

Chinese Trust in the Government

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The vast majority of Chinese people trust their government like no other country on earth. This may seem strange to some foreigners who routinely mistrust their government. Yet the statistics speak for themselves. For example, the Edelman Trust Barometer of 2019 notes a rise in the general public's trust of the government and public institutions to a staggering 86 percent. Meanwhile, the monthly Ipsos surveys indicate that on average 90 percent of people have confidence in the direction in which China is headed. And in the five-yearly World Values Survey, the vast majority trust the government to promote human rights in China and throughout the world.

Why is this the case? One reason is of course the effect of Xi Jinping's leadership, with effective rule by law and its closely associated Social Credit System, anti-corruption campaign and recovery of both traditional Chinese and Marxist values.

Yet, this is only part of the story. The assumption of trust in governance runs deep in Chinese society – assuming of course that the government in question has earned that trust. To understand how this works at a deeper cultural and social level, we need to go back a few centuries.

He Xiu's Three Worlds

Important here is a certain He Xiu, who lived from 129 to 182 CE. He Xiu wrote a commentary on a commentary; more precisely, he wrote a commentary on the *Gongyang* commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (reputedly edited by none other than Confucius). This particular history is not so important here. Instead, He Xiu¹ introduced a crucial distinction between three terms:

1. What is 'rumoured [*suochuanwen*]'.
2. What is 'heard [*suowen*]' and thus reliably recorded.
3. What is 'seen [*suojian*]' and therefore verifiable.

¹ He Xiu. 1980. *Chunqiu gongyangzhuan zhuxu*. 28 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, p. 2200. Many editions of this work exist, in 28 volumes. It may also be found at <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=642006&remap=gb>.

The importance of this distinction can hardly be underestimated. What is rumoured concerns words and indeed a world that is ‘decayed and disordered [*shuailuan*]’. This is a world of chaos in which the heart is ‘course and unrefined [*cucu*]’, the country is broken up into small warring states and the records virtually non-existent. Rumours abound of skulduggery, assassination, intrigue and inappropriate behaviour in light of established rituals. In other words, hearsay and gossip are highly unreliable, to be mistrusted at every turn.

By contrast, the world that is reliably reported is one that has written records, which enables the unity of the many different Chinese peoples. It is clearly better than rumour, hearsay and chaos, but it still has its problems. The best is the world that is ‘seen’ and therefore empirically verifiable. One has first-hand evidence, or what is now called scientific evidence, truth from facts (*shishi qiushi*), as Deng Xiaoping said on many occasions. This verifiable world is united, whether distant or nearby, large or small, and even the heart (*xin*) or inner being is now deep and thoroughly known (*xiang*).

In Chinese history, the prime body responsible for reliable records and verified facts is of course the government. Indeed, these are signs of good governance and thereby one that can be trusted.

He Xiu’s distinction has many further ramifications today, whether the refusal of newspapers to engage in gossip, the scepticism concerning oral traditions, the transparency of political statements, or the need for any government statistics to be based on solid research. Let me focus on two examples.

Mao Zedong’s Works

The first concerns editions of Mao Zedong’s works. In China, there are two main editions, *The Works of Mao Zedong* (*Mao Zedong Wenji*) and *The Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (*Mao Zedong xuanji*). Apart from these two, there are a number of other small collections, relating to early writings or those on specific topics. These have all been carefully produced by the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, which is fully resourced and responsible for reliable editions of all works in the Marxist tradition.

At the same time, there are a number of other editions of Mao’s works, the most notable being *Mao Zedong ji*, published in 20 volumes in Japan. While most Chinese

scholars have copies of this edition, they are also suspicious. Why? An individual scholar has edited the works rather than a major institution funded by the government. Is it reliable? Can it be cited? Not sure. One has to wary indeed when relying on such material. And the five volume collection, *Mao Zedong Thought Lives Forever*, published without a place, date or editorship during the Cultural Revolution, is way beyond any form of reliability.

Concept of (U)topia

The second example concerns utopia, which in the Western European tradition refers to both a no-place and a good-place. Typically, writings about utopia postulate a world yet to be realised, on a distant island (Thomas More's *Utopia*), in the distant future (William Morris's *News From Nowhere*), or even on another planet. The accounts are typically imaginative, hearsay upon hearsay, if not rumour itself. Obviously, if the world in question does not exist and therefore cannot be experienced, one must rely on nothing more than rumour and imagination. In other words, it is a transcendent world, much better than ours, but one that we cannot know empirically.

Let us go back to He Xiu, for his threefold distinction of rumoured, recorded and verified is actually the background to a major contribution to the Chinese tradition concerning what is often known as 'utopia'. But his proposal is completely opposed to Western European assumptions. In more detail, He Xiu proposed three worlds:

1. The 'decayed and disordered world [*shuailuan*]', which is characterised by rumour and gossip (*suochuanwen*).
2. The world of 'rising peace [*shengping*]', which is determined by what is heard and recordable (*suowen*).
3. The world of 'great peace [*taiping*]', which can only be known by seeing and is therefore verifiable (*suojian*).

By now you can see what has happened. What in the Western tradition is called 'utopia', based on rumour, is actually the world of decay and disorder. What cannot be known is highly undesirable, with plots, skulduggery and lack of unity.

By contrast, the world of rising peace can be recorded, leading to unity at least within the country and relative stability and security. But the most verifiable world is

precisely that of the 'Great Peace' or what is also called the 'Great Harmony [*datong*]'. This world can hardly be connected with the Western tradition of utopia, although not a few have tried to do so. Why? It is not a world of rumour and innuendo, but one that can be verified empirically and through scientific investigation.

Thus, 'utopia' is a particularly bad term to use in this context. If we stay with the Greek origins of the terms, the best term would be *topos*, a definite place, and the Chinese tradition concerning the Great Peace and the Great Harmony would have to be called 'Topian Thought'.

Trusting the Government

Let us return to question of trust in governance. As mentioned earlier, throughout Chinese history, the body responsible for recording and verifying information has been the government itself. Given the size of the country, government has always been a somewhat large affair, and in this respect at least the communist government carries on a long tradition. Of course, it has a distinct trajectory determined by Marxism, but it is still responsible for the most reliable information, for it has the best resources to ensure such information.

I would like to close with an unexpected contribution from He Xiu, a contribution carried through in the later tradition via Kang Youwei's *Book of Datong* and Deng Xiaoping's evocation – in a communist framework – of the old Confucian category of a *xiaokang* society (one that is moderately well-off, healthy and peaceful). For Deng Xiaoping and even more those who followed – Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and especially Xi Jinping – this *xiaokang* society is the goal of the initial socialist phase of the new China, to be achieved by 2020.

This *xiaokang* society is equivalent now with what He Xiu called the world of 'rising peace'. Most importantly, it is a world that about which one has reliable knowledge and is therefore able to provide reliable records. What does this mean for the core political program of achieving a *xiaokang* society in all respects by 2020? Is it merely political spin, a vague promise with little content? Not at all: it entails detailed and innovative planning, targeted projects, scientific analysis and rigorous assessment of results. For example, Xi Jinping has identified a peaceful and law-abiding country, environmental protection, and

poverty alleviation as the three greatest challenges. Massive resources and initiatives have gone into each, with the Social Credit System, a wholesale shift away from environmentally destructive practices, and a last great push to lift the final 10 million people out of poverty (850 million since 1978).

Will these targets be achieved? Final assessment will tell. But one thing is clear: without them, a *xiaokang* society is unachievable; with them, it will be achieved. But such a society must be thoroughly recordable and verifiable. Trust in government turns on this fact.