

Models of Society: Faith, Forms and Political Imagination

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Abstract: This is a paper about the power that inspires poetry and life; human imagination. More specifically, it is about the role religion plays in stimulating and protecting this most precious personal and political gift. My thesis is simply this; imagination is a divinely – inspired human capacity for self – transcendence which is essential to human flourishing. Unless we dream, we die. Societies that suppress creative freedom and the exercise of individual or institutional, imagination eat themselves off from the deepest roots of human flourishing and are, as a result, ultimately self – destructive. Socio – political health is inseparable from individual health, harmony and happiness. Creativity creates and sustains just communities; imagination inspires greatness; frustration breeds dissent. Social tension should not surprise us, if creativity is suspect and imagination is absent. As captured by the poet WB Yeats, working without living leads to ‘raging in the dark’. Society without creativity is dull, lifeless, unimaginative, and most often unjust.

Key words: China, society, intellectual models, imagination

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Introduction

It is an immense pleasure and privilege to be invited to take part in this conversation. Thank you, Prof Zhuo and colleagues at CASS for making this possible. Like many, I am acutely aware of the new challenges facing China’s twenty – five year view of religion as a social good. So, where are we? And, perhaps more pertinently, what has gone wrong? I am delighted and honoured to have a chance to reflect with you on the way forward.

I begin with two quotations. The first from the Irish poet and playwright, WB Yeats (1865 – 1939), who in his poem ‘The Choice’ declares,

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark

The second quotation is from Pope Benedict XVI, in a speech he gave to the German Parliament, the Bundestag, on 22 September this year, quoting the fifth century theologian St Augustine – the recent translation and publication of whose works in China make his magisterial thought so much more widely available – “Politics”, Benedict declared, “must be a striving for justice”; for, as Augustine pointed out in his inimitable way, “Without justice – what is the State but a great band of robbers?”

But this is not a paper about poetry, nor about justice directly (you may be glad to know!). It is a paper about the power that inspires poetry and life; human imagination. More specifically, it is about the role religion plays in stimulating and protecting this most precious personal and political gift. The title of my paper is, “*Models of Society: Faith, Forms and Political Imagination*”. My

thesis is simply this; imagination is a divinely – inspired human capacity for self – transcendence which is essential to human flourishing. Unless we dream, we die. Societies that suppress creative freedom and the exercise of individual or institutional, imagination cut themselves off from the deepest roots of human flourishing and are, as a result, ultimately self – destructive. Socio – political health is inseparable from individual health, harmony and happiness. Creativity creates and sustains just communities; imagination inspires greatness; frustration breeds dissent. Social tension should not surprise us, if creativity is suspect and imagination is absent. As captured by the poet WB Yeats, working without living leads to ‘raging in the dark’. Society without creativity is dull, lifeless, unimaginative, and most often unjust.

My paper is, then, an invitation to consider – a. what model of society best expresses China today? And, b. what model of society new China would aspire to reflect? China and Chinese culture, in all their vast richness and diversity, have always reflected an immense capacity for creativity, born of an open ear to heaven’s call and a will to live well. But will China’s future continue to reflect this? Will it be known and respected globally, in years to come as a *just, imaginative society*? If so, religion will necessarily have a central place. For, as Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, argues, in the act of imaginative self – transcendence, there exist the contingencies for an encounter with all that is divine. The imaginative, ‘think big’. Indeed, we cannot imagine without God or neighbor. Divinity and altruism are essential elements in enlarging human vision and sustaining human creativity. If all I think about is me, *my society, my wants, my needs*, I cut myself off from creative, spiritual energy. My world shrinks. My society suffers. I cease to be at peace with God, self or others. The divinely – inspired capacity for self – transcendence creates and sustains dynamic, just, *imaginative societies*. We need little persuading, I hope, of the importance of imagination; after all, most famous inventions and achievements were the result of someone’s imagination. We perhaps do need reminding, as Albert Einstein once declared, “Imagination . . . is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”^① It is imagination, not knowledge, our world needs now and into the future, if we are to survive and thrive.

I. Tools for the task

I want to use two heuristic devices in this paper to unlock the complexities of religion and contemporary Chinese society. One is ‘imagination’, which we have touched on already and will return to later; the other is that of ‘models’, which I propose we look at now. Come back to the two – part invitation I issued earlier, which is at the heart of this paper; namely, a. what model of society best expresses China today? And, b. what model of society would new China aspire to reflect? Use your imagination to listen as I do to communicate.

Intellectuals are well – acquainted with the use of ‘models’ to describe all manner of forms and fields of enquiry. In addition to *physical* models (that generate in scale, substance or image another idea, entity or reality, i. e. scale models, biological models, model trains or aircrafts), *human* models (that promote, sell, embody or inspire artistically, i. e. heroes, nudes, celebrities, icons), and *abstract* or semantic models (that conceptualise, interpret, map, calculate, or give structural form to an idea, theory, or working hypothesis), we have become accustomed to the *applied* use of models in the development and teaching of business and macroeconomics, computers

^① Viereck, George Sylvester, “What life means to Einstein; an interview”. *The Saturday Evening Post* (October 26, 1929).

and graphics, statistics and mechanics, systems and theories. Hence 'model' is applied to the related activities of business processes and molecular biology, scientific theory and social analysis, engineering and ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). Years ago I was hugely impressed by the way the theologian, philosopher Cardinal Avery Dulles SJ (1918 – 2008), used 'models' to describe and interpret the Church and Revelation (see *Models of the Church*, 1974; *Models of Revelation*, 1985)⁽²⁾. Here was a use of 'model' to encapsulate and expound mysteries and dogmas, theories and decrees. In his *Models of Revelation*, Dulles speaks of his quest to find an appropriate philosophical method to begin to speak of revelation that was free of theological circularity. He also speaks of "the value of models for theology"; particularly as a way of grouping what he calls "major constellations" of thought and thinkers, which share a certain "angle of approach that predetermined the answers to many particular questions"⁽³⁾ (p. viii). Others, of course, have used the category to expound the finer points of cosmology and philosophy over the years; Dulles uses an essentially scientific tool to interpret Christian tradition. He shows how a 'model' is, in reality, just a useful, malleable, heuristic device to explain, expound, describe and encapsulate in a succinct, often tangible or visual way, a set of data, another reality, or a new world of meaning. Through a judicious use of 'models' a presenter and receptor meet at depth on common ground at the very heart of an issue.

II. Models of society

It is natural we apply 'models' to understand society generally, and interpret China specifically today. We might do the same to Britain or America, of course, and could draw interesting parallels and contrasts. But our focus here is China, as we ask; a. what model of society best expresses China today? And, b. what model of society would new China aspire to reflect? One asks about the present, one the future. Put more sharply, we are also asking, what model best describes the way religion functions in contemporary Chinese society?

Applied to society generally, 'models' may direct us to summary accounts of different forms of government, or instruments of power, to distinctive visions of community or features of culture, to dominant economic theories and popular narratives of history or development. Hence, we speak, of 'democratic' or a 'patriarchal', societies, of 'totalitarian regimes' and 'feudal theocracies', of 'Keynesian' or 'free – market capitalisms', of 'pre – or 'post – modern' communities, of 'agrarian', 'industrialised', and 'post – colonial' societies. The list is immense. Indeed, we may have to use more than one model to capture change or conflict, progress or retrenchment in any given situation. Societies change. I sensed when I lived on the edge of Washington DC in the late – 80s and early – 90s that I was witnessing the apogee of American imperialism; as a historian, it was fascinating. But the world has moved on. In the context of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the global economic crisis, the rise of China, the new plausibility of post – secularism, the so – called Arab Spring and the renewed confidence in Turkey, new models must be used to describe many societies, be they British, American, French, German, Greek, Italian, Indian, Egyptian or Chinese. This is good and right. Few places are easy to encapsulate; certainly not China! Fine; models should never stultify or constrain, they should always liberate and energise. What interests me here is the impact application of a model has on a society's identity or self – un-

(2) Avery Dulles SJ, *Models of the Church* (Doubleday, 1974) *Models of Revelation* (Doubleday, 1985)

(3) Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, viii

derstanding; indeed, we may wonder, who has the right to apply or own, a model for a particular society. I might want to imagine Britain is still a Christian country, but members of the British Humanist or Secular Societies will disagree. India may claim to be an industrialised Super - Power, but 500 million, impoverished Dalits will dissent. America may still claim to be Number One; but China, among others, will surely question their claim. 'Models of society' are negotiated as much as applied; they are challenged as often as they are accepted. We may say to friends, 'China's view of Communism has changed'; but overseas critics and Party Members may say, no. 'Models' have a way of clarifying identity, of challenging, and refining self - understanding. It is not enough for a government or an individual to proclaim a particular self - perception or international position; identity is negotiated, 'models' are tested, self - definition accountable, behavior significant. We are what we do.

Come back to our key questions - a. what model of society best expresses China today? And, b. what model of society would new China aspire to reflect? And, again, what model best describes the way religion functions in contemporary Chinese society? Our problem in answering any of these is, now, as we have begun to see, not only that they are inherently complicated questions *per se*; the answers we give to them are essentially contestable. 'Models' offer opportunities for understanding and dialogue; they do not remove the need for thought. 'Models' propose ways of seeing things; they have no power to determine ultimate reality. So behind our questions lies lurking the bigger issue of, who defines what and why and for whom in society? Put another way, what right does any individual, or institution, have to determine a model for a society? Does the outsider, the insider, the friend, the critic, the government, or the people have the right? In numeric terms, we might ask, how many people are needed for a model to be deemed accurate, or determinative? As we know from flawed Western democracies, numbers of votes and an electoral mandate are not the same.

Political discourse always struggles when it confuses aspiration with achievement, intention with reality. As the Conservative government in the UK has discovered, to commend 'Big Society' thinking (i. e. that individuals and communities should understand they have a civic responsibility locally to effects things nationally) is *not to create* 'Big Society' attitudes. As we all know well, talk of the 'Harmonious Society' in China does not create - and certainly has not created! - a 'Harmonious Society'. Aspiration is not the same as attainment. *But* 'models of society' begin to function differently when they arise *from within* a community, and are not imposed *from outside*. As I know from my wife's African child - hood, Kenya wasn't liberated on the day the British colonial mandate ended. It was truly free on the day Kenyan's themselves took charge of their destiny; that took years. China will only be a 'Harmonious Society' when the majority of Chinese will and work for it. The imposition of a model *from above* does not effect the reality *from within or from below*; people must value and own the vision.

So, the issue isn't simply, who determines the dominant model of, or for, a society (in China's case, who decides what constitutes the 'Harmonious Society'?), but how is that model realized and sustained? In terms of this conference, the issue is, what role does religion have in helping or hindering the development and promulgation of that social vision? Put differently, what model best describes the way religion does, will and should function, in Chinese society? As we have seen, the imposition of a model from above, or outside, will have little effect, unless the model, the vision - the soul of it, we might say - is owned by the populace at large.

I have taken some time on this issue of 'Models of Society' because it is important both *methodologically* (understanding how models function) and *strategically* (preparing the way for a clearer account of the role of religion in contemporary Chinese society). Except we grasp the way 'models'

function we will miss the risk and opportunity their usage present.

III. Weber and ways of thinking about Chinese society

In this next section, I want to look briefly at Max Weber (1864 – 1920), who knew and wrote a lot about societies, and has profoundly influenced the way new China understands itself; not least for the way his second major study, in his magisterial series on religions and societies (so tragically cut short by his early death), *The Religion of China; Confucianism and Taoism* (1915; adapted 1920)^④, questions Confucianism's capitalist capability and commends the creative energies of Western Christendom.

Weber's seminal study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904)^⑤ boldly conjoins two models of society and in the process creates a third. First, he encapsulates Protestant morals and social theory as simply 'The Protestant Ethic'; ignoring the inherent diversity and habitual dispute characteristic of much historic Protestantism! He then coins the term 'the Spirit of Capitalism', as if all know the meaning and power of capitalism. He then proposes in the title of his book, a third inevitable, commendable, dynamic, "elective affinity" between aesthetic Protestantism and spirited capitalism. It is a thesis as attractive to its adherents as it is implausible to its critics, for whom either Protestantism or Capitalism are highly suspect social philosophies!

We all know, though, how influential Weber's translated works have been in modern China. The architects of China's social or religious, policies have, however, been as guilty as Weber, for either co-opting his thought to their agenda, or inserting his model of society into theirs as the best way of understanding and shaping contemporary China's attitude towards Christianity. In light of what we have seen in the previous section, this is not the way societies work. We now know that when 'models of society' are imposed on society they turn from liberating ideals to enforced – but ultimately unenforceable – dogma. We do Weber a disservice if we think he would be happy with this; far from it. It is crucial we recognize that, though we may question Weber's analysis, that is all it was, analysis; and so to him fallible and susceptible of criticism and correction. He claimed no more. To turn Weber into a necessary dogma about religion and society is a simplistic error. His was an exercise in social and political imagination, borne of thought and a will to explain; not a desire to dominate or determine. What's more, if he has indeed inspired China's social vision, and admission of religion, he should also be permitted to vindicate the value of imagination for a society. As he makes clear in his 1897 essay, "Objectivity" in Social Science', both sociology generally, and cultural analysis in particular, depend on the exercise of imaginative subjectivity in a way the natural sciences do not; as he wrote,

There is no absolutely "objective" scientific analysis of culture... All knowledge of cultural reality... is always knowledge from particular points of view. ... An "objective" analysis of cultural events, which proceeds according to the thesis that the ideal of science is the reduction of empirical reality to "laws," is meaningless... The knowledge of social laws is not knowledge of social reality but is rather one of the various aids used by our minds for attaining this end. ^⑥

In other words, Weber saw a necessary connection between social analysis and human creativity; to separate them was to engage in either bad sociology or bad government. He aspired to neither, and nor should we.

④ Max Weber, *The Religion of China; Confucianism and Taoism* (1915; adapted 1920; ET 1951)

⑤ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904; ET 1930)

⑥ Max Weber, *Sociological Writings*, Excerpts

But there is more to be said about Max Weber. For, if he is generally useful for illustrating how ‘models of society’ do and do not function, he is particularly useful for the light he sheds on the changing profile of religion in a postmodern, post – secular world. I was struck the other day, at a conference in Bangalore on religion in the contemporary Indian ‘public square’, by the abiding value accorded Weber’s thought. One paper in particular drew heavily on Max Stackhouse’s contemporary re – evaluation of Weber in a 2010 article, ‘Max Weber: A Modern – Day Globalization Guru?’^① To Stackhouse, Weber’s value continues to lie in the connection he established between forms of religion and types of culture or society. Following Weber, Stackhouse argues, if Protestantism produced capitalism, contemporary Christianity (with its holistic world – view and attention to universals) inspires globalization. To Stackhouse, this (seemingly simplistic) theme “remains among the most promising lines of enquiry in a world in which the idea that secularization is the inevitable result of modernization seems quite senile.” In other words, Weber’s bold ‘model’ that connected Protestantism and capitalism has spawned another that now connects Christianity and globalization. What’s more, the truth of this new model has, to Stackhouse, been proven by its exposé of the myth that modernity is necessarily antithetical to spirituality. No, argue Weber and Stackhouse, modern, and post – modern societies can be, and often are, deeply and abidingly religious.

In drawing on Weber for inspiration, the framers of China’s religious policy may have underestimated the degree to which human spirituality is both a necessary and a good part of dynamic, globalised cultures. For, if, Christianity is inherently – because theologically – global (the body of Christ is always and indivisibly one), Chinese Christianity will always find here both intellectual and spiritual resources to survive secular criticism and to thrive as a dynamic participant in a globalised world. For, as Weber and Stackhouse make clear, Christianity belongs to that larger global reality in which spirituality and society naturally co – inhere. What Stackhouse calls the “systemic amnesia about these motifs” is striking; as he points out, “It means that we are driving with few mental maps as to where we came from, where we are going and how we are going to where we want to be.”^② That is no way to run a responsible, let alone an *imaginative* society in a new, globalised world.

IV. Political imagination and the gift of religion

We spoke earlier of imagination and return to it now in this brief, final section. However we describe it, imagination is one the most remarkable of humanity’s capacities. Studied by psychologists and literary critics, philosophers and theologians, artists and advertisers, imagination is our capacity to form mental images from words, feelings from sound, new ideas from almost anything; as Edward Casey begins his 1976 monograph *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*^③, quoting the philosopher Bertrand Russell, “Imagination, not slavery to fact, is the source of whatever is good in human life.”^④ We are not speaking of something peripheral to human life and the political process. We are speaking of that which arises from and directs us to, their very heart and soul. For, imagination gives us sight, sound, sense and experience to terrify and delight, inspire and dread. It

① Max Stackhouse, ‘Max Weber: A Modern – Day Globalization Guru?’ (Part V), www.theglobalist.com, April 08, 2010, accessed October 29, 2011

② Max Stackhouse, ‘Max Weber: A Modern – Day Globalization Guru?’

③ Edward Casey, *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (Indiana UP, 1976)

④ *Ibid.*, viii

gives substance to words, meaning to experience, purpose to action and hope to the dying. It turns words on a page into a story we inhabit, a play on stage to a life we live. Scholars disagree about how words shape worlds; we cannot doubt they do, like instruments music, lips smiles and eyes tears.

Applied to politics and society imagination can, we have begun to see, exert immense power. In Max Weber's imaginative mind Protestantism turns from a socio-theological act of personal faith into socio-economic form of corporate, moral behaviour. In his later lecture, *Politics as a Vocation* (1919) he goes further and proposes a bold, moral vision for the worthy leader, in which ethical 'conviction' (*Gesinnungsethik*) and personal 'responsibility' (*Verantwortungsethik*) are the ideal-typical forms of value and of instrumentally-rational action. Nicholas Cane, in his monograph *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory* (2002)^①, helpfully connects this later aspect of Weber's thought with the theme of this paper as a whole and of this final section in particular. For, Cane argues, when Weber wrote of 'the politics of vocation' he was addressing the widespread disenchantment with life he saw around him in the midst of war. As Weber famously declared, "The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.'"^② This is, Cane maintains, "the closest Weber comes to formulation of a concept of human virtue."^③(p/8) Its root is essentially religious; for enchantment is the divine gift of faith imagination inspires. Hence, Weber's virtuous leader, who faces widespread social disenchantment, and is not himself disenchanted, is exercising faith. Seen in this light, political imagination is the glorious, necessary, virtuous, faith-filled gift a leader, thinker, or community exercises when they transcend the immediate with a new vision of life. This did not mean to Weber that politicians should aspire to be saints; it did mean they should be good. Many have criticized Weber for placing an impossible burden on the leader. Not Karl Jaspers, who defends him, "If Max Weber's demands were excessive, the human situation was to blame, not his lack of realism."^④ Part of the abiding power of Weber is this extraordinary capacity to look at the world as both an intellectual idealist and a pragmatic realist. His imagination, surely, enabled this rather unique combination.

But, we may ask, where is this virtuous re-envisioning of life most often to be found? Not in communities disenchanted by rationalization (and rationalism!), defeated by death, fearful of life and dreading war. Nor, surely, in communities that have lost the will or capacity to imagine another way of being and another style of life. It is in individuals and communities attuned to the potentiality of humanity to transcend themselves in a creative act of God-given imagination who are most likely to inspire hope, vision, new possibilities and an end to injustice. For faith is antithetical to deterministic materialism. It resists easy conformism by encouraging a spirit that soars. It sees political forms as provisional realities and physical means as limited and limiting ends. Welsh scholar, Raymond Williams (1921 - 1988), classic Marxist study, *Culture and Society: 1780 - 1950* (1958)^⑤ may have helpfully illuminated the complex ways economic reality shapes the imagination, and laid the foundations for cultural studies and cultural materialism, but his work pre-dates the new recognition that religion and modernity can creatively coexist. Imagination may be stimulated by loss and gain, money and poverty, freedom and injustice. But to impose one socio-economic model upon

① Nicholas Cane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory* (Palgrave, 2002)

② q. Basit Bilal Kodhal, *The postmodern significance of Max Weber's legacy: disenchanting disenchantment* (Marshall, 2006), 11

③ Cane, 78

④ q. Stockhaus, 'Max Weber: A Modern-Day Globalization Guru?'

⑤ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780 - 1950* (Columbia UP, 1983; first publ. 1958)

its origin is akin to snatching at smoke or predicting the wind. Imagination is in so many ways the most humble and most exalted act a human can perform; for when we imagine, we admit we are not the only reality inhabiting the world, nor the least powerful, for we can transcend it in our mind and re-imagine it in our dreams and creeds and prayers.

Conclusion

In this paper we have looked at imagination as the divinely given capacity for an individual, institution or community to think outside the immediate in an act of self-transcending creativity. When harnessed to the desire for self-fulfillment, or self-improvement, the imagination can be an immensely powerful tool. Applied to society, social imagination is one of the most important creative devices humans possess. To say of a society that it is *imaginative* is to give it high praise indeed. But imagination, like creativity, comes at a price. Creativity, like imagination, is compromised if all that is considered is *what's good for me*. Egoism may be pleasant in the short-term; it is ultimately destructive long-term. Similarly, though altruism may be costly short-term it is essentially self-propagating long-term. Imagination runs out of steam, when I am both the subject and the object of my dreams; it continues indefinitely if its attention is directed to others. So my self-fulfillment and my self-improvement can only be ultimately realised if they are the fruit of a negotiated social contract. Applying Kant's core ethical test of reciprocity to my behaviour in society, the acquisitive society is necessarily impulsive and self-destructive, the altruistic society is creative and sustainable, and the *imaginative* society full of both humility and self-confidence.

Which brings us back to Weber; we do Weber (like Tawney) a further disservice if we see him as proclaiming, or describing a selfish, capitalist society; far from it. What makes his vision of society so revolutionary and compelling is that he envisaged the possibility of a society which balanced self-fulfillment with altruistic social development. As long as the Chinese social programme separates the true drivers of altruism from the need for socio-economic development, social tension and destructive greed will prevail. For, it is religion that most often envisions and empowers an altruistic view of life. To love one's neighbour as oneself is unnatural; it is supernatural. It remains unattained and unattainable without the sense of accountability that flows from prior love for God.

So, what of our models of society for China today? Surely, the model that we should most energetically pursue is a genuinely communitarian view of society, in which self matters as much as neighbour, and neighbour matters as much as me. This model is most aptly termed reciprocal, or respectful. Such a society is only achieved when the leadership itself models the behaviour it expects of others. The imposition of altruism, like the enforcement of philanthropy or legislation of generosity is as impossible as it is vain. It is the humility born of piety which is the breeding ground of a leadership that can engender such a society. For great leaders have first great souls and humble spirits, before they have expansive visions and devoted followers. And they will be passionate about that greatest act of human imagination, justice; for justice imagines a society in which each individual is accorded a protected space for dreaming and developing, sowing and reaping, loving and enjoying life. In contrast, an unimaginative society is repressive and fearful, protectionist and petty. No wonder Catholic Christendom echoes still with Augustine's wonderful warning, "Without justice—what is the State but a great band of robbers?"

中文题目:

社会模式:信仰、形式和政治想像

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提要: 本文探讨刺激诗歌与生命的力量,即人类的想像。更具体地说,它关于宗教在刺激和保护这个最珍贵的个人性与政治性礼物时所扮演的角色。我的论点非常简单:想像是人类的一种为了自我超越的神圣性灵感能力,对于人类的繁荣来说它是根本性的。如果我们没有梦想,我们会死亡。压制创造性自由和个人及团体想像之实践的社会,将会从人类繁荣的最根本之处切断自己而最终将会毁灭自己。社会-政治的健康不可能与个人的健康、和谐与幸福想分离。创造性将能创造和支持公义的社团;想像能刺激卓越;虚度光阴将制造纷争。如果没有创造性和想像的话,社会冲突将会毫无疑问地出现。正如诗人叶慈所说,没有生活的工作将会“发生在黑暗中”。没有创造性的社会是愚蠢的、没有生命的、缺乏想像的和最不公正的。

关键词: 中国、社会、知识模式、想像

