

明報社論二則

Two Editorials from *Ming Pao*

Fear Your Wife, Not the Government

IN DEMOCRATIC countries, people can sue the government in court, and if the government loses the case it will pay damages to the plaintiff. This does not happen in totalitarian states where, if individuals are charged by the government, they are bound to be found guilty and sentenced; the only variation is in the length of the sentence. In totalitarian states, plaintiffs may win an appeal in some cases, or be vindicated and receive compensation at a later time, but only at the discretion of the government. This can only happen if a higher official overrules the decision of a lower official, or if a new government or a new leadership has toppled and replaced an old government or old leadership. It's not the same as a plaintiff winning his case against the government in a court of law.

The adjectives "democratic" and "totalitarian" sum up this state of affairs quite nicely: in a democratic country the people are the masters; in a totalitarian state, power is in the hands of the government, which has the final say.

Here we shall not discuss the relative merits of the two systems. All we want to say is that these two systems exist in the world, with democratic nations in the minority. There are many countries which claim to practise democracy and hold general elections. In our view, however, the true test of a democracy is not whether elections are held but whether citizens can sue their government and win their cases.

Hong Kong does not practise democracy as it is normally understood. The

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Legislative Council¹ has limited power, and it is not popularly elected. As Legco member Mr Soo Kwok-wing has said, "Everyone here has the freedom to fear their wife but need not fear the government". (The implication is that one may be, would rather be, or even chooses to be afraid of one's wife, but not of the government.) Fearing one's wife simply serves as the trappings for Mr Soo's argument, but it is true that Hong Kong people will not fear their government as long as that government does not interfere with its citizens, and provided of course no offence is committed. While any citizen can criticize the government or its officials, no official dares to offend any citizen. Admittedly, some government officials are rude to people. But many citizens act the same way towards officials. No official is permitted to abuse his power or take advantage of a citizen through illegal means. Hong Kong people may meet with calamities, natural or man-made, such as traffic accidents, robbery or homicide, but such calamities are not the fault of the government. In ancient China there was an expression: "A county magistrate can exterminate a whole family." In the old days, local officials were referred to as "mum-and-dad officials," implying people's respect for as well as fear of them. In democratic societies no local officials can destroy entire families. At worst an official can be accused of failing to perform his duty, or failing to do his best to protect the people from natural or man-made calamities.

The main function of government in a democratic society is to serve the people by providing housing, public transport, medical and sanitation services, education, social welfare, and law and order, all of which is paid for by taxes collected from the people. The government is similar in nature to the management committee of a multi-storey building. Occupants of the flats in the building pay a management fee to the committee and the committee hires the watchmen, looks after public hygiene and performs necessary repairs and maintenance.

Governments that serve the people have gradually evolved from governments that rule. In slave society, slave owners form a government to rule over the slaves. In feudal society, aristocrats and landlords (led by an emperor or a king) form the government and rule over the commoners and the serfs. In capitalist society, capitalists constitute the government, rule over the people and exploit labourers. In the last century, such factors as free education and strong trade unions have led to the decentralization of capital. Heavy taxes are levied on the rich and national welfare schemes have been introduced. Capitalists are no longer in a position to monopolize power, and like everyone else are subject to the law, although they earn much more than the average wage-earner. The basic function of government has evolved from imposing rule on the people to providing them with services. Marxism aims at the overthrow of capitalist rule by the proletariat, leading eventually to a people's democratic dictatorship serving all the people. Leninism, however, extends the dictatorship of the proletariat indefinitely, thus deviating widely from fundamental Marxist ideals.

To fear or not to fear one's wife is entirely voluntary, and whether one chooses

¹The Legislative Council, or Legco, is the Hong Kong Government's law-making body. Its Unofficial Members (members who are not government officials) are appointed by the governor.

to do so or not is of little consequence. Everyone has the freedom of choice. However, the people of Hong Kong would find it unbearable if they were left with *no* choice but to fear their government. Freedom and human rights mean in effect that people are free *not* to fear their government, and individuals have the right *not* to be afraid of their government. The government is not intimidating, not because its leaders are kind-hearted and love the people like their children, but because the government does not have the power to interfere in people's private lives, and must itself act in accordance with the law. If the government fails to abide by the law, or if a government official fails in his duty and commits an error, the government can be sued and the wrong redressed.

Hong Kong people fear change, not out of any particular admiration for British colonial government, but because they prefer a system in which they have no need to be afraid of the government. The policy of "three no-changes" states that there will be no changes in Hong Kong's economy, social system and lifestyle after 1997. A lack of fear of the government is the backbone of such a policy.

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Don't Sit under the Edge of the Roof; Bend the Stovepipe; and Move the Firewood Away

IN THE DEBATE on the Daya Bay nuclear power plant, someone quite aptly quoted the adage, "A gentleman should not stand near a tottering wall." But while tottering walls may collapse at any time, nuclear plants tend to be rather safe, so perhaps this is overstating the case. It would be more appropriate to quote: "A millionaire's son should never sit near the edge of a roof."

The risk here is that if one is seated in that position a roof tile may fall on one's head. Of course the chances of a tile falling off a roof are very slim, and of it falling on one's head even slimmer. But since there are many other places to sit, why pick a spot that involves such an unnecessary risk? Sons of millionaires should pay special attention to their personal safety.

This second saying is taken from the "Biography of Yuan Ang" in the *Records of the Historian*, written by Sima Qian in the first century B.C. In this episode, the Han emperor Wendi takes his six-horse chariot to the top of a large steep slope, and is about to go for a joy-ride. Yuan Ang, who is riding on horseback, catches up with the emperor and seizes the reins of the imperial chariot's horses. The emperor smiles and says: "Are you worried about something, General?" Yuan Ang replies: "Your Majesty, there is a saying: 'The son of a man with one thousand pieces of gold should not sit under the edge of a roof, the son of a man with one hundred pieces of gold should not sit crossways when he rides, and a king should not take risks with his life.' Now Your Majesty wishes to drive down a steep slope in a chariot drawn by six horses. What if the horses are suddenly frightened and the chariot overturns? Even if Your Majesty is unconcerned with your own safety, how will you confront your ancestors and Your Majesty's mother, the empress dowager, should your ride end in death?" The emperor accepted this advice and never attempted to drive a chariot down a steep slope again. "Sitting crossways" means riding on the crossbar or railing, something rather entertaining, perhaps, but also quite dangerous. Men of means should take better care of themselves.

Given the importance of Hong Kong both politically and economically, it is not at all unreasonable to compare the territory to a millionaire's son.

A political commentator has drawn a rather clever analogy between the building of the Daya Bay plant and "kicking the shuttlecock near an antique". In the first place, it is not likely that a shuttlecock will break an antique vase; and secondly, kicking the shuttlecock is really quite a healthy form of recreation. However, since antique vases can be very valuable, and since one can kick the shuttlecock virtually anywhere, why do it near a vase? You may say that the analogy is inappropriate, since kicking the shuttlecock is not a vital activity, whereas building a nuclear plant is an important link in the means of production. In that case, we could very well apply another analogy: "Chopping firewood near an antique." Chopping firewood is also a means of production; firewood was the main source of energy in not-so-ancient times, a vital factor in food preparation. However, if a stray wood chip or

loosened axe head struck a nearby vase and broke it, the loss would be very great indeed.

If a mother were taking her baby for a walk in a pram, and met some friends playing tennis who asked her to play a set, would she park the pram close to the tennis court, or would she leave it reasonably far away? Though the chances of a tennis ball hitting the baby are extremely slim, no mother would put her baby in such a risky situation.

Our desire to have the nuclear plant built farther away from Hong Kong is based on similar considerations. If you want to kick the shuttlecock or chop firewood, stay away from antique vases; likewise, baby prams should be parked at a distance from tennis courts. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region cannot be relocated, but the nuclear plant can be built farther away. All that's involved at this point is a small amount of money. It is not a good idea to go ahead with the plant at the risk of possible future disasters.

Chinese history can teach us many lessons about taking preventative measures. The following is a famous story from the "Biography of Huo Guang," in *The History of the Han Dynasty*, by Ban Gu: A man visiting a friend noticed that the stovepipe in his host's kitchen went straight up through the ceiling, and that there was a pile of firewood standing near the stove. He advised his host to replace the vertical stovepipe with a bent one to prevent sparks from flying out of it. He also suggested that his host move the pile of firewood away from the stove, since it could easily catch fire. The host ignored this advice, thinking that replacing the stovepipe would entail unnecessary expense, and that moving firewood would be inconvenient. Eventually his house did catch fire, and only with his neighbours' help was it finally put out. To thank them, the host prepared a banquet and seated the person who had suffered the most burns in the place of honour, and seated the rest of his neighbours according to their respective efforts. But the man who had first advised him about his kitchen was not invited. Someone said to the host: "If you had taken your guest's advice in the first place, your house would not have caught fire. Why is it that you have forgotten his kindness while honouring those who helped you put out the fire?" The host realized his error and eventually invited the man to dinner.

"Bending the stovepipe" is one way of improving safety at home, since it will minimize the number of sparks that escape from the stove. But why take the additional precaution of moving the firewood away, if doing so creates such an inconvenience, entails extra labour, and is uneconomical as well? These actions represent an attempt to tackle the safety problem on two fronts, improving the facilities on the one hand, and increasing the margin of safety on the other. Bending a stovepipe and moving the firewood away doesn't prevent anyone from burning firewood or cooking their meals. They are simply ways of minimizing risk.

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