

Rethinking China

John Fitzgerald

With his new book, *Thunder From the Silent Zone: Rethinking China* (reviewed in the Spring 2005 issue of *Defender*), Dr Paul Monk challenges Australians to reconsider some of their most basic assumptions about what makes China tick. He reissued the challenge in a recent essay for the Fairfax press where he called on commentators to ‘talk up political reform in China’ in the same way and to the same degree that economic commentators speak openly about progress and problems in China’s economic reforms (*The Age*, 03 October 2005). I would like to take up that challenge here.

As Monk observes, the Chinese leadership welcomes critical foreign assessments of China’s industrial, agricultural, financial and fiscal systems, even when these are offered by senior officials representing foreign governments. Foreign political analysts are less welcome when they offer free and frank advice about problems and prospects facing the Chinese political system.

Why the contrast? In so far as China is engaged in economic globalisation it welcomes global commentary. On the political side, however, the Chinese leadership does not welcome outside commentary because it holds to the inviolability of national sovereignty on the narrowest possible reading of the Westphalian system. Foreign criticism on political issues is dismissed as unwarranted interference in China’s domestic affairs.

The Australian government has taken this advice on board, effectively conceding that the status of Taiwan is an issue of national sovereignty on China’s domestic political agenda. China holds different national values from Australia, the story goes, and mutual respect entails respecting our different value systems. In any event, the argument goes, since China is unlikely to budge on Taiwan there’s little point pushing the issue at the risk of damaging Australia’s long-term national interests.

We can readily sympathise with this line of reasoning if we place ourselves in the shoes of Australian government officials. No point rocking the boat when we are being carried along in the wake of probably the greatest economic miracle of the last two centuries. But what would we be leaving in our own wake if we abandoned Taiwan?

Defence and foreign policy analysts no doubt have their own answers to this question. I write as an historian with a view to drawing attention to the place of Taiwan in China’s past and future. Taiwan is not some outdated relic of an old

Chinese historical problem that is in need of a swift and clean resolution – such as reunification – but rather a pointer to China’s future. If we leave Taiwan in our wake there is a very real risk that China will never realise its own potential to become a liberal democratic state, with attendant risks and difficulties for Australian relations with China.

The history of modern China taught in Australian schools for half a century and more is one in which an heroic but authoritarian band of communists defeats a bunch of well-intentioned but incompetent liberals in the KMT. The defeated KMT democrats then flee to Taiwan with remnants of Chiang Kaishek’s beaten armies. Coming closer to the present, Taiwan prospered under a KMT government which had every intention of reuniting Taiwan with China. In recent years, however, the people of Taiwan have thrown out the Nationalist Government and lost their way. They will have to live with the consequences.

This history is fundamentally wrong. The KMT Nationalists were not liberal democrats. In fact the Nationalists and Communists joined forces in a Leninist constitutional compact that dates back to the First KMT Congress in January 1924 when the Communists and Nationalists formed a United Front to attack their common enemies. This 1924 KMT congress was arguably the constituent assembly of the single-party authoritarian state under which China has been governed for the past eight decades. It gave Mao Zedong his platform and in a sense continues to provide a foundation for President Hu Jintao to this day.

At the 1924 KMT Congress, a group of self-appointed representatives of the Chinese people declared that ‘our Party’ (the KMT) should build and rule the country on the basis of a party constitution rather than a republican state one. The KMT and Communists were later at war with one another, to be sure, but they were both aiming to set up a single-party authoritarian state which placed them at war with organised society. The only issue that really divided them was which of the two parties would run the Leninist machinery of government.

From this perspective, Mao Zedong and his Communist successors are merely the proximate sources of a deeper malaise that stretches back to China’s failed Republican revolution of 1911. The inaugural date for China’s national political tragedy in *Thunder From the Silent Zone* is not 1949, when Mao’s forces took Beijing, or even 1927 when Chiang Kaishek and KMT seized control of state power. China’s

tragic turning point came fifteen years earlier, in 1912, when the first national elections were sabotaged by the assassination of the liberal constitutionalist Song Jiaoren. Since that event, China has not seen another national election. It was not Mao Zedong who originally crushed liberal democracy underfoot in China or Taiwan but a succession of warlords and KMT Nationalist leaders and their allies.

On this point, Paul Monk offers a far more robust explanation of the black hole at the heart of modern China than the biography of Mao Zedong recently published by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday. The implications of his account for contemporary politics and international relations go well beyond attacking the official and popular mythology of Mao Zedong. That should be done and doubtless will be in the course of time. It will accomplish little unless it is accompanied by similar debunking of the mythology of Sun Yatsen, Chiang Kaishek, and the KMT. Mao Zedong was Sun Yatsen's most able student – as Stalin was Lenin's – the one who perfected the architecture of the single-party authoritarian model for China.

This new perspective on the Chinese civil war has largely been accepted by specialists but it has yet to make its way outside the academy into our schools in this country, or into wider public debate on China and Taiwan.

Why should it? First, because with the exception of Taiwan, China is still under the Leninist compact that Sun Yatsen signed in 1924 when he promulgated the single-party state for China. The Communists have little to learn from the

KMT but a lot to learn from the people of Taiwan. So have Australians when it comes to dealing with China.

Second, because, the older historical perspective has direct bearing on the status of Taiwan in China's strategic thinking and on its local reception here in Australia. If we assume that the KMT represented democratic forces and the Communists were the autocrats in China's revolutionary history – as most standard textbooks of the Chinese revolution still do – then the Communists and Nationalists can presumably team up in another 'United Front' and resolve the Taiwan problem at the cost of the people and society of Taiwan. If that does not work, the Communists can invade Taiwan in the name of Sun Yatsen and democracy. In fact, both courses of action would spell the end of democracy in Taiwan.

Developments in Taiwan present a real and realistic resolution to the problem at the heart of modern Chinese politics. Since 1996 Taiwan has broken with the Leninist constitutional compact. The institution of open and contested popular elections for the government on Taiwan marks a return to the promise of the Republican revolution that was cut short with the assassination of Song Jiaoren in 1912. These gains should not be sacrificed on the altar of national unity. For China's sake, Song Jiaoren cannot be shot down again. ♦

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