because of their familiarity with the rules and regulations and of their access to powerful people. Cadets are often enticed to better paying jobs outside the public sector after a few years, sometimes with the new employer expending large sums of money to discharge the remainder of the bond.

Further, once a large number of fast track cadets are in the system, it becomes harder to recruit non-cadets: in the competition for promotion and for the attention of powerful patrons, it would appear that cadets should enjoy an advantage; among other things, they are less likely to quit and so are safer choices for critical positions and positions requiring considerable training and investment. Hence, a marginally unsuccessful candidate for a government cadetship has the tendency to write off the possibility of a government career altogether, for his/her prospects would appear to be significantly inferior to those of a marginally successful candidate, even though the difference between their abilities is only marginal.

Consequently, another plank of the meritocratic system was introduced: public sector salaries must be pegged to private sector salaries. In particular the salaries of ministers and senior civil servants should be comparable to those of corporate chief executives, judges to lawyers in private practice, and so on. The public sector executive salary scales were repeatedly revised upwards, such that now even junior ministerial salaries exceed that of the President of USA. With the strong economy generating high tax revenues, and with a relatively small civil service, the higher salaries are well affordable. They certainly showed their effect in reducing mid-level civil service staff turnover and increasing recruitment success. A second justification, that highly paid politicians and civil servants have less temptation to be corrupt, is more difficult to quantify, but the argument seems logical enough in the abstract.

So the official story is that Singapore has an efficient government controlled by well educated, well paid and honest public servants whose positions are attained for their merit and job performance. Because of this, the correct social and economic policies are implemented, resulting in productivity and prosperity, and generating high tax revenues to continue paying the public servants well. Here we have another positive feedback cycle. Also, with money available and smart officials on selection panels, Singapore can afford to send even larger numbers of promising youngsters for overseas studies and to make them promising public servants of the future. Yet another feedback cycle.

As one would suspect, such a picture is too simple to be exactly true. The life of a mandarin is no where so rosy. I now discuss some of the complexities not so readily visible.

3.5 From guns to butter

A government trying to juggle money between military and civilian expenditures is figuratively said to be deciding between guns and butter, a choice the surplus-laden government of Singapore rarely had to make. Its problem is usually how to handle more of both.

The economic development of Singapore has followed two parallel tracks. First, multinational companies were encouraged to set up operations here, initially in manufacturing components and products for export back to their own countries, and later in regional servicing and production based on a Singapore hub. This cooperation with foreign corporation has the advantage of generating technology transfers, and of minimizing the risk of raising protection barriers. Second, government-owned companies were established in certain key industries, such as those related to defence, and for infrastructure investments that may take long to produce a return and are thus unattractive to or beyond the abilities of private companies.

Many of the investments have paid off handsomely. Singapore Airlines is now one of the largest airlines of the world and for year after year the most profitable as well as the most highly rated in customer satisfaction. Its turnover accounts for nearly 2% of the Gross National Product. While retaining control in the hands of the government, its shares were sold to the public and current market capitalization is \$10 Billion. Similarly, the Development Bank, shipyards (originally started by the British Navy), and the telephone service have all been floated, and electricity, gas, port, office buildings, airport ground services, etc. are to follow suit soon.

The government finger is, literally, in every pie. The Singapore Technology Group, originally known as Chartered Industries because it had a special charter to manufacture weapons for the army, has a subsidiary called ST Automobiles, which runs an Opel car dealership and a taxi company. It originally started as part of a unit for maintaining military vehicles. Another subsidiary, ST Computers, runs a Hewlett-Packard computer agency and a software house, which started as a small unit handling computer purchase and installation projects. Two other subsidiaries handle aircraft maintenance and installation of large scale electronic equipment. The ownership of a large number of government office buildings has just been transferred to the ST Group, with the expectation of floating the shares on the stock exchange one day. The company that controls all that valuable real estate, Pidemco, was itself an offshoot of the Urban Redevelopment Authority, the government body that handles the sale of public land to property developing companies for constructing residences, factories and offices, and the granting of permissions to re-develop private land. Another listed offshoot of URA, Resource Development Corporation, operates stone quarries and ready-mix concrete plants, whose land would in due course also be developed for residences.

The government finger extends well beyond mere ownership. The largest taxi company, Comfort, and the largest supermarket chain, Fairprice, plus an insurance company, some holiday resorts and other properties, are owned by the National Trade Union Congress, which is nominally separate from the government and the

PAP, but always has a Minister Without Portfolio as its chief executive. Singapore Press Holdings, the only company with licenses to publish daily newspapers, has most of its equity owned by the banks and private individuals through shares traded on the stock exchange, but its chief executives have always been persons with extensive working experience in the government, taken from their regular positions to manage the newspaper company. In fact, assignment of senior civil servants to run commercial corporations provides an additional mechanism for rewarding loyal performers. While they continue to receive their pay from the government and have to hand over their business salaries and director fees to the treasury, they are allowed to retain the benefits of share option schemes. The assignments also provide them with experience to start second careers after retiring from the public service.

The episode of the Turf Club, the only body with a license to run a large scale gambling operation in Singapore, shows the difficulty of escaping government control. Over the years, the Club built up a betting surplus large enough to warrant government attention as to the proper use of the fund. A retired minister, Eddie Barker, was courteously nominated to be a member of the Club committee, but in a show of perverse independence he was rejected in the committee election. In swift reaction, a Totalization Board was formed by the government and given authority to oversee horseracing, and the old Turf Club lost its racing license, its use of the race course occupying many acres of prime land, and the existing surplus. A new Bukit Turf Club, with Eddie Barker as chairman, was given the license and the premises (but the surplus fund stayed with the Totalization Board). Everything went on as before, except that the old club committee lost control. In another episode, the Island Club, which operates four 18-hole golf courses around the water reservoirs of the Public Utilities Board, was at risk of losing its land leases until it agreed to accept Board nominees on its management committee.

It is easy to look upon this pervasive control with a sinister eye, but that would be rather unfair. The government involvement in the various economic activities arose because for long it had the best educated personnel of all the organizations and the best means of accumulating capital. For example, it was natural that the defence ministry acted as the technology watcher and venture capitalist, because its particular needs were vitally involved, and because others were not sufficiently trained in technology to assess new developments. Ownership and supervision both arose, as well as other kinds of involvement that occur in the course of business, such as joint ventures with private businesses that receive certain incentives and subsidies, or organizations in trouble coming under government management, analogous to insolvent US savings banks taken over by the deposit insurance agency in the late 80s.

What is more interesting is the effect on the behaviour of the people, both those in control and those under the system. For the former, the taste of business success and corporate decision making is difficult to give up once acquired. Whereas in US or Hong Kong, government control is seen as inevitably inefficient and disruptive to normal market mechanisms, hence something to be minimized at all cost, the commercial success of the Singapore public corporations tends to foster a completely

different set of beliefs. In fact, it is usually agreed that nothing much can be done without government approval, support and coordination to marshal the necessary resources. Businesses require land from URA, building construction permits from Public Works, electricity and water from Public Utilities Board, phone and data transmission lines from Singapore Telecoms, plane trips with Singapore Airlines, capital from banks that operate with licenses granted by the Monetary Authority, advertising space in newspapers that operate with licenses from the Ministry of Culture, and so on. By granting tax breaks and subsidies, establishing particular training programmes, permitting the import of certain types of foreign labour, or simply depositing its budget surplus with a particular bank, the government can make certain businesses more profitable almost overnight. Once an idea like this takes hold, it is self-fulfilling: any proposal not backed by the government, or by people known to be in favour with the government, would be given little support by everyone else and are consequently likely to fail.

For the individual Singaporean, the government is not merely the guardian of his rights, but the very source of it. Lee Kuan Yew was the person who brought the country into being; he and his associates formulated the economic policies that brought the people prosperity, just when nearby countries like China, Viet Nam and the Philippines were following slippery paths to near disasters in the 60s and 70s; the Housing Development Board established by him provides low cost accommodation to the majority of citizens; government schools provide cheap education and strict, though perhaps not very enlightened, discipline to the children. The government directly provides employment in ministries, statutory boards, and increasingly, its numerous corporations. Even when one is not directly employed in the public sector, one has to work with it: A cooked food hawker needs a license to operate a stall; a foreign owned investment bank or currency trading unit needs a permit from the Monetary Authority. Various government rules and regulations must be observed lest one risks losing one's livelihood, while offers of shares in government companies to the public provide opportunities for capital gains. And so on.

This results in a natural tendency to conform: wherever one might go, one remains "in the system", and everyone seems to be working for the same ultimate boss. Despite it being a city of four million people, Singapore feels like a very small place, one single Singapore Inc. Everybody knows it is wise to always tread very carefully, since the peer you offend today, or someone connected to him/her, might turn up as your boss long after you have gone to work somewhere else. In reverse, given the monolithic system, bosses are not skilled in dealing with dissent and disagreement, most organizations do not have well developed machinery or traditions for consensus building and collective decision making, and people who speak their views forthrightly tend to jar the system and so are given rather little indulgence from above and little support from peers. So we have another "positive" feedback: because people conform, the risk of not conforming becomes higher, making conformity all the more necessary.

But again it is not as simple as just that. Yet more factors are at play here.

3.6 Rule by book

We described earlier that the Singapore government owns, supervises or regulates a very large part of the national economy. Usually in such a situation, we see bloated bureaucracies, rampant corruption and gross inefficiency. How does Singapore avoid these? In fact the prevailing management technique is rather basic: Get a group of people you trust and give them a simple set of rules that cover all situations. It is believed that, however sophisticated and complex the situations might be, and whatever expertise that might be involved, one can always codify the knowledge into a set of rules that relatively junior civil servants can apply, and just occasional high level reviews to modify rules to cover new situations and remedy shortcomings are required. So the system is, like Mencius's prescription of "those working with their minds rule; those working with their bodies are ruled", made up of those who write the rule book and those who follow it.

Such a philosophy produces many benefits. The management system is simple, room for corruption is limited, and most of the work can be done by persons with just some limited training: check that conditions X, Y and Z are met, and grant the request. At various levels, the operational structures shuffle papers, move money and grant approvals in simple steps, allowing the country as a whole to tick along. It was particularly suited to a post-colonial situation when a government has to work with ideologically suspect, mostly foreign trained civil servants, especially if there are frequent elections and government changeovers with new governments doubtful of the loyalty of the civil service. It is also relatively easy to assess the performance of the officials: the good officials know how to collect the wanted information for a case quickly to allow the relevant rules to be looked up, provide clear and courteous replies and explanations to petitioners, and give superiors the right amount of feedback so that they know what is going on without getting distracted with details.

But to move up, an official need to be more than just a good paper shuffler; he need to demonstrate capabilities and potential for the higher levels. So in addition to the operational networks, one also needs to be plugged into a network of trust: to have the chance to show oneself before higher officials and demonstrate capabilities, receive unofficial information useful for one's work, and to provide informal feedback. Such networks are important everywhere, but particularly so in Singapore because of the wide span of control of the public sector in the economy. This network of trust is built up using various personal connections: school mates, past colleagues, officer cadet school, same cohort of government scholarship, and of course family connections. If a person is plugged into the network, there is greater chance of being remembered, when an important opening comes up, by the people who are going to make the selection.

Conversely, a person has little future if he/she has been frozen out of the behind-the-scene network. One could have a senior, well paid position, but yet be somehow "out in the cold", whether because of below par (but not obviously poor) performance, the personal dislike of someone higher up, too independent an attitude, etc.

The system is particularly susceptible to rumours of someone being “in favour” or “out of favour”, with people being deliberately deferential and cooperative to those rumoured to be the former and showing coolness to those rumoured to be the latter, whose work and life suffer accordingly. Again, the system tends to be self-fulfilling.

In the end, the usual fate of an official out of favour is a sideways movement to some less critical (though often important sounding) position, and given the wide government control of the economy, there are many obscure corners which out of favour people can be shunted to. As I have said a while ago, a well performing official can rise very fast, but the corollary of this is: one can get out of favour very fast too. Indeed, given that the economy and the civil service can only expand and renew its personnel at some finite rate, fast upward movements for some people must mean downward or at least lack of upward movements for some others. Management changes of this kind are usually announced to the people affected and their subordinates with little advance notice, as decisions are made quickly by the “in” people after quiet discussion among themselves. An official who suspects that he might be out of favour often undergoes long and tense periods waiting for what might eventually befall him/her.

We frequently hear that Singapore’s political system has high stability, and social stability is often cited as the justification for various government policies, but curiously, in some ways the system thrives on a kind of low level instability. With frequent promotions of high flyers into critical positions, usually bringing their retinues of followers with them so that they can establish their own networks of trust within their new territories, and out of favour individuals being moved elsewhere and their personal networks getting disabled as result, stable organizational cultures are rarely maintained. A new manager is expected to “shake up the place a bit” by removing deadwood, improving procedures, achieving new levels of excellence, etc. Anyone not doing this would be suspected of leadership weakness and lack of dynamism, and the success histories of Singaporean organizations being created out of nowhere argues against conservatism and preservation of traditions. Pleading bureaucratic obstruction for failure to perform would only put one out of favour as an incompetent. With that kind of expectations on them, even the successful mandarins’ life is inevitably stressful.

For the public, the main stress lies in knowing what the rule book currently says about something one currently wants, be it a government flat, a Certificate of Entitlement for buying a new car, registering a child in a good school, a public tender, permanent residence, etc. If a person happens to have a case that does not fit any item in the rule book, then the stressfulness is greatly multiplied. The junior official one sees is unable to grant the request, but he might have doubt about whether to simply reject the request or to create extra work by referring the matter higher up to another official, hoping that the latter’s rule book does cover the case, or that he has the authority to change the junior official’s rulebook. The higher official might then find that his rule book also does not cover the case, and he is himself put into equal uncertainty. The result could be interminable delays and uninformative answers (“we are considering the matter” “please come

back later”...) that infuriate the petitioner and embarrass the officials, but with both sides strenuously exercising self control and trying to avoid saying anything that might cause even more trouble.

To cite a small example: A foreigner offered a minor managerial post in Singapore rented a flat through an agency before arrival. A few days after moving in, a Housing Development Board officer came to his flat and informed him that the owner had no permission to rent it out: purchasers of low cost government flats are required to live in them except in certain situations (e.g., going overseas to work or study, moving to employer provided quarters, etc) where permission could be sought to rent out, and he was given a couple of days to vacate. Can some arrangement be made to allow him to stay? Can he have a few more days to look for accommodation? Can HDB take action against the dishonest(or at least very careless) house agent? Can HDB recommend some alternative agencies? The answer to each was no. These are not provided for in the rule book, and indeed could not be since such possibilities would easily generate opportunities for graft or favouritism.

Singaporeans hear enough such stories to be on guard. Indeed, in another Newtonian twist of action producing reaction, when they come to any office with a petition that could meet a negative reply, many would come prepared with arguments and stratagems designed to elevate the matter to a higher level where one hopes the rule book could be overridden. In the reverse Newtonian twist, officials develop skills in not taking individual responsibility for decisions (“my name? oh it does not matter” is often heard) and not saying anything outside the rule book that might hint at opportunities for prolonging the discussion and higher level overruling (“see my superior? only if you meet conditions xyz”). Dealings between officialdom and the public frequently develop a deadly serious yet near-comical pattern.

Such a situation is however totally bewildering to a foreigner, especially those from liberal democratic countries where government officials behave quite differently. Officials who do not explain their decisions, do not tell you who they are, do not seem to care about any aspect of the problem other than those required by the rule book in hand, are immediately assumed to be hiding something, and their motives are automatically suspect. Singaporeans, on the other hand, are more likely to suspect that the officials know about, but refuse to reveal, some magic buttons that, if only the petitioner knows where to push, would produce the desired result.

As already discussed, the standard management technique has allowed the government of Singapore to build up a large system of often quite sophisticated organizations in all spheres of life operating with unusual speed, honesty and efficiency, but it does not contain consensus building as an integral element. While the ultimate purpose of the rule book is to serve the public interest, operationally an official does not do his work by considering individual cases through his own assessment of public interest, nor by discussion through some form of institutionalized decision machinery, but by what the rule book says. Whether in an individual problem the solution prescribed by the rule book is unfair or undesirable is not for him to judge. Applying the same current rule to every case that comes before him is by definition the fair and right things to do. That is the way everyone has been trained

since childhood. Rules are handed down from above like examinations and model answers given by teachers to students. At the organizational level, there is usually little attempt to make people feel they are all part of the decision process.

In theory, as officials do their work they should report problem cases so that if necessary rule books can be changed. In practice, this has to be done very carefully, since it implies the superiors have made mistakes in writing the rules. It is very easy to have one's motives or judgement coming under suspicion if one provides such feedback inappropriately. For most people, the safe thing is to focus one's attention to one's own narrow domain and assume that everything is fine. Keeping a stiff upper lip is honed to a fine art, and with the great economic success and reputation for efficiency behind it, the system began to take on a look of omniscience that deters problem reporting even further.

However, if one is plugged into the network of trust, then one's room for manoeuvre is much greater. Problems can be reported to a higher level, instead of to people who need to protect their own backs and who have reasons to fear insubordination. The chance of being listened to seriously by persons with sufficient authority to change the rule book is much higher, provided one treads carefully and violates none of the unwritten rules of protocol. That is, if you are "in favour" and know the proper way to go about it, you can be more original and outspoken than other people, because your ideas get through, so that in the future you get listened to even more seriously. Positive feedback cycle again. But once again there is a Newtonian twist at work: As the network of trust is better established, people outside the network are all the more likely to keep their heads down and consider anything out of the ordinary as the problem only for the people in the know. An "us" and "them" mentality began to pervade everyone's thinking, with "us" not speaking out in any serious way because "we" will not be taken seriously, and "them" not bothering to ask because "you never get any useful feedback anyway". This is made worse by the frequent public exhortations of government leaders about "not rocking the boat" because the nation is very fragile, initially because of the communist threat and international crises like the Viet Nam War, then because of the difficulty of economic development for a nation without natural resources, then because Singapore faces competition from low cost countries, then the possible resurgence of communal intolerance and religious fundamentalism... The leaders seem to be telling the people "talk less, work more, and leave it to us to solve all the problems". While they might not have quite meant it this way, the result has been to reinforce a mentality that is already deeply entrenched.

People who let their leaders do the thinking also would leave them to do the remembering, but stable corporate cultures and national identities require good collective memories that summarize the lessons of history. Occasional exhortations from the leaders to "remember where the good life came from", and a few classes and tests at school, can do little to maintain such collective memories, which require daily enforcement by doing things in ways that embody the historical lessons. Adopting a system that permits freehand decision making at the top and quick implementation below, so desirable for adapting to technological and economic changes, inevitably

means that history, memory and tradition are secondary. Whether that is a good or bad thing remains to be figured out in the long term.

3.7 Would you join my party?

The network of trust is an informal and diffuse entity. It has no membership registers, holds no meetings and keeps no files. It is just a group of connected people who have some mutual interest in promoting each other's career, very much in the spirit of free enterprise. While the network has some similarity to the party cell structure, it cannot be described as a party or movement as its members do not necessarily share a common ideology.

There is nothing sinister in a government wanting a support group of like minded people, but why has the network of trust not been formally established and incorporated into the People's Action Party? Probably an informal structure was found to be better, since organizations can become static and obstructive. If I have a job to do, I just ask around and look at the names people I know give me, and choose one that looks best.

Traditionally, Chinese people have a deep suspicion of governments and ideology, since in their experience every government turns out to be a bad government in the end (just like the Mayflower puritans had to move to the new world to get away from bad governments everywhere in the old). While Chinese entrepreneurs take readily to the rampant individualism of the Americans, they do not share the same enthusiasm for community organizations, which require a belief in law and ideology. To the Chinese, laws are just methods rulers use to extract money from the people and to make life hard for enemies, and ideologies are just nice stories to trick followers. In their eyes, political parties are just a cut above street gangs and gongfu societies, as the Taiwan members of parliament who regularly get into fist fights would readily illustrate.

The book "Tiger and Trojan Horse" by Dennis Bloodworth records another one of those deadly serious yet near comical episodes: a senior PAP official was found to be a communist spy, and a junior minister was shown to be aware of this all along without reporting it. When confronted with this apparent betrayal of the Party, he said to Lee Kuan Yew: "If I reported him I would be an untrustworthy person to you. A man who betrays a close friend would betray anyone." His explanation was accepted and he was allowed to keep his job. To a Chinese, even a highly western educated Chinese, personal loyalty above party discipline and ideological commitment is perfectly sound, provided of course he can depend on the personal loyalty to himself.

It is therefore no wonder that, as the country became more wealthy under the PAP government, the party organization has all but lost its identity as a political party. It has ceased to have a party ideology that is distinct from the policies of the government, and its members at large, just a few thousand in a citizen body of 3 million, play almost no part in policy initiation. In theory, the party can tell its members of parliament how to vote, and if it so chooses, can bring down the

government by causing MPs to pass a vote of no confidence, but the chance of this actually happening is zero because there is literally nobody in the party with the influence to make any decisions other than those in the government itself. The leaders, the government, the important national institutions, and the country as a whole are so closely identified with each other that it is difficult to oppose one without coming under suspicion of being also opposed to the others; being against what policies the PAP has worked out for the country is almost automatically considered unpatriotic. Further, given the career situation, it is easy to believe that the government and its network of trust encompass the best educated and most able people of Singapore; to oppose all these must mark one as a disgruntled incompetent or a deliberate spoilsport, motivated by alien thinking. The idea of several political parties of equal legitimacy competing for power as alternative governments, seems very remote from reality.

Physically the People's Action Party continues to have an organizational infrastructure. In each MP's electorate there is a Party office that runs child care centres and other community services, hears voter grievances, and organizes occasional election campaigns. There is a central executive committee comprising of the top leaders, elected by the 1000 or so cadre members, who are themselves appointed from the ordinary members by the leaders, a circular process that Goh Keng Swee, a former deputy prime minister, compared to "Pope chooses cardinals, and cardinals elect Pope". But these structures are all just appendages to the government, acting as the leadership group requires them to.

Most significantly, the Party is no longer the structure through which individuals sharing its beliefs put in work to advance their political careers, with the hope of being nominated to stand for Parliament. In the recent elections, few of the candidates were party activists in the traditional sense. Instead, like a company headhunting for senior executives, the leaders identified suitable individuals who have already made successful careers in various spheres and invited them to join the Party. They were then put through a process of induction and participation in community services in particular electorates, before being nominated as candidates in the next general election. They were almost to a man (few female candidates were found) well educated, usually possessing overseas degrees, with an increasing number of past government cadets being brought in recently. Several of the more successful members have since been appointed to the cabinet, including the current Deputy Prime Minister, Brigadier General Lee Hsian Loong, the elder son of Lee Kuan Yew, who has a Cambridge 1st Class Honours degree in Mathematics which he took on an armed forces scholarship.

The process of younger people being introduced into government has been called PAP's political renewal, but it seems to be renewal to a very set pattern. Political career is now viewed as an extension of a normal career, like promotion in a company from operational staff to executive, instead of an alternative calling for people with particularly political interests. There is of course nothing wrong with the idea that only well educated and already successful persons should run the country, but the set pattern does raise the question "is there any other way to succeed?" If one is not

selected as a government cadet at 18, does not have an Oxbridge/Ivy League degree and is not plugged into the network at an early stage, will there be any opportunity in life of reaching high places at all?

In theory, any school child has the chance to do well at A Level examinations and qualify for a government cadetship. In practice, the chance of a child from a wealthy or upper middle class family is very much greater. Its parents can afford to hire domestic tutors, have a home library, buy computers and take the child on frequent overseas trips to widen their exposure. Whereas the better off children are whisked to school in cars by parents, or in some cases by family chauffeurs, poorer children spend long periods of time each day travelling by public transport or walking. They do their homework in cramped and noisy homes, sometimes in the shops and hawker centres where their parents work as there is nobody at home to keep an eye on them, whereas wealthy families hire Filipino maids to take care of the children's needs.

Given an already unequal competition for better examination results, it could only make many parents even more upset that from 1990 onwards, a number of the top schools were privatized, and began to charge higher fees to pay for nicer campuses and better facilities. While wealthy parents have no problem affording these, average and lower middle class parents, who earn a little too much to qualify for tuition fee assistance from the government, find these a significant burden.

In school privatization, the government was following its philosophy of "user pays", so that market forces regulate supply and demand. If something like going to elite schools is desirable, then higher costs control the demand and ensure that only those genuinely benefiting from it would use it, while other schools are encouraged to strive for the same status, thus enhancing supply. The same principle is applied to medical services: charges for the better wards of government hospitals were raised towards market levels, and full medical benefits for public sector employees were reduced so that users share the cost and take the responsibility of insuring themselves. Under the same philosophy, the government strenuously refuses to introduce welfare measures such as old age pension, unemployment insurance or child endowment, for fear of reducing the incentive to work and encouraging undesirable behaviours, such as children not taking care of aging parents, illegitimate childbirth by teenage mothers, etc.

However justified, all this was taking place while the budget surplus was increasing to ever higher levels, giving people the impression of "greediness", though to be fair, perhaps the motivation is not so much the money itself as the power it brings: the accumulated reserves make Singapore an important financial player and investor in the international scene, well out of proportion to the size of the country. In the mean time, the recycling of the surplus through the banking system further bloated liquidity, encouraging the banks to generously lend money for home and automobile purchase, resulting in rapidly inflating prices particularly in the years 1992 to 1995, to the joy of the "have" and the anger of the "have not", another division between "us" and "them".

Again it is no wonder that, as this feeling of "us" versus "them", the feeling

that if you are not “in” at an early stage, then you are “out” for life, that you will not have much of a voice in anything because “they” control everything, gets more deeply entrenched, there has been a steady drop in the voting percentages for the government at general elections over the past 20 years, even as the country scores more and bigger economic successes. During the 70s, PAP achieved clean sweeps in election after election, with some 80 fell to 65. Earlier in 1981, Anson became the first electorate to return an opposition party member in over a decade. In a by-election, a small practice lawyer leading a small Workers’ Party decisively defeated the well educated technocrat fielded by the PAP. Among the things that swayed the voters, it was noted that the PAP candidate had spent little time in the district and came only a few times for election rallies, driving his expensive European saloon, while the opposition candidate diligently went from house to house canvassing votes. A new era had dawned, in which the voters need to be courted, even by a government with such a long and successful record of delivering the goods.

The voters have no serious interest in the opposition parties as the alternative government. There is certainly no perception that these parties would be better at governing Singapore, nor that they have any chance of defeating the PAP and forming the next government in a general election. Going with the governing system provides such great career advantages that, unless there is a very strong ideological motivation, which the Chinese people rarely have, a well qualified person with high career ambitions would have real difficulty justifying a decision to join an opposition party. The few opposition candidates that won elections usually performed poorly in debates and parliamentary manoeuvres. Nor were they obviously effective in delivering community and municipal services to their electoral districts, and opposition party cohesion is little present either within each or between them, with regular party switching by prominent opposition figures.

Producing a common programme has been near impossible, and it is difficult to come up with any kind of meaningful opposition party ideology, partly because it is difficult to identify a government party ideology to oppose. There is a governing ideology of course - Maintain tight control; Develop the economy; Share the wealth with those who help you - but it is hard to see how anyone running for political office and seeking power could be against that. The opposition side is usually reduced to vague mutterings of “too much control is bad”, hardly a resounding platform for mass mobilization. With no ideological commitment to speak of, it is also natural that voters that want to cast their votes against the government show no significant loyalty to particular opposition parties. Within the same electorate, a party that did reasonably well in one election could do very poorly in the next, merely because another opposition party joins the contest and puts up an apparently more attractive candidate. The main motivation for voting with the opposition is simply to have an opposition. In other words, the votes are not so much “gained” by the opposition as merely “lost” by the PAP, in a basically negative show of frustration and protest.

3.8 How green is my valley

On election night of 1991, television showed a grim faced Prime Minister of Singapore discussing the results coming in. Goh Chok Tong had taken over from Lee a little while ago, and had been preaching a kinder, softer style of leadership for the government to follow. After receiving positive feedback about this new style, he called the election two years early in the hope of benefiting from this supposed goodwill, but instead of increasing or at least staying level, the PAP vote went down to 61 popular: the vote in his own electorate was 80 government's network of trust had failed to do its job properly. It had, like any old bureaucracy, told its leaders what it thought they wanted to hear. In fact, whereas in a bureaucratic organization, formal rules and procedures could be instituted to maximize the objectivity of information and opinion (though making sure the rules are always followed is not so simple), in a personal network the tendency to avoid being the bringer of bad news is all the greater.

In the 1997 election the feedback machinery seemed to have done its homework better, and the government was effective in identifying weak electorates which were either incorporated into group electorates led by senior ministers, whom opposition parties would avoid running against, or were subjected to concentrated campaigns that, among other things, promised heavy expenditures for local estate and transport improvements, something rather reminiscent of western pork barrel politics. A conscious effort was also made to recruit more candidates showing the ordinary man touch, particularly people with trade union background. After dropping for nearly two decades, the government vote rose back to around 65 four incumbent opposition MPs (generally agreed to be the more effective two) managing to keep their seats. The talk about a gentler style of government has been quietly dropped and not revived. The successful campaign was, however, quickly followed by a series of law suits involving opposition candidates, and from there arose a diplomatic row with Malaysia, but these need not be discussed here.

Coming back to the issue of governance, other similarities between the informal network and an ordinary bureaucracy may be noted. Responsive though it is to concrete initiatives directed from above, it has its particular form of inertia in its manner of doing things. Perhaps an informal system is even harder to change because there are no official rules and hierarchical structures that can be redesigned by order. Even when most of its members might want to change, none can do so individually without getting out of sync with the rest of the system, resulting in confusion for himself and others. The structure also has its particular forms of vested interests. For example, with the good supply of educated manpower and high public sector salary, the government could probably recruit enough officers without resort to the cadetship schemes. Perhaps abolishing them would make everyone feel more equal and reduce the "us"/"them" mentality. But if one actually does this, there would be an outcry from high school students and their parents who have spent a lifetime striving for good A Level examination results in the hope of winning a cadetship and a headstart in a good career. Factors like this make it difficult to

envisage any real change in the way Singapore is managed. The network of trust is so essential a method of managing all parts of the country that no Prime Minister can do without it, and the most he can hope for is some small tinkering. Instead of asking for fundamental reforms, it is preferable to seek out specific shortcomings and see how these could be remedied.

It is sometimes said that Singaporeans are excessively materialistic because the tightly controlled social system denies them the chance to make spiritual self expressions, or that the system suppresses creativity. However, such statements are virtually unverifiable, e.g., how does one measure “materialistic”, or counter the argument that Singaporeans simply have more materialistic opportunities? If creativity is measured by number of scientific papers published or visitors to museums, then there are ways to improve these “materially”.

Instead, I prefer to make the more measurable assertion that Singaporeans appear to be highly stressed: they grumble a lot about small things, and are highly aggressive when there are “rights” to be asserted, whether in drivers’ road manners or bidding for condos (at least during property booms), to the point that from time to time official clampdowns had to be introduced to deal with road bullies, excessive speculation, etc. All the employers complain of high staff turnover, and normally a quitting employee would give no advance information of job change, and would refuse to divulge his/her new employer even after giving notice of resignation. The sullenness of shop assistants is so commonplace that complaining about poor service is rare - customers know that managers can do little about it. The relatively high suicide rate is another indicator of stress.

Contrary to the rather priggish image of the country, sexual mores are far from conservative. Single American and European business executives working in Singapore, while they may complain about other things, rarely mention difficulty of meeting girls and getting sex, and the preference of some girls for such boyfriends has produced the term “Sarong Party Girl” to denote the type. Divorce rates, as high as those in Taiwan, Hongkong and Japan, are rising. Abortion is available on demand, with the number at nearly 15,000, in a country where live births are under 50,000 per year. The number of abortions indicates widespread pre-marital sex: since contraceptives are freely available (in fact, packets of condoms are displayed at most supermarket cashiers booths), one would guess that for every teenager that gets pregnant, at least 10 would have used contraception. The prospect that a large proportion of children are raised in unstable family situations raises serious questions about future social conditions.

In fact, by 2003 the birthrate has fallen to around 35000 per year, well below replacement level. In 2000 when the number was still over 40000, the government had already instituted a number of measures to defray the burden of parenting with indication of willingness to consider more, following up in 2004 with extended, subsidized maternity leave and other ideas. The prospect of success seems however far from assured however, given that deciding to have children is an emotional matter related to confidence about the future, good relation with partners, a sense of obligation towards one’s own extended family, etc, and not a matter of business and

investment where one adds up the costs and benefits, it is hard to see a significant impact other than somewhat reducing grumbles and complaints. A similar issue of confidence lies behind the assimilation of immigrants for long term stay, again a difficult issue with one side feeling the system is hard to assimilate into without the personal connections, which new immigrants have less chances to establish, but the other side feeling that newcomers already enjoy many incentives to attract them to come. Giving young and relatively young people a higher level of self esteem and a feeling of being in control is the common ground in population matters.

The past quarrel with the western media deserve a mention. The Singapore government looks at media purely from the business point of view: distributing publication in the country is an opportunity to make money, and right to do so is only granted to those that promote the national interest, and of course the government is the judge of that national interest. The western journalists take a “human rights” view: the duty of the press is, by definition, to propagate all plausible points of view, including those that might prove to be wrong, and any attempt to thwart such aims is considered authoritarian. In view of the fundamental divergence between the two camps, a settlement seems unlikely in the near term.

I see two practical shortcomings in the Singapore system: the difficulty of finding imaginative leaders and its vulnerability to infiltration by foreign agents. The system has the tendency to promote conformity, and those who thrive in the system are people who are good at conforming, or at least, at appearing to be conforming. The cautious and the sly have a better chance of survival than the frank. Such survival characteristics do not however associate with the vision and real convictions that the system needs in leaders. Obedience is not the same thing as loyalty, which often requires one to speak out and point out problems. It is not surprising that, despite the vast increase in the number of well educated people and the more effective machinery and database for identifying candidates, the government has often complained of the difficulty of finding enough good people to stand for parliament, especially those with ministerial potential.

There is a security risk in the practice of recruiting cadets and sending them for overseas studies before posting them to fast rising career tracks, because a foreign government can easily identify promising targets for agent recruitment. A combination of the cadet’s admiration for the host country, money, career assistance, participation in exciting secret ventures, and blackmail since young people living alone in a foreign country could easily commit indiscretions, may be used towards recruitment success. After the agent’s return, the foreign government could well provide help to enhance the person’s job performance in matters related to that foreign power. Further, the prevalent use of personal networking makes it easier for the agent to place fellow agents of the foreign power into positions of importance. While in the past Singapore might not have been an important espionage target, in the post cold war era industrial and financial intelligence is given greater emphasis, and the economic growth of Singapore must draw interest to it.

Another problem likely to worry Singapore leaders in the years to come is emigration, with citizens who feel unsure of a place in the sun, whether for themselves

or for their children, migrating to resource-rich, low-population countries like Australia. Given the high value of Singapore real estate and favourable exchange rates, a family could usually live quite comfortably in such countries from the sale proceeds of a flat, though the children would often return to Singapore to look for jobs after completing university because of better economic opportunities. Like expatriate workers coming here to work for a period, the returnees hope to accumulate savings and experience before going again to the more comfortable, but economically less dynamic, countries and enjoy their fruits of labour. Emigration was briefly a public issue in the second half of the 80s, but it subsided after the start of the extended recession of the western economies in the late 80s and early 90s. While the number and qualifications of the emigrants were nowhere near those of pre-1997 Hong Kong, the possible recurrence of the trend has to be watched for.

From the perspectives of classical Chinese political philosophy, Singapore is more Legalist than Confucian. While both assume the existence of a hierarchical society with hereditary rulers, Confucianism emphasizes the ideal that rulers and their educated servants should act with moderation and self-restraint, always following established procedures and setting good examples for their subjects, who would stay in line with minimal application of legal sanctions. In contrast, Legalism emphasizes the use of generous rewards and severe penalties to keep people performing well and observing rules, but its main problem is the tendency for rewards and punishments to escalate: if officials making mistakes are severely punished and also stand to lose their rewards, then office holding is a risky proposition, so that only ever more generous rewards can attract people to come on board; further, people who make minor mistakes would try to cover up and avoid the severe punishment, thus committing additional infractions that ultimately lead to even more severe penalties.

Is the Singapore system worthy of imitation by other developing countries? Or is it a unique case that cannot be successfully transplanted to other countries? I honestly do not know. While I am sympathetic towards the aims and objectives of the system, I also feel that the system can be more “Confucian”, the methods used can be more kindly, courteous and pleasant, and the gap between “us” and “them” can be reduced. This is what the new generation leaders are still trying to work out, but I have no idea whether they can achieve this - it is not clear whether the problems are endemic to the system or mere shortcomings of implementation. The jury is still out on how green the valley will be.

Karl Marx and Bubble Economics

4.1 Marx in our time

Given that some would believe that Nostradamus predicted the election of George W Bush with "village idiot will be king", it is certainly easy to agree that Marx predicted the Asian economic meltdown and a host of other historical events. While we have our reservation about such claims, it is nevertheless useful to review his relevance to our times.

The starting point of Marxism is philosophy, specifically Hegel's theory of the dynamics of ideas: a thesis is opposed by an antithesis, until a new idea containing both emerges, the synthesis, which then starts a new round of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Marx replaced "idea" by "social force" resulting in a theory of class struggle: the ruling class with an ideology based on economic interest is opposed by the oppressed class, until a new ruling ideology emerges to preside over a different kind of society. Because his theory has its roots in philosophy and logic, Marx considered it scientific and indeed inevitable, hence the name "scientific socialism", in contrast to the earlier utopian socialism for improving the condition of society. The supposedly scientifically based conviction that history was on their side has always been an inspirational motif for his followers.

As theories go, Marxism is neither good philosophy, nor good economics, nor good political science, nor even the best kind of sociology, but it is far better in providing an analysis of the shortcomings of capitalism: in striving to maximize profit, capitalists constantly invest in better technology and higher productivity, until production exceeds the limits imposed by the resources and needs of society, and has to be cut back resulting in widespread unemployment, which further reduces consumption and causes even more unemployment... Hence, capitalism suffers periodic recessions and depressions. Further, competition between capitalist nations for markets and resources, in order to support their expanding production, leads to conflict, including wars, and economic bankruptcies for the weaker competitors.

The world wars and great depression of the earlier half of the 20th century, and the sudden collapse of the Asian economic miracle near the end of the millennium,

show that the analysis still has its potency, and the search for the capitalism antithesis did get somewhere. However, in the “synthesis” aspect Marx has come up empty. His prediction of a new classless society of unselfish individuals, who will collectively control capital without the profit motive of the capitalists, has been shown to be as utopian as the earlier ideas, indeed much more harmful in its consequences. By breeding an inflexible world view together with a “scientific” disregard for spiritual values, and hence a ruthless willingness to use all unscrupulous means to achieve heaven on earth, Marxism has produced some of the most destructive political movements of this century, both following it and in opposition to it.

Yet, regardless of its lack of success as a practical political system, Marxism remains one of the most important undercurrents of modern thinking. Like Einstein’s relativity, which too has few direct uses but forms an integral part of modern physics and scientific awareness, Marx’s way of looking at history and society permeates, like it or not, through the way we see things. Today we automatically link economics with politics, and think of individuals in terms of their class consciousness. Constantly and nervously, the ruling class looks over its shoulder to see if some ideas of the lower class need to be “synthesized” and neutralized before it starts to cause big trouble. Whereas living off one’s capital and not having to work used to be the mark of the gentleman, today that would be embarrassing, and even the richest people would make an effort at something and try to be some kind of worker rather than a mere capitalist.

In short, we are all Marxists.

4.2 Living without Marx

In any society, attitude towards inequality forms the great divide between the opposing ideologies. Generally, conservatives (usually representing the upper classes who want to “conserve” what they have) believe that inequality is inevitable and to some extent desirable: it provides incentive for people to work and invest, while liberals consider it to be a social defect caused by selfishness and inefficient distribution, which must be countered by government intervention. Somewhat paradoxically, on moral issues, conservatives usually want greater government intervention to maintain standards, while liberals want less, but this is for another essay.

Both points of view are valid, and actual government policies, regardless of which group is in power, are compromises between the two. In other words, inequality is not necessarily unfair; the point is how much. It is the co-existence of both ideas that makes possible a two party system with groups of equal legitimacy which alternate in government, as is common in the western democracies. This model has so far not succeeded in planting itself in Asia: Asian governments tend to consider themselves to embody the best of each country, and opposition parties are almost automatically considered second class and even unpatriotic. But this too is for another essay.

In the normal course of events, there is always a tendency for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer, because the former have the resources to take

advantage of investment opportunities, and are better able to cope with temporary setbacks like sickness, bad harvest or economic recession. A deliberate effort by governments, elected by the majority who are more likely to be poor than rich, to redistribute wealth and curb the economic freedom of the rich, is the natural result. The tricky question is how far to go, without seriously hurting economic incentive and national competitiveness.

Economic development almost always increases inequality, at least in the earlier stages: resources previously not in economic use and so freely available to everyone, such as beaches, forests and vacant land, came to be used by the restricted few, and ceased to be free. Prices of land and food rise as golf courses replace fruit trees people used to freely harvest, while farmers and fishermen become waiters. Girls who used to marry early and take care of their husbands now go and work in restaurants, or brothels. Beaches everyone used to be able to go to get enclosed as part of hotels, and house prices soar, putting accommodation beyond the reach of the poor. While those who are directly involved in the new economic activities might benefit, those who for various reasons are excluded from them, very often are worse off. Much resentment about the perceived unfairness can built up, as China discovered in 1989 and Indonesia in 1998. Efforts to make a better distribution of the benefits are almost always too late and come about in a disruptive way.

Technology changes are also almost always likely to increase inequality, since the already well off are more able to adapt through their better access to education and their ability to invest in new ventures. Fear of new technology is therefore not merely a matter of ignorance, but has sound social justifications. Again the question is how far to take it without condemning a country to stagnation and backwardness.

Here lie the roots of Marxism's failure as a governing ideology: placing so much emphasis on inequality as a social evil inevitably led to economic and technological stagnation, and the need to cover up the continuing existence of considerable inequality between those with and those without power using a facade of egalitarianism engenders a high level of hypocrisy. Though there is a little Marxism in all of us, we cannot follow it as a way of life; those who live by Marxism can only expect to die by it.

4.3 Marxism's Asian hangover

Asia is where Marxism achieved its greatest successes. Not only did the Chinese revolution add 600 million people to the communist camp in 1949, it was communist North Vietnam that took on France and then USA in a nationalistic war extending over 30 years, and won. The deep social cleavage in almost every Asian nation of the mid 20th century was a conservative establishment of landowners and compradors that successively collaborated with various colonial governments, versus left wing insurgents, usually rural followers led by middle class leaders, with Marxism as their motivating ideology. To cater for the deviation of his movement's composition from the urban proletariat prescribed in orthodox Marxism, Chairman Mao had to invent a new "city versus country" theory of class division, incorporating the idea

of lowtech guerrilla warfare against hightech imperialists.

Such was the dominance of Marxism as the default opposition ideology of Asia that once it collapsed, there was nothing to take its place. While the conservative establishment in each country had no problem adopting the Confucian approach of trying to co-opt all the elite power blocs through some form of meritocratic selection of promising talent, it has been more difficult to find coherent ideas to coalesce the opposition forces. From time to time slogans are invented against authoritarianism, crony capitalism and militarism, but rarely do these slogans have the holding power to maintain movements and inspire them to build up as powerful social forces.

Yet, Asia is where the Marxist critique of capitalist economic development was being proved many times over. Following its astounding economic successes over three decades, cumulating in the great stock market and real estate bubble of the late 1980s, Japan went into a deflationary recession in the early 1990s and has not recovered more than 10 years later. A similar bust after boom cycle has played out in South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia, with lesser crises occurring in Hongkong, Singapore and later Taiwan. In each, capital inflows led to overinvestment and production in excess of export opportunities, followed by capital outflows, credit crunches, business closures, tumbling exchange rates and share markets, rapidly rising unemployment, and varying levels of social unrest,

In each case, foresight and appropriate social policies might have mitigated the crises. Japan's was a powerhouse for producing mass market products that reliably meet consumer needs, and hightech gizmos that satisfy the latest fashionable crazes, but its economy has limited means to absorb the foreign exchange earnings: its distribution system is not equipped to bring massive imports for enjoyment by its hardworking but low consuming population, who prefer, whether by personal or social choice, to pay high prices to eat Japanese rice produced by suburban farmers working tiny plots for a highly protected market, rather than cheap imports from California. Using the surpluses for further industrial investment to produce even more exports even more efficiently, makes no sense if the markets are already fully met by existing Japanese gizmos, while offering the goods cheaply to Japanese consumers could not provide the solution either.

For over a decade Japan has been in the grips of a deflationary cycle for which there seem no solution: by saving instead of consuming, the people made the task of what to do with financial surpluses even greater. Forays by Japanese corporations into the US real estate market, such as Mitsubishi's purchase of Rockefeller Center, did not turn out successfully, nor did company takeovers like Bridgestone's purchase of Firestone. By lending generously to Southeast Asia, Japanese banks merely transferred the bubble from Tokyo to the rest of Asia, with bad loans eroding credit standings and disrupting regular financial processes.

Instead of identifying real long term interests for their nations as a whole and ensuring a fair distribution of the benefits of economic development with careful mitigation of its negative side effects, the political and business elites of the new developing countries, in varying degrees, saw rampant opportunities for clique profiteering. For example, during the Estrada corruption trial, evidence was presented

that he granted his crony control over the allocation of frequency bands for cellular phones, to extract large bribes, a share of which went into Estrada's secret bank accounts. Similar scams involving road toll collection, airline license, banking permit and car import concession were discovered relating to companies in which the children of Suharto had shares. The elite members grasped for riches as if there was no tomorrow, which, in their case, turned out to be all too correct.

This is not just a matter of individual failures, but reflects a deeper problem, an Asian spiritual deficiency, on the part of both the upper and lower classes. Like it or not, Asia need to re-learn its Marxist lessons, and re-formulate an opposition ideology that would allow the disadvantaged classes an appropriate voice, both to monitor government performances and control abuses of power, and to bring in policies that ensure more balanced economic and social developments, just as each government need to formulate sustainable social contracts that would motivate the lower classes to go along rather than be left out, so that in both bad times and good, it would have sufficient support to make hard decisions. Instead of both sides seeing opposition merely opposing with little positive ideas to offer, given a better understanding of ideological differences, it becomes far more likely that the two sides can have positive and sustainable dialogs within a democratic framework, to encourage Confucian moderation and self criticism on the part of power holders.

Crises of Faith - From Taiji to Fa Lun Gong

5.1 The failure of Taiji

Tiananmen Square used to be known for two things: the morning crowds doing their Taiji shadow boxing, and mass rallies for the latest political campaigns. The slow, carefully regulated movements of the body prescribed by Taiji (which means literally “universal supreme”) are supposed to give the practitioner enhanced control over both body and mind, and conceptually relate to the art of soft defense philosophically embodied in Taoism and physically used in Judo. “Playing Taiji” is also used to denote bureaucratic buckpassing and subtle ways of saying no.

But on June 4, 1989 the Square rang with machine gun shots and the rumbling of tanks. For a month, student protesters had occupied the square to rail against corruption and authoritarian rule, and all peaceful means to clear them out had failed. The previous morning, an attempt to march into the square and occupy it by a company of jogging soldiers had been blocked by crowds in the streets who jostled and dragged them out of the way, and in the evening, armoured personnel carriers sent to knock down barriers blocking entry to the square were set on fire. There was nothing left to try but to shoot down protesters in the streets leading into the square and force one’s way in. After Taiji fails, the iron fist succeeds.

Since the bloodshed, many have written about the bankruptcy of communist ideology. Without wanting to defend communism, I would suggest that the behaviour of the ruling Chinese regime actually has little to do with communism itself, but is merely the continuation of traditional feudalistic practices in a modern form.

Communism includes many strands of ideas, and out of these, three may be singled out for attention:

1. The element of Marxist Political Economy: Marx hypothesized that the political processes of a society are determined by its underlying economic processes. Technological developments produce changes in the economic structure, and consequently lead to changes in the political and social structures. History is therefore driven by technology and economics.

Though Marx’s own study of history, economics and politics had many critics,

there seems no reason to doubt that a close connection does exist between economics and politics, and even the most ardent capitalists are in some ways good followers of Marx. For example, any comment along the line “the recent events in China show that economic liberalization must be followed by political liberalization” is merely repeating a Marxist truism. In contrast, in attempting to achieve a capitalist style economy without significant political reforms, Deng Xiaoping was acting contrary to basic Marxist theory. Mao, who believed that a cultural revolution was needed before China could be modernized, was a closer follower of Marx.

2. The element of Marxist Social Utopia: Marx forecasted that in due course, the proletariat would rise up to implement a new social structure in which the private ownership of capital would be abolished, and eventually there will be a utopian society of plenty in which everyone will, without coercion, work to his best abilities and take only according his needs. Marx was, unfortunately, rather vague about how to make this happen and how long it would take, and his own organizational efforts were generally political as well as financial failures, but this has not stopped old and new communists from continuing to profess belief in this utopian prospect.

Liberal capitalists are usually not utopian: if they believe in utopia, usually they do not wish to impose their choice on other people, while most right wing capitalists would leave paradise in the hands of God. On the other hand, the pro-democracy protesters of China displayed a highly utopian attitude, and were, in this sense, better Marxists than Deng Xiaoping, the great pragmatist.

3. The element of Leninist Party Organization: It was Lenin who invented the practical organizational tactics that allowed a group of Marxists to successfully take over a nation. In this scheme, a tightly knit and highly disciplined party structure is first established, to which members are required to devote their total loyalty - personal loyalties and loyalties to common humanity are not only secondary, but indeed suspect and dangerous. The party organization is superimposed onto the government bureaucracy, military command, legislative bodies, trade unions and other community organizations, so that those in control of the party achieve control of all aspects of society.

Because the party controls the economy, it can then claim to have abolished private ownership of capital and therefore begun to implement a communist society; and because the party controls the important elements of the whole society, it can indeed make an attempt to change all aspects of the society towards its version of utopia. We thus have the curious phenomenon that academic theory and utopian idealism have, in time and with excellent logic, led to totalitarianism.

But whereas in the Soviet Union, the Party developed into a privileged elite that manages to incorporate, besides bureaucrats and officials, engineers, scientists, agriculture specialists, academicians and other higher elements of society, in China the party discipline is frequently undercut and superseded by a network of personal loyalties established during the days of the revolutionary army. Thus, although Deng Xiaoping was never Party Chairman, President or Prime Minister of China, for ten years he has effectively wielded supreme power because he has placed into senior positions of the Party and Government, a large number of his former subordinates in

the Fourth Field Army, of which he was Political Commissar during the Civil War, and other loyal followers acquired from his work as Secretary General. When the 38th Army showed reluctance to crack down on the demonstrators, Yang Shangkun was able to bypass the Defence Ministry and the General Staff and directly call up the 27th Army, commanded by generals personally loyal to him, to move into Peking.

Going back a little into the past, during the Cultural Revolution a small clique around Chen Buoda and Jiang Qin, without any top Party or Government positions, was able to launch a movement that nearly destroyed both the Party and the Government, merely by issuing edicts in the name of the semi-retired Mao. During his thirty years of rule, Chiang Kai Shek was given numerous different titles and positions, but his control had always been effected through his network of military officers and other officials established when he was the Principal of Wampoa Military Academy.

Of course China is not the only country where such personal loyalties rule supreme over loyalties to organization, ideology or principles. The politics, civil service, commercial companies and even the universities of Japan are permeated with such oyabun-kobun (roughly, patron-client) relations, in which the oyabun provides patronage and career assistance to the kobun in return for the latter's loyal support. The faction-ridden Liberal Democratic Party system provides a well known manifestation of this system and any observer of the Recruit scandal would have noticed many examples where loyalty to the superior easily overrode party discipline or national interest.

In short, what holds forth in China and much of Asia is a deeply entrenched practice, developed from the age of feudalism, of loyalty to a person rather than to more abstract entities.

In traditional feudalism the king divides his territory to be ruled by various lords, who consequently owe him allegiance and will support him with their own followers when called to do so in a war; the lords in turn install knights and petty noblemen, who would then lease out their shares of the land to yeoman farmers or have serfs to cultivate it. The relation of master to servant (or lord to samurai) is both economic and military. In its modern form the network of loyalties is maintained but separately from the ownership of land. Whereas in Japan, the oyabun-kobun relations are established largely in the civilian sphere, the fact that the current rulers of China got in through successful wars meant that the most important relations reflect previous military command chains, which made the Chinese system nearer to traditional feudalism.

Once we start looking at the situation in this light, it becomes much easier to understand many aspects of China. For example, every government in China, regardless of its initial ideology, tended to become corrupt very quickly. For, under feudalistic thinking an official appointed to govern a territory would regard it virtually as his personal property, and would see nothing particularly wrong in lining his own pockets with wealth extracted from his office. A good official is not necessarily the honest Confucian who upholds justice and rejects bribery, or the hermit Taoist

who stays away from the palace and refuses appointments in order to remain clean and honest, however much admiration such figures may receive in the literature; but someone who deploys such wealth beneficially, by sharing it with his subordinates and his superiors, and making sure that his territory is well maintained and prosperous. For example, a good official would use his personal wealth to purchase grain in times of poor harvest to feed his people, or spend it for public works. But it must follow that in good times he is entitled to build up his wealth using his office, provided of course that he does not become too greedy or too seriously pervert the course of justice.

Given a strong and competent central government, the behaviour of these local officials may be closely monitored and unsatisfactory ones may be replaced. When the central government becomes weak through neglect, incompetence, external wars, or natural disasters, local administration tends to become very chaotic and corrupt, and an ambitious official, especially one that has control over both military and financial affairs of a region, can easily build up a private kingdom. The history of China is replete with such warlord periods interspersing with periods of unity.

Commentators have often complained that China has not achieved rule of law. In fact, under feudalistic thinking this is impossible, since it requires a subordinate to disobey if a superior gives an order that is contrary to the law; in other words, he needs to have a higher loyalty to an abstract principle than to a person. To the Chinese people, laws are made by men, and can be unmade by them. While some lip service is paid to such abstract concepts as “an emperor must rule with the mandate of heaven”, it is seldom implemented in practice, but only used as a last resort to justify rebellion when things become really desperate.

It is also not possible to achieve democracy when people think feudalistically, since a democratic system separates official positions from the persons holding them, and seeks to fill the positions with persons that meet popular approval. Such a concept is obviously contrary to the feudalistic view of office being a personal property given to an official by his superior. Indeed, most Chinese find it curious that no American President that lost an election would ever call in the army to arrest the winner and hence retain office. The idea that the generals and soldiers would disobey any such commands because of their belief in democratic principles is not really comprehended.

One should point out however that it is equally wrong for Americans to believe that, because the 38th Army refused to crush the demonstrators, its soldiers must support democracy. A simpler and more personal explanation is that, most of the officers and men of this army are from the Peking region, and they were unwilling to shoot their friends and relatives in the Tiananmen Square. The soldiers are simply following their usual Chinese way of thinking, namely to be loyal to those with whom there is a personal connection.

To show how deeply entrenched feudalistic thinking is in the Chinese culture, one can point out a number of curious behaviours of Hong Kong and overseas Chinese and the demonstrators themselves. First, following the crackdown, it was widely rumoured that Deng was already dead and Yang had usurped his power in order to

bring in the army. This was nothing more than the syndrome of “the emperor is wise and divine, but his ministers are evil.” In so readily accepting such rumours, the Hong Kong and overseas Chinese have shown their own true colours. Similarly, those people who believed that the 38th Army would move in to crush the 27th were merely praying for victory of the good warlord over the bad.

Second, the demonstrators centered their most vociferous attacks on Premier Li Peng. Yet, it is known to everyone that Li is no more than the frontman of hardline elders, and could not be described as the main culprit for the undemocratic practices. He is personally not corrupt, though perhaps not all that capable either. It made little sense to single him out for attack, and in doing this, the demonstrators were merely following the very old trick of attacking the boss indirectly through his underlings - the emperor is not to be criticised, only his courtiers. It is also necessary to point out that the same trick was used frequently in the past: for example, before Liu Shaoqi fell, Peng Chen was used as the target. Thus, the demonstrators showed that they were, after all, good students of the same school.

Third, the erection of the Goddess of Liberty very much reminds one of the old practice of putting up a statue of ill defined significance and worshiping it, in the hope of achieving peace and prosperity, just as outside every Chinese home there is a shrine to the God of the Earth which needs to be regularly worshiped, even though no one can ever say what the god looks like and what its powers are. Indeed, the statue put up by the students was highly reminiscent of the goddess Kuan Yin, originally a female reincarnation of Buddha but generally regarded in China as a separate deity, namely the patron of women and giver of mercy. Obviously, few of the demonstrators realized that the original Statue of Liberty in New York carries a message of welcome to refugees and poverty stricken immigrants, and has no direct relation with democracy itself.

In short, whereas the current rulers of China have shown themselves to be less than perfect communists, the protesters have not shown themselves to be very good democrats either, and have been rather muddled in their ideological thinking. Those who ask for freedom frequently want the limitation of certain freedoms, such as excessive profit making by enterprising individuals. Those who ask for democracy seem to have little idea of whom they want to elect and what kind of policies they want the elected officials to implement. They extoll Hu Yaobang, who in his life was neither particularly democratic or liberal, could boast of virtually no significant achievements, and impressed the world only with such pronouncements as “Chinese people should eat less rice and more bread.” Like the Goddess, he was only being used as a cult figure of ill defined but anti-establishment significance. Thus, the main features of the conflict do not seem to be those of communism versus democracy; instead, both sides are steeped more or less in the far older culture of feudalism.

Because 80% of the Chinese people are peasants and most of the soliders are from the countryside, while the pro-democracy movement is mainly one of the cities, the ruling regime, by virtue of its feudalistic control over the rural areas and the Army, has prevailed. Further, the very old modes of thinking its opponents themselves displayed do not give one confidence that there is sufficient understanding of

democracy, freedom and capitalism for reform to succeed. For China, democratic enlightenment is yet to be.

5.2 Fa Lun Gong

Ten years later, China had become the new home of the Asian economic miracle. Its trade surplus with USA is not far behind that of Japan, and Made in China goods flood world markets, affordable even to struggling East Europeans and South Asians. All the major cities are booming. The exiled leaders of the June 4 movement, who escaped earlier in the evening while encouraging their followers to stay and die, were all but discredited. Hongkong was successfully returned under the One China Two Systems policy.

But a new protest movement had arisen, gaining sudden prominence when several thousand followers of Fa Lun Gong (Law Wheel Power), a form of Qi Gong (Air Power) or breathing exercise, suddenly appeared one day outside the Zhong Nan Hai compound, the residence complex of the top leaders. Before long, the organization was denounced as an evil cult and a nation wide ban was declared on its activities. Many were arrested, and in January 2001 five of the cult followers tried to commit suicide in Tiananmen Square by setting themselves on fire. Supposedly a movement for good health, Fa Lung Gong has become highly hazardous to one's physical well being.

What is Qi Gong? It is believed that by taking a particular posture and doing a carefully regulated regime of breathing, a person can cause some form of energy movement inside the body, thus increasing health and strength. Many practitioners claim that the exercise made them feel more relaxed and happier, which sounds realistic in today's fast paced, highly stressed environment. This could also have some carry-on effects on their physical well being, but claims beyond the level are made, and this is where problems arise.

These additional claims relate to two other long standing practices: the meditation exercises of Zen monks, and the more recent Gongfu stories that talk about numerous forms of "inner power" (Nei Gong). In both, the meditative posture and inner efforts are supposed to bring on some communion with the force of nature, to promote enlightenment in one, and develop fighting power in the other. Fusing these two into one, there is much folklore about the legendary fighting power of Shaolin monks, and the celebrated "One Finger Zen" story:

"A great Zen master answered all questions about enlightenment by raising a finger. One of his disciples began to imitate him. When the master saw it, he chopped off the disciple's finger. As the disciple ran away bleeding, he looked back at the master, who raised a finger; at that moment he was enlightened"

was confused with the Gongfu claim of being able to disable a person by poking a finger at his critical points.

This then got fused with another Chinese tradition: Tao priests claim that by drawing talisman figures and incantation, they could move spirits and invoke natural forces, whether to bring rain during a drought, shift mountains to build roads or

canals, etc. If Qi Gong can invoke the forces of nature to strengthen one's body, it should also go the other way, allowing one's body to control nature. With that kind of thinking, the claim that Fa Lun Gong would build a Law Wheel inside your body, which you can turn to do all kinds of wonderful things, would not seem to be far fetched.

So we can understand Fa Lun Gong being adopted by poorly educated people unfamiliar with modern scientific ideas; we can even understand that some of them are easily incited by local leaders of Fa Lun Gong practice groups into sit-in protests against critics of the groups and then against officials who try to restore order and enforce laws against trespassing and illegal assembly. What is more puzzling is why so many educated people, in particular students and faculty in US and other overseas universities, would suspend their disbelief and use the world wide web to propagate the claims, even endorsing them as scientific. In fact, without such overseas endorsements, it is unlikely that the claims would have enjoyed the widespread acceptance in China among the politically conscious groups.

It is said that the economic liberalization of China has destroyed the ideological system, leaving a vacuum for something new. While that might explain what happened to some party members, does anyone seriously believe that Fujian peasants and Chinese students in Stanford used to find comfort in Marxist sociology and Mao's theory of revolution, and once these are abandoned by the Chinese establishment, have to turn to superstition? The peasants have probably believed in one kind of superstition or another all along, and something that promises not only surviving doomsday and afterlife in an oriental heaven (in parallel with the Christian heaven for caucasians), but also good health without medical bills in this life, must be quite appealing to them. The intriguing question is about the Chinese living in the west.

The vacuum they face is not so much in ideology, as in culture as a whole. What part of Chinese culture can an overseas Chinese hold onto in a meaningful way? The answer is: curiously little.

Take the example of Confucianism. For it to have survived that long, and to be able to continue its well entrenched status in East Asian political systems, it must possess some real strengthes. Yet, almost all connotations of Confucianism are negative in some way: authoritarian, morally conservative, resistant to change, obscure, comical... Lu Xun is generally acknowledged as the greatest modern Chinese writer, but while his contribution in exposing the dark side of traditional Chinese society is undeniable, it is far harder to see what constructive ideas about organizing the modern Chinese world he could be credited with. Now if a Chinese cannot explain to a westerner what is so great about Confucius or Lu Xun, what can he say to get across the grandeur of Chinese culture? How does a parent convince a child that their cultural roots are worthy of an effort to retain?

New migrants frequently suffer from discrimination and exploitation, and for them, psychological comfort lies in the twin thoughts (a) I make sacrifice for the next generation; and (b) one day I will go home and it would all be worthwhile. But if one feels that the next generation would be culturally unrecognizable, and home

has nothing attractive to return to, then the pain becomes hard to bear. It is in this light one must view the incomprehensible willingness of well educated academics to believe that breathing with half closed eyes would not only keep them healthy without medicine, but also survive the total destruction of world war three. The very outlandishness convinces a believer that a Chinese invention can be superior to anything anyone else has to offer.

Yet, the commentators are after all correct: with China adopting capitalism and economic incentive as official doctrines and state enterprises dying away, some opposition ideology emphasizing equality and concern for the down trodden will need to emerge. One cannot but be impressed at how quickly health consciousness and mystical beliefs got mixed up with economic discontent and civil protest, which rapidly escalated, cumulating into the large scale, supposedly peaceful but nevertheless menacing demonstration in Beijing. While the Chinese leaders might encourage free enterprise, accept the disintegration of the state economic sector, and allow some artistic expressions, well organized movements that seek to be alternative power centres claiming the right to direct the life and ideas of their followers, are quite another matter. No crises of faith can be allowed to become crises of control, which they threaten to be in the absence of a system of orderly establishment-opposition dialogs. As before, when Taiji fails, the iron fist.

5.3 Religious Asia

Asia is where all the great surviving religions of the world arose, but paradoxically, religion has a far weaker role in society than what Christianity achieved in Europe and North America. Tapping into people's aversion to guilt and sin, Christianity promises salvation and cleansing granted by God's grace through the sacrifice of his son Jesus on the cross, while the idea of virgin birth appeals to people's approval of purity and motherhood. Combining the use of architecture, art, music, social community and village welfare, churches successfully get worshipers together weekly to share and reinforce their faith, singing emotional hymns affirming their beliefs and listening to uplifting messages. The Protestant ethic played no small part in the rise of capitalism, as the analysis of Weber points out so insightfully, and the Ten Commandments still draw at least respectful lip service in the life of even today's population.

In Asia, not only is the part of religion in life much smaller, many of the ideas about religion are not well understood, even to the most religious, including the common place ideas of religious freedom and morality.

Like "democracy", "religious freedom" is one of the sacred cows of modern society. Forcing people to have a particular religion is considered medieval, while forcing people not to have religion is totalitarian; yet, political interference with religion is frequent, because religion is usually associated with morals and social control, with organization, and with national morale

Take the example of Tibet: by choosing a baby god as the next leader supposedly based on reincarnation, the traditional Tibetan society was inherently undemo-

cratic; the lukewarm support Dalai lama received from western governments, who are willing to socialize with him and praise him, but provided no money, weapons or political recognition, has a lot to do with this, and a recent decision by Dalai Lama to separate religious and political leadership selections reflects an awareness of this situation.

Though religion is based on a personal choice of faith, it is almost always organizational, because people must get together to share and reinforce each other's faith, unlike science in which practitioners share a common logical system that does not require emotional and environmental reaffirmation: you do not become a more fervent scientist by sitting in a dark church and singing emotional songs about your beliefs.

The moral system of a religion, giving organization leaders the power to tell followers what to do or not to do, means that religious organizations inevitably compete with governments at some level; when mobs of Fa Lun Gong followers try to close down newspapers that print articles criticizing their medical and spiritual claims, conflict with police and party becomes the logical result.

When a particular tribe or race practises a unique worship system, it is difficult to separate personal beliefs, tribal culture, religious doctrine, and political identity. A government might tolerate personal beliefs and doctrine, but disapprove the tribal culture and political identity as unpatriotic; it might therefore be allowing and limiting religious freedom at the same time. Similarly, it might exercise control over the organizational aspects of a religion (like, only patriotic people are allowed to be bishops), while claiming to allow freedom to believe.

"Is there religious freedom in country X?" Depends on what you look at doesn't it? What is reassuring is however that no government would say "we want everyone to believe in religion Y; we don't allow freedom to choose". At least this is progress.

Turning now to the issue of morality, contrary to general impressions, morality is usually a matter of pragmatics rather than principle. Take the example of urinating in the street (which is important enough to be given a special euphemistic legal term "obeying the call of nature"): why is it "wrong"? It is unhygienic, but this is a pragmatic matter; it is socially disapproved, but this too is a matter of pragmatics which varies between cultures - it is for example more or less acceptable in Japan; it costs the municipal government money to clean up the urine; so there are usually laws against it, but this is again a matter of pragmatics.

The wrongness of the act is also related to the prohibition against exposing one's private parts in public, but that too is a matter of pragmatics, of community disapproval, of violating a law, and of the possibility of inciting disgust or illicit passion in others. Indeed, the fact that disgust and passion contradict each other shows that it would be very difficult to work out any logical principle about the wrongness of public urination/exposing organs. In effect, because of the confusing mix of various ideas relating to it, communities simply decreed that the act is wrong, creating a moral principle, because a principle is needed from the circumstance and pragmatics.

Religion, however, comes to the rescue of morality. Faith provides something

that satisfies the psychological needs of a person; in other words, it allows him/her to believe something he/she wants to believe. The same process supplies moral principles where principles are needed.

Most religions adopt some ideas of the afterlife, because humans fear death and want to believe that something continues of themselves. Further, they need to believe that afterlife can remedy deficiencies of current life; it then becomes logical to believe that good afterlife is based on morality. Further, because faith needs regular reinforcement through sharing with fellow believers, religions naturally produce organizations, which then become instruments to enforce morality.

In comparison, economics has been far less instrumental in creating systems of morality, despite past sociological theories like Weber's Protestant Ethics and Capitalism: moral values to underpin orderly business practices are simply too obviously pragmatic, and not satisfyingly principle like. Humans need something bigger than themselves to provide uplifting aspirations, and religions and moral principles do that.

Are religious people more moral than non-believers? We can only be sure that they subscribe to the moral systems associated with their particular religions, but have no idea how good the systems are and how closely the persons adhere to them. Further, "God is on my side" is a belief that can provide a person with a ready excuse for any act, which a person without such a belief might hesitate to do. Overall, it is best to know a person well as a person, rather than just a member of a religious group, in order to predict what he/she would or would not do.

In parallel with their ideological weaknesses, the Asian majority have not thought out about why they believe (as against the simpler, rote learning task of what the beliefs are). Far from indicating a new move towards greater spirituality, the rise of movements like Fa Lun Gong, and the success of some religions in winning new converts, indicate the spiritual vulnerability of Asians. They remind us of the speed with which Marxism spread in an earlier era and the vehemence Asian intellectuals once showed in rejecting all religions, suspecting them of being detrimental to modernization and scientific thinking. In ideology as in religion, Asia remains in the grip of a crisis of faith.

While religions can provide some spiritual comfort to their followers, the multitude of different beliefs espoused by the various organizations do not provide a basis for a unified opposition ideology able to maintain a dialog with a government establishment. By themselves, they provide no solution to the social spiritual deficiency prevailing in Asia.

5.4 Science, proof and faith

What about science? Given the importance of economic development and technology, and the high value attached to education, scientific thinking ought to be a powerful force in Asia. Does this offer a way out of the crisis of faith? Unfortunately, I feel pessimistic here too.

There used to be a time when ideas about the material and the spiritual worlds

were not clearly divided. Isaac Newton was considered to be both the greatest scientist and the greatest theologian of his time, and Euler was employed at the Russian court to debate against atheist philosophers using his mathematical research. Universities used to give the same training to people to become either lawyers or priests, and cardinals found nothing incongruous working as the chief ministers of kings. The Pope himself used to have his own state like an earthly prince, and the great church-state conflicts arose not because of any material versus spiritual separation, but because the two were not separated: the Investiture Dispute was caused by both the Emperor and the Pope wishing to have the power to appoint prince-bishops that ruled parts of the Holy Roman Empire. In China, ancestor worship, state ceremonies, agricultural seasons and domestic life used to be so closely linked that Confucius and his students were government officials, temple priests and academic scholars combined. The Dalai Lama is traditionally both the spiritual and political leader of Tibet.

Copernicus is usually credited as the scientist who started the process of definitive separation of material and spiritual ideas, by proposing a model of the solar system incompatible with church teachings. To remain a good son of the church, Galileo had to publicly renounce the theory, despite contrary inner convictions based on his own research. Living in a Protestant country, Newton had an easier time, but even he had to struggle to maintain his orthodox reputation on the Continent. Since then, materialistic ideas have become so dominant that religions are usually relegated to being regarded as old fashioned superstitions unable to stand up against science, and in a form of rearguard defence, religious and other spiritually oriented people deliberately want to establish a border between the two worlds, so that spiritual ideas would not be subject to scientific analysis and proof. The need to form sanctuary enclaves only serves to underline the extent of the retreat.

But even this does not guarantee permanent security, because ideas come into collision in rather unexpected ways. Take the following three examples:

(a) Reincarnation: Science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of souls, nor whether a current living animal has the same soul that previously existed in a now dead animal. But this does not make the idea of reincarnation immune to scientific progress. Consider evolution and dinosaurs. If you believe that dinosaurs once existed, and also believe in reincarnation, then logically you must believe that some of today's humans are reincarnated dinosaurs. No doubt some would find the idea quite acceptable, but others might find it ridiculous. In the latter case, does one reject reincarnation, dinosaurs, or simply reject the logical connection, by dismissing the whole issue as a silly joke from an eccentric professor?

(b) Conception: This used to be viewed in an agricultural analogy - the man plants his "seeds" in the woman to produce a fetus in her womb that will grow like a plant in soil. From this analogy, an easy identification of woman with earth arises producing various versions in mythology and literature, and sex and human fertility get linked to agricultural productivity in various cultures. Today we know that the fetus in fact derives half its genes from the egg contributed by the woman, and half from the man's sperm, so that the man does not provide the whole "seed" and the

woman does not play a purely passive, soil like role. How has this affected our view of man-woman relations?

(c) Plato's theory of forms: Plato thought every object of a type, say a horse, captures part of an abstract entity that exists in nature, such as "horseness", that determines the features of the type. All horses share "horseness" and therefore are similar, and good people have captured more goodness than bad people. Today we know that "horseness" lies in the DNA molecules that exist within every cell of every horse, and by passing just one copy of its DNA to the offspring, the parent horse ensures that the offspring would be a horse. It is unknown whether a goodness gene exists, but at least we know now there is no goodness in nature for us to capture.

In each of the three cases, a previously accepted spiritual idea has come into collision with scientific knowledge, resulting in some obvious or subtle shift in our thinking.

However, the proposition that scientific ideas are better accepted than spiritual ideas because they can be "proved" is highly dubious. We believe in atoms and dinosaurs, but has it really been "proved" to us that atoms exist and dinosaurs existed? None of us have ever seen an atom or a dinosaur, nor ever will. There are some very large skeletons that are on display in museums, but how do we know these came from animals that lived millions of years ago? Some of us use electricity generated from nuclear reactors, but in what way does this prove the existence of atoms? The connection may be clear to a nuclear scientist, but not to the human majority.

For most of us, such beliefs are merely based on faith: there are these books from the libraries that show pictures of atoms and dinosaurs, and there are these wise looking men who tell us that such things exist(ed); we accept their words because they command authority. Is this so very different from believing in the bible and the priests? Even scientists themselves have to base much of their beliefs upon faith once they move out of their own specialized domain into areas in which they are not expert.

In short, despite scientific progress, faith is still required as the basis of beliefs. What has changed is merely the way faith is established and reaffirmed.

Like the existence of atoms and dinosaurs, most scientific beliefs are not verified by direct observations, but are deduced from hypotheses using a set of agreed rules. Some of these deductions that produce observable propositions are then verified experimentally. This allows the hypotheses and their deduced results to be tentatively accepted as the current theory. A theory may be rejected later if additional deductions for previously untested situations turn out to contradict experimental observations. Both relativity and quantum mechanics came to be developed when the deductions of classical physics for previously untested situations (one involving high speed movement, and the other atomic particles) failed to match observations. Science is always subject to doubts like "Other hypotheses could be just as good or even better" "Why these rules of deduction and not some other" "If we do the same experiments tomorrow the results could be different", but generally both scientists and the non- scientific community agree that these are not useful arguments

to make, if you want to have science at all.

Nevertheless, the proposition that scientific ideas are believed because they are logical is also a dubious one. Most of us are not able to follow the chain of reasoning linking electricity generation to the existence of atoms, nor see that the dinosaur bones dug up in Mongolia show that the species later became birds, because such logical deductions require considerable knowledge and methodological training to carry out correctly, and because the reasoning process involves numerous experimental observations which we cannot make ourselves. In both methodology and facts, we accept the words of authoritative figures certifying them to be correct; in other words, by faith.

For the layman, even simple hypothesis and deductions involve ready pitfalls. Consider:

hypothesis: Pigs can fly.

deduction: There will be things with wings that are good to eat.

observation: Pigeons, which are things with wings good to eat.

conclusion: Deduction has been verified by observation so...

For this one, it is relatively easy to see that many other deductions from the same hypothesis would be incorrect and the "theory" is not acceptable, but most of us would not be able to figure out what is wrong with the above argument itself. Other wrong theories may be much harder to reject, and right and wrong arguments hard to distinguish, e.g.

(a) Socrates is a human; a human can be male or female; Socrates can be male or female.

(b) Socrates is a human; a human can be born male or female; Socrates can be born male or female.

The first is correct, since if we know nothing about Socrates, then we could be talking about a male or a female; the second is incorrect, because the first clause refers to an already existing human, while the second refers to a possibly unborn human, so that the two clauses cannot be combined to produce the third clause as conclusion.

Even the idea "Science is consistent" is not a simple one. Earlier this century, the Czech mathematician Godel proved that no mathematical theory can be both complete and consistent. To take a simple example: supposed we have words that describe things; to be complete, things should include words; words can be self-describing ("short" is a short word) or nonselfdescribing ("long" is not a long word); is "nonselfdescribing" a nonselfdescribing word? If so, it describes itself and so is a

selfdescribing word; but if “nonselfdescribing” is selfdescribing, it does not describe itself, and so must be nonselfdescribing... This is in fact the same as the paradox of king and prisoners: “A cruel king ordered all prisoners to be brought before the court to utter one sentence; if it is true, the prisoner will be hanged; if it is false, he would be beheaded; so one prisoner said ‘I am going to be beheaded’...” which shows how easy it is for paradoxes to arise, since the same underlying logic can appear in many alternative disguises.

Yet, even though we have not made any scientific experiments ourselves and do not follow the logical deductions, we believe in science. What accounts for our faith?

Beliefs that are adopted by faith must in some way meet a psychological need. For example, most humans are afraid of death, and the idea of having a soul is psychologically comforting, by allowing us to think that we do not simply disappear at death, but would live on in another way. For Christians, the prospect of salvation is “truth” because they “feel it”. It is part of their “experience”, even though it is something that cannot be verified or disproved by empirical observation.

Science meets a human need to summarize our experience. $1+1=2$ applies to the situation when we place (+) an apple (1) next to another (1), and find two apples side by side, also when we put a potato into a bag that already has a potato, also... The formula has captured something in nature, an objective truth, that appears in different forms, independently of the cultural context in which the experience was gathered and expressed; that is, whether a society has apples and potatoes or not, and what notation its people use to express $1+1=2$, are independent of the truth of $1+1=2$ itself.

A belief based on summarized experience is regularly confirmed, like we see examples of $1+1=2$ every day; hence, our belief is strengthened on a daily basis. Faith in science is regularly affirmed by contact with products of science - switch on the air conditioner and the room cools down, and logging into the computer we email to our friends in New York. Science delivers. What makes modern times different from the age of Newton is the prevalent presence of science and the almost constant affirmation of our scientific beliefs.

This however does not explain why we believe in atoms and dinosaurs, which have only a tenuous connection to airconditioning and computers. We could say that quantum mechanics explains the movement of electrons in semiconductors, which are used in both airconditioner circuits and computer processors; it also explains the structure of atoms and molecules, which are related to DNA and genes, which are related to heredity and natural selection, which are related to dinosaurs. But almost none of us understand all these subject areas together with the links between them. The question is still why we do not hesitate in accepting all of them by faith.

The answer has to be socialization: the electronic engineers, computer scientists, atomic physicists, molecular biologists and evolution zoologists are part of the same scientific community. We have the same basic education, and our individual fields share much of the scientific methodology and tools. We have faith in each other, and acknowledge the authority of specialists of other areas which we ourselves do

not understand. This collective faith is passed on to the community at large, who are impressed by science's ability to deliver. Ultimately, this is not so very different from the socialization process that supports religious faith: worshipers, who get together on sundays in a dark hall with high ceilings and stain glass windows to sing emotional hymns accompanied by a grand organ, have their faith strengthened by expressing their common views together, and leaders of a community professing a faith would usually carry their people along.

This is why people who have not been socialized in the same way can respond to the wonders of technology quite differently. The hill tribes of New Guinea watching aeroplanes landing to deliver wonderful things to white men, who pay for them with cheques and credit cards, were convinced that goods being sent to themselves by their heavenly ancestors had been intercepted by European witchcraft. Instead of starting to learn aerodynamics and electronic commerce so that they could participate in this high tech world culture, they built wood aeroplanes on hilltops and waited for their ancestors to descend and bring them cargo...

In short, while objective truths like $1+1=2$ do exist in nature and determine both experimental observations and feasible applications of science, our faith in science is a cultural phenomenon, as is our particular expression of it. By demolishing certain old beliefs and co-existing with others, and forming its own cultural expressions that are used and affirmed daily, science is an integral, indeed the driving, part of the spiritual world of the modern man.

For anyone who hopes that science would form the basis of belief systems that meet social needs, it must be disappointing to hear that science itself requires faith. On its own, science can offer no direct solution to Asia's crisis of faith.

Education and Creativity

6.1 Meritocracy

”Meritocracy” is a word seldom used in USA: seeing its great variety of educational and career opportunities, one automatically assumes that talent and enterprise will find their niche somewhere. It is in the far more unitary, neo-Confucian societies of Asia where the establishment has to constantly reassure the people that the system will recognize, develop and reward merit, not just directly in the public sector with meritocratic policies of recruitment and promotion, but also by indirect influence in the private sectors. The inability (or perhaps unwillingness) of Asian societies to achieve racial integration adds further, politically hazardous dimensions to the issue.

Like infrastructure building, education is a long term process difficult to operate as business enterprises, and requires some form of public finance. While local communities and religious organizations might still have some limited participation, education in Asian nations is basically a nationally organized social service. Like democracy, education is subject to manipulation, and a meritocratic society has to work hard to maintain the accessibility and uniformity of its education system, with fair performance assessments, so that even the children of the lower classes have the means to develop their potentials and take advantage of opportunities for upward mobility.

Asian students have the reputation of being good at rote learning, but lacking in independent and creative thinking. This is usually blamed on a Confucian subservience to authority figures, with whom one is not allowed to argue and disagree, or the importance of “face” which requires everyone to maintain superficial harmony. On the other hand, such cultural requirements ought to drive people to develop a high level of tact and subtlety, and so can be very positive for mental development too.

Therefore, the way the education itself is conducted would seem to be of far greater and more direct impact: to ensure uniformity, school syllabuses are nationally devised, often based on identical textbooks and exercises in all schools, and tests and examinations normally have unambiguously correct answers. This not only reduces the workload of teachers, often overworked in schools with large

classes and limited resources, and especially in the older days while a nation was still pulling itself out of colonial backwardness and poverty, with many teachers being underqualified; the approach also looks verifiably fair.

The consequence is, however, that even with the most inventive question setting, it is not very long before one exhausts all varieties and any question paper would be answerable by memorization; while a question itself might be new, one can nevertheless recognize its template and guess its answer, if one has worked long enough at remembering all possible varieties and how to optimally attempt each kind. Knowing how to score marks without learning the content became a highly developed art, and it works extremely well in terms of additional marks gained for the amount of effort put in. An contributing factor is that much of the educational material is in English, and bewildered students often find it easier to quote whole passages and sample answers, than to understand their meaning and work something out on their own.

6.2 Creativity and entrepreneurship

When American parents drop off their children at grade school, the parting words are usually “have fun” rather than “work hard”, and until the internet boom created teenage millionaires out of weird nerds, the most admired students in high schools are the football captains and cheerleaders. When a high school senior chooses which colleges to apply to, he/she often asks about the party scene rather than academic standards. The Ivy League colleges would admit sportsmen, movie starlets and children of politicians with mediocre transcripts and SAT scores, in order to add “diversity” to its student population. One President of Yale University resigned to become the US Baseball Commissioner.

This does not mean that American society does not care about work, money, and merit in the sense of earning power, merely that it has different experiences about what gets one ahead. American leaders and entrepreneurs show their sparks in ways different from the rise of a salaryman in a Japanese corporation or a returned scholar in the Singapore public sector.

Yet, despite the differences in educational philosophies, Asia has been setting its higher education agenda according to American rules. Top professors are expected to have Stanford and MIT degrees, and be promoted according to American criteria and procedures. Publishing at American conferences and journals is more likely to be valued, and even just getting a visitor from Stanford/MIT to come over, regardless of what he/she might do during the visit, is alone considered an achievement.

Largely, this is because the top American universities are thought to be good at linking education and research with business. Professors earn high consultancy fees, sit on company boards, and start their own businesses with students. It is rarely attached significance that Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Michael Dell, Larry Ellison and Jeff Bezos never completed their college education, and Jerry Yang dropped out of his Stanford PhD programme in order to run Yahoo full time, after developing

his web search engine on Stanford machines. In the same way, Bill Gates used Harvard computers to write his hardware emulator/Basic language compiler, which Paul Allen, his classmate, marketed to microcomputer companies in Arizona and California; when business began to flow in, they both dropped out of Harvard. In short, college education and business are related, but in a more subtle way than just A leading to B.

The successful Singapore entrepreneur Sim Wong Hoo was also not a college graduate, completing only a polytechnic diploma course, and his company Cubic Computer enjoyed little initial success developing Chinese language personal computers. However, after spending much time exploring market opportunities in Silicon Valley, he realized that no one was producing a good PC output device for generating sound from disk files, and set about to develop his Soundblaster card under the company label Creative Technology. Having become the dominant player in the niche, Creative suffered a period of low inventiveness, but recently found a second niche of manufacturing portable MP3 music players. So again, college education and business are not simply related.

American professors are indeed encouraged to be enterprising; they fight for research grants from government agencies and commercial enterprises to help pay for the university running costs and their own summer salaries, and to support teams of graduate students on their projects. American students are encouraged to do their own thing like Bill Gates and Jerry Yang, rather than memorize sample answers for possible examination questions.

But starting a new business like Amazon is not just a matter of turning knowledge and technology into money. It also depends on the availability of many other things: book buyers already had access to networked computers in universities, and to a lesser extent in the early days, at home; they wanted difficult to find (and difficult to sell) books which Bezos collected cheaply in his garage; they have credit cards to pay for the books electronically; companies like UPS will deliver the books to their homes; there were venture capitalists with the foresight to back Bezos to expand his business by building warehouses and fast responding, easy to use websites. The need is to have an environment where the new technological possibilities are understood, as in places like the Stanford Computer Science Department, and to put this next to the environment where the business resources can be marshalled.

In their virtual reality of paper qualifications, assessment by simple rules, rote learning and sample answers, Asian professors and students are far away from the American style creativity and entrepreneurship. With their limited access to high-tech resources, it is also difficult to see that the Bill Gates/Jerry Yang experimentation for future commercial opportunities would be officially encouraged in the Harvards and Stanfords of Asia. Deep and disruptive changes will have to occur before they can even come close to their American role models.

6.3 Culture preservation

The expression “Asian values” goes well with “preserving our culture”, because only if the cultures are good and worthy of preservation, would it follow that the culture requires things to be done differently from the West. When obviously non-meritocratic policies like racial quota have to be applied, it becomes all the more important to have the maintenance of the dominant race’s culture as justification. Cultural preservation is however fraught with difficulties, and policies never quite do what they intend to do. The Chinese language policy of Singapore provides a case in point.

Since the early days of independent Singapore, a two-languages education policy has been in force: all school children are required to study English and the mother tongue, and the second language proficiency, as shown by examination performance, is part of the requirement for entering the local universities. For the Chinese, there has also been an annual Speak Mandarin campaign to urge the use of the common speech in place of dialects. The policy has been justified by its assumed benefit in preserving community cohesion and traditional culture, and has been maintained largely intact despite criticisms and various minor modifications.

For, almost as soon as the policy was introduced, there have been complaints that the Chinese language requirements are too hard and very stressful for the students to cope with. In reply, the officials have always pointed out that it is not particularly hard to reach the minimum proficiency standards, and in fact failure rates for English and Mathematics are usually higher. This defense has, however, largely missed the point, since for the majority of parents and students the concern is not merely to attain a minimum pass, but to obtain a good aggregate result in the highly competitive education system. Being an essential component of this aggregate result, performance in Chinese language examinations materially affects the prospect of a child.

Further, a number of features of the Singapore society have combined to make this apparently commonplace matter one of the major social issues. Like other East Asian societies based on hierarchical mandarinism, Singapore uses examinations to channel youngsters into different “streams” starting from primary school or even before. The top students attend top primary and secondary schools, and those with the best A level results are given government scholarships to study in elite overseas universities and are then placed in fast track administrative careers in various parts of the public sector, with some using this as the platform to high posts in private companies or political careers. Operating in a world market, the top managerial levels, including government ministers, offer salaries comparable to those in Europe and North America, while the importation of foreign workers pegged lower class salaries near the level of the local region.

Consequently, there is a wide gap between the two ends, providing strong incentives to achieve upward mobility through education. A good examination aggregate result thus attains a far greater importance, as compared to say SAT scores for American students, and the need not to be held back by a poor Chinese language

grade looms large in everyone's thinking. Even for good students who can pick up the language easily, the stress is no less: good students are simply channelled into tougher classes teaching Chinese at a higher level. Since a good result in Higher Chinese counts more in competitive assignment to top schools/streams, the need to try hard remains, both to perform well enough to go into the higher stream, and to perform well within it.

But the need to get high marks applies to all the subjects; yet, there seems to be some factor that makes Chinese much more of a problem. Despite the success rates in terms of passing examinations, the common reaction from students has been that they hate the subject, and want to forget about it as soon as they have obtained the grade of result they need for their particular purpose. Further, passing the examination, at even the Higher Chinese level, seems to be not a good indicator of actual command of the language, since few Singaporean students can use the language at the level on which a high school graduate in China, Taiwan or even Hong Kong is able to function. The average Singaporean high school graduate has little interest in or understanding of Chinese culture, and would quickly forget the language lessons that have cost so much effort to learn. What is the problem?

The Chinese language curriculum in Singapore schools is closer to that used in China, rather than Taiwan or Hong Kong. Among other things, it uses simplified characters, though this is a minor point. More significant is its concentration on the current Chinese language, rather than studying the modern language at lower levels followed by modern and classical literature subsequently. Its objective is to teach Chinese as a living language, for people who will use it actively, rather than as a cultural entity for a foreign or colonial audience, which is what the Hong Kong system is more oriented towards (though with the reversion to China, Hong Kong is trying to move away from this.)

With a curriculum on modern Chinese spanning over 10 years, the standard required at the end of the cycle is fairly advanced. On paper, a student passing the O level Chinese examination, especially if it is at Higher Chinese level, ought to be very proficient. Indeed, a perusal of the textbooks used in school would show a good standard of modern literary Chinese. Unfortunately, in the current Singapore society, where virtually all business transactions and daily activities outside private homes are conducted in English, people do not have opportunities to actually use the highly literate Chinese they learn at school. Without such practice, the proficiency they actually acquire is not so much language proficiency, but just proficiency at passing language examinations.

In other words, the curriculum is meant for active Chinese users, who live their daily lives and conduct serious, perhaps intellectual, discussions in Chinese, and learn other school lessons in that language, not people who merely do in Mandarin what they used to do in dialect: they might greet each other in Chinese, talk about simple things like what food to eat for lunch and the price of houses in Chinese, and then switch to English for anything to be talked about in depth. The tendency of people breaking out into Hokkien when having a quarrel, or to tease each other in Cantonese, shows that many have not even attained the dialect level proficiency in

Mandarin. Without such daily practice, one cannot be proficient, and it becomes even harder to learn the highly literary Chinese taught at the senior secondary levels since such language learners would get the practice they need only by frequent exposure to higher level literature, something that might be commonplace in China (at least in large cities) but definitely not in Singapore.

Thus, the curriculum design has ensured that the learning of Chinese in schools is an isolated, scholastic activity detached from the life experience of the students, especially as most of the text they have to read contain moralistic lectures about family values, good citizenships, etc. Valuable as such teachings might be, the simple fact is when young people want to read Chinese writings on their own, they would go for Gongfu novels by Jin Yong and soap operas by Qun Yao. So the content of the texts can only further reinforce the feeling that Chinese lessons are irrelevant to life, like the ancestral gods that one occasionally has to kowtow to, but gets away from as quickly as possible.

So why has the situation been allowed to remain after 30 years of stressful experience? The main factor seems to lie with the Chinese community leaders, mostly business tycoons, who use mandarin and dialects in social bonding with each other, but switch to English when doing business which often requires dealing with government officials and foreigners. They frequently lobby education officials to require schools to spend more time on teaching Chinese and raise standards. Their conscious motivation is undoubtedly the need to maintain Chinese culture in the face of western influence, but there is probably the subconscious motive of political influence "show more respect for our community". Unfortunately, the leaders as a group have limited contact with both Chinese culture (philosophy, literature, history, arts, etc) and the actual learning experiences of the school children. While the parents of the affected children complain, their concern is with school level issues like teacher performance, testing standards, greater language exposure opportunities through ECA, etc., rarely at the level of curriculum design. When international language teaching experts are consulted, the natural feedback has been that the requirements do not seem unreasonable, which is perfectly valid if one considers the lessons alone, rather than how they function within the real cultural conditions. Thus the cause of the problem remains undiagnosed.

Community cohesion is an important consideration for the Singapore Chinese, who are surrounded regionally by a very large Malay/Indonesian population, and bombarded daily by American culture. Having all Chinese school children learn Mandarin must have a positive impact on the ability of the members of the community to interact with each other. But what is the cost associated with this benefit?

First is the weakening of the dialect based community organizations. While associations of Hokkien, Tewchew and Hainan people continue to exist, they have lost the influence once exerted, and in fact have no meaningful roles to play except for some minor welfare tasks. More significant is the lack of contact across racial boundaries: different schools tend to offer different second languages, and Malay and Indian children generally go to separate schools, or separate classes within the same school, from Chinese children. While some mixing occurs again after secondary

schools, the paths have already diverged for too long.

Does learning Chinese help to maintain the “Chineseness” of the community? It depends on how one defines Chineseness of course. If one wants more than just speaking a common Chinese tongue, but looks at the issue of “cultural roots”, then one can come up with various criteria. Certainly Chinese festivals are celebrated, but this can be done whether one speaks Mandarin or dialects and is little dependent on how many years of Chinese are studied at school. Buddhism is winning some converts as part of a general increase in religious adhesion, but one can question how Chinese that is. In any case, if one looks for a high level of interest in Chinese culture, especially ancient culture, then the result can only be disappointing.

What about moral standards? One could argue about whether traditional Chinese society was more moral, or merely repressive, and how well it lived up to its own lectures on filial duties and prudent behaviour, but this would be merely futile: if Chinese lessons are so intensely disliked, one would hardly expect any moral messages they convey to be taken seriously.

In fact, despite its priggish image, sexual mores in Singapore have been anything but conservative: Divorce rates are as high as those in Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and rising. Each year the number of abortions performed average around 15000, and since for every teenage girl that gets pregnant, there must be another 10 who used contraception or were simply lucky, one can readily deduce that premarital sex is widespread. Reports of abandoned new born babies appear regularly in the newspaper. Crime levels are low in Singapore, but it is hard to attribute this to the Chinese lessons; besides various factors like strict law enforcement, compact city state leading to better crime detection, good economy, etc., one might thank liberal abortion policies that minimize the number of unwanted children, who would have much greater tendencies to turn out badly.

So if the objective of “maintaining cultural roots” means moral conservatism and interest in traditional culture, then the language teaching has failed to produce them. In fact, the stressful Chinese examinations have probably done the reverse: a recent survey says that 20% of Chinese teenagers wish they were Japanese or Caucasian, whereas the percentage of Indians and Malays with such wishes was small; presumably the idea “if I were Japanese/American then I dont need to take the lessons” was not far from everyone’s mind. More generally, the stressful school experience has engendered in many teenagers a sense of inadequacy: the lessons always seem a bit harder than they are capable of, and this, among other things, might provide an explanation for sexual promiscuity as teenagers with low self-esteem, especially females, frequently seek psychological compensation in such physical ways.

Another consequence has been to foster in students an attitude “it does not matter whether you know or not; just be able to bluff your way in the examination”, which is especially relevant to Chinese examinations, though the rest of the examination system does little to dispel it.

With Hollywood, MTV and McDonald blasting out the message that it is easy and fun to be like the Americans, and top students aspiring to have MIT degrees, culture preservation seems to be a lost cause, but this does not prevent it from

being used to justify a variety of policies, merely that the result is often hard to predict. Much has been made of the economic rise of China making command of Chinese language a valuable business asset, but since a small number of people actually do business with China, the argument's impact is limited. While I have much sympathy with the intent, I wonder how sustainable such efforts are going to be. In 2004 a first step back was made when the local universities stopped making Mother tongue grade a compulsory component of the admission aggregate mark (though a minimum pass is still necessary to qualify as an applicant so 2nd language is still a required subject.) How things will develop afterwards remains to be seen.

In Search of Asian Values

Until the 1997 Asian economic meltdown, leaders of the successful Asian economies were apt to lecture the West about its shortcomings, such as social decadence, family breakdown, welfare induced indolence, low savings rate, and in the case of one Japanese prime minister, ethnic impurity. Part of this was a genuine feeling of superiority, and part to fend off probable criticisms from western diplomats about democracy and human rights. For several years since then, the boom on Wall Street, induced partly by solid technological and business innovations, and partly by the bubble of investment money transferring itself from Asia to North America, has made Americans impervious to such voices, and we have heard far less of “Asian values”. Now that the Nasdaq bubble has burst and America is on the verge of recession, we should brace ourselves for a revival of the arguments. The hope is however that this time a more serious effort can be made to come up with a genuine Asian synthesis of social experiences and a set of meaningful ideologies to guide future actions.

“Asian Values” can be real cultural impediments to the application of western political principles, imposing concrete modifications, but they can also be just a convenient excuse for self-serving politicians and businessmen. The important issue is discussion and transparency: by shining light on the ideas and digging down to their bedrock foundations, we can better decide how much credibility to attach to them.

Both East and West have their share of sacred cows, some probably carrying BSE viruses; before a useful debate can take place, a number of these need to be slaughtered so that they would not be there to detract us from the serious thinking at hand. We hope to have done our share of the butchering.

Confucianism in its various versions have served east Asian nations for long, while Marxism also has had its share of successes, but their deficiencies are also apparent. Bringing the right parts of each within a capitalist and democratic framework is the promising route to try. It is perhaps not often realized how close Confucius and Marx are in their tactical ideas: Confucius wants rulers to constantly reflect on their own shortcomings, i.e., find the antithesis, and co-opt the best ideas of the opposing camp, i.e., achieve the synthesis. Their difference is simply due to the 2500 years of scientific and philosophical developments in between.

Undoubtedly, the search for Asian Values will lead us down many meandering byways and blind alleys, which many Asians would not want to undergo in view of more urgent problems. However, divorced from coherent principles, apparent solutions might themselves turn out to be mere mirages. The effort remains to be seriously tried by the thinking people of Asia.