



Rise of the East, Decline of the West: Why Liberal Democracy Matters

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Westlessness

It was meant to be the “end of history”. The fall of the Berlin Wall was a cathartic moment which was supposed to mark the ascent of the liberal democratic model.

Fast-forward, and there is now a shadow hanging over liberal democracies. Major global shocks in the last five years have exposed the limits to resilience.

“Westlessness” is what the columnists call it. We have grown complacent. We are unsure about the merits of the foundations of what we stand on. We have forgotten who we are.

The arrival of this moment is the culmination of decades of cultural amnesia. We have become experts at criticising our heritage but have failed to understand the foundations for our flourishing.

The deconstruction of our transcendent framework of meaning has left people rudderless, without meaningful stories to map their reality.

The rise of individualism and a declining sense of social and moral responsibility has triggered the fraying of the social fabric. The collapse of community and family has naturally led to rising mental health problems and increasing loneliness. Liberal individualism has paved the way for a bigger state through the deconstruction of the morality which creates supportive social bonds and the family structure which made those bonds stick.

Discarding the stories which laid the groundwork for success, we have created a vacuum. This is being filled by a combination of soulless top-down corporatism, woke dogma, and populist angst. We have become intolerant of opposing views and slaves to “political correctness” for the sake of virtue signalling.

On one side, we are watching as, shorn of their ideological roots, we have seen the emergence of a generation of fragile zealots. Fragile—exhibiting more mental health troubles and neuroses. But also zealous and dogmatic around core ideas about power, identity, and the environment—which crystallise under the label “woke”. One central element of this ideology is an in-built scepticism of Western culture.

With this generation taking the ascendancy in cultural institutions, businesses, and government, we are watching the long march through the institutions in real time. The implications range from what schoolchildren are taught about their identity, to attacks on freedom of speech. From how history is shaped by mainstream media, to growing tech censorship. It even extends to big government and big business imposing a moral and ethical agenda with no accountability.

Meanwhile, on the other side, a growing number of people feel left behind and alienated from elite institutions. Trust in institutions is at a record low. Populist angst and nationalism, which cast doubt on

the sustainability of the liberal democratic tradition, have emerged as a response—placing long-standing institutions in jeopardy and creating fraught polarisation.

We appear to have forgotten many of the stories which laid the basis for our present flourishing. For a generation, we have breathed the ideological oxygen of our forebears without much connection to the roots, and it has sustained us. But now consensus about the purpose of existence, ethical living, liberty, and the blessing of democracy is breaking down at speed.

We are at a turning point where we must decide: what is our story? Can we find a common story that will provide vision, courage, strength, and hope?

Perhaps the most helpful wake-up call that can be given is to look at the alternatives. It is easy, when everyone around you breathes the oxygen of freedom and human dignity, to imagine that this is the natural order of things. But historically, thriving liberal democratic societies are the exception not the rule.

The purpose of this essay is to lay out the merits of the liberal democratic model and why we cannot afford to lose sight of this. The essay will do this by situating Westlessness in a global context, looking at what we can learn from people on the frontlines of freedom, and why there is no alternative which could possibly sustain our way of life.

Why Liberal Democracy Matters: Learning from those on frontlines of freedom

This piece was originally meant to be a collaboration. I was working on the draft with a friend who was a prominent leader of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, and we were developing the argument together with a view to a joint publication. He would repeatedly remind me of the essential nature of the foundations of the West: freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, the rule of law, the liberal democratic order. Writing together was an invigorating process.

The situation changed in July. My friend was named along with seven others as violating Hong Kong's National Security Law. An arrest warrant was issued along with a bounty fee of \$1 million HKD. Each of the lawyers, politicians, and activists that were listed had already fled Hong Kong with their families, uprooting their whole lives. It was when a member of their extended family, still in Hong Kong, was called in for police questioning that my friend pulled out of co-authoring this paper. This was Beijing's way of saying "you cannot escape."¹

Hong Kong is the home of some of the world's most eloquent defenders of liberal democratic tradition. At the apex between East and West, it is a place which until recently provided clear evidence of the merits of the Western model—free enterprise, rule of law, free information flows, open capital flows. A rich civil society and democratic movement were given sustenance by a vibrant religious community—ranging from the Christian to the Buddhist. Edmund Burke's "little platoons" were still alive and well, that is until Beijing and their counterparts in the Hong Kong government stamped them out.

The tragedy is that, even as the West loses its self-confidence, people from many parts of the world look in envy at the well-established and effective democratic institutions that we take for granted. As they fight on the frontline of freedom, they need us to rediscover our confidence and stand firm on our true foundations.

Introducing Margaret Ng

This is the moment to introduce Margaret Ng. Ms Ng is one of Hong Kong's greatest legal minds and most highly respected barristers, a woman who had represented the legal profession in the Legislative Council for many years in her career, and prior to that was a journalist.

She delivered this remarkable speech in 2021 when she was on the dock as a defendant. Her crime? Joining 1.7 million of her compatriots (around a quarter of the population) at a peaceful mass protest against a piece of legislation which threatened to compromise Hong Kong's judicial independence. Many other highly respected Hong Kong democrats had been singled out for "national security" offences tied to their lifetime advocacy for democracy and freedom in Hong Kong.

This is what she had to say:

"There is no right so precious to the people of Hong Kong as the freedom of expression and the freedom of peaceful assembly. Not only is the freedom to speak the truth the core of human dignity, it is also the last safety valve in a democratic society, as remarked by our illustrious judges repeatedly. Respecting those rights is also part and parcel of defending the rule of law.

I had learned that the rule of law not only has to be defended in court, or in LegCo, but also in the streets and in the community. Your honour, I had spoken countless times in LegCo. But I also realize that it is not good enough for me to make speeches in beautiful words and measured dignity in the precincts of the Legislative Council, shielded by the privilege of absolute freedom of speech and debate, and immunity from legal action. When the people, in the last resort, had to give collective expression to their anguish and urge the government to respond, protected only by their expectation that the government will respect their rights, I must be prepared to stand with them, stand by them and stand up for them. Otherwise, all my pledges and promises would be just empty words.

Your honour, the Hong Kong people is a peace-loving and well-disciplined people. Their resolute self-restraint even in highly emotional situations has been proved time and again. In the critical hours of the handover between 30 June and 1 July 1997, the great event passed without a hitch. In the march of half a million on 1 July 2003, not a single pane of glass was broken. Even in 2019, when over 1 million marched on 9 June, and over 2 million marched on 16 June. The peace and good order of the massive crowds astonished and won the admiration of the world.

...

Your honour, I came late to the law. I have grown old in the service of the rule of law. I understand Sir Thomas More is the patron saint of the legal profession. He was tried for treason because he would not bend the law to the King's will. His famous last words were well authenticated. I beg to slightly adapt and adopt them: I stand the law's good servant but the people's first. For the law must serve the people, not the people the law.

Your honour, please permit me to thank my counsel. Their tireless dedication and excellence have made me proud to be a member of the bar." (Margaret Ng, 2021)²

“Living a Lie”

It is often those writing in the shadow of totalitarianism who most fully understand why liberty is worth defending. The Czech dissident and statesman Vaclav Havel’s essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, provides a helpful reminder that in totalitarian states, social pressures force people to “live a lie”. Regardless of the reality, the state’s word is the truth. Financial forecasts might be fabricated or massaged to paint an unnecessarily positive spin but those who point this out are “traitors to the state”. Court judgments must serve the state or its cronies’ interests, instead of the truth, and the common good is bulldozed in the name of hitting overly ambitious state-planned targets.³

It is no coincidence that Havel and Alexander Solzhenitsyn are two of the most eloquent articulators of why liberty should be prized. From behind the iron curtain, both the strengths of Western civilisation, and the folly of our direction of travel were sharply illuminated. Solzhenitsyn’s early writing focused on the oppressive nature of the gulag, his later writings asked whether the radical individualism of the West was sustainable – he was prescient in both contexts.⁴

East Meets West: Lessons from Hong Kong

Women like Margaret Ng are Havel and Solzhenitsyn’s natural successors and represent some of the most articulate defenders of the liberal democratic tradition alive today. Many of her generation were refugees or descended from refugees of the Cultural Revolution.

Although Hong Kong was never allowed to be developed into a full democratic system, it had all the core elements needed to sustain a mature civic society based on the rule of law. All that has been steadily unpicked since the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law in June 2020.

Hong Kong’s emergence as “Asia’s World City” was a result of two key elements: the introduction of free trade and liberal constitutional structures, and a population boom catalysed by mass refugee flows in the wake of the Great Leap Forward famine and the Cultural Revolution. By the 1980s, close to half of Hong Kong’s population had fled from mainland China.

The identity of Hong Kongers was thus formed by the unique coalescence of two factors: first-hand memory of the worst incidents in 20th century communism, alongside experience of an extraordinarily fast economic transformation which was catalysed by the introduction of liberal economics.⁵ The starkly contrasting model adopted by the Communist Party north of the border, and the growing creep of CCP interference in each aspect of daily life, meant that the population was clear about why its unique constitutional, economic and cultural settlement was worth defending.

A city where East and West collide, Hong Kong’s historic strengths and recent rapid deterioration into the grip of authoritarianism provides an illustration of both the merits of what we have in the West and a sobering story as to why it would be foolish to take this for granted. In the shadow of totalitarianism, many Hong Kongers have consciously studied and sought to understand the key foundations for human flourishing.

The question for us is simple: do we cherish our constitutional freedoms and rich foundations in the same way?

The Alternative: Rise of the East, Decline of the West?

It is a sad reality that my friends in Hong Kong appreciate the richness of our inheritance, but no longer enjoy the fruits of it; while my friends in the United Kingdom live in one of the most well-established democratic traditions in history, but fail to appreciate the privilege of that.

Will we recover our confidence in the institutions which have underpinned our way of life? Will we remember what it is that unifies us? Will we seek to instil the virtues and values that have sustained our cultures over centuries?

These questions are critically important, and they matter because we often fail to have the right perspective. Those who are living in free democratic societies and criticise their own system often do not know what it is like living in an authoritarian regime. They do not know what it is like to live in a system where the individual is not respected by those in power, and where fundamentally, the people are there to serve those in power and not the other way round. If we are to find a way forward, out of the polarisation, stagnation, and division of our time, we must recover the founding principles which set us up for success.

The significance of the current moment should not be underestimated because the West's current crisis of confidence is taking place in the context of a changing world order with a different value system. The next part of this essay lays out the developing alternative vision that is being presented by liberal democracy's detractors on the global stage.

Rise of the East, Decline of the West

In the spring of 2021, the phrase “**東升西降**”—translated to “Rise of the East, Decline of the West”—rose sharply in popularity when it was much quoted in China's legislative sessions.⁶ Parallels were immediately drawn between the phrase and Mao Zedong's slogan, “**東風壓倒西風**” (The East wind prevails over the West wind). Western media characterised Beijing's repeated usage of the phrase as symbolic of the government's increasing confidence in the strength of Chinese-style governance, with President Xi Jinping declaring, “Time and momentum are on our side.” This was further illustrated by his parting words to Putin in Moscow in March 2023. Xi remarked that “Right now there are changes—the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years—and we are the ones driving these changes together,” as he stood at the door of the Kremlin to bid Putin farewell. The Russian president responded: “I agree.”⁷

China's conception of “Rise of the East, Decline of the West” not only entails shifting power dynamics, but also a redefining of what constitutes democracy, liberalism, and freedom. Looking at Xi's vision for the future is instructive for two reasons—it should sharpen our appreciation for the freedoms and way of life we take for granted, and it should provide a warning about the dangers of complacency as a time of shifting geopolitical tectonic plates.

Background: The Emergence of Hostility Against Western Values and Document No.9

The financial crisis in 2008 was the turning point for Chinese leaders in their historic patience with the West and in what they viewed as the inadequacies and incompetence of the Western liberal capitalist system. The financial crisis caused by financial institutions on Wall Street and the subsequent response

of the Western governments gave confidence to the next generation of CCP leaders, including Xi, that the Western system of governance had reached its natural crisis point.

The Chinese government was able to weather the financial crisis reasonably well by using its “all of government” state power to restore confidence in the markets, capital controls, and economic management. One could detect the change in tone in Chinese official documents and speeches after 2008. The talk of being “confident in one’s own system” (制度自信), and the need for China to adhere to its own developmental path instead of blindly copying the Western model, began to be openly endorsed by top Chinese leaders—chief amongst them being Xi himself.

The result was a resurgence of outright hostility to Western values. Terms such as “constitutionalism”, “universal human rights”, “independence of judiciary”, and “separation of powers” have been all but banned from being discussed in universities and society in general.

A chilling document, labelled Document No 9., was issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 2013. It discussed seven “Noteworthy Problems Related to the Current State of the Ideological Sphere”—and is essentially an essay from the Chinese government about the main ideas which it perceives as threats to the stability of its rule. The ideas in question are:

1. **Constitutional Democracy:** “The point of publicly proclaiming Western constitutional democracy’s key points is to oppose the party’s leadership and implementation of its constitution and laws.”
2. **Universal Human Rights:** “Promoting ‘Universal Values’ is an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the party’s leadership.”
3. **A Vibrant Civil Society:** “Promoting civil society is an attempt to dismantle the ruling party’s social foundation.”
4. **Free Markets:** “They claim our country’s macroeconomic control is strangling the market’s efficiency and vitality and they oppose public ownership, arguing that China’s state-owned enterprises are ‘national monopolies,’ inefficient, and disruptive of the market economy, and should undergo ‘comprehensive privatization.’ These arguments aim to change our country’s basic economic infrastructure and weaken the government’s control of the national economy.”
5. **The Free Press:** “The ultimate goal of advocating the West’s view of the media is to hawk the principle of abstract and absolute freedom of press, oppose the Party’s leadership in the media, and gouge an opening through which to infiltrate our ideology.”
6. **The Pursuit of Truth in history:** “By rejecting CCP history and the history of New China, historical nihilism seeks to fundamentally undermine the CCP’s historical purpose, which is tantamount to denying the legitimacy of the CCP’s long-term political dominance.”
7. **Questioning Socialism:** “For the past several years, the discussion of reform has been unceasing, with all kinds of voices joining one after another. Some views clearly deviate from socialism with Chinese characteristics.”⁸

The Current Context | An Alternative Vision for the Future Marked by Fear, Control, and Nationalism

Beijing's power and hostility to the West are both now well established, and the ideas laid out in Document No.9 are now enacted in policy and practice. We have not reached the "end of history". The emergence of an alternate vision for the future deserves further consideration.

Xi's vision is sustained by control, fear, and nationalism. Nationalism is the first impulse as Xi's social contract with the people is legitimated by his promise of the fulfilment of "The Chinese Dream"—a vision of domination of China in the Asia Pacific and the overturning of "A Century of Humiliation". The narrative goes that from the Opium Wars to the rise of Chairman Mao, China was oppressed and embarrassed by the West and Japan, and now the Communist Party is restoring the pride and status of the Chinese nation. For many in China, this is a compelling vision which jingoistic propaganda has fed for decades. From the South China Sea to Taiwan, Beijing's nationalist ambitions could have a destabilising effect.

But the Communist party's rule also relies on the two other levers of fear and control.

When considering the treatment of China's minorities, we see these impulses in play. From Hong Kongers to Tibetans, Uyghurs to Christians, the patterns are the same.

Since Xi took power in 2012, the persecution of organised religion in mainland China went into overdrive. The taking down of churches and Christian symbols along the coastal region of China became rampant. There have been attempts to rewrite parts of the Bible, and every sermon or teaching at church must now be "balanced" by Xi Jinping Thought—the state sanctioned ideology. Portraits of Xi are hung next to the cross in churches. Chinese pastors have to undergo hours of training sessions to learn the teachings of Xi Jinping Thought.⁹

The persecution is of course most notorious against the Uyghurs where millions are held in concentration camps, women face sexual violence and have been forced to undergo sterilisation. The CCP issued an official directive "prohibiting" the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, thus attempting to take control of Dalai's succession into the hands of the party. In Buddhist temples across China, instead of broadcasting Buddhist chants, daily recordings are now replaced with important sayings of Xi Jinping.¹⁰

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong we have seen, without any regard for internationally binding treaties, the steady unpicking of every human rights safeguard. It was not long after the democratic politicians were all rounded up that the government came for the media. The opposition press was shut down and then it was the turn of civil society—as group after group was shut down. "Patriots" are now in place in every key cultural post. Every single person I was working with in 2018 as part of my work at human rights organisation Hong Kong Watch is now in jail, in exile, on trial, or silenced.¹¹

It is not only minorities for whom these three trends carry consequences. Dr Li Wenliang may not be a household name, but he is a modern-day martyr. The whistleblowing doctor from Wuhan was silenced as he tried to raise the alarm about a new coronavirus in local hospitals.¹² Months passed as the state bureaucracy tried to pass the buck and avoid confronting the embarrassment of the outbreak of a contagious new disease. Beijing's control of the press and social media meant that there was no awareness of the coming storm. Hundreds of thousands passed through Wuhan for the Lunar New Year festival. Still Dr Li was forced into silence. Months later he died of the disease that he had warned against. COVID-19 by this point had reached Italy. The rest is history.

The hard COVID lockdown practised in China from 2020 to early 2023—more brutal and totalitarian than pretty much any country in the world—carried a deep psychological cost as state directives and control drove a harsh and inhumane policy with no regard for the wider social impacts.

Cover-up, control, and repression were the three main themes of Beijing’s response to COVID. There were no safeguards to stop the Chinese authorities forcibly entering and sanitising people’s homes, or even welding up the doors of people who had the infection. The insistence of retaining zero-COVID as a priority, even when it was evidently not feasible and was carrying appalling social costs, was another example of why we should be grateful that our nations have democratic levers of accountability and the feedback loops that these provide.

But it is not only in the COVID response that we see these tendencies. Crackdowns on tech firms (as a consequence of the imperative of party control) and a teetering property sector (as a result of an over-leveraged sector which has been propped up by the state for years) has left the country’s economy teetering on the brink.

The preservation of ultimate authority not only erodes personal freedoms and human rights—its effects extend deep into the business sector. The more control the CCP seeks to assert over all aspects of the economy, the more it kills drive and innovation.

Growing numbers are seeking to find a way out. For some, the answer is to run. When Beijing restated its “dynamic zero-COVID” policy in April 2022, searches for “immigration” on WeChat increased more than 400% within the same day. Inquiries submitted to immigration consultants drastically increased in the same period.¹³

Others, who may not have the resources to leave, use other creative forms of protest. Although the CCP insists on the extensive array of freedoms enjoyed by Chinese citizens and the Chinese people’s great satisfaction with Communist rule, recent events have proven otherwise—in November 2022, thousands of Chinese residents in major cities protested against the administration’s zero-COVID measures. Holding up blank sheets of A4 paper, many of the demonstrators also called for the demise of the Chinese Communist party. These protests simultaneously point to bubbling discontent and the harsh reality of the costs of speaking out.

Reflections: Turning the Tide

If you want to understand the true force of unrestrained leviathan, you need only to look to a country where holding a blank placard up is considered a protest. Words are unnecessary, the very act of expressing discontent of any kind is too much for the state.

The West’s crisis of confidence about its identity and ideas is taking place in the context of a rapidly changing geopolitical map. An alternative ideology marked by nationalism and authoritarian control is the governing ideology of a growing bloc of nations that see the West as the problem and want to remould the global order. When Xi said to Putin that “We are seeing changes the likes of which we have not seen for 100 years,” he was sharing an observation which carried genuine insight.

An indifference to our values and the source of those values risks not only ceding international institutions to actors who share a profoundly different value set, but also the steady drift towards an alternative system at home. We cannot undermine one without setting up potential for the other.

But many of the old choices remain the same as they have always done down through the centuries: We must choose between freedom and control, responsibility or regulation, democracy or dictatorship, privacy or surveillance, the rule of law or rule by law. While it is easy to imagine that the privileges that we have inherited will naturally carry on, the strength and resilience of Western liberal democracies is a legacy of generations choosing to build institutions which last: choosing to submit themselves to the rule of law, not use the law as a tool to dominate. Choosing to respect and venerate democratic institutions, rather than manipulate people and whittle away constitutional safeguards. Choosing to govern in a way that promotes liberty of thought and exchange, rather than inviting the government to regulate each and every aspect of life.

It is critical that we do not underestimate the value of our heritage. It is a privilege to hold these truths to be self-evident:

- Freedom of conscience means that each individual can pursue meaning without the iron fist of totalitarian state control mandating bowing before idols.
- Freedom of speech allows valuable inquiry and the pursuit of truth—from intellectual pursuits to honest financial forecasting, this freedom has underpinned prosperity.
- Human dignity and the fundamental value of every human life are unquestionable assumed. It should go without saying, but the West is profoundly pro-human.
- The vote is extended to all—the freedom to remove those who seek to laud power over others and fail to represent the people.
- Material prosperity has two key pillars. Free exchange is the driver of innovation and prosperity. Affordable energy is the driver of abundance.

We no longer live in a world where these ideas can be taken as given. But this way of life is still the best way forward. Authoritarian regimes are undermining these values, questioning their universality, and proposing their own competing values. China now claims that its own version of “whole process people’s democracy” (全过程人民民主) is far better than Western democracy. We must recover our foundational stories, revive our economies, and reduce our vulnerability to geopolitical shocks if we are to see the liberal democratic model continue to underpin the modern world.

Let us now turn to how we can do that.

The Essential Role of Responsible Citizenship in a Liberal Democracy

This gets to the heart of the argument. Underpinning ARC’s approach is the premise that our stories shape our identity, and our identity shapes our actions. Our current stories are ones of permacrisis, decline and stagnation, and power and victimhood.

We have rapidly forgotten or neglected the ideas and rich tradition that created the very foundations of the nations we inhabit. A coordinated effort needs to be made by people from all sectors of society to mine the intellectual resources we have, as we seek to confront the challenges we face.

This is important because the liberal democratic model did not emerge out of a vacuum. From Alexis De Tocqueville to Vaclav Havel, from Alexander Solzhenitsyn to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, some of the greatest thinkers of recent centuries have recognised that the recipe for success in the West lies in the combination of liberal political and economic structures, with a set of virtues and a strong social capital that were inherited from the classical, liberal, and Judaeo-Christian traditions.

“The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism,” in Michael Novak’s words,¹⁴ relies on: responsible citizens, a thick morality which causes each person to recognise that they can find purpose in contribution and that every human life has fundamental value, and that human dignity is a grounding principle which shapes society.

In the words of the former Chief Rabbi in the United Kingdom, Jonathan Sacks, morality in the West has historically been the glue which “teaches us to value the ‘We’ as well as the ‘I’.”¹⁵ It is a shared code of conduct, a means of imagining our existence, which:

“...restores the dignity of agency and responsibility. It leads us to see our lives not as the blind play of external cause – the genome, the free market, international politics, the march of technology – but as a series of choices in pursuit of the right and good, choices in which we are not left unguided but for which a vast store of human experience lies at our disposal. It reminds us that the acts we perform, the decisions we take, make a difference: to our family, to our friends and associates, to our sense of a life well lived.”

There are many challenging jobs in society, from the hospice worker caring for the dying every day to the primary school teacher investing in the life of a child with special educational needs, that require a public-spirited sense of service and duty in those who choose that calling. Virtue matters for society to prosper.

Closer to home, virtue sits at the base of social capital. Strong families rely on covenant commitments which involve self-sacrifice, integrity, and a willingness to prioritise one’s family. Community institutions similarly rely on that sense of personal responsibility and pursuit of the common good to function effectively.

Patience, gentleness, humility, self-control, integrity, courage, honesty, decency, service, and self-sacrifice: until recently, these were the ideals to aspire to and they remained central in the ethical imagination for most of the 20th century.

It is said that the common law relies on decency. In parts of the Western democratic world, internal political divisions have become so deep and visceral that it is breaking down the basic civility needed for a society to function. Politicians on both sides need to understand that their true enemy is not internal. Authoritarian regimes like China and Russia will continue to exploit these divisions to their own advantage. China’s previously mentioned United Front operations are now openly interfering in many democratic countries—stoking these divisions.

We must not do their work for them. This is a moment when we need leaders of character, courage, integrity, and honesty. Those who know how to speak truth in love and who are not swayed by the wind. People who will stand tall in a time of shaking and who have a clear vision of the society that we want to build. Public servants who are willing to make difficult decisions in service of the common good. Human dignity has always been at the core of Western notions of virtue and self-perception—this must not be lost. Many of these ideas still sit deep in the unconscious of people in Western society—they

need to be brought back to life and prioritised again if we are to see the renewal of culture, society, and the economy that we desperately need.

Renewing culture and the economy

Of course, reversing malaise in the West is not purely a matter of culture. The interaction between culture and the economy is profoundly complex, and both have the capacity to shape the other. Growth is stagnant across the West. Over-zealous regulation coupled with the emergence of gigantism and monopolies has led to economies failing to foster creativity and growth. Meanwhile, too many people have struggled to cope with major structural adjustments which began in the 1980s, and were catalysed by increasing automation, globalisation, and a failure of politicians to properly anticipate the rise of behemoth technology corporations.

The credibility of the Western liberal democratic model depends on us also investing in deeply understanding this economic malaise and developing meaningful strategies for the future. New ideas are urgently needed—both among business leaders and in policy making circles. Other papers in this series will seek to address this in further detail.

The Decline of the West?

This conclusion has consciously focused on us “getting our own house in order” because, while the geopolitical context provides a motive for action, it is only if we have a strong base at home that we will be able to wisely respond to the changing reality further afield.

We have an enormous amount to be grateful for in our heritage. An economic system which encourages creativity and fosters abundance, a legal system which starts with the presumption of innocence and guarantees a fair trial, a press which is free to tell the truth, democratic accountability and feedback loops, a virtue and value set which encourages integrity, humility, decency, and honesty.

Contextualising this system in the context of the alternative brings into sharp focus the enormous benefits of our legacy. If Dr Li had been based in London or New York and the COVID outbreak had begun there instead of China, would there have been a global pandemic? Undoubtedly, the unfolding of events following the initial outbreak of the virus would have been very different.

Looking forwards, will we be able to build on the rich legacy we have inherited? We are at a crunch-point—our universities teach critique but not how to build, and a rising generation is in danger of inadvertently throwing aside its inheritance. We are failing to pass down the fundamental principles which have animated the spirit of democratic capitalism for generations. Meanwhile, the liberal democratic model’s legitimacy depends on the economic model continuing to promote just outcomes. A failure to hear the cries of the left behind is driving discontent, polarisation, and a decline in institutional trust.

Ultimately, a flower detached from its roots may be sustained for a period, but it will eventually wither and die. The world cannot afford the decline of the West. This is the moment to relay our foundations. This is the moment to remember who we are.

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- ¹ Tiffany May, "Hong Kong Offers Bounties as It Pursues Dissidents Overseas", *The New York Times*, 4 May 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/04/world/asia/hong-kong-bounties-dissidents.html>.
- ² "In full: Hong Kong barrister Margaret Ng's mitigation plea given before she was sentenced over a peaceful 2019 demo", *Hong Kong Free Press*, 16 April 2021, <https://hongkongfp.com/2021/04/16/in-full-hong-kong-barrister-margaret-ngs-mitigation-plea-given-before-she-was-sentenced-over-a-peaceful-2019-demo/>.
- ³ Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless: citizens against the state in central-eastern Europe", M.E. Sharpe, New York, 1985 (original text 1978).
- ⁴ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart", Commencement Address: Harvard University, 8 June 1978, <https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/a-world-split-apart>.
- ⁵ See Chris Patten, "The Hong Kong Diaries: Epilogue", Allen Lane, London, 21 June 2022.
- ⁶ William Zheng, "China's officials play up 'rise of the East, decline of the West'", *South China Morning Post*, 9 March 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3124752/chinas-officials-play-rise-east-decline-west>.
- ⁷ "China's Xi tells Putin of 'changes not seen for 100 years'", *Al Jazeera*, 22 March 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/22/xi-tells-putin-of-changes-not-seen-for-100>.
- ⁸ "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation", *ChinaFile*, 8 November 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.
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ISBN: 978-1-916948-09-9

www.arc-research.org

October 2023