

INSIGHT

Reformers within

Andreas Fulda says a group of prominent Chinese who work within the system to advance democratic change have, remarkably, carved out a role denied their more liberal compatriots

Chinese author Mo Yan (莫言), winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, came under fire late last year for choosing not to condemn the principles of censorship, comparing it, perhaps flippantly, to inconvenient yet necessary airport security checks. Salman Rushdie took to Facebook to label Mo “a patsy of the regime” and criticise his refusal to sign a petition calling for the release of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo (刘晓明).

The episode highlighted the expectations among people outside China of how prominent Chinese should behave in their pursuit of changes to their political system. This narrow desire for black-and-white opposition politics risks overshadowing the efforts of a new generation of Chinese reformists who manoeuvre within official channels to push forward reform.

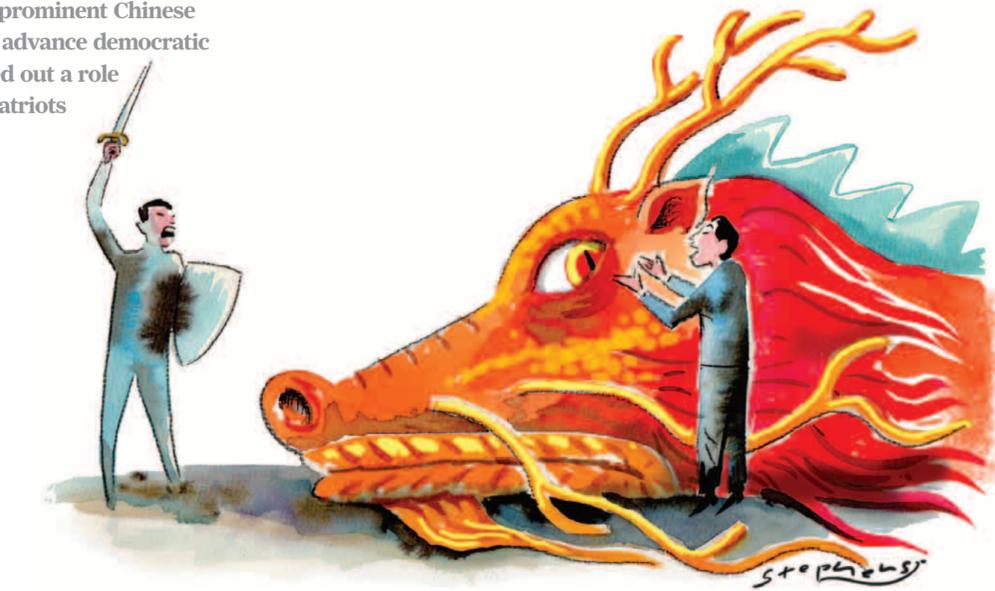
A man who typifies this generation is Yu Jianrong (于建嵘), a 50-year-old scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He was named in *Foreign Policy* magazine's list of Top 100 Global Thinkers “for daring to be specific about how to change China”. It followed his publication of a 10-year plan for China's social and political reform on the Chinese weibo.

He has been in the news again of late, launching a campaign for blanket and winter clothing donations for Beijing's homeless population, following reports that local security officials had begun confiscating the belongings of groups of people living on the streets despite sub-zero temperatures.

Yu, an establishment intellectual, is an unlikely poster boy for the Chinese democracy movement. He is a patriot first, a democrat second. His position on the East China Sea islands territorial dispute between China and Japan is emphatically nationalistic, much to the frustration of his liberal supporters within China, and in his 10-year plan he does not advocate civilian control of the Chinese military, as most other liberals in China do.

In contrast, outspoken libertarian activists like Liu Xiaobo and artist Ai Weiwei (艾未未) are clear-cut reformers, railing at government control from outside the system. Their cause offers a compelling narrative to the West. But the strong focus on activists outside the system comes at the expense of people like Yu, who are prepared to straddle both sides. Establishment intellectuals need to walk a fine line between their reformist aspirations and the existing political realities in China.

Both Liu and Ai were among the initial 303 signatories of Charter 08, a manifesto signed by Chinese intellectuals and hu-



man rights activists. Published in December 2008, it called for the establishment of a legislative democracy and the protection of human rights in China. Signatories have suffered harassment and political persecution but Yu, after sharing his 10-year reform plan that repackaged many of the principles laid out in Charter 08 with his 1.5 million weibo followers, has continued his political and academic work unimpeded.

The contrasting official reaction to both reform agendas can be explained, in part, by differing reform goals and means.

Yu, an establishment intellectual, is an unlikely poster boy for the democracy movement

Yu is working within the system to advocate incremental political reform and is frequently invited to lecture officials at training seminars funded by the Communist Party.

Signatories of Charter 08, on the other hand, consider immediate democratic reform a necessary condition for China's development, placing themselves firmly outside the current political system.

Unlike other establishment intellectuals, Yu has specified clear timescales for reform. He outlines the steps that will lead

to an open society with a free media and multi-party competition between 2016 and 2022. With this goal in mind, Yu suggests that in its first term, from 2012 until 2015, the new Chinese leadership should focus on social reforms and promote welfare policies, in particular pensions, employment rights and health-care insurance.

Yu calls for comprehensive reform to the household registration system, which limits rural-to-urban migration and has led to a system of first- and second-class citizens. To protect citizen rights, he has called for abolishment of the traditional petitioning system and re-education through labour.

Yu picked up on points laid down in Charter 08, but reshaped its reformist goals into a more procedural and watered-down agenda. The fact that his plan can be discussed both online and offline signifies a willingness among party officials to engage in open-ended discussions about democracy and human rights.

Embedded in the Chinese political system, Yu has real influence. At seminars held to “enlighten” extremely conservative officials, he reportedly scolds the cadres for their corrupt behaviour.

But he is careful not to cross key battle lines. While he advocates multi-party democracy, he is careful to place this reform step at the end of his 10-year plan. So far, his reformist gamble seems to have paid off, since it grants him greater access to senior officials.

Crucially, he is social-media savvy in building up a strong domestic following. He uses weibo to publicly reflect on reac-

tions to his ideas and proposals. He has described how senior officials agree with his reform plan. And he has revealed opposition to his proposals from within Tsinghua University, one of China's leading academic institutions, using the incident to secure widespread public support against his detractors.

Such is the size of his supporter constituency, he would be able to mobilise significant domestic support if ever the party were to decide he had crossed the line.

Due to the repression of reformers outside the system, policymakers dealing with China should recognise that more people like Yu will grow in influence in the years to come. This may be challenging. These patriots will first and foremost stand up for China's interests, yet the reality is that this is fairly representative of popular thinking in modern China.

In intellectual and political circles within China, there is no shortage of complaints about the directionless and trapped nature of the political transition process. Last November's 18th party congress, with its retrograde language and lack of a coherent vision of China's political future, is a case in point.

But for reformists both outside and inside China, there is cause for optimism. Establishment intellectuals like Yu are the people the West must learn to work with if it wishes to encourage political reform in China.

Dr Andreas Fulda is lecturer in contemporary Chinese studies at the China Policy Institute, based at the University of Nottingham's School of Contemporary Chinese Studies

Ramped up

Louisa Mitchell says the attention paid to disability issues in the policy address may well encourage activists to push even harder for change

Don't faint. I am going to say something positive about Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying's policy address last week.

Earlier this week, I attended a press conference held by a student-led social concern group at City University. It had undertaken a survey on the accessibility of the campus and attitudes towards disability and was publicising the results.

In general terms, the researchers found that much of City University was inaccessible to people with different physical disabilities, yet attitudes were positive. No great surprises there, but what struck me was the way the work was conducted and presented.

The students had co-ordinated across university departments, consulted the community, engaged external experts to conduct credible research and leaned on the students' union for resources. They had produced a comprehensive leaflet in which the results were clear and precise. The panel of speakers was articulate, professional and passionate.

As I sat listening to them present persuasively how physical accessibility was important but only part of the problem because it was co-ordination and total quality management that were required to change values and systems, I found myself musing about how people with disabilities have developed their voice. They have a strong ability to argue strategy and vision for how to ensure they are fully integrated in society, with access to equal opportunities, with evidence behind them and specifics on how to get there.

And that was when I saw Leung's policy address in a positive light for people with disabilities.

He gave disability more airtime than before, mentioning it in 13 paragraphs out of 200, compared to 7 out of 210 in Donald Tsang Yam-kuen's 2011-12 address.

Leung's reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities could be seen as a nod to the delegation of non-governmental organisation representatives who went to Geneva last September for Hong Kong's hearing with the related UN committee. Nearly all of their proposals were included in the committee's recommendations to the Hong Kong government.

Leung talked about fostering integration in society, mentioned employment as the key to achieving this, and committed to reviewing the role of the commissioner for rehabilitation to improve co-ordination.

Yes, you could argue it was short on specifics and lacked new policies. Most of the initiatives mentioned are already being implemented and there was no commitment to consider quotas and supported employment, to review the amount and eligibility of the disability allowance and multiple other things the community of people with disabilities have been calling for.

But I asked one active member of the community whether the address could be seen as an open door for pushing. She conceded that she saw a plank that could become a door.

If not exactly a positive response, it could well be the call to rally the increasingly vocal community of people with disabilities to seize the opportunities for change, and to remain united and articulate.

Louisa Mitchell is a research fellow (social policy) at Civic Exchange

Meek Lam has failed in his duty as EOC chief to champion gay rights

The recent public conduct of Equal Opportunities Commission chairman and Executive Council convenor Lam Woon-kwong reminds me of the bat in Aesop's fable, *The Bat, The Birds and The Beasts*.

In the story, when there was a great battle between the birds and the beasts, the bat fought on the side it believed would win. When the birds had the upper hand, the bat declared it was a bird. But when the beasts had the advantage, the bat switched sides and declared itself a beast. Lam has, of late, been rather like the bat.

As a staunch supporter of gay rights, Lam has long called for equal rights for homosexuals. He has been urging the government to launch a public consultation on the implementation of anti-discrimination laws.

In a recent radio interview, he expressed disappointment about the government's decision not to launch such a consultation, which he said would have been a reasonable first step.

But, he added, since the chief executive thought there was no urgency for the matter, he had to accept this political reality. And, no matter how disappointed he was, he said there wasn't much he could do.

He said the commission would continue to speak for people with different sexual orientations and called on the community not to give up on the fight to protect gay rights. So far, Lam has merely paid lip service to the cause.

When he was appointed to Exco last July, Lam made it clear that he would quit the council if there was any conflict of interest due to his dual roles.

Albert Cheng sees a clear conflict of interest, given the Exco convenor's reluctance to criticise the chief executive on anti-discrimination law



But, after he had been reportedly briefed by officials responsible for Hong Kong and Macau affairs, Lam apparently changed his tone. He said that since taking over the commission, he had delegated much of his power to senior staff and, as a result, he believed the chance of any conflict of interest would be minimal.

Lam made it clear he would quit if there was any conflict of interest due to his dual roles

Also, he had previously said that when his term expires at the end of this month, he would not seek another. Now, however, his term has been extended for two months, pending the appointment of a replacement.

Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying appears to have changed his mind about launching a public consultation on the anti-discrimination legislation due to strong opposition from the conservative pro-establishment camp. Leung's U-turn forced Lam to also shift his stance.

It was absurd to see former head of the Equal Opportunities

Commission and current Exco member Anna Wu Hung-yuk defending Lam by saying that his Exco role would help him in his fight as commission chairman to better protect minorities and the vulnerable. The truth is that neither of them have ever used the Exco platform to advance and promote the work of the commission.

Instead, Lam defended Leung's maiden policy address, praising his boss for his energy and vision. He even applauded Leung for being the first chief executive willing to tackle pressing issues such as land shortages, retirement protection, poverty and pre-school education.

Lam said he admired Leung's perseverance and the government's courage in choosing the treacherous path when tackling policy issues. This kind of praise-singing is undignified, to say the least.

After the new Exco was formed last July, I said that if the vulnerable in society continued to have no voice in the body, it would demonstrate that its members were all working for their personal interests. This is clearly the case.

Ironically, the Equal Opportunities Commission has recently released the findings of a public survey showing that 60 per cent of the respondents favoured consultation on a law to protect sexual minorities against discrimination. With

such strong public backing, why would the chief executive say society was still largely divided and insist on reaching a consensus before making a move?

Lam didn't have to accept Leung's decision not to consider a public consultation on an anti-discrimination law, he chose to do so.

Shortly after taking the helm at the Equal Opportunities Commission, Lam established a very high public profile by attacking the various policies of former chief executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen. He immediately became a man of the people.

In January 2005, Lam resigned as director of the Chief Executive's Office after a tabloid magazine published photographs of him and a woman friend at a Tokyo hotel. His decisiveness won a lot of applause at the time. Until he shows the same willingness to do the right thing again – which is to leave the Equal Opportunities Commission at the end of this month, as he was supposed to – he will be unable to reclaim any respect, grace and dignity. He should beware of the fate of the bat from Aesop's fable: it had to conceal itself in the dark, going out alone and at night, and never seeing the light of day again.

Albert Cheng King-hon is a political commentator. taipan@albertcheng.hk

> CONTACT US
Agree or disagree with the opinions on this page? Write to us at letters@scmp.com.

If you have an idea for an opinion article, email it to oped@scmp.com

Are Hong Kong's freedoms really being threatened?

Bernard Chan says a comparison with others is useful for self-reflection

There is a danger that we take international indexes of freedom too seriously.

Before Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying gave his policy address last week, some commentators warned that Hong Kong would lose its “freest economy in the world” status if it adopted particular policies on housing.

Let's say there was some sort of government intervention that would clearly benefit the community. Should the government not act, simply to keep the “freest economy” title? That would be absurd.

These indexes are compiled by people with an ideological agenda. What they call freedom is to some extent loyalty to their particular philosophy. Nonetheless, the data used to compile these lists can make interesting reading.

A few weeks ago, researchers linked to Canada's Fraser Institute added an index of personal freedom to the economic freedom index we know so well. Hong Kong comes third in the combined result. This is largely because of our commanding lead in economic freedom; in terms of personal freedom, we come in at around No 50 out of over 120 economies.

This personal freedom index has quite a few surprises. Albania is virtually neck and neck with the US, while El Salvador ranks ahead of Britain. Hong Kong's score is ahead of South Korea, Taiwan and – by a fair-size gap – Singapore. Indeed, Hong Kong ranks second in Asia, after Japan. Taken as a region, Asia ranks

alongside sub-Saharan Africa and comes ahead only of North Africa and the Middle East.

This leads us to the sort of criteria the personal freedom index compilers have used. They have drawn on data in several specific areas, including crime rates, freedom of speech, assembly, movement and religion, and controls on women and the media.

The impression I get is that the index is largely designed to penalise territories where seriously nasty things happen.

The survey shows we are clearly ahead of just about anywhere else in Asia

Things like torture, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment and female genital mutilation account for quite heavy weightings. Places where such inhumane behaviour takes place predictably make up the bulk of the countries in the lower part of the list.

The differences among the more stable and secure places seem to be largely of degree. Press freedom in Hong Kong, for example, is probably not so very different from that of South Korea or Taiwan, or from, say Britain's or Germany's. One area not covered is corruption; our

good record here would probably push Hong Kong's score higher, past some Latin American and Eastern European countries.

Looking at the whole survey, I think Hong Kong comes out of it better than some local critics might think. Some government opponents often warn that our freedoms – especially of assembly and the press – are under threat. But the survey (and personal experience travelling around the region) shows we are clearly ahead of just about anywhere else in Asia.

It is hard to pin down exactly how we have less personal freedom than the Netherlands, Ireland, Norway or Iceland – which all score very high. If we are significantly behind in some way, I would be interested to know how.

I am all in favour of our opposition politicians, civic society, churches, media and other groups being vigilant in defence of personal freedoms in Hong Kong. The reason Hong Kong is one of the freest, if not the freest, place in Asia is not simply because of administrative measures or legislative safeguards. It is because people cherish their freedoms and exercise them responsibly.

But it would be a pity if critics became the boy who cried “wolf”. I don't believe our freedoms are in danger. But if you constantly claim they are, who will listen if a real threat ever comes along?

Bernard Chan is a member of the Executive Council