

# A Perfect World

by Shiping Hua

In 1925, the left-wing writer Guo Moro published a short story called “Marx Enters the Confucian Temple,” hoping to reassure the Chinese people that communism was not as alien as it seemed. The story tells of a somewhat comical encounter between Confucius and Karl Marx in which the two discuss whether their visions of the good life are compatible. After Marx describes his communist utopia, Confucius claps his hands in delight. “Ah, yes!” he exclaims. Marx’s utopia and the traditional Confucian concept of *datong*, or the Grand Harmony, “unexpectedly coincide.”

*Datong* is to be found not in the afterlife but in a real human community on earth, a community said to have actually existed long before Confucius’s own time. In his story, Guo cites a much-quoted Confucian description of *datong*:

When the Grand Harmony was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky. They chose men of talent and ability, whose words were sincere, and they cultivated harmony. Men did not love only their own parents, or nurture only their own children. The elderly were cared for till the end of their life. . . . Provisions were made for widows, orphans, childless men, and the disabled. . . . Possessions were used, but not hoarded for selfish reasons. Work was encouraged, but not for selfish advantage. In this way, selfish schemings were repressed. Robbers, thieves, rebels, and traitors had no place, and hence the outer doors remained open, and were not shut. That was what we called the Grand Harmony.

Eighty tumultuous years after Guo wrote—after a world war, civil war, and several gigantic utopian attempts to transform Chinese society—the communist dream is all but dead in China, but the 2,500-year-old idea of *datong* is very much alive. *Datong* plays a role in China much like that of freedom in American society: It is a lodestar of Chinese attitudes and thinking—and is also more prescriptive and all-encompassing than the American idea of liberty. This ideal of a prosperous and harmonious political and social order still defines the future imagined by many in China’s large and influential intellectual class. “When China’s intellectuals and leaders speak or write about their hopes for their nation’s future, elements of the notion of the Great Unity are still strongly evident—in spite of 50 years of Marxist ideology,” writes Suzanne Ogden, a political scientist at Northeastern University, in *Inklings of Democracy in China* (2002).

No second Guo Moro has emerged to proclaim that the new capitalist order created by the Communists since 1979 is compatible with the vision of



*At the Confucius Temple in Nanjing, students and their parents pay a New Year tribute to China's great sage, who at times in the recent past was the object of Communist scorn.*

China's great sage. Yet in its outlines the official post-Mao ideology conforms rather strikingly to Confucian precepts. The new theory announced in the early 1980s by Hu Qiaomu, the Communist Party's ideology czar, holds that the realization of communism in China must be put off to an indefinite future. Mao Zedong and his followers, said Hu, had committed the error of trying to rush into socialism by skipping the stage of capitalist development. In Confucian terms, the Communists were saying that *datong* would need to wait; China would have to settle in the meantime for what party leaders call *xiaokang*, or small prosperity—a word borrowed from ancient Chinese thought that describes a condition of relative social stability and wealth marred by an imperfect hierarchy of human relations and an unequal distribution of wealth.

**T**he need for a larger sense of meaning and purpose—for hope—is a universal in human society. In the Christian West, that hope traditionally resided in the afterlife, a Kingdom of Heaven reached by those who obeyed God while living in a sin-ridden world. The

Chinese *datong* is a secular and pragmatic hope. Confucius is not a religious figure, and Confucianism is a code of ethics rather than a religion. (Two other sources of Chinese tradition, Taoism and Buddhism, are religions, but China's governing class has traditionally been secular and

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Confucian.) In the Confucian worldview, hope lies in hard work and the benevolence of others, especially rulers. There is no original sin, nor are there any saviors or miracles. "Benevolence" is believed to be an inherent

human quality. In Confucius's *Analects* (c. 500 B.C.), the word *ren* (benevolence) appears more frequently than any other.

Because of their religious tradition, Westerners tend to accept as natural the imperfect nature of human society. The checks and balances built into the U.S. political system, for instance, reflect a frank recognition of the imperfection of human society. As James Madison put it, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." To a Chinese, the American tolerance of disharmony in the social and political realms is remarkable. When the sensational 1995 murder trial of O. J. Simpson ended in a not guilty verdict, I was fascinated to see that the American public eventually accepted the outcome and lost interest, even though no one else was ever charged with the crime. In China, the failure to achieve a full resolution of the crime would be much harder to accept. If a government hopes to retain its credibility, high-profile murders must somehow be "solved."

**D**uring the past 2,500 years, the Chinese quest for harmony and order in this world has inspired many extraordinary, and sometimes utopian, undertakings. In A.D. 191, for example, the peasant rebel Zhang Lu seized a part of central China and ruled over a kingdom boasting a welfare system, controlled market prices, and rehabilitation rather than punishment for petty criminals. For most of its history, however, China has lived under authoritarian feudal leaders, who have governed more in the spirit of *xiaokang* than *datong*. Yet always there remains a commitment to prosperity, pragmatism, and a belief that the collective good overrides the good of individuals.

The imperative to create a more perfect world on earth was one of the forces that drove China's premodern emperors to pour enormous resources into a system of irrigation works and waterways that exceeded in scale and scope even the great works of the Roman Empire. The Great Wall and the Grand Canal, created over the centuries to carry rice and other goods more than 1,000 miles into China's north, are by far the best known examples, but there are many others.

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Unlike Egypt's pyramids, which served religious and ceremonial purposes, these massive public works were meant to ensure relative stability and freedom from want for generations of Chinese. Although Confucian ethics impose limits on how far rulers can go in pursuit of the common good, enormous human costs accompanied these works. At the Shan-hai-guan Pass, the eastern end of the Great Wall, there is a temple in memory of Meng Jiangniu, a woman who lived during the Qin dynasty (221–205 B.C.), which began construction of the Great Wall. According to the story, which is still told to schoolchildren today, Meng's husband was one of the thousands of peasants who died doing forced hard labor to build the wall and was buried beneath it. Upon learning of her husband's death, Meng went to the site, where she cried so hard that her tears achieved a magic power and brought down a vast length of the cruel emperor's Great Wall, allowing her to recover her husband's body.

**T**he Opium War of 1840–42 and the general trauma of China's encounter with the Western imperial powers forced Chinese elites to realize that they must reform; but even as they sought to learn from the West, they took their inspiration from *datong*. They viewed the creation of a constitutional monarchy not as an end in itself, but as only the first step on a new path toward *datong*. In 1898, for example, Emperor Guangxu designated an intellectual named Kang Youwei to devise a set of political reforms for China. Even as he labored on his plan, Kang was also secretly writing his *Datong Shu*, or *Book of Datong*. It was, in essence, an attempt to reimagine the world along Confucian lines:

To have states, families, and selves is to allow each individual to maintain a sphere of selfishness. . . . States should be abolished, so that there would be no more struggle between the strong and the weak. Families should also be done away with, so that there would no longer be inequality of love and affection. And finally, selfishness itself should be banished, so that goods and services would not be used for private ends. . . . The only [true way] is for all to share the world in common. . . . To share in common is to treat each and every one alike. There should be no distinction between high and low, no discrepancy between rich and poor, no segregation of human races, no inequality between sexes. . . . All should be educated and supported with the common property; none should depend on private possessions.

With the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the leaders of the two major political parties that emerged from the ashes, the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, both embraced the concept of *datong*. Mao Zedong read the *Datong Shu* in 1917, when he was 24 years old, and soon after produced an article describing his own prescription for a utopian “new village.” In 1940, writing in explicitly Confucian terms, he spoke of the need “to eliminate class and to realize *datong*” as China developed into a communist society. During the disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958–1960), when virtually all of China's peasant farmers were organized into “people's communes,” Mao even



*Largely left behind in the recent prosperity, the vast majority of Chinese who still live in the countryside, such as this woman in Xinjiang, pose a challenge to Beijing's legitimacy.*

ordered the Communist Party officials in charge to use Kang Youwei's *Datong Shu* as their guide.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), no effort was spared in the drive to make Chinese society conform to Mao's plan for utopia, with tragic consequences for millions. A small incident from my own life illustrates the degree of this zeal. One day in 1968, when I was 12 years old, a poster was found on a wall of my school that read "Down with Chairman Mao." The poster was immediately torn down and taken to be analyzed by the Little Red Soldiers, a junior version of the Red Guards, who found that it was written on the back of a math homework assignment. It was quickly determined which teacher had given the assignment, and all the students in her class were required to write "Long live Chairman Mao," so their handwriting could be compared. Soon the author of the poster was identified: a girl in the second grade whose parents had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. The girl was not severely penalized; her parents very likely were.

If the hope of the Cultural Revolution was for "good politics," the hope of the post-Mao era is for prosperity and "good economics." This change is reflected in the composition of China's leadership and the Communist Party's ideology. Most Maoist leaders, especially during the Cultural Revolution, were literary intellectuals given to dreams of proletarian unity—



the writer Guo Moro, for example, became president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences—but most of the post-Mao leaders have been pragmatic technocrats. Graduates of Tsinghua University, China’s MIT, dominate the party’s upper echelons. The party once lionized as popular heroes people such as Lei Feng, a Communist soldier who loved everyone but himself. Today’s heroes are the rich, regardless of their individual character. The contemporary Chinese obsession with wealth is reflected in a popular saying: China has a population of a billion, and 900 million of them are businessmen—a singsong line that seldom fails to elicit cynical laughter.

That hollow laughter reflects the fact that the post-Mao zeal for wealth has fulfilled only part of the hope of the Chinese. It has emphasized the pragmatic this-worldly quest for prosperity encouraged by the *datong* ideal but has neglected the complementary pursuit of the collective good. Even among those Chinese who have done well during the economic boom, there is widespread discontent and unease. The unrelenting materialism of the new China no doubt helps account for the popularity of quasi-religious movements such as the Falungong, along with Christianity and other more traditional forms of religious expression. (The government has banned the Falungong, and it strives to suppress other movements.) In the eyes of many Chinese, the growing income gap between rich and poor—now larger by some measures than it is in the United States—and rampant corruption in government and the ranks of business are evidence of a society in which all are out for themselves.

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China’s leaders will not be able to continue indefinitely to meet the nation’s deeply rooted desire for *datong* with empty rhetoric. Yet the persistence of Grand Harmony as an ideal also suggests that China’s evolution in the direction of Western-style liberal democratic capitalism is not very likely. “Despite all the references to *ziyou* (freedom) in the many constitutions of the successive regimes of 20th-century China,” notes historian Philip Huang, “*ziyou* has never quite been able to shake its associated negative connotations of selfishness, with obvious consequences for Chinese conceptions of ‘democracy.’”

For a glimpse of how China may evolve, many scholars look to Asia’s other Confucian societies, such as Taiwan and South Korea. The continuing strength of the *datong* mentality in those countries can be seen in the relatively narrow gap between rich and poor—narrower than in many Western countries—that is maintained as a matter of government policy. Yet this emphasis on the collective good often goes hand in hand with some variety of authoritarian rule. While Taiwan and South Korea took several decades before they embarked on the path to democratization, China may take longer, given its official communist ideology and the size and diversity of the country. For better or worse, the *datong* tradition will remain a powerful influence for a long time to come as China struggles toward modernity. □