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Modern China's real revolution

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What is the historical significance of the economic rise of China's coastal cities? The answer to this short and simple question has to be a long one. The length of Chinese civilisation often means that certain basic patterns are visible only when events are seen on, what I shall call, a geopolitical time-scale. Any notional association to geological timescale here is fully intended.

The political culture throughout the eastern segment of the Euro-Asian continent has always been more land than sea-based. This is notwithstanding the fact that the cultures along the Yellow River provided much of the backdrop for the long-lasting civilisation that began evolving at least 5,000 years ago. One should also notice that there was no reachable landmass in ancient times, and therefore no counteracting civilisation, directly east of China to draw its concerns in that direction.

As far as China's impressively complete dynastic histories, written after the fall of every preceding dynasty, is concerned, the political orientation had always been towards the north and the west. That was where the threats came from. The agrarian cultures of northern China, which gave birth to the sciences based on the forces and rhythm of Mother Nature, also created the bureaucratic classes. These classes kept records of natural events, which of course was a prerequisite for sufficiently correct predictions of future calamities to be possible. A pictorial language grew out of this, along with an extremely detailed calendar. Since these records had largely socio-political goals, records of societal and political events were always intertwined with those of natural events.

The ties between nature and mankind were therefore fused at that fundamental level. Political power was legitimised through the idea of "Tianming" — heavenly mandate — where the emperor no doubt ruled over the people, but nevertheless, for their sake. Should he fail, the forces of nature would revolt, sometimes in place of, and sometimes alongside the people themselves.

This holistic view of humans and their world generated philosophies such as Confucianism and Daoism, which conceived of all things as parts of the flowing mechanism of a complete unit, be it "Tianxia" (All under heaven) or the "Dao" (the Way).

However, Chinese history has painfully shown that this holistic view of the world suffered from the neglect of at least two aspects of human existence. Firstly, humans have never been, and probably never will be, united politically, which means that international relations in China remained an underdeveloped science, especially when compared to the Chinese science of domestic relations. Secondly, economic forces were never given due attention, which resulted in insurmountable hurdles encountered by economy-oriented reformers throughout the ages such as Wang Anshi of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127)

These philosophical biases were most clearly seen in the traditional Confucian disdain for the soldiering classes and businessmen.

Needless to say, solutions did evolve to remedy these shortcomings. Where relations between polities were concerned, peace was maintained through the concept of tributary states where nominal moral and military power emanated from the centre, the Middle Kingdom, and lesser states paid tribute to that centre. Inter-state conflicts, on the other hand, lacked a standard solution and each dynasty developed its own military system, and kept enemies at bay through a battery of methods such as threats, alliances, appeasing gifts of luxury goods or the marriage of Chinese princesses to foreign rulers (as in the case of Melaka).

The science of economics developed only in the shadow of a political tradition that preferred moral terms such as justice, ritualism and filial piety to notions of supply and demand, profit and loss and balance of trade. Despite the ingenious invention of paper money and a banking system around the time of the Northern Song, politics remained fixated with threats coming from the north and west.

The age-old Great Wall is a lasting testimony to the Chinese orientation northwards and westwards, with its “Other” always being more a threat than an inspiration. A geopolitical pattern became evident, which showed that Chinese civilisation tended politically to stay in the north, glued there by its strong sense of history, while economically, it steadily moved south — and this included waves of migration already since the latter half of the Han Dynasty (25-220).

This created a growing inter-regional tension that saw support for the Tang Dynasty (618-907) being much stronger in the south than in the Yellow River basin. Riverways close to the coast were subsequently joined to form the Grand Canal for the movement of goods from the rich south to supply the warring north. This thoroughfare was kept open at great cost, and symbolised the drifting of the economic centre away from the political centre.

Thus, it was in the south, in the region around Hangzhou, Suzhou, Nanjing and Shanghai, that the refined Northern and Southern (1127-1279) Song flourished, where the Mandarins actually had real power, the economy became highly sophisticated, and seafaring skills advanced. Tellingly, this was also the time when these Chinese dynasties had to bow occasionally to the powerful half-Chinese dynasties controlling the traditional Chinese homelands up north.

Incidentally, what was classified as Chinese maritime prowess, at least in the eyes of court historians, started to become evident only after the conquest of the southern kingdom of seafaring Nanyue based around Panyu (today’s Guangzhou) by the long-reigning Emperor Wu (141 BC-87 BC) of the Han Dynasty.

The rich resources in the south, along with the trading routes that had existed for thousands of years between the southern Chinese coast and the Nanyang (Southern

Seas, today's Southeast Asia), made it inevitable that the economic engine in China would in the end establish itself in the south, and stay in the south.

The conquest by the Mongols from the north, who founded the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), slowed the historical movement southward. The flow southward continued only after the Ming Dynasty had chased them out, and had set itself up at the southern capital, Nanjing. However, the third Ming Emperor Yong Le (1360-1424), who was a general and who usurped the throne from his nephew, decided for political reasons to move his administration to the Yuan capital of Beijing — that was where his power base was.

Yong Le was powerful enough to maintain his interest in the rest of the world while struggling against securing continental borders. He was responsible for the seven giant fleets sent under the command of General Zheng He (1371-1435) to as far away as East Africa. Interestingly, these expeditions were more interested in proclaiming the return of indigenous imperial Chinese after the Mongolian conquest than in promoting economic ties with the many kingdoms throughout the regions to its south. Again, politics went before economics.

After Yong Le, the Ming emperors showed little interest in the world beyond the empire's coasts, and were more concerned with the recreation of the glory of pre-Yuan times. This tug of war between politics and economics, between north and south, continued with the arrival of the Manchurians from the northeast, who set up the last of the many dynasties, the Qing (1644-1911). China's political orientation at the time of the arrival of the Europeans was therefore strongly continental.

Economic forces in the south did continue to grow, nevertheless. In the 20th century, the Kuomintang Nationalist Party, supported and indeed founded — by Overseas Chinese, and by Chinese in the coastal cities, had its capitals in Wuhan, Nanjing and Chongqing (the latter during the war against Japan). But again, we see how, when the revolutionary Mao Zedong gained power in 1949, he took the conservative decision of placing the capital of the People's Republic at Beijing, a city adorned with the power architecture of the ancient emperors.

One could, nevertheless, argue that Mao found in Marxism a holistic correction to Confucianism's biases against the soldier and the businessman. His answer was deceptively simple — firstly, the insight that power comes from the barrel of a gun, and secondly, society moves in accordance with economic forces following an inevitable pattern punctuated by serial revolutions. Force comes first, and history itself is economic in essence. Ethics became a function of class struggle. In interstate terms, Mao's China turned isolationistic, adopting a moralistic posture vis-à-vis other countries, considering them capitalist, revisionist or revolutionary.

As the sufferings of the Chinese population in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s showed, Mao's solution was far from complete, and far from stable. That instability was expressed through the power struggles within the Communist Party after it came to power, and was succinctly mirrored in the up-down-up-down-up career of Deng Xiao Ping. Is politics to come first, or economics?

With the fall of the Maoist faction in 1978, one may say the economy-oriented group within the party finally gained the upper hand over those concerned with ideology. In contrast, Deng's argument was that the colour of the cat did not matter as long as it caught a mice. In contrast to Marxism's determinism, China had to look for solutions

by feeling for the stones as it crossed the water. There is no ready and clear path to use.

The economic growth of the coastal cities of China today thus reflects the latest stage in two important dialectical relations in Chinese history.

Firstly, the economy continues to move south and outwards even as historical notions keep the political orientation in the north and inwards. In simpler terms, while China's self identity remains continental, its economy has moved to the coast... and this is now effectually acknowledged.

Secondly, economic thought now comes before ideological concerns, overturning China's age-old Rule of Man ideology, and the regime is now basing relations with the rest of the world on issues of trade. Such is the historical significance of the rise of the coastal cities of China, and such is its true revolution.

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