

May 2, 2012 7:54 pm

A blind prophet speaks of trouble in China



By David Pilling

The Chen Guangcheng case exposes China's moral vacuum

The idea of a blind seer is not new. In ancient Greece, Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes, warned Oedipus he would end up killing his father and sleeping with his mother. His very blindness made the truth of his prophecy more telling. So it is with Chen Guangcheng, the blind, self-taught lawyer who on Wednesday left the safety of the US embassy to resume his life as, one can only hope, a relatively free man in China.

Mr Chen's blindness resonated on several levels. That was evident from the online campaign in China, in which supporters posted photographs of themselves wearing his trademark dark glasses. The campaigning lawyer's lack of sight made his struggle seem all the more extraordinary and the state that imprisoned and beat him all the more thuggish. It made his improbable escape from house arrest, over a wall and past ranks of guards, more heroic. And it hinted at the vulnerability of a state whose security apparatus can sometimes appear unbreachable by society as a whole, let alone a single blind man.

Like Tiresias, who divined the truth in darkness, Mr Chen's central stance – that women should not be forced to have abortions – exposed in a flash the moral bankruptcy of China's public policy. Forced abortions, as well as being morally repugnant, are hopelessly out of date even from the coldest policy perspective. More than 30 years of the one-child policy have left China on the brink of rapid ageing, raising the prospect – prophesied by economists – that China could grow old before it gets rich.

It is ironic that Christian Bale, the Hollywood actor who played Batman, should have been beaten up when he attempted to visit Mr Chen last December. In China, as in America, a blind man who overcomes poverty and illiteracy comes across as braver than any superhero in a leotard.

That is what makes Mr Chen such a difficult force for the Chinese authorities to deal with. Unlike Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize-winner whose calls for democracy directly challenged state power, Mr Chen is harder to portray as a threat to authority.

Like the protesters of Wukan, who demanded the ejection of corrupt village officials, Mr Chen directed his anger not explicitly at Beijing, but at officials in Shandong province. In the video uploaded on YouTube after his night-time escape last week, he appealed directly to Wen Jiabao, the premier, to punish local cadres. Blaming them for sullyng the party's image,

he challenged Mr Wen to answer whether local officials were acting alone or in accordance with Beijing's instructions. Mr Wen was the right man to ask. He has presented himself as defending ordinary people. His speech against Bo Xilai, the disgraced former party secretary of Chongqing, was couched in precisely the terms of wayward officials breaking party ranks. The distinction has provided Beijing with a get-out. It has agreed, say US officials, to move Mr Chen to a "safe environment" and to allow him to study at university. It has also, again according to the US, pledged to investigate allegedly trumped-up charges against Mr Chen.

Of course, no one knows whether Beijing will honour its promises. There were some indications last night that Mr Chen may have decided to stay in China because of fears about his family's safety. He will be living in China's sovereign territory beyond the reach of anything but Washington's moral suasion. Still, for now, Beijing must be content with berating the US for interfering in its internal affairs and with extracting a promise that there will be no repeat performance.

It is a fragile compromise befitting these extraordinary times in China. The Communist party is still reeling from the abrupt downfall of Mr Bo, the repercussions of which are unclear for this year's leadership succession. Revelations about Mr Bo, even though the party can claim to have dealt with him, can have done little to bolster the government's reputation among the Chinese people for legality or propriety. The strange case of Mr Chen only adds to the sense of instability. Few would bet the party will get to its succession without more bumps along the way.

The prophecy given to Oedipus led to tragedy. At the end of Sophocles' play, the young Greek king, realising what he has done, gouges out his eyes so that he no longer has to look upon a world he has so befouled. No one expects the Communist party to do anything like that. But Mr Chen remains a potent symbol. It will not escape some people's notice in China that, for thousands of years, the personification of justice in the west has been blind.

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3d11a47e-92eb-11e1-b6e2-00144feab49a.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.

April 11, 2012 7:56 pm

A case of more than Tinker, Tailor, Bo Xilai



By David Pilling

The arbitrariness of China's system harms its image, writes David Pilling

The drama surrounding the purge of Bo Xilai, including the attempted defection of Chongqing's police chief and the alleged murder of a British businessman, sounds like a far-fetched plot from a spy thriller. That would make it Tinker, Tailor, Bo Xilai. The Communist party, however, is determined to read the vastly damaging episode not as sordid intrigue but as morality play, perhaps Bo's Seven Deadly Sins.

In proclaiming Mr Bo's suspension from the Politburo and the arrest of his wife on suspicion of murder, an editorial in the People's Daily, the Communist party mouthpiece, said: "China is a socialist country ruled by law, and the sanctity and authority of law shall not be trampled." It went on: "Whoever has violated party discipline or broken the law will be dealt with severely and will not be tolerated, no matter . . . how high his position is."

The message sounded blunt. No one stands above the law. But what precisely is the law in a one-party state without properly independent courts? And how can the Communist party talk blithely of uniform laws for all when it is well known there is one set of rules for party members and another set for everyone else?

That the Communist leadership should resort to purging one of its own in so public a fashion shows just what a threat to its authority Mr Bo represented. Ousting him is a last-ditch attempt to put what had looked like a smooth leadership transition back on track. Yet the episode, which has riveted the Chinese public, exposes deep rifts within the party's upper echelons that may yet crack further open before a new standing committee is installed in October.

The invocation of the "rule of law" is partly a cloak under which Mr Bo can be bundled from the scene. Even more important, it is an attempt to reaffirm the party's legitimacy, which has been scorched by the Bo affair and by widespread public perception of its corruption. For the Communist party, it has become vital to cast Mr Bo and his wife as criminals and itself as the paramount upholder of the law.

Mr Bo, after all, was popular. His campaign against crime syndicates in Chongqing was arbitrary and brutal. It included swift executions and the use of torture. But he presented his

crusade as a drive to impose law and order and an effort to root out pervasive corruption. Vigilante justice it may have been. But justice of any sort had been seen to be in short supply.

That is why it has become vital for the Communist party to regain the high ground for itself. A clue in the People's Daily editorial is the elision of the idea of law and that of party rules. "People will see CPC's [Communist party of China's] solid resolution of safeguarding the party's discipline and the rule of law," it said, as if they were the same thing.

Arthur Kroeber, managing director of Dragonomics, says that compared with 25 years ago, China is a far more rules-based society. More day-to-day transactions come under the rubric of established rules. But the system remains wildly arbitrary, he says. "It is understood by all that the Communist party has its own set of rules." That is known to everyone in China. It is why, for example, Communist party officials are able to confiscate land from peasants or buy it for a song. Foreign businesses know it too. It is the reason their technology can sometimes be stolen with impunity or why their executives may face harassment under state security laws.

That arbitrariness is simultaneously necessary for the party's survival and damaging to its image. The Chinese public knows full well that Mr Bo is not the only princeling to have abused his position. The country is awash with stories of the privileged and their offspring acting with impunity and flaunting their increasingly spectacular wealth. The party apparatchik brought low may not be the biggest criminal, but the person with the fewest allies or the most threatening to the façade of unity.

On Tuesday, the same day Mr Bo was suspended from the Politburo, Wen Jiabao, the premier, sought to tap these deep traditions in the cause of party legitimacy. Citing a passage from The Analects of Confucius, he said: "To govern means being upright. If you lead the people by being upright and set a good example for others, who will dare not behave correctly?" He was talking to Leung Chun-ying, the man selected to run Hong Kong, a city also bubbling with allegations of business corruption and the abuse of political power. Hong Kong's leadership too must regain its moral authority.

Mr Bo's populism and vigilante justice threatened to rob the Communist party of its legitimacy. And that, as Mr Bo now knows, runs counter to Chinese law.

david.pilling@ft.com

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d968e014-82fe-11e1-ab78-00144feab49a.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.

August 15, 2012 7:26 pm

China's very different election show



By David Pilling

The country's democratic process is in full swing, but the result of the election will not be left to chance



On November 6 or 7, two American men in suits will appear on television. Even with the sound off you will be able to tell, by the expression on their faces, which of them has been elected president and which has not.

And, on an unspecified date between now and the end of the year, an unspecified number of Chinese men in dark matching suits will applaud themselves on to the stage of the Great Hall of the People. From the order in which they appear, experienced onlookers will be able to tell who is president, who is premier and who has which of the other jobs on the Politburo's standing committee, China's pre-eminent ruling body. My colleague Richard McGregor, in his enthralling book *The Party*, says the spectacle provides "something rare in modern China, a live and public moment of genuine political drama".

If the Communist party keeps to its present 10-year cycle (and manages to hold on to power), the next time the two most powerful countries in the world elect their leaders at roughly the same time will be in 2032. This year, then, will witness the psephologist's equivalent of a total solar eclipse.

In the US, we know practically everything there is to know about the candidates, if you leave aside Mitt Romney's missing tax returns. In China, we know almost nothing substantive about them, save that Bo Xilai need not apply.

This week the Communist party picked the 2,270 delegates who will attend the 18th party congress at which the new standing committee members will be anointed. Party officials sought to present the process as the most "democratic" in its history. It emphasised the humble origins of some of the delegates, who include miners, factory workers, bus drivers and 22-year-old Jiao Liuyang, who won the 200m women's butterfly gold medal at the London Olympics. The official China Daily newspaper pointed out triumphantly that the selection entailed "an unprecedented choice, with every 100 delegates elected from a field of more than 115 candidates". In Communist party terms, this evidently counted as near-anarchy.

Deng Shengming, deputy head of the powerful organisation department, said: "It's a very open, transparent electoral system, all out under the sunshine." One must assume he was talking about the view of sunshine one often gets in Beijing, through the pea-soup haze of coal dust and assorted particulates.

So open is the transition process that the date of the party congress itself is still a state secret. Hong Kong newspaper Ming Pao this week speculated that it would be moved forward to September as a signal of party unity following the Bo Xilai scandal. Party officials would only repeat the mantra that the national congress would take place sometime in the second half of 2012. Even the number of people who will sit on the standing committee is unclear. Currently nine, it may be cut to seven. Or then again, it may not.

The result of the election will not be left to chance. It will be decided well in advance. While Delegate Jiao was breaking an Olympic record in London, senior party hacks were getting down to real business. They gathered in Beidaihe, the seaside resort favoured by Communist party leaders and – in the doubtless open and democratic atmosphere of their walled compound – they set about finalising the selection process.

The transition was blown badly off course by the detention of Mr Bo, the disgraced former party secretary of Chongqing who had openly campaigned for a slot on the standing committee. It is ironic that the only man who publicly sought office should be the one barred from seeking it. With Mr Bo purged and his wife, Gu Kailai, convicted of murder in last week's one-day trial, there are signs that the transition is back on track. Beijing is stepping up security and cracking down on any sign of disgruntled citizens. The silencing of the powerless is a sure sign that China's democratic process is in full swing.

If everything goes according to plan, the Communist party will accomplish only its second smooth transition since it came to power in 1949. Deng Xiaoping took over from Mao Zedong after a protracted tussle with Mao's chosen successor, Hua Guofeng. Jiang Zemin succeeded Deng in the chaotic time after Tiananmen Square. Before the Bo scandal, the party had gone to considerable trouble to telegraph its next two top leaders. Xi Jinping, almost certain to

succeed Mr Hu as president, and Li Keqiang, who will take over from Wen Jiabao as premier, have been paraded at home and rolled out on symbolic visits to the US and Europe. So organised is everything, the new leaders won't even have to worry about coming up with their own policies. Those were laid out for them in the five-year plan for 2011-2015 approved last year.

The murkiness of the transition process is in direct proportion to its importance. In spite of the shift towards collective decision-making, it matters greatly who runs China even if, as Mr McGregor writes, "any fundamental political differences between them had been purged on their ascent through the ranks".

One would like to think it matters, for instance, whether Wang Yang, the (possibly) liberal-leaning party secretary of Guangdong province, is on the standing committee. It should matter too who is in charge of domestic security, a portfolio whose budget has been ramped up to surpass that of national defence under the hardline incumbent Zhou Yongkang. It ought to matter how committed the new leadership is to rebalancing the economy towards domestic demand, how tightly it wants to control interest rates and bank lending, and what sort of tone it hopes to set in foreign policy. It is almost enough to make you want a televised debate.

david.pilling@ft.com

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/749e09d4-e564-11e1-8ac0-00144feab49a.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.

August 22, 2012 7:14 pm

Japan, China and their 'history problem'



By David Pilling

Beijing may be seeking to drive a wedge between Washington and Tokyo

When the Democratic Party of Japan took power three years ago, it promised a radical overhaul of foreign policy. It wanted to rebalance relations with the US and China, by addressing its “over-dependence” on the former and its strained relations with the latter. In a world moving from US unipolarity to multipolarity, in the words of Yukio Hatoyama, then prime minister, Japan would rediscover Asia as its “basic sphere of being”.

It was a grand vision. Today it lies in shreds. That became clearer this week with Tokyo’s replacement of its ambassador to Beijing after a flare-up in Sino-Japanese tension. Anti-Japanese protests erupted across Chinese cities at the weekend after a renewed war of words over the Japanese-administered Senkaku islands, called Diaoyu by China.

Since the Democratic party came to power it has failed to forge closer relations with China. Its relations with the US, easily its most important ally, are near rock-bottom following years of US frustration at its foot-dragging over military-base agreements. Japan is not only replacing its ambassador to Beijing. It is also sending new envoys to Washington and to Seoul, the latter following a parallel territorial dispute with South Korea.

There are obvious reasons for Tokyo’s continuing painful relations with Asia, much of which it tried to conquer seven decades ago. Arguments over territory, history textbooks, war memorials, fishing rights and oil deposits are just some. At the root of all these is Japan’s wartime conduct and its inability – at least in the eyes of its neighbours – to repent properly for what it did.

But Japan’s problems with China in particular and with Asia more generally go back further than the second world war. That’s a shame because it makes them even more intractable. In 1885, an anonymous editorial entitled “Leaving Asia” appeared in a Japanese newspaper. Believed to have been written by Yukichi Fukuzawa, a modernising former samurai who appears on the back of the ¥10,000 note, the editorial advocated a rejection of the Sino-centric world and the embrace of western learning. That had been the basis of Japan’s Meiji restoration of 1868, a sweeping programme of modernisation intended to protect Japan from the colonial depredations of encroaching western powers. Japan copied westerners in everything they did, including their practice of invading other countries. The result was

murderous and tragic. After the second world war, Japan remained in the western camp. Initially occupied by the US, it has been locked in a client-state relationship with Washington ever since, shorn of its right to maintain a military or to pursue a properly independent foreign policy.

There are tens of millions of Japanese who know full well what Japan did in the war. Many Japanese servicemen bravely spoke out about atrocities committed. Japan has apologised for its conduct on countless occasions. Yet it has been unable to address the “history problem” as thoroughly as Germany for several reasons. One is that the emperor, in whose name the war was fought, remained on the throne. Another is that, after the war, Asia fell into a cold-war freeze. There was little chance of reconciliation across the ideological divide. As the cold war receded, ugly questions of history rose from the mud.

The argument over Senkaku goes back to the start of Japanese colonialism. Japan surveyed Senkaku in 1885, about the same time that Fukuzawa’s “Leaving Asia” editorial appeared. Saying there was no sign of the islands being under anyone’s influence, it incorporated them into Japanese territory in 1895. Beijing says the islands have appeared on Chinese maps since the 16th century. From its perspective, Japan seized the islands when it was setting off on its western-inspired colonial rampage. The islands were controlled by the Americans after the war, but returned to Tokyo in 1972 as part of the reversion of Okinawa to Japan. Beijing says the US had no right to return them since they were not Washington’s to give.

For reasons well rehearsed, it suits Beijing to keep historical hatreds alive. Part of the Communist party’s legitimacy derives from its role in fighting Japan’s invasion. Deng Xiaoping later sought to bury historical differences, but more recently Chinese leaders have disinterred them again. School textbooks and city museums full of Japanese atrocities are widespread.

Beijing also sees Japan as a proxy for US power in the Pacific. By testing US resolve to defend the uninhabited Senkaku islands, it may be seeking to drive a wedge between Washington and Tokyo. That makes the islands part of a much larger strategic face-off between a rising China and America. Nor is the process entirely in Beijing’s hands. The Chinese nationalists who travelled to the Senkaku islands last week included anti-Beijing activists.

It is hard to see how frictions will recede. The only long-term solution is some kind of Asian political community on the lines of the EU. This would seek to bind former enemies together institutionally. The prospects of any such project gaining momentum in the next years, even decades, are precisely zero. Having left Asia 150 years ago, Japan is finding there is no easy way back.

david.pilling@ft.com

July 4, 2012 7:31 pm

The former colony may get stuck down China's gullet



By David Pilling

The line between Hong Kong and the mainland – one country, two systems – is blurring

When the new chief executive of Hong Kong made his inaugural speech this weekend, he did so in Mandarin. One native of the Cantonese-speaking city said that made her feel alienated. If Hong Kongers were not allowed to vote for their leader, she said, at least the swearing-in ceremony could be conducted in their own language.

Fifteen years after the British – who were never too big on democracy or Cantonese either – handed Hong Kong back to China, the former colony is becoming increasingly Sinified. That is to be expected. It is reflected not only in the language in which Leung Chun-ying made his first remarks as leader, but also in the fact that he has close ties to Beijing and the Communist party – quite a departure from his predecessor, a bow-tie wearing remnant of the British civil service.

The Sinification of Hong Kong goes deeper. The amount of Mandarin spoken on the streets has risen palpably. Shopkeepers, fishing for the bulging mainland wallet, often greet customers in it. This year's census shows that 48 per cent of Hong Kongers say they can speak it, overtaking English, at 46 per cent. Nearly a third of residents were born on the mainland. Then there's the renminbi, ever more commonly accepted, alongside Hong Kong dollars. Hong Kong is the centre of Beijing's efforts to internationalise its currency. Some in the territory have even floated the idea, once taboo, of breaking the Hong Kong dollar's peg with the greenback and switching to a basket of currencies including the rmb.

Mainlanders are snapping up property. Last year, some 40 per cent of newly built luxury apartments went to Chinese buyers. Even the South China Morning Post, once a paper to be read over a boiled egg by pinstriped expats, is now edited by a mainlander, provoking not a little anguish about its independence. Everywhere, in other words, there are signs Hong Kong is becoming more Chinese. The line between it and the mainland – safeguarded by the principle of one country, two systems – is blurring.

Yet every action provokes a reaction; Hong Kong's has been vigorous. It was on display this weekend when tens of thousands of protesters poured on to the streets, many voicing their dislike of Mr Leung, whom they see as being imposed on them. In recent months, anti-mainland sentiment, some of it unpleasant, has been rising. Hong Kongers have objected to

everything from Chinese mothers crowding their maternity wards to company advertisements in simplified Chinese rather than the complicated Chinese characters used in Hong Kong.

In a recent survey 45 per cent of respondents identified themselves as “Hong Kongers”, up from 34 per cent at handover. Only 18 per cent put their primary identity as “Chinese”. Such definitions are open to misunderstanding. Most Hong Kongers are proud of China’s culture, history and impressive economic performance. The “China” that makes them nervous is the one run by a party, which some fear could impinge on the freedoms enjoyed by Hong Kongers and limit their progress to universal suffrage.

From Beijing’s perspective, the Sinification of Hong Kong must be gratifying. But it carries dangers. Many mainlanders who watched Mr Leung’s speech were impressed by a leader who at least appeared to be addressing people’s problems. (Hong Kongers, used to grandstanding politicians, were less enamoured.)

As Hong Kong becomes more integrated with China, it has also become more engaged with mainland affairs. Recently, Hong Kongers have vociferously taken up the case of Li Wangyang, an activist who died in Hunan province shortly after being released from prison. In a mirror image, some Chinese farmers went to Hong Kong last weekend to march against land confiscations at home.

The relationship between Hong Kong and the mainland is evolving in complicated ways. In 1997 there were lofty hopes Hong Kong would somehow infect the mainland with its relative freedoms. That was wishful thinking. China was too big and on too much of a roll to take much notice. Yet as Hong Kong becomes more of a Chinese city, the liberties it cherishes are melding with the aspirations of politically stirring mainlanders.

Hong Kong is a Chinese city. Eventually, China will swallow it up. But on the way down, it may just get caught in the mainland’s throat.

david.pilling@ft.com

The writer is the FT’s Asia Editor

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/43bb357c-c4fc-11e1-b6fd-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2013 FT and ‘Financial Times’ are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.