

The cultural crazy train

Trendy influences are reshaping national character

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Somebody must have broken the brake handle on the cultural crazy train. With no way to slow down the dizzying changes in conventional values, the needle on the gauge measuring virtue and vice is spinning wildly. New ways of thinking have always fueled the advancement of civilization, but freewheeling change threatens to send the entire social compact around the bend and into the ditch. Judging by the breathtaking metamorphosis of customary ideas that have powered the nation's progress, a crack-up could be near at hand unless conservators of character wrest control.

The degradation of tradition values from one generation of Americans to the next is alarming. A recent Wall Street Journal/NBC News survey found that while 79 percent of respondents over age 55 consider patriotism "very important," only 42 percent of Millennials or Generation Z, ages 18 to 38, put patriotism on the same level of importance.

Whereas 67 percent of the older generation rate belief in God as very important, the proportion of younger people who agree falls sharply to 30 percent. And the importance of having children is endorsed by 55 percent of the senior set, but only 30 percent of the younger generation concur.

"The values that Americans say define the national character are changing, as younger generations rate patriotism, religion and having children as less important to them than did young people two decades ago," stated The Wall Street Journal.

As appalling as the destruction of essential mores has been, it's hard to avoid the fact that the speed of change has fallen squarely into the realm of likelihood, given the influences on public attitudes starting in the mid-20th century. Since the days of the Korean War in the 1950s, U.S. academia has clicked its tongue in opposition to the use of American military might. Since the early '60s, American children have not heard so much as "God is great, God is good, and we thank Him for our food" as a simple schoolroom grace. And since the '70s, each age group has been worthy of the ignominious title of the "Me Generation."

Americans are finding that values which compose a nation's character are easier to wreck than erect. And while values can shape behavior, China is acutely aware that behavior can shape values.

Toward that end, "Middle Kingdom" is devising a system of social credit rating that rewards the good and punishes the bad. Thanks to the power of a cyber-connected

society, the everyday behavior of Chinese citizens is being recorded in various pilot programs and aggregated to form a citizenship grade.

Daring activities that officialdom considered unpatriotic, such as giving props on social media to demonstrators standing up to authoritarians in Hong Kong, or even no-nos like jaywalking in Beijing can ding an individual's social credit score. Too many black marks could mean being denied access to foreign travel, public transportation, choice jobs and low-interest loans. The system is expected to go full-scale, covering all of China's 1.4 billionplus residents, by 2020.

It's all for the common good, of course. The sooner Zhang Wei (an equivalent of John Smith in Chinese) gets with the program, the happier he, and his compatriots, will be.

In his dystopian novel, "Nineteen- Eighty-Four," English social critic George Orwell warned of the ability of government in the guise of "Big Brother" to socialize its citizens — either persuasively or forcefully. In the end, stubborn dissident Winston Smith (a British variation of John Smith) finally surrenders his heart to the embodiment of authority that had been his nemesis: "But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother."

It is natural to yearn for the comfortable feeling of belonging, but would an intrusive system pushing nontraditional values be allowed to take hold in the United States? Ask the algorithms, the academia of the 21st century. Therein lie the secret brew of attitudes that social media — among them Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat — are pumping into the Americans psyche. From there is emerging a new iteration of American behavior and, ultimately, new forms of American attitudes toward patriotism, religion and the family.

Citizens of both China and the United States should ask who or what is behind what's "trending." Americans shouldn't have any doubts, though, that it's time to regain control of the crazy train that is taking their culture off the rails.

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