Building a Harmonious Society and Achieving Individual Harmony

AI GUO HAN

Rapid economic growth in China is accompanied by economic disparity, corruption, crime, and a great deal of frustration among China’s citizens. These social problems threaten the country’s further development, social stability, and harmony. This study discusses the recent campaign in China for a harmonious society. Many Chinese scholars, officials, and citizens seem to believe that more effective and efficient social structures will result in social harmony. However, social harmony is a more complex social psychological phenomenon which is determined by the interactions among social values, people, and society. People achieve social harmony when they feel their values and desires are attainable in society. They have to make strong social and psychological effort if they want to successfully achieve harmony with nature, society, and themselves.

Key words: harmony, harmonious society, Chinese society, Chinese values, Daoism

The notion of harmony often reflects the ultimate value and goal of Chinese people in life. “Tian ren he yi” (天人合一 “Heaven and people in harmony”) is a prominent view in Chinese philosophy and has been the most desirable accomplishment for many in Chinese culture. Consequently, building a harmonious society has been the dream and pursuit of Chinese people for centuries.

The desire for harmony, however, became more intense and urgent in recent years in China’s rapid economic growth and unprecedented social changes. On October 11, 2006, the Sixteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China passed a strategic document, “Chinese Communist Party Central Committee’s Resolution on Major Issues of Building a Socialist Harmonious Society,” at its sixth plenary session. Thereafter, the construction of a harmonious society became the central theme of China’s economic, social, and political activities. People from all walks of life--party leaders, public officials, college professors, students, China’s new economic elites, workers, farmers, school teachers--suddenly found themselves in the middle of a propaganda campaign for a socialist harmonious society. Recently, at the Seventeenth National Congress of the

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Communist Party of China, Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the party, reaffirmed the importance of building a harmonious society in China. One may ask: What is the urgency? What is a harmonious society? How does harmony work? How do people achieve social harmony?

CHINA'S URGENT NEED OF A MORE HARMONIOUS SOCIETY

While phenomenal economic development and social changes in the past two decades brought the Chinese people many benefits and opportunities, they have also presented major challenges to the country. As stated in the resolution, the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCPC) believes the construction of a harmonious society is of strategic importance in addressing issues of “uneven urban, rural and regional economic development, increasing pressures from human resource conditions; employment, social security, wealth distribution, education, health care, housing, industrial safety, crime prevention and public security which have direct impact on people’s life.”

Economic developments in different regions of China are uneven, and the gap of income among residents is increasing. According to a 2006 report compiled by China Economic Monitoring & Analysis, the average GDP per capita in Shanghai in 2003 was $5,649, while the average GDP of Guizhou, a province further away in the west of China, only reached $436. The income of urban residents was 1.86 times higher than that of rural residents in 1985. However, it increased to 3.21 times in 2004. In 2003 the average per capita dispensable income in rural area was 2,841 yuan (about $355), which was only one third of the average dispensable income of urban residents. In Shanghai, the average per capita dispensable income reached 14,867 yuan (about $1,858), about ten times as much as the lowest income in some rural areas. According to an analysis, in 2005 China’s income disparity was the worst in the world. Official statement put the number of people living in absolute poverty at 57 million, about 6% of the rural population at the end of 2006. About 2500 years ago, Confucius said that people are not bothered by having little but by not having equal amount. The widening economic gap and the uneven and unfair distribution of wealth, often perceived by many, have brought forth all the problems known to be associated with such conditions.

Hoping to escape the economic trap in underdeveloped regions and rural areas, many people, mainly farmers, have left for the big cities, forming the largest army of migrant workers in Chinese history. It is estimated that there are over 120 million such migrant workers, about one fourth of China’s farm labor. This has greatly changed the social landscape and labor market of China. Inadequate, almost non-existent, labor laws and regulations provided no support and protection for these workers. While workers made some economic gains, they paid a heavy price. They not only worked long hours, about 9 to 12 hours a day and 6 to 6.5 days a week, but also subjected themselves to poor and unsafe working conditions. Greedy employers exploited these migrant workers by providing low pay, usually only 40% of the pay of city workers for the same work, and often did not pay them