

# **Order and Society: Musil and China**

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*Paper prepared for 2010 APSA Conference at panel:*

*“China and Political Philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”*

September 2-5<sup>th</sup>, 2010

[Draft version]

## **1.Society in disorder---the Problem**

There seems to have been a certain aloofness subtlety held between politics and life itself. Not that politics has ceased to make its appearance in life: to some extent it's arguably true that politics has become an integral part that it's almost everywhere: Television shows, interviews, speeches, textbooks and cultural tastes... everything written, spoken in the public sphere seems to have a golden ring shining with prospects of a better future yet but when one takes a closer look at each object personally, itself with its solidity evaporates. There're certainly politics being discussed everywhere,---among men especially, but these topics are always the non-immediate ones: the "international", the "far-sighted", the distant, the dead.---None has donated a single grain yet the famine in some faraway province was discussed with a most eager concern, weapons are compared meticulously from one country to another, future state leaders and dead politicians are written and spoken with a sincerest passion; while politics that are near to life have been neglected completely.

Whether it's on purpose or unconsciously done I cannot judge, but the local politics have appeared to be anemic and unworthy of attention. Most new policies are passed without notice of the people, except for those who once in a while complains about mandatory "donations" in salaries; no one watches the local news except for political people who sometimes have a glance at themselves in interviews, wives who mimic their husbands' ossified looks in interviews and of course, the few that exist in every society who are just thrilled by personally knowing anyone on the screen. Decisions are made

and published, bills are proposed and passed with unanimous "thunder like" applause, yet no one remembers what they are, and the very contents of them blur into a vague conception that seems to have stayed in memories "clearly" when one does not recall them. I didn't know our town mayor's name until I was eighteen, and that was only because my mother told me the mayor disliked my father thus dad was early "retired" to become vice director to the local People's Congress, which was publicly acknowledged as a useless position in an "Olds' Home" for the bureaucrats. There's a sense of futility and helplessness pervading that compels inertia and ignorance, yet it was so intangible that even sensed, it truly can be ignored with a Chinese big-hearted shrug, ---every adult knows complaints submitted are not to be answered seriously just like every student in our high school knows water never gushes out from the splendid marble fountain unless educational inspectors are visiting in black cars. Dull as these routines can be, people do not particularly bother anyway, since the disadvantage is not directed toward them as individuals or specific families and after years of practice, it has become more of a used-to tradition than fresh pricking nuisance. Outside politics, pallid speakers and proposal-planners may turn out to be friendly, funny, flawed and above all, humane, thus the very acquaintance of these people, through the working of the wide guanxi web, makes it almost impossible for most people the bearing of hatred or acute awareness of the problematic. Business are run better if frequently visited by officials; jobs are found through the friend of a friend; small prizes are awarded if documents are well-made...The magic net of guanxi covers a great majority of citizens, making space for ways around, mingling with a flexibility of the Chinese society that appears to be the

harmless, non-political, virtuous quality intrinsic in a collective people.<sup>1</sup> Plus, there are trainings to help young, less-experienced people live with the system by living in it: Upon puberty there're reports to hand in to the Youth League, once in a while, on the progress of their political consciousness. Excellent students are invited into the party; school awards , job offers are given with a priority to party members; What's even better is that plagiarisms on these "reports of political consciousness" are perfectly fine since the sole object is to create familiarity, tolerance and parasitism. In people's eyes there's no clear distinction between political and politics, and people just are the system. Current politics appears to be something with both merits and laid-backs, just like most ordinary events that happen in the realm of reality. A different life and reality becomes something inconceivable, beyond imagination. As to quote Louis Sass: "Human concepts work through their relationship with each other than by any direct connection with the real"; it is this particular trait in human connections that has blurred the boundary between reality and pseudo-reality, that contact with real has been lost, people become content with their shadowy life as "doctrinaire existence in a closed world"(Eric Voegelin).

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<sup>1</sup> Here I would argue guanxi itself is not an evil to be demolished, on the contrary, it is a nature of human relations whose foul side has somewhat been amplified under certain ideology. Cf. the example of guanxi-based human-flesh search engine, to be mentioned later.

## **2.Consciousness Back to Limbo: Internet Commotion vs. Era of Harmonization.**

In 2004 Chairman Hu introduced Scientific View of Development, and later, perhaps out of a concern for the society's disordered state it was revised with a special focus on harmony. Unfortunately, the time of the proposal of the concept is also a time that Internet swept over China, with its second wave of transformation. Internet has, as some called, entered the Web 2.0 era. Instead of bringing to people positive ideas about Marxism<sup>2</sup>, this time it helped realize the actual unsatisfying situation they're in. Many people have taken on acquiring information in ways different from before, and this is especially a strong tendency among the young, ----later I will demonstrate with a specific example of my classmate. Subscription to feeds, network of acquaintances and blogospheres has suddenly opened up a world of different perspectives.

Despite the great confusion and indeed, division of ideas it has caused among the Netizens, it did make a change. Besides getting knowledge from traditional media such as newspapers, Televisions and major www--.coms that speak in accordance with the professed Zeitgeist, ordinary people start building their own information channels and are enabled to further implore. Compared with manipulation from faceless newspapers and TV programs, private connections and personal writers have quickly gained popularity and become more trusted as better information sources. In turn, the sharp contrast between news gained through traditional media, and that acquired through

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<sup>2</sup> Years ago, the idea of advanced technology always came with a genuine appreciation for the government's Reform and Open-up policy, and the arrival of Internet mostly stood for one of the many good that "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" has brought to people.

Internet, has widely planted seeds of doubt and anxiety toward the reality given. ---- Are those claimed realities really real? This question has been raised by many before in one way or another in China, but regarding the false impression the traditional media has produced, that these unrealities are always *somewhere but not here*<sup>3</sup>, the question has been ripped off its due weight and was unable to produce vast influence. Yet the Web 2.0 era has brought to us a closer inspection of the surrounding unrealities.

This summer, while bathing in his student dormitory, one of my high school classmates got killed by leaking electricity. In local papers and major .coms, this had been no more than a few lines about an accident out of personal negligence, with light-hearted advice at the end suggesting students to "better take care of yourself in the season of greater danger"(transition of liability). Naturally, to anyone who wasn't directly related, this might have been just another "careless" incident that, with a few lines fit perfectly into a blank at a corner of local papers, whose "somewhere" quality would within days hurry this "personal negligence" into the nowhere place where all previous careless deaths lie in heaps. It was the witnesses' report and pictures shared among students through cyber network that disclosed further details of the accident: late arrival of medical help, the shoddy wires and all-paralyzed school doctor, whom, suggested by Netizens, "must be" relative of some leader to have gotten the job. Contrasts have people better learned the invalidity of traditional media and perhaps, even the limit of media altogether, and it takes just a few steps to further realize the reason of these

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<sup>3</sup> The very light-hearted writing of newspapers and its particular attention on eccentric misfortunes in other places have helped fostered "somewhere" illusion which, can be easily washed away from memory.

contrasts.

Most people like me have never had personal experience of great, direct conflict with the system, ---or if any, we are apt to regard them as rare, isolated incidents which give false impression of the country's general healthy state. Now a great many have been able to learn that those are not separate, isolated incidents, but prevailing social phenomena that have existed long before. The sights of holes here and there have weaved out a clear pattern of disorder. Channels have been cleared, facts have become once more accessible, ---- though reality is still quite far away, ---- still, as to which story to believe in, now the choice is mostly in our hands.

Yet, although young audience no longer buy the stories of spontaneous harmony, image of harmony still has to be established, not much choice is left for our government. To lead the unpleasant incidents back to somewhere and to achieve the goal of "harmonious society", the era of harmonization began.

The Chinese word harmonized ("to be harmonized" in full), is one of the most popular Chinese phrases invented during recent years. It generally is used to describe the situation on the Internet when information is removed without notice. In this category of situations we find it impossible to directly post articles and questions involving particular words without hours of "auto-submission" and the subsequent disappearance of supposedly processed posts.

“To be harmonized” stands typical of a new group of passive phrases invented to describe various situations in which the un-harmonious people are "altered" by force to fit into the bigger picture of harmonious society. In these phrases people put nouns and intransitive verbs into passive sentences, deliberately committing grammatical mistakes to call attention to particular incidents where the supposed initiative actions are actually forced upon people. There are the poor being "well-offed" by government statistic figures, journalists "being disappeared" during independent investigations, farmer being "suicided" in hometown prison before setting out to report again on illegal land use of his government; and also kind joking advice to young writer Han han that he needs to be careful about his words for otherwise he might sooner or later be “car-accidented”.

The art of reduction is not enough; seeds of positive news need to be planted manually to beautify the waste land of public opinion pool. Notwithstanding the famous fifty cent party hired to post “harmonious” opinions at fifty cent per post, there are scholars issuing lengthy articles analyzing the ever-wilier Capitalistic attempts to overthrow China thus explaining the necessity of a real-name Internet system being fully implemented.

Toward harmonization Netizens have all kinds of reactions. Most noticeably is a burst of creativity in fields of culture, art, and the subsequent awareness brought by this peculiar type of anti-propaganda. Countless of grammatical mistakes, jokes, imitation



plays, poetry, novels and cartoons are invented with vivid portrayal of the ridicule of harmonization, and the more it gets banned the faster it spreads around.

There are also actions taken aside from the relatively safer virtual field of culture. Journalists ----although not as many----set out independent researches on facts behind standardized reports; anonymous flowers are sent to Google's Beijing headquarters; frequent calls for "human flesh search engine" gets thousands of hits each day that so-called "hands in the dark" are thus located within days based on vast information body constituted by Netizens all over China.

A very interesting group of people have emerged during the Internet commotion. Aside from those who criticize and those who don't, there are some--- and indeed many, that is the “酱油党”(“soy sauce party”)who choose to do the "not-doing" as a subtle way of showing concern. After politically controversial or unharmonious posts there are many remarks such as “looking for soy sauce” and “Unknowing masses passing by”. These all can be read as the innocent political disclaimers in one way, and “I am safely showing concern by building up ‘floors’ for this post, and you know what I mean” in the other.

The unnatural death of my high school classmate Song later was dubbed as "electro-gate" and became the most talked-about incidents among southern universities, and the competition of student posts against official news eventually led to actions

outside the Internet. In answer to an e-note passed among students, after a week hundreds of students gathered near Song's residential building in mourning of his death. Within an hour the candlelight gathering had transformed into a demonstration outside university hospital. Opposite to angry shouting questions outside and incessant knocks on the door, hospital chose to turn off all its light and "played possum" to the crowd. One party leader came with other teachers to "harmonize" the event yet cell phone kept buzzing, some journalism majors even brought video cameras, and the demonstration has been broadcast live on Internet. A month later, university official autopsy report came out, attributing the death to personal negligence: that Song was "scared by harmless amount of static electricity and died from internal bleeding caused by tripping over out of panic". ----despite that, the unofficial follow-up reports about the parents' situation (initially not being allowed to get into school) and subsequent escort-volunteers indeed made a difference----compensation price later was raised from 20,000 to 700,000 RMB. As we can see channels to facts have been partly cleared, and indeed there're actions taken and progress made, but is Internet the solution to disorder? In the last part I will try to answer this question by recollecting from the very beginning of my personal experience as a disordered man in the disordered society.

### **3. Possibilities and Impossibilities, Polis vs. Man**

My break from the society began with early experience of alienation. Like many

other children, when I was little I had no doubt about my important place in this world. I had sincerely believed myself to be the most beautiful being; and the alienation felt then was a feeling of living above the world, of the world unworthy of me, lonely yet strangely comforting. As a child I believed myself to be immortal and the perishable life is truly a dream to which I will wake up at the end of this life. As a child I believed myself to be living in a fuller passion, a richer beauty and was under the brilliant light of truth. By that time the sense of alienation felt had not caused the radical break from polis; ---on the contrary, it was felt as a desire to fix “the problem”, eagerness to come into use to have the polis lighted up. The first years of studying English I wrote the following song for myself:

I am the heart of the universe

Who dies but never dies

I was born in a drop of time

Then put myself in this rhyme

The sun open. And close.

Open. Then never close.

Yet as one grows into adult, one becomes more susceptible to the thing-reality under the attack of one's everyday existence as well as the trainings one received to better adjust to the society. Together with the loss of belief in one's irreplaceableness in this world and loss of possession of “truth”, the sense of alienation has aggravated into a

different level---this time not only of estrangement from the world but also of an irremovable distance from light. To a generation mostly raised atheists, without religious faith, and into an ideology where propaganda has penetrated every source of information that one can no longer tell facts from standpoints thus either facts were abandoned or opinions were taken altogether, where one is only given the ready-made ability to think within the system, reality becomes all the more inconceivable. One is only left with acute pain of alienation and wants to have a break from the unreality.

But this disillusionment with the society and this gap created, is not a result of the perception of true reality but merely a sense of restlessness against the reality perceived, which tends to produce self-indulgence in many other forms of unreality within the impenetrable dark rather than strength to truly break out, spiritual strength that could only be acquired through clear insight into pseudo-reality. Thus we have materialistic disbelievers of a most decadent kind whose desire for money makes not only their primal impetus but their sole definition for happiness and meaning, and we have among students the anti-mainstream advocates who denies all traditional ideals, and who have, quite ironically, constituted the mainstream of youth; we have self-claimed patriots, practical cynics and we have back-to-ancient-times fictions occupying top list of fiction sales. On campus I am frequently confronted with two types of students when it comes to topics involving politics : the first being those students who, ---having gone through the phase of disillusionment, adopted the fashion of cynicism as smart, all-powerful answer to all questions, ----they laugh at those who criticizes socialistic system as "naive"

since "reality is same everywhere" and criticisms could only prove their being romantic about "Western capitalistic" democracy, and second group being the blessed patriotic students who, laugh at these rebels as "naive" for a slightly different reason: these ideas being not romantic but simply "unpatriotic". To this stage, those in this situation would probably find that he can no longer find reality in his bedeviled polis, his connection with either the society or local politics will be nothing other than painful obligation.

As For the minority who have still kept faith, the only means probable in sight, is to retreat to the Self, to one's own experience as source of information.

Yet when one chooses to retreat to his Self, he confronts further problems: though alienation suggests a hypersensitivity to the disorder of the society, alienation itself is a complex of various pathos resulting from the problematic. Apart from the great majority in bliss whose personal mode of being with an "affective imbecility"(Louis Sass) cannot but perceive the life given; those who suffer alienation have different problems themselves. How then, are the sick to reintroduce order back to this society when they themselves are struggling to find order of their own being?

Here I am going to just name a few problems that I, as one of the many sick, have personally experienced.

First, despite the great courage one needs to get back to the society that alienates

him in order to have political reality recovered, the requirements intrinsic in politics itself has made "philia politike" ever more difficult. Politics requires affirmative qualities in a person, while alienation and retreat to the self has left nothing but enhanced the perhaps more negative qualities in a person, abilities of denying. A person of politics here needs to be able to confirm, of what was, what is, what should and will be. That affairs of politics to me is either the art of lying, or a kind of noble blindness. On the other hand, the study of philosophy has become a process of disowning. Disowning of qualities. One by one, one lost his standpoints, his confidence, his supposed meaning for life, and is at lost. How am I to talk about the polis when I am not even assured of my own existence? How am I to care about others when I have found them unworthy, and thinking that, am obsessed about my own callousness and hypocrisy?

After the 08's political turbulences I became aware of my hypocrisy and selfishness. The subsequent knowledge of doomed ignorance and distance from truth, together with previous realizations, has thrown me into endless second-thoughts, indecisions and repentance self-loathing while all these again have become mirroring of themselves, the act of repentance being but an attempt of self-forgiving which but in turn proves my hypocrisy and selfishness. While aware of human's task of the pursuit of truth and justice I was paralyzed.

Also, looking into the self, reflection of oneself, is supposed to be a cleansing process. Yet I found that retreat to the self requires living in a way that makes you

tolerable to the bedeviled society so that you are granted to be left alone but not in mental asylum, ---the living becomes deliberate negligence, connivance with the devil. How funny it is when I found my keeping doing crimes has provided me with the content of my repentance, the impetus for cleansing. Self-cleansing practice becomes a dirty engagement as well. I am trapped. There're crimes and crimes.

Here in the talks and papers the word "opinions" often appear with the word "constructive" before it, that whenever we give an idea or offer an opinion, they're supposed to be "constructive" ideas and opinions. The government welcome opinions, but only opinions that are "constructive"; justice has been accepted by people as necessary to be upheld only when its "constructive" to the society---- of course, unless oneself falls the victim. Thus here, we are faced with a further problem: even if Man has overcome his personal disorder, pathos of alienation, and has bravely taken on the responsibility to nobly blind himself through going back to the bedeviled polis, his order, his love of God, has manifest itself as a de-constructive force in the eyes of the disordered people. How then, does he introduce and convince? How then, are people to follow him when he's appeared to be the black sheep, the disruptive one, “naïve idealistic” or “wily Capitalistic”, "whose attempt to damage the living order is doomed to be a failure", as says the propaganda?

Despite the conflicts within the self and between self and others, we still have to know that although the foundation of Marxist beliefs have been shattered, the ideology

still influence our mind and have quite successfully created a few dead paths. Most people are given to semi-think within the ideology that repeats over and over the “non-political” truth of "economic infrastructure determines superstructure" without perceiving the paradox of the propaganda of our political system "superior" to the more economically developed West, and I am often told by those who claimed to be disbelievers that things will improve, as long as the development of economy is not to be "interrupted", and consequently I am told in a time like this “constructive development” is our top priority. After watching a documentary about the Tian'anmen incident in 89', one of my cynical friends told me that these students were brave, passionate, but (again) "naive" and "impractical", since 1) reality is same everywhere, that any reasonable "country"(note confusion between country and government) would do the same thing; 2) the idea of Western democracy is inapplicable given China's situations, and is either "unpatriotic" or "romantic"; 3) in a time of the country's construction, we "can't afford political turbulence like that", for "economic, constructive development is all-important", and any political call would be a “distraction”, a disruption of order.

Having reviewed the possibilities and impossibilities from personal level, now I am sufficed to look further into the prospects brought to China by the Internet.

When we look at the Internet first thing that came to notice is the great impact it has made and potential it displays, regarding the number of Netizens it involves. Those involved all have, more or less, participated in the “transformation”, and are being



changed themselves,--- which I the current situation has been helping disclosing facts about our country. But we should also note that this time the number of people involved in sharing and promoting is so big thus the risk of getting into jail is reduced to almost nil, and it is this reduced risk that provides terms for the participation of the majority, i.e., the so-called Internet commotion is made possible only upon the condition of the majority being safe, the “soy sauce party” being one example. Nobody would mind sharing facts in the virtual world once in a while, to feel himself safely just but when it becomes a threat to personal interest, justice for others don’t seem that constantly necessary anymore, and most people, including myself, would quickly find their way back to their comfortable spot as conformist to the bedeviled society.

Same thing applies to actions. No doubt should be given on the goodwill of these actions out of but when we take a closer look we find these acts of benevolence highly unstable. A person who joins the demonstration outside hospital for the justice of a stranger is proved to have a good conscience, but the situation could’ve been completely different were the unprofessional doctor his mother; a woman could easily change her sympathetic attitude toward protesting students were her husband one of the policemen who wants to keep his job. On one hand, the strength based on such meek conscience can be greatly dissolved by nature of human guanxi (current disorder stabilized); on the other hand, to those who have actually fallen the victim, actions purely out of personal interest could not produce consciousness but evolves into blind violent hatred in a different social context(evoking perhaps more violent order); “justice” being

but a wrongly-labeled mass excitement that has been too many times abused in our history.

And we mustn't forget that those who created and shared and invigorated the critical environment also include students that play computer games twelve hours a day and teachers who lie to their soul to get promoted, and all other cynics, materialists, patriots dwelling and indulging in pseudo-reality. The strength displayed by Internet could easily shrink into an insignificant amount as the fundamental problem is that facts don't entail insight, and truth can neither be gained through massive following, clever jokes nor angry exciting actions, but only through personal experience and reflection of the soul.

## **Closing**

Have a look at the apparently revived critical atmosphere we surely sees huge political power. It's more of a strength somewhat magically magnified by social networks (constituents: some ideas most following, soy sauce party). It has no specific direction because it's not result from insight into reality but from anxieties within unreality which manifest itself in all different ways. It does not come from the Self or faith but from the polis, which, in the case of China, has been following and sharing politically "cool" ideas

that are not their own, mostly from the red-eyed excitement about power and at very rare occasions, from the noble decision of self-blinding.

Though not access to truth, and its source of direction remains doubted, Internet indeed opens up gate to facts, and hopefully has brought the public consciousness back to limbo. With the strong political strength it has displayed, I believe that under appropriate guidance (the word “guidance” itself is by no means an appropriate way to describe it) sooner or later it will play an important role in the de-construction of a bedeviled society and reintroduction of order back to polis. What I am sure, is that the only way to correct the disorder, whether of one’s own being or of the whole society, begins with a reflection of Self and a humble heart, effortlessly moving toward light, with somewhat uncertainty, yet with faith.