

**Xi Chuan**

### **In the Shadow of the Oxymoron**

According to *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, ‘oxymoron’ means: an epigrammatic effect, by which contradictory terms are used in conjunction. In his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, the American critic M. H. Abrams says “if the paradoxical utterance conjoins two terms that in ordinary usage are contraries, it is called an oxymoron”. He cites examples like “Dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear” by John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (III, 380), and says it is a “frequent figure in devotional prose and religious poetry as a way of expressing the Christian mysteries, which transcend human sense and logic”. But if we are not so religious, does it mean that all things that “transcend human sense and logic” need an oxymoron to express themselves? The following questions arise: what is the scale of Adams’ “human sense”, and whose “logic” is it that is being mentioned?

Oxymoron---a linguistic term. Yet can we use it in a social sense? I feel an urgent need to enlarge the boundary of this word because I am from China and the modern Chinese experience, which always “transcend (s) human sense and logic” (but follows its own sense and logic), shows a preference for paradox and oxymoron. In late 1940s, Chairman Mao, in describing the nature of the on-coming socialist system, invented the term “people’s democratic dictatorship”. The dictatorship was going to happen but it should belong to the people, and relate to democracy. Is this political term difficult to understand? In late 1970s, after the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Deng Xiaoping invented another term for the Chinese socialism, namely “Socialism in Chinese style.” It is obviously a revisionist term, and one that approaches the notion of “socialist market economy”---absolutely a socialist oxymoron. It is by following this oxymoron that China experienced the rapid economic growth of the last 30 years.

An Indian poet once asked me whether today’s success of the Chinese market economics owes much to Marxism. To be honest, I don’t have a definite answer. Marx was hostile to the capitalist market of course, but Marxism brought egalitarianism to China which in turn laid the foundation for an easier acceptance of the economic reforms. But is Chinese Marxism a hundred-percent Marxism? Guo Muoruo (1892-1978), one of the founding fathers of the new Chinese literature and its most famous hack poet after 1950s, wrote in 1941 an essay entitled *Marx Entered the Confucian Temple*, satirizing the Chinese accepting of Marxism. It tells of Marx and Confucius meeting in a shabby Confucian temple, where they are surprised to find that they share all basic goals such as harmonious society, mutual love, communism, etc--with just one exception. Confucius is for one husband with many wives, whereas Marx is for one husband with one wife, a Christian attitude. The joke behind Guo’s meaning is clear: Chinese Marxism is located in the shadow of an oxymoron, with Marxism at one end and Confucianism at the other. Now capitalism comes as the third end. And these three ends, or four ends, or five

Home/Lands.

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ends, embrace each other and make something wonderful, and funny.

For instance: the Chinese population is made up by 56 ethnicities and in general the government has been kind to the so-called “national minorities.” But perhaps because it is an unbearable task to make further anthropologic distinctions, the government decided in the 1990s that China does not need any more ethnic groups. No group may therefore at this point claim to be a new ethnic people, and everyone must therefore obey the one-couple-one-child policy devised principally mainly for the Han people who make up over 90% of the Chinese population. Another point: although we have 56 ethnicities, people are not so interested in multi-culturalism. Instead, what you usually find in China is the effort to integrate on the terms of some national affairs, an attitude that comes down right from the First Emperor of Qin (259-210 BC). The latest instance of integration: since political slogans are becoming less influential, many people have begun to think that money is something very good.

Next example: China has world’s biggest population of internet and cell-phone users. Recently I found a picture on the internet that shows a street-beggar using a cell-phone. The picture was taken in Shen Zhen, a city close to Hong Kong. This exciting situation leads ordinary people toward several different realms: 1) the realm of free information and free expression which enables the grass-root culture to grow stronger; 2) the realm of fictitious reality, where people can enjoy distractions; 3) the realm of absence of copyright, where people find the boundary between socialism and capitalism, between good and evil. The Chinese people are enjoying unprecedented freedom in a warm bath of computer viruses, dirty words and language violence. Meanwhile, the government is trying to control things for the sake of social stability and so on. Here political culture looks down on political economy. Some thirty years ago, people in China said “left is right and right is wrong.” Now, to live in the shadow of oxymoron means therefore to live with embarrassment; it means to enjoy a happiness that is absurd.

But to speak in oxymorons means that you are a person who is not going to be understood. I am not using a term like “contradiction” because contradictions are yet to be blended, whereas the social oxymoron is now a reality. Yes I do know concepts such as freedom, justice, love, privacy, equality, democracy, literacy, elite, etc. -- but these quasi-saturated concepts are stronger and more popular. The reason why things are going like this is probably the result of an overdone revolution meeting a half-done modernization. It may also come from the geographic conditions: although China is big, three-fifths of its territory are mountains and plateaus, unsuitable for agriculture. So you have to learn to go with these natural conditions in the name of mercy. Even Confucius knew that. Life is ambiguous and doubtful. The social oxymoron meanwhile calls for wild smiles and spiritual blindness, so that the person with spirit can qualify to reach and explore the secret core of history-- if it really exists.

In 2004 China passed a law of Private Ownership of Fortunes. But whether one can

really own his or her apartment or house remains a question. As for land, or buildings on that land, you are theoretically not permitted to own it yourself because theoretically China is a country with public ownership system, even while it is practicing market economics. Here we can see clearly the oxymoronic situation in the Chinese society. Market economy on the one hand, public ownership on the other. You can only lease your apartment or house for usage for a maximum of 70 years, even if you build the house by your own hands. After the limit of 70 years, you will be asked to re-rent it, in accordance with the law. The sociologist Fei Xiaotong claims that the Chinese social structure is predicated on a vertical relationship, and is in that sense totally different from the Western social structure, predicated on a horizontal relationship. So if a Chinese person cannot pass on his fortune to his or her offspring, he or she has to throw the fortune away in some way-- good or bad.

And since China is a secular country, for the Chinese there is no other China or a Utopian China. There is no other way to go. To live the life of oxymoron is something one must study for one's whole life. If you thus try to understand China in one perspective, you are bound to fail.