

Hong Kong as a Trojan Horse Capitalist Bait

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Tuesday, October 19, 2004

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Someone recently mentioned an interesting perspective on the Hong Kong turnover to China in 1997.

Neo-liberal and not so neo-liberal capitalism proponents argue how great it is to use capitalism, greed, consumerism and free market forces to defeat the Chinese communist menace. It seems reasonable. Lure them with consumer goods, make them feel like consumers, then they'll consume democracy and throw out them Maoists.

Even still, the "loss" of Hong Kong to the godless hoards could be re-framed as a Trojan horse: let them taste the rich juices of hyper-capitalist, unregulated Hong Kong and it will work as a little insipid virus to transform their economy and political system to liberal democracy, thus further reinforcing Francis Fukuyama's assertion that history is over as there is no serious competitor to free market liberal democracy.

But what if China doesn't convert to our divinely-sanctioned political and economic system. What if the godless hoards can maintain centralized control with only limited market access. What if they really learned from Russia's eager embrace of a free unregulated market, which led to Mafia rule. What if they learned to include markets to a point, but to retain control of their society while managing a slow growth of a mostly urban middle class of consumers while keeping almost a billion citizens still in centrally-planned gulag-ish bliss.

What if China becomes something new that Fukuyama didn't envision: a capitalist dictatorship, much like a communist dictatorship, but with a McDonald's. And automobiles for the blessed party members [the new "middle class", a kind of expanded politburo with access to a Lexus]. What if China fools us all and keeps a kind of communism alive and leaves us wondering how constructive engagement could continue to be a paradigm of defeating this remaining evil empire. We couldn't toss constructive engagement, could we? How then would we sell all those hundreds of millions of American cars to those bicycle-riding Beijing yuppies?

Greed may be good for Gordon Gecko, but it may not defeat millennia of Chinese communitarian tradition that may somehow inject subtle legitimacy in a communist regime, despite what the Formosans say.

Ideally, I'd like to have a coffee with Fukuyama to mull this over. And I'd like to ask Karl Polanyi to join us.

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