24th Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration

By George Yeo

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Human Solidarity in a Fragmenting World

Introduction

I first heard of Prof Ransome from my elder brother, Peter. He is 7 years my senior. When he was in Medical School, I was in Secondary School and shared a room with him in our old house at East Coast Terrace. He would often tell me stories about this remarkable English doctor who could diagnose diseases accurately, often based only on observation, palpation and even by smell.

When Dr Sayampanathan asked me early last year if I could deliver the Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration, I resonated immediately, my mind going back to stories I heard a long time ago. I thank the Singapore Academy of Medicine for giving me this signal honour.

This Oration was originally planned to be held in Hong Kong last December in conjunction with an event co-organized by the Academies of Medicine of Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong.
Unfortunately, that event had to be cancelled because of the unsettled situation in Hong Kong.

No one expected the protests which began in June last year to become so big and to last so long. As a legislator of many years, I decided to download the Extradition Bill and read it for myself. Frankly, I did not find the proposed amendments to existing laws unreasonable. It did not seem right that one could commit rape or murder in China and find sanctuary in Hong Kong.

However, most Hongkongers viewed the Bill differently and were outraged that the Chief Executive Carrie Lam was determined to get it passed despite mass opposition. Looking back, the Bill was only the spark that set off a forest fire. For many years after the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the fuel load in the forest had been building up. Social injustice had gotten worse. Most parents in Hong Kong no longer believed that their children could do better than them. As a result, there is not a sense of hope and, without a sense of hope, society turns sour. The lack of affordable housing is egregious.

During colonial times, the HK civil service was conditioned to take instructions from London. The British approach was to govern firmly but lightly unless their core interests were affected, leaving people to
fend for themselves. After 1997, Beijing left Hong Kong to govern itself, not giving instructions the way London did. However, the HK Administration changed little; vested interests remained comfortably in place; and political leadership was lacking. Hong Kong has a well-developed social and economic establishment but not a political establishment. Under the British, it was not desirable for Hong Kong to have its own political culture. Perhaps China should have been more interventionist after 1997 but, for a variety of reasons, including the selfish interest of groups from the Mainland which found Hong Kong’s separate status convenient, it left things be.

Worse, the people of Hong Kong had to struggle with an identity crisis. Older Hongkongers had fled the Mainland during earlier periods of upheaval and distrusted Beijing - 1949, the Great Leap Forward, the mass famine of the early 60’s, the Cultural Revolution and June 4th. The majority of teachers from Primary One to University are anti-Mainland and pass prejudices against China, especially against the Chinese Communist Party, on to their charges. To be a student leader in university, you have to honour June 4th. Most Hongkongers know that they cannot be independent but many prefer not to identify themselves as Chinese citizens. At the top, they hold multiple passports.
When Deng Xiaoping proposed One Country, Two Systems, the precondition for it to work was that Hongkongers must not only love Hong Kong, they must also love China. 一国两制，爱国爱港 · 港人治港. In fact, loving China should come first but it will take time and much effort for that to be put right. National education in Hong Kong has been neglected for too long.

After leaving government in 2011, I joined Robert Kuok in Hong Kong. My wife and I shuttle back and forth between the two cities. Hong Kong has become for us a second home. We now have our own social circle there including a number of young Hongkongers interested in politics. Some of them are yellow, some are blue; all feel deeply for Hong Kong. We ourselves have developed an affection for Hong Kong and its people, and decided, after my retirement as Chairman of Kerry Logistics last year, to buy an apartment near Hong Kong University. Like many others, we were shocked by the rapid deterioration of Hong Kong in the last 8 months. Unlike many others, we remain cautiously optimistic for Hong Kong’s long-term future because of its special position half-in and half-out of China and the resilience of its people.

It is however not my intention to talk principally about Hong Kong today. The reason for my raising Hong Kong is because there are
larger, deeper forces at work in Hong Kong which affect the whole world. We have to be mindful of them because they affect us in Singapore too. These forces are unleashed by technology and challenge us morally.

I would like to highlight four in particular - the social media revolution, fragmentation and reconfiguration of human society, growing wealth and income inequality, and mass manipulation by new masters of the universe.

**Social Media Revolution**

First, the social media revolution.

When the Internet arrived in the 90’s, many saw it as liberating. It became much easier to access information. Patients have already googled their symptoms before seeing doctors and everything the doctor said and prescribed could be counter checked on the net.

In the same way, teachers are challenged by students, and government leaders by the citizenry. At home, parents have come to accept that, for many things and in many areas, they have to rely on their children for information and advice.
The social media revolution has disrupted old relationships. Everywhere, we see hierarchies breaking down. Old institutions, once preserved and sustained by ritual, secrecy, information asymmetry, hypocrisy, deception and force are being corroded. Traditional leaders are dragged down from their ivory towers and shown to be quite ordinary and fallible after all, their hypocrisy and corruption exposed by ubiquitous cameras and microphones.

When Pope Francis smacked an Asian lady twice on the arm after she grabbed him by his sleeve in St Peter’s Square and refused to let go, it immediately became news all over the world. The Pope quickly apologised the day after. A Mainland Chinese friend of mine told me that it actually made the Pope look quite good because it showed him to be human. It is just as well that Francis, since becoming Pope, frequently declares himself a sinner.

Old leadership models have become obsolete. Whether it is Pope Francis, President Donald Trump, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Elon Musk or Greta Thunberg, we are in a new situation. It sometimes seems as if a necessary qualification for leadership is to be publicly a sinner. The term used nowadays is ‘authenticity’ although that too is often manufactured.
Fragmentation and Reconfiguration of Human Society

Human society takes time to adjust to new technologies. The IT revolution shows no sign of abating. In fact, it is setting off concomitant change in other technological fields like biomedicine, material science and manufacturing. These changes in turn act upon one another, often in unexpected ways, causing even further disruption to the old order.

In his analysis of economic cycles, the Austrian economist, Joseph Schumpeter, wrote about creative destruction. What we see all around is the destructive phase of the technological revolution which is fragmenting human society. This fragmentation, which is the second force I am highlighting today, defines the age we live in.

Going back to Hong Kong, what characterises the protest movement is its fluid, leaderless, organic character. The social media reinforces beliefs and biases. Those who are yellow watch yellow sites, get angrier and become more yellow. For many, police officers have become the villains and even their family members are targeted. For those who are blue, the demonstrators are cockroaches to be smacked down. Views become highly, absurdly polarised. We hear of couples breaking up and parents who are no longer able to talk to their children. Unmediated positive feedback loops quickly become
unstable. The same phenomenon is evident in the US today, Taiwan during the recent elections, the UK when the Brexit debate was raging, and in many other countries.

Fragmentation is however not the end state. Gradually, the fragments recombine in new ways, similar to the pattern of neural networks. Nodes grow and compete with other nodes with which they are linked through multiple pathways. There is a biological quality about these new forms of organization. It is almost as if we are witnessing a Cambrian explosion of diverse organisational species. Those which successfully adapt to the new environment proliferate while others reach dead ends. Apple, Samsung and Huawei have very different organisational structures and systems. Which among them will still be successful ten years from now no one can foretell but for sure that there will be new winners and losers.

Losing faith in existing institutions, there is at one level a reversion to tribal networks of trust. Some of these networks are based on ethnicity and religion. Some years ago, Joel Koetkin in his book ‘Tribes’ wrote about the tribal networks which undergird global commerce like those of the Mormons, Jews, Parsees, Jains, Armenians and Chinese. Among the Chinese, there are regional networks which stand out like the Wenzhou connection. We also see new tribal networks
forming around specific causes such as LGBT rights, climate activism, even veganism.

There is an obverse and negative side to this phenomenon. Networks like Al Qaeda and ISIS have similar morphologies but are destructive. Anti-Semitism has also become more pronounced fuelled by groups which corroborate each other’s prejudices on the Internet. Positive or negative, politicians everywhere are quick to pick up populist causes to win votes, undermining the civil society which is the bedrock of democracy.

Political systems are subject to the same creative destruction. Western democratic systems no longer function well. Long-established political parties are fissuring. In many democracies, domestic political debate has become toxic. The seeming success of China’s system is an affront to western liberal democracies. China’s authoritarian Communism is not supposed to work well. Yet it has raised hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and enabled the country to join the front rank of nations in many fields causing the US to view it as a strategic threat. China sees its own system as unique and does not seek to export it to others. But China’s relative success does give hope and heart to many developing countries that there are other ways to the future. They do not have to take the path of western liberal democracies. I say ‘relative success’ because China too faces
enormous challenges. Political systems and organisations which are unable to evolve to new needs become dysfunctional and unstable.

Thus, at all levels, from the family to companies to political structures, we see continuing fragmentation, experimentation and reconfiguration. It is a process which can be described as Darwinian.

Growing Wealth and Income Inequality

The third force impacting society today is growing wealth and income inequality.

Wealth and income inequality in Hong Kong is an important underlying cause of the current unrest. According to a recent study by the Asian Competitiveness Institute at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, the inequality has gotten worse in recent years. Without a strong injection of socialism, Hong Kong society will remain fractured.

The problem is worldwide and not confined to Hong Kong alone. The impact of technological change on individual fortunes is uneven. Once upon a time, hardworking, responsible employees could expect their lives to improve year by year. Today many feel they are struggling to
run up a downward-moving escalator. Those whose work are repetitive are at great risk. Their jobs can be outsourced to countries where labour is cheaper. Or be replaced by robots and algorithms.

In contrast, those who are well-placed to seize new opportunities created by fragmentation prosper. For example, among new graduates, computer engineers command among the highest salaries. Many companies remain stuck in the past. Those who are able to disrupt them become rich and are lionized. When we look at the league table of the most successful companies in the world, the top positions are increasingly held by those in technology. In Singapore, Sea, which is a company specialising in gaming and e-commerce - a company which most Singaporeans have not heard of - has quite suddenly become one of the top companies, with a capitalisation half that of Singapore Telecoms.

The flood of global liquidity released by central banks after the Global Financial Crisis has unfairly benefited a relatively small group of companies and individuals, accentuating wealth and income inequality in the world. Those who are well-connected to governments and to wealthy families, especially in high finance and tech, are able to access cheap money while the great majority of small and medium enterprises pay higher interest rates. Inflation in asset
prices have skewed wealth further to those who are already wealthy. In many developing countries, those already invested in asset classes like property get richer while the rest struggle to buy a first home. This is being perpetuated down one generation. Many successful start-ups are founded by young men and women who are themselves scions of wealthy well-connected families.

Growing inequality of wealth and income exacerbates existing class and ethnic divisions in society. In many countries, large groups resent being systematically disadvantaged and left behind. This frustration, though still inchoate, has become widespread. ‘Yellow jacket’ protests in France are part of this phenomenon. There are eerie similarities between the protests in Hong Kong and those far away in Barcelona and Santiago.

**Mass Manipulation by the New Masters of the Universe**

The fourth force challenging us is the way big data and the social media are being used to manipulate the way we think.

The first phase of the internet revolution opened the floodgates to information access and eroded old power structures. For a short while, there was an exhilarating sense of equalisation. That phase has
ended. We are increasingly discovering how our minds are being manipulated by new masters of the universe.

Companies like Amazon, Google, Facebook, Alibaba and Tencent make use of the enormous data they collect to squeeze out competitors and influence our preferences often without our knowledge. In Singapore and elsewhere, a very high percentage of ad revenues is cornered by Google and Facebook because of the eyeballs they have captured.

A few weeks after the HK unrest started, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, in quick succession, blocked hundreds of sites which they claim besmirched protesters, giving the reason that these sites originated from China. Sites which supported the protesters were untouched. It is unclear who made these decisions but I don’t think they were made in Hong Kong. There is no doubt that the way friction is increased or reduced in different parts of the Internet can significantly sway public opinion. Trapped in an old mindset, the Hong Kong Government was unable or unwilling to intervene.

Other governments have no such inhibitions. India routinely shuts down the Internet in various cities when there are riots to calm public anger. Kashmir was denied the Internet for months, a decision which the Indian Supreme Court judged unlawful earlier this week. When
mass demonstrations erupted in Iran after fuel prices were raised, the government switched off Facebook causing Secretary Pompeo to threaten sanctions on those responsible. In the battle for hearts and minds in Iran, the US actively intervenes in the way Facebook, Twitter and Instagram cover developments in the country. Sympathetic coverage of General Suleimani has been systematically blocked.

The big powers devote considerable resources to the exploitation of the social media for political purposes. Domestically, they may be constrained by national law. Externally, there are no restrictions. In 2013, Edward Snowden revealed the existence of Prism, an incredible system developed by the US National Security Agency (NSA) to collect internet information worldwide. All governments would love to have such a capability but none can hope to, and certainly not on the same scale as the US except, possibly, China one day.

A key reason for the US campaign against Huawei is the fear that China may not only develop a similar surveillance capability but Chinese equipment and Chinese systems will make it harder for the US to maintain the same surveillance reach. For some countries like Singapore, the only safe assumption is that all systems expose us to external intelligence penetration. We have to find ways to protect ourselves and accept that nothing is fool proof. The challenge is made much harder with increasing dependence on clouds.
China makes no pretence about controlling the Internet. President Xi himself declared that the development of the Internet is an integral part of national development and not separate from it. All internet providers in China accept the leadership of the Communist Party. They have no choice. In fact, China is probably the first country to make extensive use of big data for national governance. Big data analysis has enabled China to overcome a problem which afflicted its governance system over the centuries. Because of the size of the country, there are many layers of administration making it hard for Beijing to know what’s happening on the ground. Corrupt officials often succeed in covering up problems by working with counterparts one level above to suppress complaints. When problems do reach the Centre, it is because they have already become big and serious. To overcome this defect, Chinese dynasties develop elaborate systems of inspection from the Imperial Court. Wrongs do get righted but they are so rare, the stories are immortalised in Chinese operas. With big data analysis, it is easier for Beijing to be alerted earlier. Information systems monitor the overall shape of data. When there are signs of inflammation, Beijing zoom in to find out more. Once lower level officials know that it is hard to cover up, they behave better. In fact, securities agencies like the NSA use similar methods to spot potential terrorist attacks by monitoring internet chatter.
In Xinjiang, China is criticized by western and Muslim countries for the way information is collected and used, including the mass deployment of facial recognition. Whether the Chinese method of curbing terrorism is more effective than the western method of acting forcefully only when the evidence has become clear is still an open question. The difference is not unlike the methods used for treating cancer. The western method of tackling terrorism is akin to surgery and chemotherapy such as the use of Predator drones to kill terrorists. The Chinese method is to treat the body politic holistically, gradually boosting its immunity. Immunotherapy however requires patience and a deeper understanding of complex reality.

For many westerners, China has become George Orwell's 1984. For many Chinese, the loss of privacy is a price worth paying for safety and convenience. There is probably no safer big country than China today. But will the centralization of control lead to massive abuse one day? The Chinese Communist Party is not immune to the same forces of change in the world. It has to evolve in response to new circumstances. By cracking down on corruption and re-establishing moral authority, President Xi Jinping has bought time for China and the Communist Party.
In the US, what intelligence and law enforcement agencies are allowed to do is the subject of a raging debate. Trump has raged against fake news since his Presidential campaign. Is the deep state out of control? Well it depends on whom you ask. There is also growing reaction against the big tech companies. Democratic candidate Elizabeth Warren is campaigning for their breakup, which alarms Mark Zuckerberg. She is a policy wonk and has thought through the implications of such a move.

In Europe, the General Data Protection Regulation, commonly known as GDPR, came into force two years ago. It provides some safeguard to the misuse or abuse of data collection. This may make it more difficult for Europe to catch up with the US and China in AI. However, the use of facial recognition technology is not likely to be held back because it is simply too useful.

Thus, we see in the world today a range of responses to the challenge of big data, in particular, the loss of privacy and the mass manipulation of public opinion.

In Singapore, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, commonly known as POFMA, is a brave attempt to
stem the same incoming tide. It is not easy but we should not stop trying.

**Moral Challenge**

The revolution in IT is enabling the collection, storage and processing of data on an unprecedented scale without theoretical limit. It is almost as if nothing that happens will ever be forgotten again. In China, to ensure better disease control, there is an effort to recognise every pig either facially or from the back. The pig population in China is almost half a billion. For computer engineers, this is a trivial problem. Every detail of every human being on the planet living today and in the future will eventually be monitored, recorded and analysed. With AI, his probable behaviour will also be known. It is a scary prospect.

This leap in the collective intelligence of human beings has a god-like quality about it. There does not seem to be any phenomenon which we cannot as a species potentially understand.

(As an aside, I do not believe that the kind of AI (Artificial Intelligence) Elon Musk talks about can replace collective human intelligence. AI requires either that there is sufficient past data about collective human behaviour to predict the future or that the rules of collective
human behaviour can be repeatedly simulated. Neither condition exists. The history of human civilisation is too short and too complex for AI to ever master.)

That which the technological revolution has unleashed is however two-edged. There is always a temptation to weaponise the newest technology in order to gain a military advantage. In the biological world, you either produce or you take away from someone else what he has produced. Anything which lives must solve the dual challenge of production and security. Thus, every new technology is used for both creation and destruction, for both good and evil.

It takes time for the moral sense of human beings to catch up with new technologies and to tame them. In the last century, mechanisation, mass production and nuclear energy led to the slaughter of over a hundred million people. Whether we will be wiser in this century is still an open question. There is an air of hubris in the way the new masters of the universe view their growing capabilities. This hubris infects us at all levels - state agencies which are carried away by the use of technology; politicians who rely on clever data analytics to manipulate voters; generals who fantasise unstoppable spears and impregnable shields; economists who believe that the manipulation of money supply can rid us of economic cycles;
corporate leaders whose ambitions know no bounds; successful tribes and wealthy individuals who are convinced of their own genetic superiority; scientists who tinker with germ lines to improve the quality of human beings; and computer engineers who see AI as the ultimate.

Memento Mori

It is said that in Roman times, a victorious general in a triumphal procession would have behind him a slave whispering into his ears 'memento mori' which means 'remember, you will die'. It is a warning against hubris, a call to humility and restraint when one is successful.

Whether as parents, teachers, doctors, government ministers or corporate leaders, we must therefore not lose our moral sense in the pursuit of achievement and success. It is important to contemplate human weakness, and the meaning of suffering and death. It is in pathos that we forge group solidarity. In an age of fragmentation, solidarity is vital. In everything we do, we must not ignore those who are wounded or have fallen by the wayside. Without this social glue, civilized society breaks down.

Tectonic change has caused the old edifices to crumble into smaller pieces. We must rebuild but with the expectation that the ground will
continue to quake. We need simpler structures which are flexibly linked to one another, like those in a Middle Eastern souk. Above all, we need solidarity which is the instinct to connect and bond.

Solidarity

Human society cannot be organized on the basis of law and the market alone. Laws only mark outer boundaries. Laws can require parents to look after children. Laws cannot make parents love their children, or vice versa. The market is a powerful way of allocating resources in a complex economy. But the market alone cannot solve many human problems. We are all familiar with Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ but we often forget that he was first and foremost a moral philosopher. Take the healthcare system for example. If doctors are only bound to their patients by the money nexus, many diseases will be poorly treated or mistreated however clever AI systems become.

Human society needs solidarity as a cohesive force to bind human beings together in cooperative effort. In traditional Confucius teaching, stress is put on five core values: 仁 义 礼 智 信 - broadly speaking meaning benevolence, justice, proper behaviour, wisdom and trust. All moral systems incorporate and elaborate these values. These values are deep in our nature and probably encoded in our DNA.
In order to remain relevant, these moral systems, which include religion and ideology, must adapt to new challenges thrown up by technology. Take 礼 or proper behaviour as an example. For human beings to interact, we need protocols facilitating communication and cooperation. When individuals are masked, whether in public or on the Internet, protocols are hard to establish. In anonymous settings, individuals quickly become irresponsible and abusive. Civilised behaviour requires behavioral responses which are generally agreed to and therefore predictable. Interestingly, it is protocols like TCP/IP which made possible the Internet in the first place. The fact of the matter is that there can be no freedom without accountability. Without a moral sense, the new freedom which technology offers destroys itself.

At the heart of the situation in Hong Kong today is a moral crisis. Two nights ago in Hong Kong, I had dinner with Gary Wong, a young Hong Kong political leader whom I have known for some years. Together with Jasper Tsang, former President of Legco, Raymond Mak, another young political leader whom I had dinner with the night PolyU was encircled and five others, they decided in the late evening of 18 November to enter PolyU which was then under siege by Hong Kong Police in order to persuade the few hundred remaining diehard
protestors to leave. They made the decision after receiving a WhatsApp message from a young girl in PolyU with a heartrending plea for help. After consulting Government leaders, the Police agreed for the group to enter on the understanding that the Police could not ensure their safety. Indeed, they were greeted by arrows on the draw pointed at them as they crossed the barricade. The campus was a war zone. They were shocked that among the protestors were many who were well-educated, some from well-to-do families. There were some girls who were as young as 12. Eventually, they succeeded in persuading some 70 protestors to leave. There were loud cheers when they came out. Not only by the crowd outside PolyU, but by many all over Hong Kong watching the drama on television and the social media. Chief Executive Carrie Lam decided wisely that those below the age of 18 could go home once they had their names registered.

The polarization in Hong Kong had reached a point when protestors who wanted to leave did not believe they could trust the authorities. The majority of Hong Kong youth today has developed a visceral antipathy toward the Hong Kong Police, yet it was not long ago when the Hong Kong Police was rated among the best in the world. And, from the other side, among many in authority and the older generation, there is anger and grief vis-a-vis a younger generation which had seemingly turned wayward. It will take time to clean the
wounds and for the wounds to heal. China has despatched former Party Secretary of Qinghai and Shanxi, Luo Huining, to Hong Kong. He is new to Hong Kong and will bring a fresh mind to bear on the problems. He will have to work with Hong Kong leaders who showed physical and moral courage, and wisdom, during the recent crisis to restore solidarity in Hong Kong and between Hong Kong and the Mainland.

In all fields, we need moral leadership. The great danger today is the revolution in technology outpacing the evolution of our moral sense. Whether in the private, public or people sector, in grappling with economic and technical questions, we should never de-emphasise moral considerations. It is common nowadays for decisions to be taken in an amoral way. An indifferent, amoral approach in a period of rapid technological change is possibly the greatest danger to humankind today. We must not be beguiled by a so-called post-truth world. The more complex the world becomes, the more must we affirm that which is at the core of our humanity.

The human quality of Prof Gordon Arthur Ransome as described by Prof Seah Cheng Siang is therefore worth recalling. “He is always ready to render a helping hand when a fellow doctor himself is in trouble. ...he has an ever-constant ear which in itself is
therapy. Time appears to him to be of no consequence when it comes to giving it to someone else. The distressed talks on and he listens. A few carefully chosen words of advice now and then provides the panacea.”

Abstract

Information technology is altering power relationships in human society. The first stage is destructive. Old institutions and hierarchies, preserved and sustained by ritual, secrecy, information asymmetry, hypocrisy, deception and force are being corroded. For example, the social media has forced leaders down from their ivory towers revealing them for what they are, warts and all. The relationship between parents and children, teachers and students, priests and laity, government and governed is all changing causing great stress to traditional society. The old world is fragmenting. The pieces are however reconnecting in new ways with patterns more akin to neural networks. New nodes are forming with multiple connections in ceaseless competition with other nodes. This reconfiguration is still in the initial stages. The gathering and processing of vast amounts of data create new power centers. Edward Snowden revealed the scope of US National Security Agency’s Prism project. The Chinese Government is concentrating more data than anyone else and using it
not only for surveillance but also to reduce corruption and improve governance. Huawei is but one example of the overt and covert competition for data at the political level. Commercially, tech conglomerates like Facebook, Google, Amazon, Tencent and Alibaba have been expanding at the expense of traditional players. There is now a growing political backlash at them. In the west, there are calls to limit their power either by breaking them up or regulating them more tightly especially in the way they make use of private data. In China, all tech companies know that they cannot afford to run afoul of the Chinese Communist Party. Will big data and AI lead to ever growing concentration of power? Is the future 1984? Or will clever computer minds succeed in creating decentralized internet webs and decentralized AI? It will take time for human relationships and human institutions to adapt to the revolution in technology. In the meantime, we must expect a long transition marked by disruption and confusion. All major advances in technology are marked by a choice between good and evil. Our moral sense is still struggling to catch up with the new powers being unleashed.