

Political overreach

Eric Li says a look at history shows that today's democracy may not be the best form of government. And, while the West sees it as an end in itself, Chinese see any system as a means to an end

As the US presidential election shifts into high gear, Washington is hosting China's Vice-President Xi Jinping (习近平), heir apparent of the emergent superpower. The world's most powerful electoral democracy and the largest one-party state meet at a time of political transition for both. Many have characterised the competition of ideas between the two giants as one between democracy and authoritarianism. This false perspective needs to be dispelled.

In the long history of human governance, spanning thousands of years, there have been only two experiments in democracy. The first was Athens, which lasted a century and a half from 6BC to the middle of the fourth century BC – a quick failure really.

The second is the modern West. If one defines democracy as "one person, one vote", American democracy is only 92 years old. In practice, it is only 47 years old, if one considers the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – more ephemeral than even China's shortest-lived dynasties. Why, then, do so many boldly claim they have discovered the ideal political system for all mankind and that its success is forever assured?

The answer lies in the spiritual source of the current democratic experiment. It began with

designed a myriad of bells and whistles to constrain the popular will. But, as in any religion, faith would prove stronger than rules. The political franchise could only expand, resulting in ever more people participating in ever more decisions. As they say in America, California is the future. And what is that future? Endless referendums, paralysis and insolvency.

With the advent of television and then the internet, whatever excuses the founders of the American republic came up with to contain democracy, such as an ignorant public and a lack of information, fall by the wayside.

After all, if the people are rational and divinely endowed with rights, and all knowledge is at their fingertips, why shouldn't they be allowed to decide on everything? In the Athens of old, ever-increasing popular participation in politics led to rule by demagoguery. Public fervour whipped up by Alcibiades' oratory sent its fleet on that fateful mission to Syracuse, and its defeat there by Sparta started Athens' decline.

Fast-forward to the present, money is now the great enabler of demagoguery. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Michael Spence phrases it well: America has gone from "one propertied man, one vote; to one man, one vote; to one person, one vote; trending to one dollar, one vote".

By any measure, America today is a constitutional republic in name only, and an Athenian democracy in practice. Elected representatives have no minds of their own and respond only to the whims of public opinion for reelection; with the abundance of information and the most efficient communication ever known to man, the public believes it knows everything; special interests manipulate the people into voting for ever lower taxes and higher government spending, even supporting self-destructive wars.

Elections become the game through which disparate groups seek rents from the system. Such is the vicious cycle that is in the DNA of the current experiment in democracy based on the faith of rationalism and rights. A similar version of the same movie is showing in theatres everywhere in Europe. In contrast, the Roman republic survived much longer because it never pretended or aspired to be a democracy.

The West's competition of ideas with China is not between democracy and authoritarianism, but between two fundamentally different outlooks on political systems. The former sees democracy as an end in itself; the latter sees any political system as a means. It is indeed a commonly held faith in America that democracy is a good in itself and the more democratic, the better. Is there a politician in America who would dare say otherwise? Western democracy is inherently incapable of becoming less democratic even when its survival may depend on such a shift.

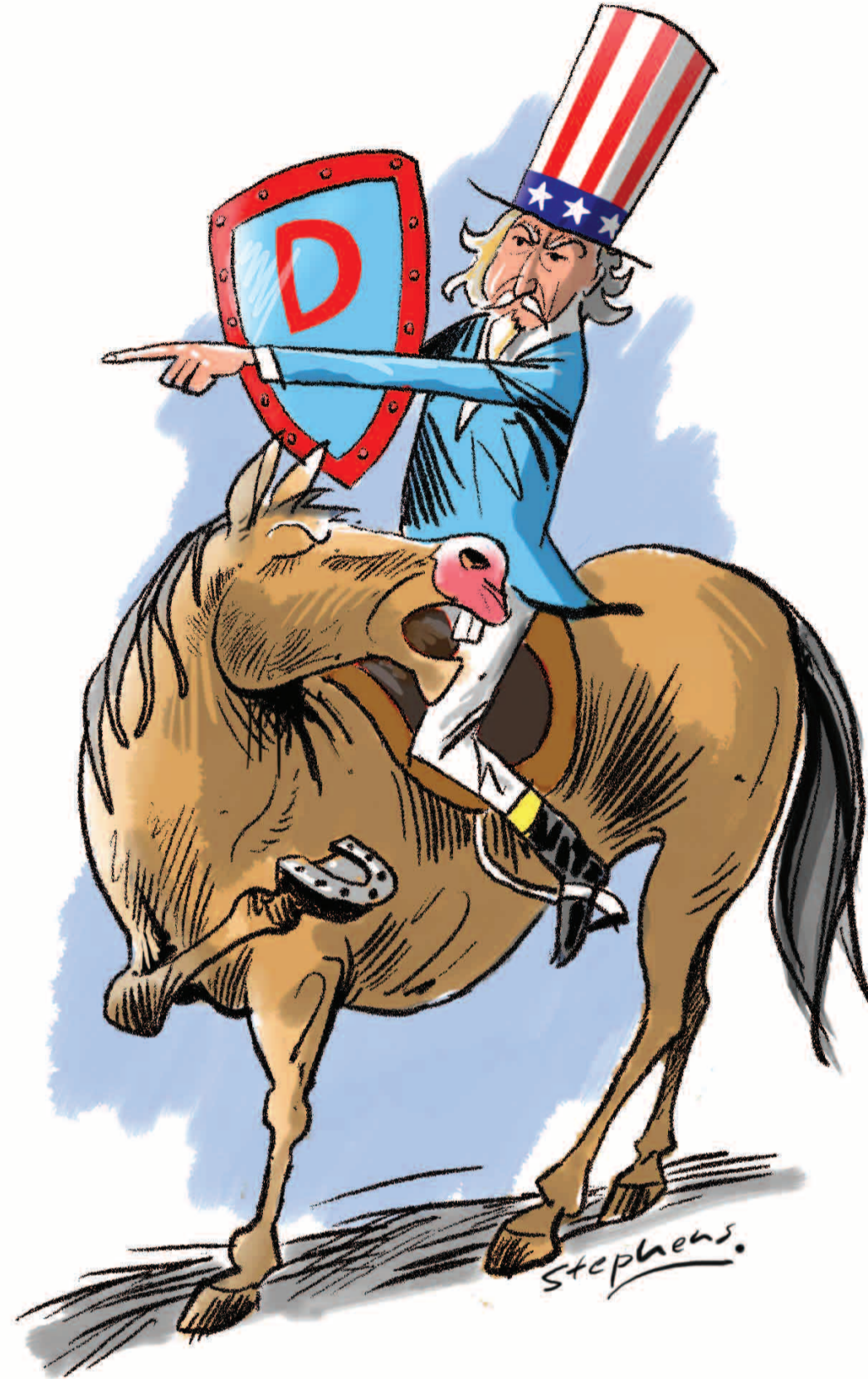
The Chinese, on the other hand, will allow greater popular participation in political decisions when it is conducive to economic

development and favourable to national interests, as they have done in the past 10 years, but would not hesitate to curtail it if the conditions and needs of the nation change.

In this framework, the Americans today are not dissimilar to the Soviets of the last century in that both see their political systems and their

underlying ideologies as ultimate ends. The Chinese are on a different path. History does not bode well for the American path. Their faith-based ideological hubris will soon drive democracy over the cliff.

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Forward role

Stacilee Ford says Hong Kong's young men struggling to adapt to women's changing expectations need a mentor, and today's role models need to step up

University student populations in Hong Kong are becoming more diverse each year. A growing cohort of exchange and transfer students from all over the world is augmented by the returning children of Hongkongers who migrated in the late 1980s and 1990s. These students share common ground with our local students in terms of their skill with technology, their passion for popular culture and social media, and their belief that education is a key ingredient for success.

Their differences are also revealing. As a cultural historian who has taught at the University of Hong Kong since 1993, I have observed some of the ways in which gender intersects with generation and familial and societal expectations.

I find – and studies affirm – that while most Hong Kong students are mindful that the future will bring challenges different from those their parents faced, it's the male students who are more resistant to change and more likely to hold fast to certain traditions, particularly those linked to gender roles. In general, men who have been born, raised and educated in Hong Kong tend to have more entrenched views of gender roles when compared with most mainlanders, exchange students and repatriates who have spent their formative years in Europe, Australia and North America. This could be less a matter of genuine attitudinal difference than being sensitised to politically correct language.

Here's the dilemma. Most of the women in my classes hope to achieve success at home and at work. They are loyal to and respectful of parents, deeply embedded in extended family networks, and willing to negotiate between personal and professional demands. They're keen to embrace some traditions while reinventing or jettisoning others. They seek partners who will share the load, and they know that outsourcing child-rearing and domestic duties does not address long-standing gender asymmetry, nor is it always ideal for children.

For their part, men have seen their sisters, mothers and female peers succeed in various domains. They are comfortable with women as competitors and co-workers. Yet, many – when they feel safe enough to do so – admit that their "ideal" companion is a woman who will subordinate her interests to theirs, and place family before work so that they can focus on their career.

Anxiety about how changes in women's expectations and opportunities affect men is not new, nor is it a uniquely Hong Kong concern. But we are a "crossroads culture" with an opportunity to foment meaningful dialogue across gender and generational divides.

We know that gender equality makes economic sense. Moreover, there are plenty of men who choose to be supportive partners. We need them to step forward and mentor the next generation by talking about how they are juggling responsibilities and re-envisioning roles in the private as well as the public sphere. As men step forward, women must be ready to listen, learn and examine how their own attitudes and biases stand in the way of true collaboration. Ultimately, work-life balance benefits us all.

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Elected representatives have no minds of their own and respond to the whims of public opinion

the European Enlightenment, which gave birth to modernity. Two fundamental ideas informed its core: the individual is rational and the individual is endowed with unalienable rights. These two beliefs are in essence based on faith, not empirical evidence.

As Thomas Jefferson wrote: "All men are created equal... and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." And who was that Creator with a capital "C"? God, of course. To further emphasise the divine nature of the claim, the "R" in rights was capitalised as well. Along with claims such as "liberté, égalité, fraternité", they form the basis of a religious faith called modernity of which the ultimate political manifestation is democracy.

In its early days, democratic ideas in political governance facilitated the industrial revolution and ushered in a period of unprecedented economic prosperity and military power in the Western world.

Yet, at the very beginning, those who led this drive were aware of the fatal flaw inbred in this experiment and sought to contain it. The American Federalists made it clear they were establishing a republic, not a democracy, and

Hong Kong needs legal clarity on assisted suicide

Grenville Cross argues that the factors for a prosecution should be made known

The University of Hong Kong's Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention reported last month that the suicide rate now stands at 13.6 per 100,000 people, and predicted a rise in 2012.

While most suicides are associated with personal tragedy or despair and involve individuals acting alone, there are, inevitably, cases of assisted suicide, although these rarely come to light.

Although suicide itself was decriminalised in 1967, a person who assists another's suicide is guilty of an offence, punishable with 14 years' imprisonment. A prosecution, however, requires the consent of the secretary for justice, who has not disclosed the criteria he applies to cases.

In England and Wales, assisted suicide is also an offence, and a prosecution must be approved by the director of public prosecutions, who has recently explained his approach to prosecutions.

To circumvent English law, terminally ill people sometimes travel abroad to places where it is not illegal for doctors to end the life of those who have no hope of recovery and wish to die. In 2009, for example, published figures indicate that 27 Britons ended their lives at the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland. However, the family and friends of victims had, until recently, little idea if they faced prosecution for providing assistance.

In 2009, Debbie Purdy, a multiple sclerosis sufferer, successfully argued in the House of Lords that, by not disclosing whether her

husband would be prosecuted if he accompanied her to the Dignitas clinic, prosecutors were breaching her human rights. The court concluded that far greater clarity was necessary in relation to prosecution policy. It said that though assisted suicide cases were few and that decisions were sensitive to the particular facts, these were not reasons to excuse the director of public prosecutions from

If the secretary for justice believes in transparency, he should also provide guidance

his obligation to clarify the factors he saw as relevant for and against prosecution.

The director of public prosecutions duly published policy guidelines, which indicate that a prosecution is unlikely if the victim has reached a clear, voluntary, settled and informed decision to commit suicide; the suspect is wholly motivated by compassion; the suspect has sought to dissuade the victim; and the suspect has reported the suicide to the police and assisted their inquiries.

If, however, the suspect has pressured the victim to commit suicide, acted with a view to gain,

lacked compassion, has a history of violence or abuse towards the victim, or assisted the suicide of a victim under the age of 18, a prosecution is likely.

Although more than 40 assisted suicide cases have been referred to the Crown Prosecution Service since the guidelines came out, there have been no prosecutions. However, the director of public prosecutions, Keir Starmer QC, has emphasised that there is no "blanket policy" of non-prosecution, and that there are now more cases as "people feel more confident to come forward and say what they've done because they've got a degree of clarity about what might happen to them".

If Hong Kong's secretary for justice believes in transparency, he should also provide detailed, published guidance. No one knows for sure how many cases of assisted suicide there are each year, or their exact circumstances, but the community should understand the secretary's position.

The secretary must clarify his policy, and not simply wait until a Debbie Purdy comes along to force his hand.

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With no moral compass, HKU will lose its way

Lau Nai-keung says the protest row showed administrators did not know right from wrong

To quote a recent popular saying: "This city is dying." I think quite a lot of people in Hong Kong will agree with me that the University of Hong Kong is dying along with it. Its centenary celebration last August turned out to be a big mess which led to an internal investigation.

The subsequent report admitted to the mess and faulted the university for administrative blunders. Now, those supposedly responsible have resigned – behaviour typical of a dying establishment.

In what kind of a university would students be caught making a nuisance during a grand celebration, then lying about how events unfolded? And in which other university can we find a dean of the law faculty making a rash statement on a point of law against the university, which he later retracts but without a word of apology? Surely, if a practising lawyer made such a mistake, he wouldn't keep his job.

This fiasco is rooted in the fact that the university didn't know what it was doing and what it wanted. And when something happened, many of its staff – from the vice-chancellor down – panicked. This is not how one of Hong Kong's most celebrated academic establishments should conduct itself.

It has now transpired that the police did not force their way into the campus but were invited by the university to assist in maintaining law and order during the

ceremony; they became an easy scapegoat.

Vice-Premier Li Keqiang (李克强) was the main victim in the affair. He came in good will at the invitation of the university and brought gifts, not only to the host but to Hong Kong. But he was portrayed as the chief villain from the moment he sat in the VIP chair on stage, provided by his host; he was criticised for dominating the ceremony and influencing the security arrangements.

These charges were again thrown out by the investigation, but I wonder how much damage has been done between Hong Kong and the central government. Judging from the recent heated exchange of words between Hongkongers and mainlanders, the wound is gaping at the grass-roots level.

There was nothing wrong with the ceremony or the security arrangements. What went wrong was that the university didn't stand firm, with the vice-chancellor apologising to students for no reason at all.

A university that does not know right from wrong has already lost its soul. Divorced from national history and the huge suffering and humiliation since the opium war, there is no Hong Kong history, and subsequently there is no soul and no salvation.

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Turning a toast into a roast is poor diplomacy

Tom Plate says US leaders should keep arguments with Beijing private, and not play to the gallery

Don't get me wrong. Abject kowtowing is no way to forge an honest and productive relationship with anyone, including China. The US has differences with Beijing – and Beijing with the US. Covering them up will allow them to fester.

The Chinese are unhappy with the US because they view America as having raised the military stakes in the Pacific region. For its part, the US government is unhappy for a host of reasons, including human rights in China, intellectual property theft and obstruction of collective action on Syria.

Solving such difficult issues may take almost forever. Only nationalistic partisans on either side can honestly believe that the other is wholly wrong and they are wholly right.

So how should the bilateral relationship proceed? The answer is: cautiously but honestly, because so much is at stake; but never much publicly. And so here we raise the troubling case of this week's official visit of Vice-President Xi Jinping (习近平).

He was invited to the Oval Office by President Barack Obama, in part as a return favour for the gracious treatment accorded Vice-President Joe Biden during his August swing through China.

It was during a "toast" at a State Department lunch this week that Xi got his not-so-funny "roast" – and from Biden of all people. It wasn't that the issues raised were inappropriate. It was that they were raised so publicly, and so

ungraciously, during this official event.

It was difficult not to feel that the US administration's public edginess was for domestic political effect. With the showdown election only a few months away, the Obama administration had to show – but whom exactly? – that it could be tough on China. So, who: the Republicans? That's not going to work. Independent voters? It's hard to imagine anyone who's truly anti-China voting for a Democratic president because he appears during re-election season to be tough on China.

So who is the Obama administration fooling? Maybe they think it's appropriately muscular of them to have public airings of differences with China.

This is all silly and unnecessary. Both superpowers should be confining their differences to the intense private sessions provided amid the routine of their ongoing bilateral discourse; but in public they should almost exclusively emphasise areas of agreement or at least commonality.

The stability of the international political system depends on a confident and civil relationship between Beijing and the US. Loose political lips can create serious problems of their own. Who needs that?

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