China’s religion is a belief in its own absolute being

From Prof Chin-Tai Kim and Prof Yeomin Yoon.

Sir, We agree with China’s most popular novelist, Jiang Rong, who stated that the fate of a nation, e.g. China, hangs on its culture, not its politics or economics. Although Roderick MacFarquhar’s analysis “Tackling graft must come before the Chinese dream” (April 12) is highly informative and insightful, it seems to lack a dimension of cultural analysis.

Prof MacFarquhar’s main point seems to be that China can change only after it experiences a trauma. This point does not so much explain as require explanation itself. China’s history seems to indicate that once a change is forced, China reverts to a uniformity and rigidity and corruption among the powerful that builds up resentment towards another explosion. The explanation is the Chinese character itself. If we were to allow ourselves colourful language, China is a colossal solipsist. It does not really care about what lies outside its borders as long as it is left alone. There is an egregious contrast between China and the US. The latter must keep telling the world it is number one in order to believe in its raison d’être; the former is happy if it does not even have to address the world. The “religion” of China is that of China’s absolute being.

A challenging question for China and the world is how to transform China into a country where diverse cultural, ideological and political forces can vie peacefully to accommodate a governance structure that serves the whole, with a mandate from and responsibility for it. “Democracy” is multivocal. Proof of democracy is the presence of a flexible structure that allows and appropriates diversity. One can dare to say that China will have changed only when it releases Tibet, frees all political prisoners, and sheds its illusion that it has suzerainty over its small neighbours.

Throughout its long history China produced remarkable thought systems such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen (Ch’an) Buddhism. It is sad to note that the contemporary China seems to have thrown away its cultural legacy in endorsement of mammonism.

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