

## **On a Trip Through China - David Morrissey:**

*"... 'Objectivity' is not meant here to stand for 'disinterested contemplation' (which is a rank absurdity). but for the ability to have the pros and cons in one's power and to switch them on and off, so as to get to know how to use, for the advancement of knowledge, the DIFFERENCES in the perspectives and psychological interpretations . . . "* --- Nietzsche.

One month spent in a culture as unrelated to one's own as China is to Sydney is hardly enough to come up with any real answers; what you are left with is a refined version of the original questions. We found ourselves continually peeling off layers of Chineseness, mostly through assimilation but sometimes via rejection or non-perception, usually to find the next question (or layer) to be so much more Chinese that it was even, less open to Western scrutiny. And the fact that every part-answer led to several more basic questions left us eventually content to soak up the esprit that ties 750 million people to the vision of their own unity. And tied they are.

Why socialism has advanced the way it has in China is a question with many answers: the "Eastern psyche", improved living standards, historical forces, shrewd politics, military skill and comprehensive planning, to name a few. But the fundamental, and most difficult, problem for the Western observer is to appreciate the Chineseness of the phenomenon and to avoid his automatic cross-cultural value judgments. Not only is this necessary to keep a clear perception of 'the other', but, having slightly edged into another frame of reference, one sees oneself and one's own culture with different eyes.

I had thought the most obvious, and most crucial, area of observation (the area from which I could draw most inferences) was that of 'the arts'. Not that the arts could either practically or ideally be observed out of their particular social context, but that if the society was repressive it would be most obvious and critical in art and artists. Assuming, of course, the demands of group necessity to conflict strongly with the necessity of self direction.

I saw only a small example of the Chinese 'revolutionary art', (several revolutionary operas and ballets, the Hall of Cultural Minorities, public art, the art taught to school children), but what soon became evident was that the inferences of my questions were simply inapplicable. The basic question of the relation of art to society is expressed in China as the "role of art and literature in the socialist revolution". I think this is far from a mere semantic jump; it is an important jump in cognition. The attitude of the Chinese represents a jump from the relational thinking of the mutually-competing, self-identifying, intrinsically-valued units which "accidentally" find structure in the West to the consciously whole-directing, mutually-cooperative, extrinsically-valued, ongoing system approach being used in their socialist methodology. Theoretically speaking.

So to appreciate the worth of the art becomes a matter of appreciating the effectiveness of the whole culture, and then the efficiency with which the arts fill their

role. I had thought I could judge the society on its art, but I found that firstly I couldn't make judgments like that, and secondly it's the other way around anyway.

The demands for personal freedom that we make, and need, in the West are cultural; a society based to such a large degree on institutionalized aggression requires the separation of its individuals for its kinetic energy. The masses of China would devolve into autodestruction on such a basis; the cohesion they need, and that they provide themselves through socialism, makes the Western ideals of artistic freedom and individual autonomy simple inoperable. As Mao says, "... to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine ...". And what must be remembered here is that their socialism is far from being merely 'in' China; it is very much 'of' China.

Value judgements notwithstanding, there are some East-West relationships to be noticed. For instance, the movement of the last few years away from producing 'art' and towards affecting general activity with 'artistic' sensibility enable us to appreciate Chinese social directions from a particular point of view. If their 'art' is at best excellent realism, still much of their daily life closely approaches the life experiment and thinking of non - or post - or ex - artists of the West. They are working toward a permanent state of cultural revolution, with decision making carried out at production level, within the conceptual framework of the dialectical method and the reality-view of materialism. Criticism is not a right or privilege, but a normal aspect of decision making and, more generally, social evolution; in self-criticism the individual appreciates society's view of himself.

The ideological directions that apply to situations where the West applies a codified legal structure, e.g. the street committee instead of Local Government Acts, or the self-education approach to domestic crime in lieu of a prison system, are based on the ideals of self help and mutual cooperation. The aim seems to be to constructively involve the individual in the running of whatever issues he encounters; and the ever-present political cadre's role is to relate the modes of problem solving used in minor issues to the social method of "Marxism-Leninism- Mao Tse Tung Thought".

From this point of view the aim of Western legalism is to assume self-interested individual activity and delimit it to "harmless" channels. Certainly they gain security (beyond physical requirements) from the necessary exercise of creativity for social improvement, and on this level the Cultural Revolution served to strengthen social change as a basis for behaviour. Thus for the students, if not for many of their teachers, the Cultural Revolution was an anti-alienation drive; and the energy they are going to conserve by forestalling the gaps that the West popularly misnomers "generation gap" could lift them to an appreciable level of social synergy.

There will probably be periodic cultural revolutions, and it seems to me that the most important lesson the West could learn by watching China's social revolution would be how to generate a cultural security based not on the precedent of the past, but on the assuredness of improvement in the future.

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