

Positive influence

G. Bin Zhao calls on Beijing to accept the pope's offer of friendship and open China's doors to the Catholic Church, as well as revive its own faith traditions, to stem society's moral degeneration

Last week, as Pope Francis passed through Chinese airspace after his visit to the Philippines, he sent a telegram to Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平), it was reported, to again express his willingness to visit China. This is an important indication that the Vatican is trying to improve relations with China. Perhaps more significantly, the news was widely reported by mainland media and not blocked, unlike a lot of other sensitive information.

Although China has made great progress, gradually reducing poverty and increasing prosperity as the economy grew to be ranked one of the largest in the world, in terms of gross domestic product, there is general agreement that the moral quality of the population is falling as fast as living standards are rising.

Examples abound: when an elderly person fell in a public place, no one dared help for fear of being blamed or blackmailed; car thieves strangled an infant they discovered in the vehicle they stole; food producers sold poisonous goods to obtain higher profits. Such tragic events, among many others, provide anecdotal evidence of the country's falling moral standards.

In recent years, as this descent has become more obvious and alarming, the issue has been a cause for much reflection and discussion in society. The main problems can be summarised as follows.

Serious long-term corruption has distorted the concepts of equity and justice in society, and eroded the integrity of business and personal relationships. The growing wealth disparity has led to social discrimination and class contradictions.

Feelings of "hatred against the rich" and "hatred against government officials" are common among ordinary people, feelings that have grown to the point where apathy and low levels of morality are the result.

Furthermore, moral education, unable to adapt to the rapid pace of social change in China, is lagging. For more than 2,000 years, including in more contemporary times, ideology and morality in China have mainly been influenced and dominated by the thoughts and teachings of Confucius, the Buddha and Lao Tzu.

Unfortunately, since 1949, the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism has taken up much of the ideological space. The reform and opening-up process, from its start in 1978 through to the time of Deng Xiaoping's (邓小平) southern tour speech in 1992, focused almost solely on economic development.

Current mainstream moral education is still locked in with the teachings of

socialist ideology, ideas that are thin and weak, and incapable of improving people's moral qualities in the modern era of economic prosperity.

After over 2,000 years of heritage and development, the traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are deeply rooted in the blood of Chinese people. Yet, they are neglected today.

Although civil society has started to gradually bring attention to this issue in recent years, the government has not



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emphasised it enough, despite the fact that the promotion of these traditional and religious beliefs would not only have no negative effect on society but would probably be an effective complement to the nation's development.

Since such traditions have not been given due attention, how could the Catholic Church, which was only introduced in recent history, hope to have any influence? It is precisely for this reason that Beijing needs to improve relations with the Vatican. The moral decline in China requires immediate and drastic action. The Chinese government should encourage and develop the traditional thinking of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, while also welcoming Catholicism, Christianity and other religions.

It should improve its relationship with the Vatican and help liberate freedom of religious belief for Chinese people, an area where the government has repeatedly been criticised.

The new leadership, which has garnered the attention and applause of people around the world with its extraordinary fight against corruption, would find that opening the door to such initiatives would ease many social problems associated with China's ethical and moral decline.

If the top leadership can be more open-minded and find a way to embrace and respect – even propagate – Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, as well as welcome Western religions to China, the country's culture, values and social systems will develop and become more refined in just a few years.

It would therefore be a joyous and vital moment if President Xi were to shake hands with Pope Francis – in Beijing, the Vatican, or indeed anywhere in the world.

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Lurking danger

Lam San-keung says Hong Kong's laws are inadequate to safeguard us from the security threat of some in the city colluding with external forces

The Occupy Central movement caused harm and disruption to society. It did, however, also prove that we have one of the finest police forces in the world, and that the majority of protesters in Hong Kong still respect the law.

Yet another consequence of the movement has been the severe erosion of the mainland's trust in some people from the pan-democratic camp (especially those in the legal profession). This erosion of trust was not a result of their demand for freedom and democracy but, rather, due to their attempt or intention to associate with external forces to subvert the country and separate Hong Kong from China.

Most people in Hong Kong have seen that China is growing stronger, on the way to again becoming a great power. This is undoubtedly a matter of pride for every Chinese. President Xi Jinping (习近平) will lead China to realise the "Chinese dream" and the rule of law. This is very encouraging.

The disruption of national security by external forces is the biggest hurdle to the realisation of China's renaissance. Every Chinese, including the people of Hong Kong, should know how China and its people have been exploited and impoverished by the Western powers over the past few centuries. It is still happening today: the French magazine *Fluide Glacial* used the racist term "yellow peril" on the cover of a recent issue, right after the *Charlie Hebdo* tragedy.

Occupy Central brought the same concern about external forces. Yet, some advocates of the movement from the legal profession claim Hong Kong's existing laws provide adequate protection on national security and the legislation of Article 23 is therefore unnecessary. In my view, Occupy Central provides a good opportunity to review our laws and decide whether they do provide adequate safeguards.

We have also seen some prima facie evidence in newspapers of the alleged association between the instigators and supporters of Occupy Central and external forces. Hong Kong citizens have a right to know whether these occupiers fought purely on ideological grounds, or if they acted, or were being used, to subvert the nation and bring chaos to China again, as has happened in Iraq, Egypt and Libya.

Some supporters of Occupy Central from the legal profession have made a public statement that the existing set of laws are sufficient to prevent the occurrence of such incidents. I would invite them to suggest which provision or provisions of the law would achieve that purpose, so the Department of Justice and the legal profession can consider it.

The Department of Justice could then rely on such laws to prosecute suspected Occupy Central supporters.

The courts will ultimately be able to tell us whether the existing laws are relevant and can provide adequate protection on national security, and also whether some of the Occupy Central supporters are innocent, which perhaps would once again show the superiority of the rule of law in Hong Kong. Otherwise, what reason could be used to oppose the legislation of Article 23 for national security?

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Don't expect a multipolar global order to be any fairer than the status quo

Andrew Sheng says moral certitude, and welfare and rights entitlements, belong firmly in the past

The period between Christmas and the Lunar New Year is a period of grave reflection. In East Asia, the holiday season coincides with travel and family time, when we question friends and relatives about what to expect in the coming year. You know the year will be good if, after the Lunar New Year, either the stock market or the real estate market picks up. If they go down, look for a weak year for the economy.

This year, the crossover signals a time of momentous change, as the West shows signs of faltering, whereas the East is not only slowing, but the sharp drop in oil prices is beginning to hurt not just oil producers, but also global demand.

Western writers are in an unusually pensive mood. Influential *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rachman argues that the West has lost intellectual self-confidence, whereas former US Treasury secretary and Harvard professor Larry Summers suggested that China's growth may revert back to the mean, meaning slower growth levels. On the Globalist website, my former colleague Jean-Pierre Lehmann thinks we should get rid of the "Myth of Asia".

Terms like the "West" or "Asia" are of course concepts of geography that encompass culture, economies and history. There is nothing wrong with anyone talking of the rise of Asia or the decline of the West; just because each of us has his or her own perception of God, it doesn't mean God does not exist. The only problem is

whether my God is better than your God. And, on what basis do we make such judgments?

Just as Western intellectuals are redefining their place in the world, Asians are trying to pin down their own value systems in a world that no longer has one hegemonic value system.

Globalisation has truly removed the concept of entitlement of rights for even the most powerful of nations. US President Barack Obama's State of the Union speech this month may have crowed that the US economy is the only one to have recovered from the crisis, but the



The rest of the world has come to realise that influence in Washington can be bought

reality is that US inequality is worse than ever. Growth cannot be sustained when military and welfare budgets are unsustainable and the rest of the world is slowing.

The tragedy of the West is that the concept of a united and peaceful Europe is at risk of fragmentation, with the increasing possibility of a Greek exit from the euro zone.

Because Europe is hampered by its own cumbersome governance structure, founded neither on military nor civil

bureaucratic prowess, its raison d'être has been weakened by the fact that the centre will not pay for the mistakes of the periphery. Political union is ultimately founded on the self-interest of the member states, and it is now proven that monetary union is insufficient without fiscal union.

With advanced countries becoming burdened by higher debt, they are reaching the tipping point where their entitlement to prosperity guaranteed by the state is under threat. The 2007-2009 crisis was foundational because it was not a crisis of the poor or the underdeveloped, but a crisis of the rich and developed. Furthermore, it was not just financial bankruptcy that was at stake, but the moral bankruptcy of the free market ideology.

The shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world without the capacity to negotiate more global public goods (such as to rein in climate change) is not a good sign for global security. The US realises that it remains the dominant military power, but it can no longer deal with too many fronts without overstretch.

At the same time, a multipolar governance architecture is neither more stable nor fairer than the status quo. Prior to the Wall Street crash of 2007, the US considered itself a moral empire, which could justifiably call other empires "evil". The social inequalities and shenanigans that Wall Street can exercise on Main Street with little impunity post 2008 shattered the myth of moral superiority. Historians remember that

Rome was not necessarily more moral, more law-abiding or less corrupt than Persia, Carthage or Gaul, just militarily more effective and more disciplined in the exercise of realpolitik on its friends and foes.

The rest of the world has come to realise that influence in Washington can be bought, both through lobbyists and friends in Wall Street. This is not to say that influence in Asia and elsewhere cannot also be bought. The price is different, and if you have to ask the price, then you can't afford the game. In other words, it is not a fairer world, only an amoral and unequal division of spoils.

In this age of the multipolar game, just as no country can be entitled to hegemonic powers, so no individual or company can be entitled to any lasting welfare benefits, franchises or protected rights. The youth that kicks the policeman in the shin during Occupy Central thinks he is entitled to police protection of his rights. Yet, responsibility comes with every right.

This sounds very much like the view of a cynic. An Asian cynic is one who recognises that the West practises hypocrisy. The Western cynic is one who thinks the reverse is true. The tragedy is that both are right.

Andrew Sheng writes on global issues with an Asian perspective

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Cronyism and nepotism are hated in HK, not the rich

Stephen Vines disputes the welfare chief's characterisation of society

Sometimes, a single sentence in an otherwise unremarkable newspaper story really leaps out at you. This week, it happened with a reported statement by Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, the labour and welfare secretary, who said that a new scheme to help stay-at-home parents rejoin the workforce could reduce "the city's hatred of the rich".

This statement provides an unthinking insight into the unwitting of senior government officials who are wrapped in a self-reinforcing cocoon and remarkably out of touch with the society they are supposed to serve.

We shall gloss over the general patronising tone of Cheung's other comments accompanying this statement, as he spoke of how "the kids might feel grateful when they grow up..." and might even be able to become the next chief executive.

Patronising people outside their circle is, after all, the default attitude of Hong Kong's elite. However, they seem unaware that there is no hatred of the rich as such, but a deep distrust and loathing attached to the cronyism, institutional obstacles and nepotism that have produced a remarkably small and powerful wealthy elite.

Hong Kong people admire creative and hard-working people who, by their own efforts, have succeeded in making money. Indeed, in this immigrant-based society, the creation of wealth is a widely shared aspiration. What has changed has been

the rapid consolidation of the Hong Kong elite's power and wealth, giving rise to a sense of desperation among those hoping to climb a ladder that evidently has its upper reaches securely blocked.

Moreover, and this is something common to all immigrant-based communities as they mature and become more settled, there is less of a focus on wealth alone. A wider appreciation of other important aspects of life starts to develop. This, in turn, breeds greater social and political awareness of a kind so feared by the elite.



Patronising people outside their circle is the default attitude of Hong Kong's elite

Many of the younger people who took part in the recent street protests belong to the third generation of Hong Kong residents. They are looking beyond mere individual economic survival to collectively building a community, which they view with pride.

I also happen to be a third-generation descendant of very poor immigrants who arrived in Britain with nothing. My grandparents worked and worked to feed and clothe my parent's generation. That

generation climbed out of poverty with steely determination and became more self-confident members of the wider community.

My generation reaped the rewards of their hard work. We started to take economic sufficiency for granted. Still, we had an awareness of how it came about and this may explain why we were attracted to social and political activism that not only affirmed our identification with the wider community, but was also part of a feeling that we had to pay something back to a society that gave shelter and opportunities to our grandparents.

This pattern of behaviour is clearly evident in Hong Kong and should be widely lauded. But, instead, it is viewed with fear by those who have scrambled to the top of the pile and want to ensure they stay there.

Ironically, the scheme Cheung was talking about is one of the few government plans that makes sense because there are many parents, especially mothers, who can become valuable members of the workforce, if their domestic obligations allow this to happen.

The problem is that the government sees this kind of social, and indeed economic, advancement as part of its plan for containing social and political pressure, not as an end in itself.

As ever, what the privileged elite fears most are the people.

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