Major socio-political changes are taking place in communist-ruled China, opening up strong possibilities for the growth of democracy and citizens’ rights in the coming years. However, China is not going to imitate the Western model of democracy. Rather, it is proactively exploring its own model of democracy based on the nation’s rich cultural and philosophical traditions, such as the teachings of Confucius.

This was the thrust of an illuminating talk by Shri Ravi Bhoothalingam, a noted China expert, at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Mumbai on July 20th, 2010. He was speaking to a full house on ‘China 2020: A Confucian Democracy?’ The function was presided over by Shri D.P. Tripathi, National General Secretary of the Nationalist Congress Party, who has been promoting the cause of closer India-China ties for many years. In his opening address, Shri Sudheendra Kulkarni, Chairman at ORF Mumbai, stressed the importance of China’s arrival on the world stage and its increasing level of participation in global affairs. In particular, it is important for India to take note and to study the ascent of China closely and rigorously, with specific reference to the implications for India’s economic, social and political development. He explained that the talk was the beginning of a sustained agenda of activities that ORF Mumbai has planned to contribute to the revival of India-China friendship, which he described as “the need of the hour”. He warmly welcomed the presence of Mr. Zhan Yuhui, Consul (cultural affairs), in the Consulate of the People’s Republic of China in Mumbai.

Shri Kulkarni drew parallels with Confucianism and that of the ancient wisdom of India. According to Confucius, he stated, “to cultivate moral qualities in an individual is the same as being in government”, (He drew the attention of the audience to a beautiful poster prepared by the ORF team highlighting this Confucian thought). Shri Kulkarni explained that this Confucian aphorism is similar to the concept of Swaraj in India, Swaraj’ or ‘Swadheenata’, he said, means “self-rule”. But what is the meaning of this “self”? In the Indian philosophy, “Swa” extends from the individual self to the Larger Self, which includes various collectivities – such as Nation - - of which the individual is a unit. Hence, Swadheen or Self-Rule means not only self-governance of the nation
An example of Chinese modern day physical infrastructure – the Olympics Stadium in Beijing. “The 2008 Summer Olympics highlighted Confucian themes, quoting the Analects of Confucius at the opening ceremony and in booklets handed out to visiting journalists, and downplayed any references to China’s experiments with Communism” (China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing society by Daniel A. Bell)

but also self-governance of the individual himself. And if the individual has to govern himself well, he must cultivate such moral qualities in him and conduct his life in such an ethical way that even the Highest Self (God) is pleased with him.

The core theme of Shri Bhoothalingam’s talk focused largely on the similarities (and differences to a lesser extent) between India and China. Considering the movement for mass education in China, Shri Bhoothalingam stated that Confucius started this system by teaching five male students under a tree similar to the way education was imparted under the gurukul system in India. Moving over to familial relations, he explained the concept of Xiao, being the Chinese concept of a child’s devotion to parents. Both India and China, he highlighted, shared this tradition of familial relationships and filial piety.

“In if we are to make any sense of this mélange”, Shri Bhoothalingam stressed, “we must understand China in her own terms, and appreciate that China’s modernization need not, and does not, look anything like Westernization, superficial appearances apart.”

In India, our analyses of China relied on largely western models and so reflect their inbuilt assumptions and values, lamented Shri Bhoothalingam. He went on further to explain that China is a civilization-state with a history of over 5000 years. Throughout that history, China has demonstrated a remarkable ability to preserve her essential character whilst absorbing lessons learnt through her contact with the wider world. Moreover, China is a land of many paradoxes (like India). She is a near-superpower whilst still being a developing country, a continental-sized civilization-state which is authoritarian but with some features of a democracy, a dynamic secular nation with a traditional Confucian core, a population enjoying social and sexual equality but with vast income and regional disparities. “If we are to make any sense of this mélange”, Shri Bhoothalingam stressed, “we must understand China in her own terms, and appreciate that China’s modernization need not, and does not, look anything like Westernization, superficial appearances apart.”

The Chinese propensity to align individual goals and actions to larger social and national objectives and create mass mobilization of people owes much to the Confucian legacy, and cannot be ascribed only to coercion or state diktat, stated Shri Bhoothalingam. He cited examples of Chinese mass initiatives throughout their history such as the Great Wall, the Grand Canal linking the Yellow River and the Yangzi, the gigantic irrigation works of Du Jiang Yan and many others. Moving over to modern times, he highlighted initiatives by the Chinese addressing issues such as women’s rights, sanitation, afforestation, and of course their development of physical infrastructure. All of these projects, he stated, were intended to provide a public service and were initiated with the inherent intention of serving the greater good. He lauded this Chinese philosophy of collective working where the state is considered an extension of the individual and the family. Government, in Confucian thought, was seen as the outermost part of a series of concentric circles comprising of family, community and
The widely held consensus is that China should build its own system of democratic governance...... A Confucian Democracy!

The Chinese government today is uniquely quasi-Confucian. “What is distinctly visible in contemporary China is a strong and nationwide revival of interest in the teachings of Confucius. People are re-discovering the value of

state, and therefore as a ‘necessary good’. There is no room for extreme individualism in Chinese thought, which is an important and defining aspect of Confucian philosophy.

Describing how China’s spectacular progress has attracted global attention, he highlighted that Western scholars, who had predicted the “coming collapse” of China, stood discredited. Answering a question by an audience member who was seeking to ascertain factors that prevented the collapse of China like that of Russia, he answered that the problem in Russia was that political liberalization trumped economic liberalization leading to an oligarchic system where economic goods were siphoned. The Chinese, careful not to repeat that mistake, have concentrated first on economic liberalization paving the way for a gradual seeping in of political liberalization.

However, economic liberalization in China has not come without its share of problems. He noted that although China is proud of its many achievements in the economic and other spheres, the Chinese people themselves increasingly feel that their society is adrift. “There is a growing sense at all levels that China is suffering from a ‘moral vacuum’, which is further accentuated by the rapidly widening economic disparities, combined with corruption at many levels of the one-party governance system.” said Bhoothalingam. Although the government has made numerous efforts in the direction of internal reform, communism no longer appeals to the wider society as they sense a palpable discord in the form that development has taken in China. With the encouragement of the government, and facilitated by the growing economic prosperity, people are increasingly turning to higher intellectual pursuits – including philosophical and political activities. In this manner, the Chinese people are now searching for new pathways towards democratic change. “The situation is also forcing the Communist Party of China (CCP), which has been ruling the country since 1949, to seek new ways to attain legitimacy in the eyes of the people.”, he concluded.

In the party’s effort to prevent further moral degradation in society, “it has taken up study of and reflection on itself and society. The CCP’s Party School, he explained, had conducted a serious study of various systems of governance around the world, including the Indian system. “It has come to the conclusion that, although China should be open to learning from other systems, all are deficient in some way or the other. However, in spite of the people’s urge for democratic expansion and CCP’s own internal debate on political reforms, China is not going to copy any Western model,” Shri Bhoothalingam remarked. He reflected on a quote from the Mahatma, wherein he says “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.” Therefore, , with Chinese characteristics with emphasis on establishment of transparency, of accountability, of rule of law, and of public participation in government. This is to be achieved, as Shri Bhoothalingam coined it, is through its own model of democracy: A Confucian Democracy!
China is looking within its own tradition and crafting its way forward so that Chinese modernization achieves the best of technology and science that it can offer to the world, and at the same time combining these with a governance system with its own genius.”

The Confucian ethos is already influencing the internal functioning of the Communist party. “This trend is likely to gain momentum.” He explained that the government is experimenting with this in different ways:

1) Through village level democracy which is similar to Panchayati Raj, whereby voting is set to take place in all villages and for all posts through contested elections;
2) Through inner party democracy that works to promote an acceptable meritocracy whereby people are promoted from rank to rank by a combination of acceptability and performance; and
3) Through consultative or deliberative democracy whereby the use of public surveys, questionnaires and feedback are tools used to consult large number of people before implementation and action.

This customized system of democracy, Shri Bhoothalingam noted is amended/modified from the American system of government as espoused by Abraham Lincoln: “Of the people, For the people and By the people” to that of Chinese Confucianism to be “For the people, Of the people, but not necessarily By the people.” “The Chinese system of government is by meritorious people, trained and equipped to govern in the Confucian way”, he said.

In closing, Shri Bhoothalingam reiterated that the educated people in India should avoid being influenced by the Western view of China. “We should look at China, our biggest neighbor, with our own eyes and try to acquire a deeper and broader understanding of various aspects of the Chinese society.” This, he states, has been a feature of Chinese thought and strategy for the last two to three centuries. In India, Gandhi provided a powerful alternative vision which caught the imagination of the entire Indian people. Since then, there has been no comparable grand project that has caught the Indian imagination. He stressed the need to look at the model that China is adopting to change its system and apply it to our traditions and knowledge to reinvigorate the system prevailing in India. India and its government can learn a great deal from the CCP's efforts through its Party School system and the efforts it is making to re-introduce values and a sense of morality into the society to complement and to contravene the social ills of a rapid phase of unbridled capitalism.

Shri Rabindranath Tagore, Shri Bhoothalingam expressed, had stated on a visit to Korea that “India, China and Japan are the lamps lighting Asia and the lamps had been lit”. Therefore, “modernizing the two countries, India and China is possible taking advantage of science and technology”, he stated, but with a caveat that it should not be an automatic reinvention of the past. Shri Tagore and Confucius both had a true humanistic vision of the world for India and China respectively. “India and China are two ancient civilizations which have a lot in
common and both can benefit by forging close bonds of friendship”. We must learn from each other and grow together, using our strengths as complements.

A question from Dr. Spenta Wadia in the audience requested Shri Bhoothalingam to comment on the absence of religion in China. He stated that the Chinese state religions – Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism are philosophies more so than they are religions. Religion in China is considered a way of life. Shri D.P. Tripathi, also reiterated this view of China where he visited quite often. He stated that three things he found typically Chinese was the sense/behavior of practicality, the absence of a religion and their devotion to trade and business. These are qualities, he stated, that are present amongst the Chinese diaspora as well. On his last visit in May 2006 as part of a delegation invited by the CCP, he stated that when he asked a member of the Central Committee of the International Department of the CCP what he felt its central task was, the answer he received, surprised him. It is “building capitalism”. The CCP has been very reflective and responsive in the past 20 (almost 30) years to try and renew itself. It understands the limitations of communism and is keen to pursue capitalism for the greater economic good of the country and yet maintain the positive elements of social welfare, equality, a strong work ethic and community strength that have flourished under communism.

In his closing remarks Shri Sudheendra Kulkarni said that the time has come for Indians to look beyond the bitter experience of 1962 and revive the India-China friendship in today’s new conditions. “Mature nations, especially those like India and China who are inheritors of two great and ancient civilizations, which never had any conflict for thousands of years, can find ways of resolving recent differences through dialogue and cooperation,” he said. Echoing the view of Shri Bhoothalingam, he stressed the need for both India and China
to take “a long view of history”. He stated that ORF Mumbai’s platform for India-China Friendship would endeavor to create better mutual understanding and cooperation between Indians and Chinese people alike.

Shri Bhoothalingam’s talk was heard with rapt attention by a packed hall. Several eminent personalities attended the talk, including Shri Charles Correa (renowned architect), Ms. Manjeet Kripalani (who heads the think tank ‘The Gateway House’ which promotes better understanding of India’s international relations), Mrs. Neelam Deo (a retired diplomat and India’s former ambassador to Denmark), Ms. Nazia Vasi (founder of InChin Closer, a consultancy for stronger India-China business relations), Shri Suketu Shah (prominent businessman) and Shri Atul Bhatkhalkar (general secretary of the Mumbai unit of the BJP).

The ORF team had presented a nice display of books, magazines, music and movie DVDs from China (and on China) to mark the occasion.

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Shri Ravi Bhoothalingam is Founder and Chairman of Manas Advisory, a consultancy practice focusing on Leadership Coaching and India-China business development. Until June 2001, he was President of The Oberoi Group of Hotels, responsible for worldwide operations of 36 hotels and 5 luxury cruise ships in six countries across Asia. Significant portions of his career at senior levels were spent in Human Resource Development (HRD) and with Hotels, the latter with both ITC and Oberoi Hotels. He has been Chairman of the National Committee on Tourism and Heritage of the Confederation of Indian Industry [CII] 1997-2001, Member of the Review Committee for the Archaeological Survey of India, and on India’s National Tourism Advisory Council. Shri Bhoothalingam is a B.Sc Hons in Physics from St. Stephen’s College, Delhi and holds a Masters degree in Experimental Psychology from Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge University, UK. He has traveled extensively in China and its neighborhood. His journeys include expeditions on the Silk Route to China, journeys in Mongolia, across the Tibetan plateau and to Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar, and to Xanadu and ShangriLa within Inner Mongolia and Southwest China respectively. He is Convener on Tourism for the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum (“the Kunming Initiative”), and leads the India-China CEO Forum for the Confederation of Indian Industry. He is a regular advocate of ‘win-win’ India-China business partnerships for the 21st century, based on complementarities in Indian and Chinese capabilities and ways of thinking. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, London, and Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi University, and Visiting Professor at the Administrative Staff College of India, Hyderabad. He is also a member of the Editorial Board of World Affairs, and a Moderator on Global Leadership Programmes for the Aspen Institute, Colorado, USA. Recently, he delivered a scholarly talk at ORF Delhi on ‘Ways of Thinking: Psycholinguistic Reflections on Sino-Indian Relationships and Potentialities’. The publication is available to download from the ORF website (www.orfonline.org).

Shri Devi Prasad Tripathi is General Secretary of the Nationalist Congress Party. He worked as a Political Analyst and Strategy Planner with Late Shri Rajiv Gandhi, Former Prime Minister of India. He was a member in the Governing Body of Indian Council of Agricultural Research from 2000 to 2003 and is part of the governing body of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan from 2004 to date. His published works include Praroop, a collection of Hindi Poems written in 1973; Congress and Independent India, written in 1985; and 'Jawahar Shatakam', a Sanskrit Poem written in 1989. Since 1989, he has been editor of Think India quarterly, an influential journal that covers a wide range of topical issues related to culture, society and politics. The latest edition of the Think India quarterly is dedicated to China and features contributions by both Shri DP Tripathi and Shri Sudheendra Kulkarni.