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OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS CHALLENGES



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Chinese Question in the Times of Coronavirus

I

The current global pandemic crisis that we all are finding ourselves in has opened a host of questions:

How long and how well can we be able to practice social, or maybe better physical distancing in these challenging times, prescribed to us by medical experts in order to stop the spreading of COVID-19? What will be the medium and long-term social and/or political impacts of this practice that we have had to get used to in the past couple of weeks? How much are our deep-rooted habits and behavioral patterns going to be changed in the “brave new world” that we can imagine now emerging around us after the pandemic’s peak is over? For instance, will we really see the total disappearance of handshakes in the future?

How to support effectively those who are on the front lines? All brave first responders, not only in hospitals and other facilities, dealing with the patients already infected and struggling with this horrible disease, but also all others whose work must be counted and factored in as belonging to essential professions to keep our now “closed” societies running? Police, FEMA, the army corps of engineers, firefighters, undertakers; people taking care of senior citizens, the most vulnerable segment of the population; people operating the supply chains necessary to offer people access to food, water, electricity, gas, gasoline, and all other essential commodities; people taking care of everything else that is necessary if the society as a whole or the local communities, large or small, are not to fall into dirt and chaos, including removal of garbage being dumped by all of us day after day? And I could go on and on, further expanding this list.

Where are all the rules, responding to the pandemics, to come from? Who is authorized constitutionally to be in charge? In the case of the United States: is it the President of the Republic, the Governors of States, the Mayors of Towns and Cities, or all of them at once, in some sort of coordinated manner? In other words, should the decisions concerning measures to be implemented, be made hierarchically, from the top down, in the way the armed forces used to operate, or rather coordinated—locally, at the state and at the national level—based on intensive horizontal communications between them, and relying on the spirit of cooperation, traditionally at home, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed already in the 1830s in America, in all sorts of intermediary bodies of civil society, such as churches and the multitude of not-for-profit voluntary organizations, in the first place?

And there is another set of questions here, again at all three levels previously mentioned (local, state and national): When and where will it be not only possible, but rather vital and necessary to start opening temporarily “closed” societies and, at least gradually, return to their normal economic activities? What is the role of the private sector in it? Isn’t it true that the economy simply cannot be stifled more than what is necessary, if the cure, to use President Trump’s phrase, is not to have worse effects in the final balance of the COVID-19 epidemics than the disease itself?

It is not surprising at all, that, in the time of peaking epidemics, it is the experts from medical professions who are the ones who must be consulted first and have the last word in all concrete decisions to be made, especially when it comes to phasing in the gradual reopening. It is they who approach the problem “scientifically” and, therefore, are key players here; who treat patients; who develop vitally necessary testing capabilities; who decide about the application of antiviral drugs currently at their disposal; who are introducing therapies with antibodies into their medical practice; who are engaged with other scientists in research and clinical studies, striving to shorten as much as possible the time necessary to discover, produce, test, and introduce into common use the ultimate

remedy we all dream of and pray for: an effective anti-COVID-19 vaccine. And we shouldn't be surprised, too, that they may have different opinions and may recommend more cautious timetables for the economic recovery, in comparison with the economists, working with them in the advisory bodies created by the decision-makers at all three levels.

One should always be aware of the fact, when trying to understand and eventually take sides in this debate, that the current crisis is unprecedented—both in the speed with which it has emerged, and in its scale and impact. There are hardly any examples in the past to provide safe guidelines to political leaders who are finding themselves at the helm in this situation, having as their primary “epistemic tool,” rather than anything else, their own often poor and biased judgement, their own past decisions (certainly not perfect, to say the least) that are always calling for improvements, adjustments, or even radical corrections.

Observing all the processes that we are now all participating in, my main point is as follows: there is no escape from the triangle science-economics-politics and from the conflicts of interpretations and strategies discussed and being corrected daily between those who participate in these triangular communications. As I have already said, the first two tops of this triangle have their important and indispensable role to play: First and foremost the science of epidemiology, and then economical expertise, both of which are essential components of any successful solution in the medium and long-term perspectives.

The key and decisive role, however, is and will be played by the politics of pandemic, and by those who occupy now and will occupy in the future the triangle's third top. Politicians will have the primary responsibility in the end; they are the people whose activities and decision-making will decide which political communities, where they have been endowed with and hold power, succeed or fail in the on-going “war with the invisible enemy” bearing the name COVID-19.

And that's why I say here, loud and clear: The most powerful weapon against COVID-19 is democracy and the very existence of a free and open society, the only source of legitimacy of democratic rule. Our common essential task in this fight is not to allow ourselves to be fragmented by COVID-19 epidemics and turned into a mass society of individuals full of fear and thus susceptible to all sorts of manipulations. Our best chance to make it is to remain united in the defense of democracy, to preserve its basic functioning, in spite of the fact that the great majority of democratic countries in the world, including the United States, declared state of emergency, finding themselves in a “war” which the traditional warfare doesn't seem well equipped to handle.

What does it mean? It means that certain restrictions can be and are justifiably imposed on rights and freedoms of their citizens. But it also means that such restrictions are imposed on them only within the limits allowed in democratic societies; it means standing respect for the separation of powers and the rule of law; it means the proportionality and only temporary character of such measures.

And with respect to all of that, here is what I consider as a key element of proper civic response to COVID-19: We all, as citizens, should follow and implement the rules and orders being given to us by authorities, but at the same time to stay vigilant and on guard; to be ready to raise our voices, if necessary, in defense of our freedom, because the state of emergency—no matter how reasonably its declaration is justified in a democratic society— always offers the temptation to political leaders to manipulate or even damage irreparably, for the sake of their own power, the democratic form of government, thanks to which they are now endowed with emergency powers, and even to destroy it and replace it with some sort of oligarchy or autocracy. There are multiple examples in the history of mankind and especially in the 20th century that can be used as a warning in this regard.

There is one more characteristic of coronavirus pandemics that hasn't been mentioned yet: its global character. What is of primordial importance is the fact that the spread of COVID-19, which started in early January in Wuhan, China and within weeks reached planetary dimensions, requires a proper international response if the war against this "invisible enemy" is to be won. The truth of the matter is clear and simple: Because of the nature and still only very vaguely known mechanisms of COVID-19 behavior, this war cannot be waged only by individual nation-states in the territories under their jurisdiction. It requires a concerted action of all members of the international society of states around the globe. If it is to succeed, the "war" must be waged by all the governments of the world with the intention not only to protect their own population at home where they exercise their territorial sovereignty, but conceived as a global humanitarian action in the name and on behalf of all mankind.

The implication of this requirement is evident: What is being tested now and will be necessarily affected by the Coronavirus epidemics are all existing institutional forms of international coexistence—be it cooperation or rather competition—of all those who operate on the global scene. What must be used as a point of departure, when analyzing and evaluating the possible international responses to the COVID-19 crisis, is the existing system of international relations, its legal basis, its financing, and its established practice.

One should look at and try to assess impartially the performance of international organizations in the COVID-19 crisis, starting with the World Health Organization, to name just one of them, whose record has turned out to be rather problematic in its capability as an international first responder, the top responder out of all of those operating on the platform of the United Nations.

One should look at the response of the G-7 and G-24 groupings. One also should do the same for all regional institutions, such as the European Union, NATO, and other components of today's European political architecture—enlarged after the fall of the Berlin Wall by the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe—that have bridged the two sides of the Atlantic and are the principal channels of communication between Europe and the United States. How have all these entities reacted, so far, to the current challenges and what they are planning to do?

Political realists like Henry Kissinger can offer their perspective based on the evaluation of "national interests" of members of the international society of states and the changing patterns of distribution of power among them. What kind of effect can the Coronavirus crisis have in the realm of geopolitics? What will the new multipolar world that emerges from it will look like? Who will be its main players—the traditional Big Three, the United States, China and Russia, or will there be any other new participants in the "global concert" of world powers? —How large might their "zones of influence" be, both globally and on the regional scale? How are all other, i.e. smaller and less powerful states belonging to the global community going to be impacted as their potential "clients"?

Political philosophers and anthropologists can bring into this debate still another perspective: Science and technology—without any doubt, key instruments at our disposal in today's war against COVID-19—are products of the European modernization project that started in the enlightenment period and gradually transformed the whole world to the form in which we know it today. Thus, our main weapon in this fight is European rationality; the European concept of scientific reason.

At the same time, however, the same people will argue today that in order to understand where we are now politically as humankind and in all the efforts to formulate a corresponding global strategy we need to meet the current global threat. One should not omit the fundamental reality of the contemporary post-European world, the unescapable fact that the universalism of European civilization is a matter of the past now, and that what must be factored in, in the first place, is the rise of other non-European cultures and civilizations—Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean and many others—with their different ethos, habits, and patterns of behavior. There is no doubt that these two

different sets of arguments: the one praising the gift of European rationalism to the contemporary post-European world and the other one introducing post-modern relativism and recognizing the transformative power of other civilizations (besides the Western spiritual legacy, based on Greek philosophy, Roman law and Judeo-Christian religion) must be accommodated here. But how? With what results?

With due respect to all these approaches and perspectives that, for sure, deserve to be studied carefully, if the search for an efficient and comprehensive global response to the pandemics that has managed to change profoundly the whole world within a few weeks is to succeed, I want to strongly argue that the argument that I have tried to elaborate above is valid also in the international realm. Even there is no escape from the triangle science-economics-politics. It is democracy that must be recognized as a crucial weapon against COVID-19 not only domestically, not only within the orbit of European/Western civilization, but on a planetary scale.

What has to be brought internationally into action, if COVID-19 and other viruses that may come in the future are potent enough to cause pandemics, is democracy's unique capacity of self-reflection and self-transformation; its readiness to keep discussions between scientists, economists and politicians going on in an open, unbiased and non-ideological manner; its firm commitment to the rationality of arguments that must be again and again critically reexamined and tested against reality and in the light of experience; the preference of the reality experienced before ideological biases and power manipulations of any kind; and last, but not least the readiness of all democratic politicians in power to undergo willingly a test of democratic elections, and be replaced, if they lose, by others with different policies. The war against the invisible enemy called COVID-19 is an urgent call for action of the world's community of democracies.

II

Where does China stand in it? When one observes the behavior of its government in the past months after the COVID-19 pandemics burst out, several basic facts must be restated first.

China is an ancient civilization, with its very specific historical experiences going back thousands of years, with its long historical memory, highly developed culture and many significant achievements. All of that always has to be taken into account in any efforts to understand the actions of the currently existing Chinese nation-state, the type of actual "social contract" between its government and its people, and also the way how this state, today a global superpower, operates internationally. That is why it is absolutely necessary, in my view, to consult real experts here, sinologists who are familiar with Mandarin and other Sinitic languages, Chinese history, Chinese culture, Chinese mentality; who have sufficient knowledge to penetrate into the Chinese collective soul and understand Chinese customs, religion, basic patterns of thought and social and/or political behavior. The reason is clear: there is no doubt, I think, that what we are experiencing now, often in the form of new Chinese nationalism and unprecedented Chinese assertiveness on a global scale, is a much larger and much deeper phenomenon than just a sheer extension beyond Europe's borders of certain "gnostic"¹ revolutionary currents of modern political thought that emerged—with the well-known and really devastating consequences inflicted on a number of European nations—sometime around the middle of the 19th century. What we can see in action here, provoked by originally European political ideas, is a great Chinese re-awakening whose consequences for the future history of humankind are still unknown and cannot be fully assessed or predicted. Here is what Czech

¹ In the sense of term gnosticism used in the "new political science" of Eric Voegelin

philosopher Jan Patočka² wrote already in 1975, in one of his last texts, dealing with the “end of Europe and the arrival of the post-European age”:

“The moral superiority, the awareness of insurmountable strength, which had spoken once in the orders of Chinese emperors, even in the moments of their most profound humiliation, turns in the times when those who up to now ruled the world, have lost their power, into a new bond for enormous consensus. What claims its rights here is the energy kept intact by isolation, untouched by barbarian rule, strengthened by humiliation, steeled thanks to its entry into the world processes during the revolution which lasted for long decades, the energy zeroing in an unknown direction; mankind speaks here, all of a sudden, from the abyss of times, which were pre-European; unconquered Egypt which persisted in isolation and waited for its moment to come back and reveal itself in its full strength. Post-European mankind speaks here from the pre-European depth, and if the language used is the one of all contemporary revolutionaries – Marxist terminology – it is only conducive to the fallacy Europe so easily succumbs to....

“What entitles us to expound the latest phase of the history of East Asia from the European perspective and view the phenomena such as the Chinese revolutions in 1912 and 1949, as the Europeanisation of China as matter of course, instead of at least considering - mindful of Europe’s own evolution through various catastrophes to an ever more complex new formation of the same principle – that what we might be confronted with here is, on the contrary, Sinitization of certain European cultural elements?....

“Is Chinese Marxism a continuation of the Marxian way thinking, applied to the Chinese material, or it is rather the continuation of Chinese universalism which uses the conceptual equipment of Marx as a welcome means of how to articulate its own historical mission?”³

There is obviously no space here, even to open up a larger and, first of all, qualified debate on China—something that would be very necessary, I think, exactly in our times—so I will make here, as a layperson with only a very rudimentary knowledge of Chinese history and realities, just a couple of remarks that must be taken accordingly—just *cum grano salis*.

First of all, what we have to take into consideration, if we want to understand the current phase of Chinese history—where does China stands right now?—is a larger context of Chinese modernization in the 20th century, the Chinese political transformations that started in the decades before the First World War when the Eurocentric and self-confident world of previous centuries was about to die, together with many Europeans, in the fronts of the Great War 1914-1918; when a new

² Jan Patočka, one of the most influential Czech philosophers of the 20th century, was born on June, 1, 1907 in Turnov and died on March 13, 1977 in Prague, having suffered a heart attack following prolonged police interrogations. He became the Associate Professor at Charles University (docent) in 1936, and the Full Professor in 1968. He was allowed to lecture only in the years 1945-1950, then forced to leave Charles University and returned, thanks to the Prague Spring, in 1968, and forced to leave finally in 1972. In the meantime he worked in various academic institutions as a researcher, being under the surveillance of the Communist regime, always considered its ideological enemy. In the fall of 1976 he was actively involved in the process of the formation of Charter 77, the most important Czechoslovak human rights movement, and became together with Jiri Hajek and Vaclav Havel one of its first spokespersons. In spite of his limited possibilities of teaching publicly, he raised at least two generations of students, lecturing and having seminars in all sorts of private and semiprivate places and venues, laying the foundations of what was in the years of Charter 77 nicknamed as Patočka’s “flying university.”

³ Patočka, J. Evropa a doba poevropská (Europe and Post-European Age) in: Péče o duši II, Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky (The Care for the Soul II, Collected Works of Jan Patočka) , Vol. 2, edited by Ivan Chvatík and Pavel Kouba, OIKOUMENÉ, Praha 1999 op.cit., p. 94-96 (trans. from Czech to English by the author)

era of humankind was already announcing itself in all sorts of signs of the time—first barely reflected, because coming on “doves’ feet”, to say it with Nietzsche, but, as it was to be demonstrated pretty soon, bringing on the “storm.”

In the case of China, the arrival of the 20th century first brought an end to a form of government, being there in power for many centuries. On January 1, 1912, the imperial rule was terminated, and the Republic of China proclaimed. Sun Yat Sen, a scholar and statesman inspired by European philosophical thought and Christian religion—for his whole adult life committed to launching a Chinese modernization project (who spent decades outside of China, in the United States, in Europe, in Japan, in Hawaii, in British Hong Kong), organizing relentlessly all available political forces able and willing to join him in his efforts to set his homeland on the path of “progress” —was elected its first provisional president. His Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) became the leading political power in China and set for itself an ambitious goal: to lift the Chinese nation from its backwardness, underdevelopment, and poverty and transform it, following the European example and call, into a prosperous, healthy a self-confident member of the family of modern enlightened nations. But as it turned out, the Kuomintang’s power was too weak, not only to start implementing Sun Yat Sen’s political program, but even to keep the country united. Internal strife and rivalries broke out quickly in the new Republic and China fell apart into several territories controlled by mighty local warlords.

In 1924, Sun Yat Sen’s successor at the head of Kuomintang, Chiang Kai-shek, entered into a short-lived coalition with the new Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and, together, these two parties tried for a while to get the situation under control. This partnership, however, resulted, three years later, in a fierce civil war between them, that lasted, with the exception of a “truce” between them, during the eight years of Japanese occupation for more than twenty years, with Kuomintang having its stronghold in Southern China and CCP in the North.

In 1931, the traditional rival of China in East Asia, the Empire of Japan, also engaged in a project of modernization, initiated in this case already in the second half of the 19th century in the context of the so-called Meiji Restoration, which was gradually turned by its political leaders after the First World War into a more and more aggressive, chauvinistic, and militarized state. Its army, in evident disrespect for the Wilsonian principles of the New World Order agreed at Paris Peace Conference twelve years earlier, decided to occupy China’s northern province of Manchuria, taking advantage of China’s current weakness and instability.

Since 1937, Japan, future military ally of Nazi Germany in the Second World War, controlled the whole Chinese territory. Kuomintang and CCP started to cooperate again to organize the Chinese resistance. After the Japanese defeat in the war in 1945 and liberation of China from the Japanese yoke, Kuomintang, and CCP resumed their armed conflict and the communists prevailed in it.

On October 1, 1949, on the Tiananmen Square in Beijing, their leader, Mao Zedong, announced the creation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and its program of socialist revolution. His rival, the head of Kuomintang, generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, was pushed with his army off the mainland to his last bastion, where the Republic of China (ROC) has managed to survive: the island of Taiwan.

As a result of that, CCP has held power in mainland China for more than seven decades. Its leading role is considered—in a very similar manner as the previous rule of Emperors was conceived as something that had its basis in the “Mandate of Heaven”—as an undisputable and sacrosanct foundation of unity for the Chinese people and a principal guarantor of territorial integrity for the Chinese state. And symptomatically, as if inherited from the imperial tradition, its leaders also have been and still are enjoying, when in power, an almost superhuman status.

On the one hand, Chinese history under communist rule is marked by several important turns: Mao Zedong’s “Great Leap Forward” in the late 1950s and the “Cultural Revolution” in the

1960s and 1970s; Deng Xiaoping's "Open Door" policy that introduced a necessary flexibility and the significant elements of liberalization and market economy in the 1980s and 1990s into the so far very rigid Chinese economic model; the political and economic model coined and realized now, in the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, by today's Chinese supreme leader Xi Jinping.

At the same time, however, there is a common denominator here, too. But it is not so much the rigid ideology of "scientific socialism" defined according to the teachings of Marx and Lenin, the language in which the Chinese state's doctrine has always been and still is articulated. The Chinese form of communist government has another distinct and, in my view, more important feature, based on the Chinese historical experience: a strong, even almost obsessive, one can say, concern for the stability and unitarian character of the Chinese state; a concern that today's communist rulers inherited from their predecessors ruling in "the Central Empire" of the past—always on guard against all sorts of separatists trying to break it into fragments, always suppressing all subversive elements, ready to exploit any praise of its weakness and destroy its order. And it is exactly the amalgamation of this concern for the state's unity with an ideology, the goal of which is to transform society in the name of communist "radiant futures" by all available means, that creates a unique Chinese variety of totalitarianism, a new species among autocratic forms of government that emerged in the 20th century.

The ideology that the Chinese state subscribes to seems to be less ideological in terms of its adherence to the doctrine of "scientific socialism," and much more pragmatic as far as its practical uses and implementation. Instead of being dogmatic and stable, emphasizing the purity of its Marxist Leninist creed, it is constantly developed and reinterpreted in the never ending efforts of CCP ideologues, now with Xi Jinping at their head, so that it can serve its main purpose: to keep the Chinese population obedient and under strict top down control.

This doctrine, which aims to lead the Chinese people from the current successful phase of socialist construction to an even better future, has actually brought about, thanks to Xi Jinping's leadership, a remarkable change in its history, more than seventy years old now. The so-called "proletarian internationalism" of Mao Zedong has been gradually replaced with today's self-confident and assertive Chinese nationalism, full of pride of what has already been achieved thanks to the wisdom and foresight of the CCP, but also having the tendency to revive in the current leader Xi Jinping's "cult of personality" the image of a wise and mighty Emperor, mandated to rule by "Heaven"—and in this context also allowing the Chinese people to rediscover its own great historical past in the old, no longer reactionary, but on the contrary, now venerable and respected Confucian traditions.

The main message of Chinese state ideology, however, is clear and simple despite its intrinsic fluidity and somewhat arcane formulations stemming from the huge body of Chinese historical experience and cultural traditions. Its unambiguous denial of the Western liberal tradition, of all its values and fundamental principles: respect for unalienable and thus universal human rights, the rule of law, the separation of powers, the recognition of the importance of intermediary bodies of civil society, the civic participation in political processes, and the free competition of political parties—that Western democracy (government "*of the people, by the people, for the people*" that in the famous phrase of Abraham Lincoln "*shall not perish from the earth*") is built upon.

When one starts examining the realities of the Chinese state under the "leading role" of the CCP, all distinct features of totalitarianism are present there today, even in more robust form than ever before:

- 1) Power totally monopolized in the hands of top party leaders with a dictator at the helm, and, in the hands of all entrusted functionaries on the party ladder, who are in charge of and decide about practically everything;

- 2) No freedom of expression, no freedom of religion, no respect for privacy or other fundamental human rights;
- 3) Omnipresent State Secret Police, using huge networks of confidants and informers to collect information, ready to act against anyone who shows the slightest sign of disagreement with the current party line;
- 4) Disappearances and long-term imprisonments of all dissenters and potential opponents;
- 5) Concentration camps, strongly reminiscent of practices of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, designed to reeducate their inmates by brainwashing and hard labor;
- 6) Omnipresent state propaganda, the system of state education fully subordinated to the needs of state ideology, the strict censorship of all media, the total control of social networks, the restrictive measures imposed on the use of the internet;
- 7) Economy totally controlled by the state and its huge enterprises and banking sector.

At the same time, however, there are the indisputable facts here, too, that can't be ignored and overlooked. As far as its latest achievements, both domestic and international, the Chinese model of governance has turned out to be a great success, especially under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The numbers and data speak for themselves in a way that simply cannot be denied:

Thanks to a really historically unique and unprecedented economic growth, Chinese society has changed dramatically, beyond any imagination. From the status of a developing country, China has been transformed into the second largest economy in the world, on its way to overtake the current world leader, the United States. Chinese people are experiencing, under the Xi Jinping's leadership, significant improvement of their standard of living: Large numbers of them are being lifted from poverty and underdevelopment into their current more comfortable position as members of the middle class, fast growing, ever stronger, and thus also more and more self-confident, segment of Chinese society, that seems to be, indeed, fulfilling the primary goal of Xi Jinping's policies, well "stabilized."

Under Xi Jinping's leadership China strengthened not only domestically, but also internationally. China has become, whether we like it or not, an economic and military superpower, equipped with all weapon systems and technologies necessary for operations on a global scale. It can afford to be more and more assertive in the international realm by showing its muscles, but, at the same time, present itself as a "benevolent" and essentially non-aggressive player. Here is Xi Jinping's message to the world, pronounced at the "Belt and Road Forum" that met in October of 2017 to discuss the Chinese prime global economic, and by definition also political, project launched in 2013 in Beijing:

"We should foster a new type of international relations featuring 'win-win cooperation', and we should forge a partnership of dialogue with no confrontation, and a partnership of friendship rather than alliance. All countries should respect each other's sovereignty, dignity and territorial integrity; respect each other's development path and its social systems, and respect each other's core interests and major concerns... What we hope to create is a big family of harmonious coexistence."

So, what is actually wrong with China, with respect to Xi Jinping's vision of its place in the future world outlined here? Shouldn't the advocates of the Western type of liberal democracy rather respect the Chinese specific "*development path and its social system*" that the great helmsman Xi of the Chinese people was advocating here and seems to be ready to push forward with stubborn determination in the years to come, instead of trying, in vain, to force upon the Chinese effective and highly successful system of governance their own fundamental values, labelling the Chinese regime as totalitarian?

What is wrong with it, why this strategy is, as I am strongly convinced, in spite of all its impressive achievements and successes, a way to the dead end on the current historical crossroads,

has been clearly demonstrated, in my view, in the coronavirus crisis and in the role and behavior of the Chinese government.

No one doubts today that the virus named COVID-19 was “born” in the Chinese city of Wuhan and there is a serious debate going on about whether it was a natural transmission from bats to humans, caused by weird traditional culinary Chinese practices to consume all sorts of wild animals and the absence of basic hygienic rules on Chinese wet markets, or an accidental leak from a laboratory specializing in on viruses and experimenting with their genes. The Chinese government officially rejected this theory, but who can trust their always ideologically-biased statements whose major concern is not objective, factual “truth” (in the Chinese mindset a typical western concept), but its firm grip of power and the uses of facts and data in a way appropriate in the war, i.e in a manner advised by the ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu, whose famous “Art of War” has become so popular all-over the world today that his pronouncements can be easily found on the internet:

“All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near (chapter 1, verse 18)”

There is, of course, a “small” detail, a question that we must keep asking when observing all Chinese action that followed after the “People’s” war against the invisible enemy COVID-19 was declared. Isn’t there another actual enemy in this war that China, thanks to the totalitarian nature of its government, must fight against at the same time? Isn’t this enemy our democracy?

So, on the contrary: what can be observed in China today from our democratic perspective? We see the tendency of members of the Chinese party apparatus trying first to cover up everything that could be seen as damaging the shining picture of current Chinese realities, that could be blamed on them for such an unforgivable failure. That’s why those who had the responsibility and were in charge of all affairs in Wuhan decided to suppress an inconvenient information and reprimand those who had discovered it by labeling them as socially and politically dangerous leakers. And only later when things got so bad that they could not be kept any more as one of the party’s many secrets, the supreme leader ordered to conduct their “war operations” by closing Wuhan hermetically and placing all its citizens under quarantine— enforcing their compliance by all available means, controlling them 24/7, issuing permits to leave their homes; and when they let them get out, tracking literally all of their movements.

For understandable reasons, this strategy may be appraised by epidemiologists as laudable and very efficient. But there is another thing here that should not be forgotten at the same time, which is exactly what I have said above: China is under attack by a dangerous virus, but all strategies to win this war must also be thoroughly examined from an ideological point of view; and only if qualified ideologues say that there is no harm done by their implementation to the regime, they can be approved. In short, in order to be able to protect Chinese citizens, Chinese totalitarianism has to protect itself first and this rule must always be obeyed.

And the same approach can be discerned in many other steps of the Chinese government taken in the middle of the coronavirus crisis.

Let’s review the allegation: China failed to timely inform other countries of the world about the seriousness of the emerging danger, in evident non-compliance with the international rules to be guarded by the World Health Organization; and instead, the WHO has tried to cultivate its special relationships with its president, in order to get him on its side in possible international debates and disputes.

Let’s look through this lens at its strategy as far as international humanitarian assistance is concerned. Since the beginning of this crisis, the Chinese government was receiving shipments of

necessary medical material and equipment, and was sending its emissaries around the world to purchase all that was available in this area. Most of these imports to China have been later - after China managed to get the spread of COVID-19 under control in its territory and the pandemics burst out with full speed around the globe - resold to the same countries, but this time for market prices, i.e. at that moment much higher prices.

Let's take into consideration the fact that the Chinese government, being well aware of the fact that China is the country that has the greatest capacities to produce equipment and commodities to deal with COVID-19 pandemics, has started immediately to use this fact to its own advantage and as a part of its grand strategy to promote the Chinese "national interest" in the world.

In short, it seems evident to me, that the Chinese government has been using, as it is used to do in the past seven decades, all the instruments it has in its totalitarian toolbox. So here is my Chinese question: is there any chance that the crisis itself, in the long run, can make Xi Jinping change his mind, and decide to gradually leave Chinese totalitarianism behind and start dismantling the oppressive regime and replacing it with some form of Chinese democracy?

I concluded in the first part of this essay that the war against the invisible enemy called COVID-19 can succeed—because of its global nature—only as a concerted action of the world community of democracies. My argument departed from the opinion that seems to be shared by everybody else today: that the most effective action in the triangle science-economics-politics can be achieved only when the steps taken come at the right time and in the right order. What comes first is *the moment* of medical professionals and epidemiologists. They should not only work in their own field and treat the patients, but must also be in charge of overseeing the whole sequencing of "war operations": to set the criteria, to organize testing and measurements, and to create and keep adjusting timetables for players occupying other tops of the triangle. Only then comes *the moment* of economic experts to suggest the necessary steps for the alleviation of the immediate consequences caused by economies coming to a stop in the first phase of the crisis; and they must create medium and long-term plans for economic recovery and gradual re-opening of quarantined societies, i.e. temporarily closed societies; and only after all of that happens, should politicians return with full steam to their party politics.

Can the Chinese totalitarian government follow this protocol and accept the premise, that it is democracy, and, in the end, only the community of democracies who can succeed in this global war? That even China, with all its current power and global aspirations, will have to absorb democratic values and principles into its rich, deep world-view, informed by thousands of years of its history, and make it an intrinsic part of its future reality?

Frankly, I doubt that Xi Jinping, the current Chinese leader, is capable of even thinking about such a profound turn, at least with regards to where things stand in this moment and his *modus operandi* is, but it still remains to be seen because all possible answers in our uncertain and fragile world may be possible and have to be kept open.

In conclusion, I would like to raise my Chinese question again: what is the attitude of the Chinese people to their religion, culture, historical experience, towards democracy?

The answer is certainly not easy, but one has to always be aware of other realities apart from the reality of the current Chinese government, with its ideological constructions, seemingly firmly embedded now in the collective mind of the Chinese people, living for generations exposed to "totalitarian radiation" emitted day after day by the regime in power, now for more than seventy years.

At least, there have always been courageous individuals, like Liu Xiaobo, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2010, ready to go against the current and even ready to sacrifice their lives because of their democratic convictions. Even today there are many likeminded people, prisoners of conscience, in

Chinese jails and I can imagine that there are millions of people in China today, dreaming about freedom and democracy in their homes.

Who we shouldn't forget about are the members of the Falun Gong sect, the members of the Christian churches also living in oppression for their religious beliefs.

There is an army of independent bloggers struggling for their free cyber space, there are Chinese doctors and other medical personnel struggling on the frontlines in the war against coronavirus, and who in contrast with functionaries hidden safely in their party secretariats and busy with their ideological nonsense, are confronted with the hard "data" of daily realities.

As well, there are Chinese scientists who have to protect the principles of scientific rationality if they are to be successful in their endeavors within their particular disciplines.

What about the inhabitants of the Chinese provinces of Tibet or Xinjiang, Buddhists and Moslems? What about the students in Hong Kong demonstrating for democracy? What about the Chinese in Singapore? What about the members of the Chinese diaspora around the world, here, in the United States, in Australia, in Canada, in Europe, or elsewhere? How many people among them are democrats and how many are new nationalists?

I would like to end this list mentioning the case that is, in my view, of key importance from the perspective of a future Chinese democracy. It is the Republic of China, Taiwan, where democracy now has existed for more than three decades and Sun Yat Sen's spirit is still alive. It is the Chinese state that has already experienced its peaceful transition from an authoritarian form of state, created by its founding father, generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, in 1949; and until 1987, was ruled by martial law. Taiwan is, in my view, living proof that not only the Chinese culture and traditions can flourish in democracy, but that it is democracy that must be seen as a fundamental condition for civic peace in Chinese style and economic prosperity.

Taiwan, as we know, is perceived by Beijing rulers as one of the Chinese provinces in the so-called "One China Policy," which is one of the basic elements of the Chinese government's foreign policies, insisting that the states that want to enter into a diplomatic relationship with China must not recognize Taiwan as a full state, endowed with sovereign equality. As result of Beijing's pressure, Taiwan (ROC), a founding member of the United Nations and permanent member of the Security Council since 1945, was expelled in 1971 from the United Nations and until today is unsuccessfully trying to apply for UN membership. There are still a few states (in the Pacific region and in Latin America), where, mostly for economic reasons, Taiwan has its embassies, but its international isolation is bigger and bigger. It has tried unsuccessfully to gain at least observer status in some international organizations that belong to the UN system, including the World Health Organization, among others, to no avail.

In the times of the coronavirus crisis such systematic international isolation of Taiwan, the existing Chinese democracy, is not only counterproductive, but more scandalous than ever before. The fact is that if there is a country that can be used as an example of successful struggle against the COVID-19 pandemics, it is Taiwan. It is the state that can and should play—given its high level of scientific research and economic potential—an active role in the collective efforts of mankind to stop the virus in order to overcome all the consequences of its brutal attack. I am convinced that the international status of Taiwan is also an important aspect of today's Chinese question and the community of the world's democracies will be best advised to look at it with fresh eyes in an attempt, maybe, even to find some new, more creative solution.