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Has the Cultural Revolution arrived in the West?

Prof Simon Haines

Well, Anastasia you have spoken and written eloquently in many fora about major policy issues relating to China and the West including human rights questions, organ transplants, trade matters such as the Belton Road Initiative and the role of China at the WTO. I know you've got thoughts about this and also the acute dilemma, in some ways a particularly Australian dilemma, of our own commercial and strategic relationship with China. But the Ramsay Centre, as I'm always saying, is an education enterprise so I'll be focusing probably more on education matters as we go along.

But I'd like to start, if you don't mind, at a more personal level, especially given what we've just seen, given that the bulk of your work as a creative artist lies in short films discussing the plight of dissidence and what it's like to find yourself seriously out of favour with the Chinese government. I wonder for the first step, you could tell us something about your own childhood and formative years, your school years in China, and how they seemed to you at the time in the kinds of roles that you found yourself playing, like a kind of cheerleader. But then how they came to look to you in retrospect. How it felt to change your perspective once you immigrated, your

impressions of the school system in China and then how it felt to you looking back on that from outside.

Anastasia Lin

My name is Anastasia Lin and I'm very happy to be here and I thank you so much for coming here and thank you very much to the Ramsay Centre for inviting me to be here to speak to you today. I was born in China and I spent the first 13 years of my life there. My father, he's a businessman, quite a successful businessman in the past and my mother, she's a professor at University for Western Economics. I guess one can say that I grew up in a communist elitist family because the structure of the society in China, it's in such a way that if you are intelligent, if you're successful, if you are doing better than the rest of the crowd, then you are automatically attracted to being a communist party member because they want to encourage everyone to feel like that is a higher social status.

When I was in elementary school and high school for two years in China my element would automatically make me qualified to be a communist youth leader. And that's precisely what I did. When I was there the indoctrination started in kindergarten, but it's in the form of songs, it's in the everyday, it's the pictures on the wall, it's the Mao picture right in the centre of the room, but it's just everywhere. It's very hard to detect as a form of indoctrination. It was only after I came to the West that I actually learnt more about the real Chinese culture. When I was in high school 911 happened, a lot of the political turmoil in China happened, for example, the persecution of Falun Gong. I remember specifically that the 911 incident in China at that time was

somewhat praised by the Chinese media as a punishment for the American imperialism, “see they learned their lesson”.

After we watched the official Chinese propaganda, oftentimes it was my job to organize my fellow classmates to have a formal discussion and everyone had to show their opinion, of course there was only one opinion you could talk about. I felt really proud because I was the leader speaking on stage and there is a hierarchy that's going on. The more loyal or aligned you are with the Communist Party, the higher the status you are in China. It didn't feel morally wrong. Because that's just the norm and that's how everyone is.

Prof Simon Haines

So somehow when you left that space and looking back in on it from the outside this polarized your feelings in some way, this is when you became an activist. What was it about that change that made you do that? Is it that your activist convictions and the creativity which was kind of unleashed when you left, had all been constrained by the same atmosphere before? How did the change happen?

Anastasia Lin

It's a very long process and sometimes Australian friends ask why Chinese immigrants, when they come to Australia, the free world and they breathe the air of freedom, why don't they change their mind? It takes one fearless self-examination to recognize what you have been taught from childhood might not be right. And that change happened to me when I was about 14 years old. I moved to Canada when I was 13 years old with my mother. And I think the primary reason for her to move is that she recognised, she's a professor herself, she recognised that the Chinese

education isn't the best for me. My personality is also a bit more stubborn and outspoken. Being in a society like that might be quite dangerous for me. She thought that bringing me to Canada is the best move she can make.

And I do agree it was for the best. I do thank my mother very much for doing that.

After I moved to Canada in the first year of high school, I remember this, there was a Chinese exchange scholar teacher program that came to my high school and I remember sitting in the social science classes, we called it social science, and I remember my teacher was talking about communism. Later on the Chinese teachers, they were listening to the class and they came to me and said, "It doesn't seem like their view of our country is all that positive". And I remember myself telling them how to combat the western democratic rhetoric against China. And that's what I did as a 13 year old child.

When I was 14 years old, I think my mother saw a very big problem, that I was living in a bubble because all my news sources were from Chinese websites because my English wasn't good enough for me to read freely. I was very thirsty for information, so I read Chinese websites. Of course, most of the Chinese websites were pro-Beijing. That was back in 2003 and now it's even worse.

I absorbed the news, not from the free world, and my mother thought that if I am to integrate into the community here, to the Western society here, I needed to open up my mind. What she did was, she bought back a newspaper from Hong Kong. At that time, freedom of speech in Hong Kong was still quite open and she also brought back a small flyer that a Falun Gong practitioner distributed on the street. I remember this incident very clearly because Falun Gong was being propagated as a cult in China.

I personally have indoctrinated my fellow classmate about it. There was no doubt in my mind about what they are and their nature, as the communist portrayed them to be. And after I read the booklet, it blew my mind away because I couldn't think that it was possible for such an opposite truth to exist that they may be just lay Buddhists who believed in Chinese traditional values.

It was very interesting, later on, to watch these Chinese social activists like the Falun Gong practitioners, pro-democratic activists coming from China and their journey was also a very interesting observation experience for me. I saw that and that just started to make me question a lot of things. I went online to research about the Tiananmen massacre, which the Hong Kong newspaper would talk about when June 4th came along. I watched the video of a Chinese youth in Tiananmen Square. I saw how they actually stood in front of tanks and I felt so proud as a Chinese person for the first time. I knew it wasn't motivated from a position of nationalism or patriotism. I was really proud for that young man as a human being. And then it was very exciting for me to know that there's this whole world out there that I could explore. And you know, the thing about indoctrination is that the person receiving the indoctrination, you always know that there's a truth down there. It's there, it tries to come up once in a while through reason, but you just don't dare to live it or admit it.

Prof Simon Haines

This is really interesting. I wonder if you can develop this a little bit. You mentioned your mother and I know that your father being left behind in China was a huge thing for you both. I wonder if you can talk to us a little bit about how it felt for the older generation and your parents' generation to endure and survive the cultural revolution and then the years of relative openness in the era of Deng Xiaoping afterwards and

then the more recent era of Xi Jinping, which in some ways, some people say is a kind of throwback to earlier times. How do you think the mental climate at the kind of thing you're talking about impacted on that generation? You've talked a bit about this, the clash in their minds between some sorts of traditional Chinese values like filial piety, for example, and the kinds of indoctrination that were happening in the era of the cultural revolution. Can you talk about that a little bit? Filial piety, particularly, I think is something that you've thought about.

Anastasia Lin

Yes. Filial piety is what Chinese Confucius value, praised as the virtue that trumps all virtue and is the number one of the hundred virtues.

Prof Simon Haines

And the symbol is of a younger man carrying an older man on his back or something like that. As I recall.

Anastasia Lin

I think the idea of filial piety from a western perspective, maybe this is how I can explain it. It's about a continuity of tradition. Respecting your parents does not mean you take on the burden of your parents at an older age, but more like a respect for, and a gratefulness, for what they have given you. I guess the closest idea in the west is the idea of being grateful, in Christianity, where you pray before eating every day, to be grateful for what you receive. And this is the Chinese way of giving back for the ones who have raised you. So that's why it is the number one virtue.

During the cultural revolution, this Chinese tradition has been the number one enemy of the Communist Party for taking total control of the Chinese citizens' mind and heart. And in a way humanity and conscience is the number one enemy of communism.

Prof Simon Haines

Because children were encouraged to betray their parents

Anastasia Lin

To denounce their parents as anti-revolutionary

Prof Simon Haines

The opposite of the traditional virtue.

Anastasia Lin

That created a lot of anxiety within the family, that parents don't even dare to speak their minds to their children. Family members were turned against each other and these youth, out of ideology and passion and the Red Guards have sometimes turned their family members in. And I learnt this only after I came out of China. I have listened to my father talk to me sometimes and he does not speak his true mind, even to me. It's very interesting that I do not hear about what they've been through in the cultural evolution until after I left China. I have to question my mother repeatedly because this is not something that they feel they have the courage to tell their children. When you go to school, the school teacher would ask them, "What did your parents say to you at home?" And the children sometimes naively just tell and

turn their parents in.

Prof Simon Haines

What I want to do now is play devil's advocate for a minute because after all the

Ramsay Centre is about open debate and putting all sides of the question forward.

What would you say about the argument that's often advanced, that since the 1980s, the Communist Party has brought an era of unprecedented stability and prosperity to a country with a history full of upheavals and civil strife and invasion and colonialism.

What would you say to that argument that in fact we should be grateful, Chinese people should be grateful to the party for what it's achieved.

Anastasia Lin

First of all, I don't think the stability is really true. China has gone through movement after movement, disaster after disaster. A lot of these disasters are man-made. For example, The Great Leap Forward and the cultural revolution - the famine that created, starved so many Chinese people to death. The cultural revolution that took away our traditional culture, the humanity, that was created by Communist Party.

Also some people say that the Communist Party has loosened their bind on Chinese people. But if they didn't bind the Chinese people in the first place, what's the point of loosening the binding? You have to capture the people and then liberate them and they always pose themselves as the saviour. But in truth, they have captured the Chinese people's freedom to live an authentic life since they have captured the regime. I want to explore this in detail.

This is a journey that I went through after I came to the west and it's not in one or two

years, it's actually about a decade in length. First in my high school year of getting in touch with the Chinese human rights activists, the Uyghurs, the Tibetans, the Falun Gong practitioners and the democratic movement activists, they went on the street to protest. Now, the freedom to protest does not exist in China. So that's something new to me. And looking at the western and peace talk coming out, talk about things and trying to mobilize and tell the West about the truth. And I didn't really get the point of why they are doing this and I understand there was this idea of democracy that people, due to whatever their information source, they have a right to choose their future and Chinese people never had the right to choose their future under the communist regime. And that's a new idea. So after that I went into university and going to university I got the chance to read Plato and my favourite book, *The Republic*.

The reason why *The Republic* is my favourite book is because it taught me two things. One is individual liberty is a responsibility. And secondly, individual thought, freedom of thinking, of intellect is also risky and it takes courage. Because I remember specifically that, in China, oftentimes the youth are encouraged to use extreme language and extreme action to condemn the government's enemy. And we can see them on Australian campuses now when they shout sexist, foul language to shout down the Pro Hong Kong protesters or that they have to tear down the Lennon Wall. I'm trying to just cover the other side of the debate and that was motivated by something that was injected into their blood since they were very young. It's in disguise of nationalism and patriotism. So I read Socrates, you know the second tier of Guardian, which is the silver auxiliaries, they're guided by honour and glory. Yet the gold class of Guardian is guided by reason and that is just what clicked with me.

All my life what I thought was glorious and honourable in defending my country, that is not guided by my true thinking, that is perhaps motivated by the exterior and wisdom is beyond all of that.

Prof Simon Haines

It is probably picky of me to point out that some people have said that the Guardians in *The Republic* became the model for a self-appointed Guardian class who think they are cleverer and more intelligent than everybody else and have the right therefore to be philosopher kings and undemocratically run the country.

Anastasia Lin

Are they self appointed?

Prof Simon Haines

Well they're appointed by a process which tends to always appoint the same group.

Anastasia Lin

It's selected, right? But also there is mobilization between the classes. If your quality is good enough, I think that involves intelligence and most of all courage to take the step of taking that responsibility. Wisdom for sure.

Prof Simon Haines

That gave rise to that wonderful Douglas Adams joke about a planet of humans who are run by a government of lizards and every year they elect the lizards and somebody says, "Why?" And they said, "Well, if we didn't vote the wrong lizard might get in".

So remaining with this question of Chinese capacity for innovation, really that we were talking about a minute ago. And just very briefly, Anastasia, I'm sure you know about the Qian Xuesen question. Have you heard about this before?

The story is, this was a famous Chinese rocket scientist and engineer trained at MIT and at Caltech who fell under suspicion during the McCarthyist era of being a communist. So, essentially, he was thrown out of America in the 1950s, and then basically went home and created China's aerospace and rocket and satellite programs. A wonderful man who achieved terrific things for his country. He asked the then Premier Wen Jiabao in 2005 this question. Why does China produce so many clever people, but so few geniuses? That was his question. And this has resonated, this is something that the party, I believe, has asked itself repeatedly. Why is that? What is it about the education system that does this if he's right. This is to do with the theme of innovation and creativity, which is where we started out. Do you have any thoughts about this?

Anastasia Lin

Yes. Because the education system in China encourages "obey" instead of "challenge". You cannot challenge your predecessors, you have to think inside a box. You have to abide to the communist line, only that way you're safe. And this is why China's scientists don't have the quality of western scientists. They dare to go

out of where they don't know and to explore with their own paths, with their own wisdom, their own reason to go there. And the Chinese scientists are often discouraged from going there. And I think there are a lot of clever people because naturally Chinese work ethic is very good.

Prof Simon Haines

That is fantastic, all those Tiger Mums, right?

Anastasia Lin

I lived with them, so yes. And that is a traditional Chinese value that shouldn't be accredited to communist party goals.

We're trying to obey and this is something that also comes back to Plato if you don't mind me talking about *The Republic* a little more.

My favourite allegory in history is *The Allegory of the Cave*. And it's because it also described my process of coming from that chained position and looking only onto a wall and seeing the shadow passing in front of me without knowing the truth and the layer of true human experiences that are underneath. And after reading *The Allegory* I discovered the path to wisdom and to discover something that is true and authentic and eternal takes courage and it's painful. And I remember reading Socrates describing the process of that chained man starting to turn his head and using his limbs to climb out of the cage and being dragged out of the cage. How much he is unwilling to take that path. Yet he took it and how painful it is. It takes a lot of

courage to utilize your own faculty and to reach your own conclusion because you have to take responsibility for it. You can no longer rely on a party, on a state taking responsibility for an individual action. At the same time it is liberating because you are experiencing the life in your own way, in the way that God has assigned to you, has given to you.

Prof Simon Haines

That is wonderful, I'm just thinking this bears directly on the theme of education. If you think of education as the word literally means is bringing out of you what is already inherent in each individual rather than force feeding, pouring into the head what's coming in from outside and this is what you're talking about, isn't it?

Anastasia Lin

Yes. I remember going to this Montessori school that my Mum forced me to study for two days in because I had a tiger mum. She wanted me to get in touch with why there are many Westerners who go to that school system. And I think one thing that came out, that really resonated with me is that the system was to try to bring out the child's innate nature, not a struggle within, not to make everybody the same, which is what the education system in China is trying to do. And I remember Socrates said, don't struggle with your shortcoming, build your strengths, build the new instead of struggling with the old. Education is a process to remember, to bring all the memory. And that is just so wonderful to know. I think all of a sudden, then, I had the courage to have self-acceptance, to just be okay with my experiences and my feelings and my own understanding of the world because, for 13 years of my life, I was trained to deny all of that.

Prof Simon Haines

Thinking about your main theme on our invitation for this evening, which has to do with whether the cultural revolution is arriving in the west and linking it to the education theme that we've been talking about. Many people here will have come to an earlier lecture a few weeks ago given by a New York professor whom I think you know called Jonathan Haidt. You've met Jon. In his book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Haidt talks about the recent phenomenon of campus witch hunts in the last seven or eight years and it happened at Berkeley, Yale, Evergreen College, Middlebury College, many places where what seems to have happened is that weak campus leadership, from the top down, collapses in the face of aggressive denunciations by students and even colleagues, sometimes, of supposedly racist or sexist attitudes among the professors and the administrators.

Haidt says all of this is taking place in a wider social context of over protective parenting, a call-out culture that you've talked about, a safety-ism is the word that Haidt uses and also massively increased political polarization in the wider society. Now you've linked this phenomenon in western campuses to the cultural revolution itself, which some might say "that's a big stretch". So what's the connection between all of that that's happening on American campuses and the Cultural Revolution in China of the 60s and 70s. Can you tell us about this? How do you see this as connected to the Cultural Revolution in China, this phenomenon of safety-ism and the call-out culture in the United States and other Western countries?

Anastasia Lin

I think they are similar in the ways that the goal of these campaigns are aimed not toward free thinking, individual thinking, free debate and exchange of ideas, they're aimed at absolute conformity and that is what culture revolution was for. In the past the Red Guards have labelled their professors as empty revolutionaries or the Four Olds.

Prof Simon Haines

The Four Olds? Can you tell us a bit about that?

Anastasia Lin

Old culture, old tradition, old thinking, old religion, right. And I see what's happening today on campuses that is a lot of the western world is what it is today thanks to the enlightenment ideas that we are able to have this safe space to discuss hard opinion, to debate and refine them. And I think that is the process of wanting to be more firm in one's ideas and to listen to others. That is very important in the building of a character. And I think children today have been deprived of that and partly in their own doing. When they label a certain thing in a very victimising passive aggressive way, it's very similar to when the Red Guards were saying that the professors are indoctrinating them with feudalist old ideas and it's harmful for the youth's soul and the position they are calling on is aimed at absolute conformity because they actually tell you.

How do I explain this?

In the Cultural Revolution what often happened is that a Chinese person got picked on by the government and they're not exactly sure why they are getting picked on. They come up with this list for themselves of what might have gone wrong and they start to self-censor. They would ask the government, "Is this what I did wrong or are you angry with that?" And eventually none of them worked out. Then they'll ask "Okay, just tell me what to do". This is how the absolute conformity comes about. And I think that's happening on western campuses today where a lot of debates are being stifled.

Prof Simon Haines

Although I suppose the difference is that it was centrally planned in the Cultural Revolution by the governing party in a one-party state. And that isn't the same as what's happening on campuses in the West. It's a more spontaneous movement arising right the way across the society, but not being controlled by a central authority. Wouldn't that be a difference?

Anastasia Lin

I don't know if it is completely naïve and spontaneous. Because certain rhetoric sounds as if people are trying to grab onto power through these movements. But, of course, that is only my observation.

Prof Simon Haines

What they have in common is that both movements are using slogans and ideas to stifle thought and originality. Very interesting. I'm afraid I can't resist, Anastasia, talking about Hong Kong for a while. I hope you don't mind. You know I'm somebody who feels pretty strongly about what's been happening recently in Hong Kong and we've all been watching the news. Let's talk about the Hong Kong question for a minute. It strikes me, and I'd like to know what you think about this, that these millions and millions, I mean the numbers are in the millions, of extremely well behaved Hong Kong students out on the streets in the last three months were probably radicalized by two earlier events in their earlier childhood. And I'm thinking about this in terms of your story about your childhood and being radicalized when you were about 13, because the two earlier events in Hong Kong, one of them is the umbrella revolution, the occupy central movement of 2014, led in fact by somebody I know very well, Dr Kin-man Chan, who I'm very proud to call a friend, a colleague at Chinese university who is now in jail, I might point out. This happened when the current generation of protesting students were in their mid-teens.

But then it seems to me that an even more formative moment for that generation of students was the attempt to introduce what was called a National Education Curriculum into Hong Kong primary and elementary schools in 2012. This is seven years ago when the appalling CY Leung was the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, even more impressive in his ability to ignore what everybody was saying than his successor who is the current Chief Executive. The curriculum which was supposed to be introduced into primary schools was to foster a spirit of enthusiasm for Chinese communism, Chinese nationalism, and was supposed to criticize democracy.

But then after an outcry led by some of these students and the black shirts began to

appear then and by their parents, it was dropped, the plan was dropped. And these students that we are watching on the streets today were those same primary and post-primary students who I think were radicalized by the national education fiasco in 2012. We're back in the territory of doctrinal education where we started out this evening, what's your take on Hong Kong? What might happen? How we've come to be where we are? What do you think the future might hold? What would you say to young people in Hong Kong out on the streets at the moment worrying about 2047 and what's going to become of them during their lifetime?

Anastasia Lin

Does radicalisation have a negative connotation in English?

Prof Simon Haines

Neither necessarily negative nor positive. It could be either. It's something that makes you an activist radical, in some ways you are radicalised

Anastasia Lin

It just sounds as if there is an extreme element in there.

Prof Simon Haines

Sure, that often happens, a form of zealotry, yes, this is true.

Anastasia Lin

But I think, given the state of what they're dealing with today, if the communist party suddenly started to indoctrinate their curriculum in Sydney, imagine how your kids are going to react to that.

Prof Simon Haines

But Hong Kong is Chinese, would be the argument, so it's fine to be a proud Chinese. Many Hong Kong people say "we are Chinese".

Anastasia Lin

They are Chinese. There it's a different kind of Chinese, they have not gone through an indoctrination process and they have the information of the free world. They know what freedom is and that makes them very much different. The process that I have just described, that I have gone through, they have not experienced that when they were young. In a way that's a different quality of human being.

I'm not trying to be racist, but this is just my own experience. What they're fighting today is their way of life. And I think these children, they know innately that their future is now and they're in a very decisive moment. When I went to Hong Kong in 2015 there was something that I realised, it's very different between Taiwanese and Hong Kong people because in Hong Kong it's as if they know their freedom is being tightened up and so they're fighting for their freedom inch by inch.

I met with many Hong Kong Democratic Movement activists and they're very courageous. They know exactly what they might lose and they're doing everything

they can to defend it. But in Taiwan it's a different atmosphere, the media is portraying China in a very different light in that they want to believe in this illusion that unification with China is a good idea and it's not touching their interests so much that they feel this urge to immediately defend something even though they might also be in danger.

Prof Simon Haines

Why do you think that that feeling is less strong in Taiwan than it is in Hong Kong?

Anastasia Lin

I think it might actually have something to do with British education for the Hong Kong youth.

Prof Simon Haines

And maybe with recent events like the business man who was abducted in broad daylight from a hotel because he had the wrong kind of links to the leadership in Beijing or the book seller story or the Ming Pao editor who was hamstrung in the street because he was being too critical of the party. Things like this aren't happening in Taiwan in the way that they are in Hong Kong.

Anastasia Lin

They are also happening, Taiwanese businessmen are being harassed, blackmailed arrested in China. But the difference is that Hong Kong youth are much more outspoken because I think that by the time the handover is over, the 50 year period is over they know the clock is ticking. They know this is probably their destiny, but they will preserve what they can in a way. It is an active struggle. But for Taiwan it's like, "we're fine, we don't know what the future holds" and that's not a certain destiny even though it might actually be the same result.

Prof Simon Haines

I've had lots of chances to ask questions and I want to give everybody else a chance because I'm sure everyone's got some, but I just wanted to read this to you at the end, to get your take on this, Anastasia, an excerpt from the *China Model Teaching Manual*, which was the document at the heart of the national education curriculum controversy seven years ago. I think this might be interesting to everybody and might resonate with you. This was the key manual that was going to be distributed to primary schools in Hong Kong to guide the way that the national education curriculum would work in the future in Hong Kong primary schools, of course, it didn't work, but this is just a short extract. The translation is available online.

"Unlike the system of regime change in western democratic countries, China's ruling group mainly serves the country and the people, unlike the regime change in the west, the closeness of ruling philosophies and orientations inside the ruling group ensures the continuity of the regime and the stability of the society. In America, on the other hand, two majority parties hold power in turn, the two parties always refused to pass the annual fiscal plan due to the need to campaign for votes or to arguments."

Can't have that.

“This makes government shutdown and public services stop. American media have statistics showing that the shutdown of American government costs taxpayers \$1 trillion daily.”

That was in the centre of this new document that was going to be introduced in elementary schools in Hong Kong. How would you react to that kind of state?

Anastasia Lin

Well this is what I was learning all 13 years of my early life. And you imagine why the Hong Kong students feel such an urge to go on the streets.

Prof Simon Haines

This is what they read when they were 13 years old.

Anastasia Lin

Well they have their very unique way of turning what is good into bad and what is bad into good. I guess they are largely successful at that. Unfortunately, there are a lot of Chinese people who have been learning this so much that they don't think about it twice. And a lot of them that come here still have their news sources from WeChat, from Chinese media, when they have the privilege to look at the outside. I guess not everybody has the opportunity and the privilege I did to have a mother like my own to actively open up my mind. But I think it also takes the western universities to make the effort to help these students to open up their mind. Things don't happen

on their own. And I do hope that every Chinese student would get to read *The Republic* and probably they will reach similar conclusions.