

COMMENTHK

Chinese culture puts brakes on government power

Ho Lok-sang says mainland officials devoted to serving the people, and act in strict accordance with the law

In my last article on public governance in China, I pointed out that ideology-driven ratings of China's constraints on government powers and fundamental human rights have dragged down China's ranking in the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index. Against practice-based governance criteria, like absence of corruption, order and security, effective regulatory enforcement, sanctions for official misconduct, civil justice, and criminal justice, China ranks generally well above the median in the world. Unfortunately, this bias (of WJP rankings) is not just a ranking for academic purposes. It shapes public opinion and adversely affects international cooperation when international cooperation is sorely needed to deal with global challenges.

It is therefore appropriate for me to explain the nature of the Communist Party of China and the weight of cultural constraints on government powers in China.

I was recently on a panel at an online conference themed "The Chinese Emphasis on Culture", organized by the Hong Kong-based Global Institute for Tomorrow. The main point of my presentation was that while the cultural constraint on government power is particularly strong and effective in China, the Communist Party of China is sadly very much misunderstood, especially in the West. While all members on the panel on which I spoke agree that China has a meritocracy system, I strongly disagreed with one who thinks that China practices "benevolent dictatorship". This gentleman is from India and thinks that, given the complexity of human nature, only a dictatorship can effectively govern.

To me, a dictator is a powerful leader who can do anything he likes without any constraint. A benevolent dictator is a powerful leader who can do whatever he likes but has benevolent intentions. The Chinese government is not a dictator because it is, under the CPC Constitution (2002) and the country's Constitution (2004), required to serve the roles as stated in the Three Represents: Represent the development trend of China's advanced productive forces; Represent the orientation of China's advanced culture; Represent the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.

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This simply says that the CPC is the embodiment of the Three Represents and is above any individual person or group of people. Anyone who deviates from the Three Represents does not deserve to be a CPC member. The Three Represents is a culture of service to the people, i.e., a "for-all-of-us culture" without distinction rather than a "for-me-and-my-kind culture". The "for-all-of-us culture" is the ideal of "datong" as spelled out in the ancient text *Liji* and is no different from the ideal of communism, which is also no different from the ideal of "everything under heaven is for everyone to enjoy". This implies that wealthy individuals do have a responsibility to use their wealth to further the common good of humankind.



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The first Represent asks the government to foster productivity and economic well-being. The second Represent asks the government to respect everybody as equal without discrimination or favor (the "for-all-of-us culture"). The third Represent requires the government to serve all the people within the country. The government must be responsive to people's needs and do what it can to allay people's concerns. This means that the Chinese government is obliged to follow these requirements stated in the country's Constitution. There is simply no room for it to "dictate" anything.

The reason is that what is the best policy or institutional reform is dictated by the laws of nature, the laws of the market, and human nature. This is why China adopted the Scientific Outlook on Development, which is also in China's Constitution. Even with good intentions, one must never prejudice about what works. That is why Deng Xiaoping advised that all leaders should be humble and careful in taking policy decisions, "as if they were groping the stones under the water when wading across a river". As an enlightened leader, he in particular advised people to adopt pragmatism rather than letting ideological biases contaminate their analysis, suggesting "it doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice".

In short, the CPC is characterized by these cultural characteristics: devotion to serve the people; a readiness to draw talent from across the population regardless of background, while a cultural test and strong track record are required for promotion to the leadership; pragmatic and scientific and lending an ear to the advice from all corners of the country and even the world; and a willingness to self-correct. China, under President Xi Jinping, is committed to embracing the "for-all-of-us culture", and that applies to international relations as well as domestic affairs.

The culture of fair play and respect for everybody is not unique to China and indeed is shared by many enlightened Western thinkers and activists. I have long pointed out that 2,000 years ago, the teachings of the Stoics and Jesus resembled the teachings of Buddhism and Confucius. Even today and in the recent past, there are many enlightened Western thinkers whose philosophy and lives resonate in Chinese minds. Sadly, however, enlightened Western thinkers today rarely make it into the echelons of power. The deep-seated biases against China are undermining international cooperation and putting planet Earth at risk. These worries are particularly poignant with the G20 and COP30 meetings convening in Johannesburg and Brazil these days.

The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



Yang Sheng

Human life is the most precious thing of all

The loss of life, particularly in an unnatural way, is always saddening and a cause for deep regret.

The ferocious blaze that broke out on Wednesday afternoon and continues to ravage a housing estate in Hong Kong's Tai Po neighborhood caused the deaths of 83 people, including a firefighter, and 77 injuries as of late Thursday. Nov 26, 2025 will go down in history as one of the saddest days in Hong Kong as well as for the nation, and rightly so.

In a move that reflects the severity of the disaster as well as his affection and care for Hong Kong residents, President Xi Jinping called for "all-out efforts" to minimize casualties and losses while expressing his condolences in a late-evening statement.

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government immediately mobilized all available resources to fight the fire, with all department heads gathered at the firefighting command center. Residents have been flooding the relief centers to donate materials that are needed by the affected and evacuated residents, reliev-

ing Hong Kong's Lion Rock Spirit – a collective sense of societal unity to overcome difficulties.

A raft of factors contributed to the huge disaster: Strong winds, the low humidity, and the height of the affected buildings that made the work of the firefighters more difficult. Noticeably, the highly flammable netting and waterproof tarpaulin materials used in the buildings' renovation significantly contributed to the rapid spread of the blaze, a situation Secretary for Security Chris Tang Ping-keung described as "unusual".

Police and fire service officers will jointly conduct the investigation, including a criminal probe, into the cause of the deadly fire and suspected irregularities during the renovation, Tang said. Latest news reports have it that two directors and an engineering consultant of a construction company tasked with the renovation of the buildings were arrested early on Thursday morning.

The police have reason to believe there was "gross negligence" on the part of certain staff members of the

company responsible for the renovation, which caused the fire to spread rapidly, resulting in casualties, Senior Superintendent Eileen Chung Lai-yeetold the media.

It is believed that the investigation has started immediately, and rightly so. The swift enforcement action is not only intended to prevent the responsible individuals from fleeing Hong Kong to evade potential criminal liability. It is also imperative to identify the main causes of the disaster, the risk factors, and prevention measures necessary to preempt any similar fire disaster of the same scale – God forbid it. After all, lives matter the most in all human endeavors. The government has rightly halted all its publicity efforts regarding the coming Legislative Council election slated for Dec 7 to allow the whole administration to prioritize tackling the fire disaster and handling its aftermath.

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China can take lead in tackling looming space-debris crisis that threatens Earth

The Shenzhou XX crew arrived safely back on Earth on Nov 14 using the recently arrived Shenzhou XXI capsule. This has left the Shenzhou XXI crew with no immediate prospect of return if there was another emergency. The Shenzhou XXII capsule has just been sent up early, given the situation is an unprecedented event for the Chinese Tiangong (Heavenly Palace) space station. However, given that the crew of the last two Shenzhou missions have spent some EVA (extravehicular activity, aka spacewalk) time installing additional shielding against space debris, it was clear the risks were understood, and that further precautions were already being taken.

Given what has eventuated, this event will spur the Chinese space program to build more redundancy into the space station sooner than planned and to reevaluate the urgency that China, and indeed the world, attaches to the issue of and threat from space debris. I speculate that China will also plan to add an extra docking port. It would make the space station larger, which is part of the overall plan anyway, but they might now bring those plans forward. This event is sharply focusing the minds of the Chinese and indeed all space-faring nations on the profound impact of space debris.

At the moment, we have a 1 billion yuan (\$141 million) space capsule stranded, attached to the space station, and unable to be used at all as a result of the impact of a small, worthless piece of space junk traveling at perhaps 10 kilometers per second. At such speeds, small pieces of debris, a few grams in mass and less than 1 centimeter in size, can have the explosive power of a grenade. It is not the mass of the debris particle that is the main issue; it is the velocity at which it is moving. This is because the kinetic energy of impact is given by the square of the velocity multiplied by the mass of the debris particle, then divided by two. The piece that affected the window on the capsule was likely even smaller, but still had a significant effect. This impact created fissures and cracks in the space capsule's glass. In the searing heat of reentry and the attendant vibrations, these cracks would spread and easily blow the whole window out. This is why they haven't risked it. It's just too dangerous.

Furthermore, the window is not a



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This event will lead to a much stronger, better-resourced, and more urgent global program to address the space-debris issue, and this is the silver lining we need. China can take the international lead in tackling this issue for all of us.

component that can be fixed in situ because it is complex and critical, and the damage is too severe to be repaired on-site. The China Manned Space Agency has now announced that the spacecraft will remain in orbit and be deorbited after the current mission completes its tasks. An alternative is to keep it as a storage facility attached and for experiments, but the docking port is needed.

Despite this unprecedented saga, all is now well for the time being on board the "Heavenly Palace". Though this issue has now grabbed all the headlines, there are still many positives and "firsts" for this mission worth noting.

To begin with, this was the quickest-ever docking between the rocket lifting off and the taikonaut entering the space station in just over three and a half hours, a new world record, and interesting to compare that with the equivalent timings for the International Space Station, which is typically 16 to 19 hours. There was also the youngest taikonaut ever on board, at 32. They also installed a special oven so they could have, effectively, the first barbecue in space, with viral images of the taikonauts tucking into chicken wings and steak. It is not just any oven, but one that filters out smoke and fat effectively, so as not to contaminate the pristine, almost zenlike space station environment characteristic of Tiangong. I am sure the barbecue aromas were still greatly appreciated.

Another fascinating snippet was the crew commander's intention to improve the psychological and cultural well-being of the taikonauts, with plans for poetry, calligraphy, and tai chi to supplement the "gardening" already underway and to provide a few kilograms of lettuce and tomatoes. Interestingly, they also brought up four mice. These were not just any mice, but were selected from dozens of mice that were "specially trained", and they picked the best, the fittest, and most physiologically suitable to be part of the space mission, two male and two female mice. So while this is interesting and even entertaining, there is a very serious side to study and experiment.

Given the saga of the Shenzhou XX-to-XXI changeover, the implications of what's just happened will filter through to the highest levels of all spacefaring nations, and I think there may well be a very proactive approach going forward, and hopefully, greater collaboration and cooperation to solve the debris problem before it becomes too difficult. This event will lead to a much stronger, better-resourced, and more urgent global program to address the space-debris issue, and this is the silver lining we need. China can take the international lead in tackling this issue for all of us. This is also in the context of all the pushing and warnings from certain vocal quarters, including me, that have stressed the existential threat posed by space debris to the entire low earth orbit ecosystem and, by extension, the whole of the global space program. Space sustainability is included as a theme for the upcoming Asia-Pacific Regional Meeting of the International Astronomical Union, a massive megascience event to be held in Hong Kong in May. There will be talks addressing this very issue of space debris and the Kessler syndrome, and how it threatens all of space. The relevance to astronomy is that if that ecosystem is destroyed, the Chinese space station and the Chinese space station telescope for astronomical research will be gone as well.

In summary, China can take a global lead in tackling space debris for us all. At the same time, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region could play a pivotal role by establishing a global space sustainability hub. It's a very opportune moment with enormous potential – can we grab it?

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