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Brexit and China

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KERRY BROWN, JUN 30 2016

Ancient Chinese wisdom is something beloved by Chinese leaders these days – despite the antagonism of their predecessors in the recent past to it. So, referring to one of the ‘analects’ by Confucius is a good place to start when working out what Chinese reaction to the shock decision by the British electorate to leave the European Union (EU) on 23rd June might be. 2,500 years ago, the sage wrote: ‘to allow people to go to war without first instructing them is to betray them.’ And while the Brexit vote of course was not remotely about war, it was about tipping a nation into political turmoil and economic confusion for which its leaders had evidently neither prepared themselves, nor those that follow them. In a Confucian framework, the very least one can say is that in this respect, David Cameron and his colleagues simply failed in their moral duty to their people. That will not impress Chinese leaders.

A consensus is now growing that one of the primary reasons for the Brexit referendum outcome was that it served as a punishment for the government through the ballot box by large numbers of British people who felt they had gained nothing from globalisation, open labour markets, free movements of trade – all the things usually presented as unalloyed goods. For many who voted ‘leave’, the EU is just one of a whole cast of villains responsible for their stagnant wages, poor job prospects and the huge inequality in the society around them. And their concerns are shared across the world, from Americans voting for Trump to the French toying with Le Pen.

If this explanation is true, and Brexit proves to be part of a global anti-elite movement, then it is unsettling for Chinese leaders for a number of reasons. Firstly, issues of social inequality are very bad in China. There are plenty of people there who would have exactly the same anger at the side effects of globalisation and who feel they have been left out as those in Britain. With living costs rising, wages failing to keep up, and manufacturing moving elsewhere, that looks likely to get worse. Secondly, the UK has strong rule of law, strong institutions, strong freedom of the press – all the things that are meant to protect against instability and unmanageable public anger. China has only rudimentary capacity in these areas. The UK, however, is already proving that even with such a system, it is creaking at the joints when it hits such a crisis.

So, while China might have some schadenfreude over seeing this catastrophe happen to an old colonising opponent, it won’t be happy to see a so-called mature, stable, developed democratic political system overwhelmed by challenges and unable to function properly. It has enough instability in itself, without having to worry about potential sources from a place which before now has been as boringly stable as the UK.

For China, the response to dealing with all forms of discontent has so far has been simple: repression. But expressions of public anger in China that get out of hand and which cannot be put down with hard security responses would make the results of what is happening in the UK look like a light shower on a sunny day compared to a force ten gale. And at least the British had the option of venting their wrath peacefully through the ballot box, rather than taking to the streets. That option isn’t there in China.

Finally, there is the issue of interpreting the public mood. The UK must be one of the most polled, observed, vociferous populations on the planet. But despite all this, the political elites very clearly didn’t really understand what public opinion was, and still are trying to grapple with what they were told on 23rd June. For China, despite all the talk in recent years about consultation over decision making and getting better public feedback, no one, not Xi Jinping or any of the people around him, really knows what the Chinese public mood is. They must feel now that they make

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assumptions about it at their peril. For any global leader, a sense of insecurity and unease will rise when they see the turmoil in the UK. Unexpected events are becoming the norm, not the exception.

If the events in the UK last week was the first sign of a global popular revolt against political elites and the whole discourse of globalisation of the last four decades or so (with Trump in the US capitalising on this), then despite the difference in political model, that relates directly to China's worst worries. For the real decision makers in the Chinese government and Party, nothing about Brexit and what has happened since will be reassuring. There is another saying from a contemporary of Confucius, the legalist Han Fei, which is relevant here. His warning echoes across the centuries. 'Prepare, and expect, harm from those that hate you,' he said, 'but calamity only from those you love.' The insiders, not those outside, are more often than not the ones that can do real, lasting harm – something the events around Brexit in late June threatens to back up.

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Dr Kerry Brown is a Professor of Chinese Studies and the Director of the Lau China Institute at King's College London. His areas of interest are on modern Chinese politics, Chinese political economic and Chinese relations with the UK and the EU. He is the author of over 20 books on contemporary Chinese politics and international relations, the most recent of which is *China: A Modern History* (Polity Press 2020).