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Deng's China: From Post-Maoism to Post-Marxism

Kalpana Misra

Ideological reorientation in China, which began in the late-1970s, was borne out of the need to invalidate the hitherto 'standardised' and 'immutable' Soviet socialist model, and to move beyond the limitations of classical Marxism. In emphasising subjectivity and a moral-ethical interpretation of humanism, which was found lacking in Lenin's theory of reflection, the post-1978 thinking undermined the centrality of class and ultimately the party's claim and authority as a representative entity. Yet this intellectual reassessment failed at furnishing a new persuasively and coherently articulated ideological framework since it did not address the adverse long-term political and socio-economic consequences of economic liberalisation.

The post-Tiananmen period has seen a simultaneous emergence of neo-conservatism, a nostalgia for the Mao era and the receptivity to New Confucianism, as an effort to address the loss of central authority and the consequent ideological and political fragmentation by having recourse to a blend of selective western ideas and institutions with the traditional Chinese values. The post-Mao change of course illustrates the 'orientational crisis' that has enveloped Chinese socio-economic cultural order after it can no more be contained by an official orthodoxy.

IDEOLOGICAL developments in the Deng Xiaoping era were reminiscent of developments in the international communist movement in the wake of the historic 20th congress of the CPSU. In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe Khrushchev's denunciation of the grim realities of the Stalinist era marked a watershed. But as far as leaderships and political regimes were concerned, de-Stalinisation delivered much less than one had been led to expect. On the other hand, for Marxist intellectuals, both in the east and the west, it was the beginning of a period of creativity, intellectual liberation and reconstruction, prompted by critical questioning of orthodoxy and a new interest in other non-Marxist intellectual traditions.¹

Ideological reorientation in China began in the late 1970s with an easing of restrictions on party intellectuals under the sponsorship of the new general secretary, Hu Yaobang. Given Deng Xiaoping's limitations as a theoretician, or his lack of interest in the finer aspects of ideological discourse, the task of revitalisation devolved entirely on a broad base of theoretical workers. The intellectual pluralism made possible by this was enhanced by the divisions within the leadership on the questions of the extent and direction of further reform and reassessment of previous policies. The precise extent of freedom and autonomy characterising debate and discussion varied with periods of liberalisation, alternating with demands for conformity. Nevertheless, in the decade and a half or so after the return of Deng Xiaoping, the diverse and voluminous amount of theoretical activity which had

resulted from the effort to explain the significance of the Chinese experience in constructing socialism was being compared by observers and participants alike in scale and intensity to the May 4th movement.

The first direct reflection of the post-Mao shift was evident by early 1978 with the launching of a nationwide campaign to 'seek truth from facts' which epitomised Deng Xiaoping's strategy of downplaying theory in favour of a 'more flexible and utilitarian standard' to evaluate a new set of priorities and policies.² The new emphasis on practice, however, early on exposed the cleavage within the post-Mao coalition, between 'upholders' and 'developers' of Marxism, i.e. those who would attempt a restructuring of the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist-Maoist legacy without abandoning its basic assumptions, and others who preferred to move on to a new paradigm of relativism for understanding 'facts'. For the former, relativism was no solution for the need was a 'seal of scientific authority' to authenticate their selection of some doctrinal tenets over others. The extent of their commitment to the slogan 'practice is the sole criterion of truth' was illustrated in the enunciation of the Four Cardinal Principles³ that established boundaries for debate which could be entirely arbitrary.

The position of the latter group of theorists signalled an intent to remove the stigma from 'revisionism' and make the idea of revision itself a sign of vitality and theoretical creativity. The orthodox definition of Marxism as a science provided the justification for its supersession by new discoveries and innovations. Intellectual supporters of radical reform pointed

out that the development of science was not a continuous process of accumulation of knowledge but a discontinuous and revolutionary one in which earlier conceptions and theories were falsified, rejected, and replaced by new theoretical constructs.⁴

However, the attempt to fashion a new ideological consensus within the party was essentially a failure. The discussions on practice became, in a real sense, a fertile breeding ground for the scepticism and doubts about the validity and relevance of Marxism which would be emphasised prominently in the coming decade by the astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, literary critic Liu Zaifu, and many others. For these individuals, Marxism had become an epistemological obstacle, an outmoded perspective that needed to be replaced by newer ones. The motivation of the Chinese leadership in espousing an 'irrelevant and obsolete' theoretical framework when it appeared to be pressing for innovation on other fronts was at first inexplicable, and then, inherently suspect.

Radical reformist attempts to extend the terms of intellectual debate were countered at every step by moderate⁵ attempts to contract the agenda. A theory conference convened in 1979 under the aegis of Hu Yaobang (then head of the propaganda department) set the agenda for a comprehensive political and philosophical critique of 'ultra-leftist' policies and the Maoist theory of capitalist restoration. The principal themes for discussion by intellectuals like Wang Ruoshui, Su Shaozhi, Li Honglin, Yu Guangyuan et al included not merely the origins of policies linked to the Great Leap Forward (GLF) and the

Cultural Revolution, but more fundamental ones regarding historical development and the nature of the Chinese Revolution. The evolving discussions on epistemology, stages of socialism, and China's feudal characteristics brought home to the moderate leadership the significance of Lukacs' insistence, two decades earlier, that revision could not be undertaken piecemeal without estimating the consequences for the entire doctrine. The retreat of Yang Xianzhen, Deng Liqun, and Hu Qiaomu on the question of de-Maoification revealed the complexity of the situation where critiques of Maoist 'voluntarism and subjectivism', the GLF and the Cultural Revolution could be logically extended to the pre-liberation period and the Communist Party's path to power, and ultimately socialism itself as a system and model of development.⁶

In the early post-Mao period, CASS theorists Su Shaozhi and Feng Lanrui's attempt to locate China in a pre-socialist phase and hence obviate the need to justify economic reform in terms of its compatibility with socialism was a significant development.⁷ It reflected the spirit of the debate on practice yet retained the Marxist perspective and remained doctrinally defensible. Their thesis that China was still a transitional society was not simply a modification of the official Chinese position, but also indicated a new willingness to accept the validity of other Marxist analyses such as the Yugoslav conception of socialism, or those of theorists like Bettelheim, Sweezy, and Mandel. In the Chinese context it was a novel, yet theoretically consistent analysis which provided an objective and systemic explanation of CCP errors as well as a justification for the 'step backwards'.

A prominent influence on Su seems to have been the Polish economist, Włodzimierz Brus who emphasised 'the aspect of continuity' between capitalism and socialism so that 'it is precisely from the changes taking place in the world of mature capitalism that one can derive, amid zigzags and conflicts, with varying strength in different countries, the continuing tendency towards socialism as the stage logically following capitalism'.⁸ Such an analysis provided a critique for the Maoist attempt to make the transition to socialism 'in conditions of immaturity'; it also validated the introduction of capitalist features which 'continue' to be of use in the socialist stage; and asserted a linear progression of history in which less developed countries such as China were actually a step ahead, having undergone a proletarian revolution.

Similarly, Wang Ruoshui (deputy editor, *People's Daily*) and Zhou Yang's (deputy director of the propaganda department and chairman, All China Federation of Literary and Art Circles) explanation of dictatorship and authoritarianism in terms of 'alienation of power' in a society 'still constructing socialism' was, at the time, neither a violation of Marxism nor necessarily an enunciation of a law of alienation as CAS president Hu Qiaomu and Politburo member Wang Zhen contended.⁹ Their reaction to alienation theorists, critics of feudalism, and the authors of 'undeveloped socialism' stemmed from the same basic assumption. To accept China's backwardness in terms of productive forces or class character as well as the thesis that alienation, in any form, existed in contemporary Chinese society was to acknowledge the limitations of 'socialist transformation' or that China's socialism was not genuine. Such an allegation not only undermined the achievements of the leading core but also came dangerously close to vindicating the views of ultra-leftists and Democracy Wall theorists on bureaucracy and the emergence of new exploiting groups in post-revolutionary societies.¹⁰ The moderates' response illustrated their reluctance to countenance too rapid and fundamental a revision of doctrine, as well their concern with retaining party prestige as a guarantee of social and political stability.

Despite moderate opposition, radical reform theorists continued to broaden the terms of debate by analysing and disseminating the wide array of Marxist and non-Marxist writings available outside China.¹¹ Critiques of Stalinism in humanist and historicist Marxism and the works of Althusser, Lukacs, Gramsci, Rudolf Bahro, Pavel Campeanu, the Frankfurt School, Branko Horvat, Ferenc Feher, Agnes Heller, Gyorgy Markus, and others, had immense appeal. So did Kant, Locke, Montesquieu, Prigogine, Alvin Toffler, and Milton Friedman.

The presentation of this diversity followed from the reformers' perception of the need to invalidate the hitherto 'standardised' and 'immutable' Soviet socialist model, and to move beyond the limitations of even classical Marxism reflected in its assumptions regarding capitalist crises and slow-down of growth, the impoverishment and expansion of the proletariat, sharpening class contradictions, and the prospect of socialist revolution in capitalist societies.¹² Following CASS president Yu Guangyuan's injunction that "even universal principles of Marxism are not ready-made formulae and

need to be 'developed', dialectics, historical materialism, reflection theory, and class analysis, i.e., both Marx's method and his social theory came under critical scrutiny".

Some of the most significant ideological developments in this period were related to epistemology. The invocation of practice for the purposes of verification was taken forward by radical reformers to emphasise 'practical materialism', and enhance the role of human subjectivity versus objective reality. Lenin's theory of reflection (as outlined in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*) which continued to be upheld as party orthodoxy came under increasing criticism for paying attention only to material objects while ignoring the attributes of value given by men to objects, and hence neglecting human feelings and will.¹³ The post-Marxian view that objects are never given as mere 'existence' but are always articulated within discursive totalities, and with reference to human subjectivity found its echoes in Wang Ruoshui's claim that "real people and their practice have ontological significance...this is a historical phenomenon which, while not denying the 'precedence of the natural world without' stresses that it is not a primitive natural world, but one that has been humanised".¹⁴

Jin Guantao, the chief editor of the book series 'Towards the Future' argued that developments in modern psychology and physics, the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics had rendered Engels' and Lenin's epistemological position obsolete.¹⁵ The incorporation of Kant and Piaget in the philosopher Li Zehou's works pointed to the shortcomings of Leninist-Maoist conceptions of the birth of knowledge. Li's exposition of the cognitive process transformed a priori structures of understanding into 'sedimentations' – the accumulated practical experience of mankind through history. The significance of the human subject was redefined within a materialist outlook by a creative appropriation of Kantian idealism.¹⁶

The political relevance of these philosophical arguments was not lost on the party leadership. The emphasis on subjectivity and a moral-ethical interpretation of humanism undermined the centrality and significance of class, and ultimately the party's claim and authority as a representative entity. 'Abstract' affirmation of humanism, therefore, repeatedly came under fire as 'bourgeois individualism'.¹⁷

The new party line which emerged from the long series of debates reflected intellectual dynamism and confusion as well as opportunistic compromises between rival factions to ensure political survival

and continued monopoly over the policy-making process.¹⁸ The epistemological positions staked out by the more radically innovative reform theorists, even if intellectually attractive, were politically unacceptable in the eyes of the leadership. Yet, the legitimacy of the moderate position on politics and economics was consistently eroded by concrete departures from the Soviet model in practice, and radical reformist theoretical arguments in favour of deepening reform. In 1987 the 30th party congress' adoption of the 'primary stage of socialism' thesis (in lieu of 'undeveloped' socialism) as the main theoretical justification of the new course reflected the moderate determination to preserve outmoded concepts such as the identification of nationalisation with socialisation. However, the assertion that China was engaged in 'socialist construction' or was in any stage, primary or otherwise, of socialism was quite effectively undermined by the scepticism introduced by reformist writings by their contention that socialism, public ownership, 'labourers being masters', etc, were terms whose meaning had never been very clear to the political leadership which professed to implement them.

The patchwork official doctrine, a product of radical reformist innovations and the moderate ideologists' attempts to preserve basic tenets of doctrine which had traditionally served to justify and legitimise their leading position in Chinese society, was characterised by conceptual fuzziness, inconsistency and eclecticism. One could argue that every ideology, in as much as it is a generalised interpretation of an evolving social reality, cannot but espouse both true and false principles. However, all ideologies, because they are intellectual instruments and weapons, must satisfy certain intellectual requirements and rules of logic in order to be serviceable. The disarray and erosion of the ruling doctrine in China undermined simultaneously its utility as an analytical tool, and the legitimacy of those who sought to enforce it.

Reformist intellectuals exhibited a keen awareness of this when they pointed out repeatedly that 'once a theory becomes incapable of answering the challenges of real life and dissipating the ideological doubts of the masses, it will inevitably be cold-shouldered by them and lose its prestige'.¹⁹ Su Shaozhi quoted approvingly the Soviet scholar, G C Jilgansky, who wrote:

It must be taken into consideration that the ideology of the masses, either in their knowledge or in their ability to think, is

not what it was several scores of years ago. Intellectually, people want to have more independence. It will not do now to look upon the relationship between ideology and people's thought as only one of unconditionally accepting ready-made ideological formulae... The masses of today have set a higher demand on ideology, requiring it to have a standard of learning and also basis.²⁰

The ambiguity of official proclamations resulted, to some extent, from the reformers' need to supplement new ideas with sufficient propagandistic verbiage to thwart attacks from moderate 'upholders' who interpreted signs of ideological laxity as a dangerous diminution of the party's prestige and an indication of a 'peaceful evolution' to capitalism.²¹ However, even bearing in mind that radical reformist intellectuals wrote in a political atmosphere that was not always conducive to frank and forthright expression, it is clear that inconsistency and eclecticism were traits that they shared with their rivals. Theorists like Liao Gailong and Yu Guangyuan complained of 'labourers not being masters' in Chinese society on the one hand, and on the other, sanguinely asserted that 'capitalist factors' posed no danger in a workers' state implementing the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. The moderate myth about workers being 'masters of the socialist state' found its counterpart in the radical reformist myth of hired labourers being 'masters' of enterprises after the adoption of the labour contract system to counter the 'iron-rice bowl' had accentuated an already evident shift of power within the enterprise in favour of managers.²² The freedom and equality of opportunity accompanying the commodification of labour was more obvious to CASS economists and Zhao Ziyang's advisors than to workers where greater discretionary power was devolved to personnel managers to dismiss employees in response to changing market conditions, and managers who focused more on workers' rights and benefits were assailed for not living up to the ideal of cost-cutting efficient entrepreneurs. Reformist admiration for Yugoslavia did not translate into an endorsement for a worker-management system for China.

Similarly, criticism of Mao and other leftists for arbitrary definitions of class status could scarcely be sustained by theorists who themselves identified class positions on the basis of commitment to the 'socialist system and reform', rather than relationship to the means of production or sources of income. Yu Guangyuan's exposition of a new social contradiction

between 'advancing and holding on' could not but end up with an identification of 'progressive' rural capitalists and business entrepreneurs who, for obvious reasons, would be favourably disposed toward reform, and a 'conservative' working class and poor peasantry, which would resist further encroachments upon jobs and social security. Advocates of neo-authoritarianism in the late 1980s simply drew the logical conclusions from such formulations and were far more candid than their liberal democrat colleagues in pointing out the need for autocratic authority to override 'vested interests' such as 'consumers' and 'imperial workers' who sought to resist the march towards a market economy.²³

Indeed, discussions of 'equality of opportunity', 'fair exchange of value', and 'social individual ownership' by radical reformers and liberal intellectuals in the late 1980s were as one-sided and simplistic in their denial of differences as the ultra-leftist egalitarianism that they contemptuously denounced. Arguments touting the equality of opportunity inherent in a liberal democratic market economy system reflected the same blindness to socially constructed realities of class and gender as the party leadership which denied the existence of privilege and inequality in 'socialist' society. For the new converts the model of modernity offered by the west was 'deceptively simple'.²⁴ Political scientist Yan Jiaqi's oft-quoted assumption that people will tolerate disparities based on differences in human abilities was naive and cavalier, at best, as was the dismissal of popular discontent with inequality as the 'green eyed disease'.²⁵ Radical reformist and liberal writings suffered from a serious shortcoming in their failure to assess the long-term political and socio-economic consequences of economic liberalisation.

The tension between economic determinism and the concept of revolutionary praxis or anthropocentrism remained unresolved in radical reformist critiques of the past, and their prescriptions for reform. Articles by Sun Changjiang and Wu Jiang (Theory Research Office), on the tenth anniversary of the practice criterion discussions unequivocally equated the criterion of productive forces with the criterion of practice.²⁶ Zhang Xianyang (director, Marx-Engels Research Office), curiously enough, criticised Marx for 'mechanistic determinism' and rationalism, yet joined his colleagues in emphasising objective laws of development, especially the determination of production relations and the superstructure by

productive forces, and in the evaluation of theories and policies in terms of their contribution to economic growth.²⁷

Su Shaozhi invoked Marx's injunction that "no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself", to explain the continued vitality of capitalism, and to chastise Communist Parties for violating this theory.²⁸ But the logic of this argument also pointed to the futility of conscious tampering or popular mobilisation to undermine the authority of the contemporary 'feudal despotic' Chinese state based on what Su Zhang, Wang Yizhou and others still considered a predominantly small producer economy. Yu Guangyuan justified the adoption of capitalist policies on the grounds of China's immaturity for socialism. But, his arguments for dismantling the dictatorship of the proletariat harked back to Marx's notion of the withering away of the state under conditions of economic abundance in a mature classless communist society.

The attraction of economic determinism was reflected in both neo-authoritarian and liberal democratic arguments for transition to a market economy. Although many of the economic and technological determinists maintained more than a residual commitment to Marxism, socialist goals and values as commonly understood had ceased to be meaningful guides to social and political action. For the liberal democrats to raise the issue of means and ends and ask the neo-authoritarians how despotism would lead to democracy was ironic indeed, for they themselves had chosen to pass over the question of how widening socio-economic inequality and the reinstatement of private property in the 'primary stage' would lead to socialism.²⁹

'Critical and humanist' Marxists like Wang Ruoshui who emphasise the subject centred view of history have, to some extent, resisted the overwhelming of teleological goals by the imperatives of modernisation and industrialism. Earlier on and against the equation of the criterion of practice with productive forces, Wang had identified 'people's needs and interests' as the criterion for evaluating aims and the results of practice. Despite his critique of Maoist voluntarism, Wang continued to uphold the role of practice and the human subject in constituting objective reality and the knowledge of that reality. Nevertheless, the commitment of alienation theorists to Marx's notion of

'recovery of human species essence' remains both partial and selective. For Wang and his colleagues, bureaucratism and loss of freedom leading to intellectual and political alienation are unacceptable 'obstacles to progress'. On the other hand, the alienation fostered by commodification and capitalist market relations along with a perpetuating division of labour based on enhanced mental/manual, worker/intellectual, rural/urban distinctions – 'a special form of alienation' is 'the price of progress'.³⁰ For these Chinese intellectuals as for other post-Marxists like Laclau and Mouffe the 'classism' of Marx, Engels and their followers is untenable.³¹ The proletariat is no longer the privileged class in history and there is no 'inherent antagonism' between the interests of capital and labour.

Overall, radical reformers proved more able at undermining the existing doctrine than at furnishing a new persuasively and coherently articulated ideological framework. The most striking aspect of the intellectual reassessment that occurred in the two decades since Mao's death is that, for all the critiques of ultra-leftism, Mao's successors never really succeeded in marginalising his concerns regarding the emergence of oppressive, exploitative groups in post-revolutionary society. Mao's fears of capitalist restoration were echoed by Chen Yun, Peng Zhen, Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun in the years leading up to and after the Tiananmen movement. The radical reformers' and liberal intellectuals' indictment of the Stalinist 'socialist system' reflected strains of the 1960s Maoist analysis of bureaucratic degeneration. Their panacea, of course, was democratisation and representative institutions, not political mobilisation and cultural revolutions. Such a resolution was in line with the interests of the group that articulated it, and it was all the more attractive and justifiable because it coincided with a rational public interest. Its omissions were equally significant for it marginalised the issues of socio-economic equality, class and hierarchy which have, for so long, sustained the power and attraction of the communist idea.

Despite their harsh denunciations of party work-style and policies in 1979 and 1988-89, and their radical reassessment of Marxism and the viability of socialism as a system or model of development, Chinese establishment intellectuals remained essentially reformers rather than revolutionaries in their outlook. In 1979, the party leadership's explanation of the GLF and the Cultural Revolution in terms of 'individual opportunism and

adventurism' was decried by Li Honglin, Guo Luoji, and the writer Liu Binyan as neither convincing nor Marxist.³² However, in marking a retreat on the questions of feudalism and bureaucratic class, their own critiques at the time focused on political and personal shortcomings. Wang Ruoshui attempted to maintain his ideological consistency by continuing to identify Mao's personal character and his flawed understanding of dialectics (over-emphasis on struggle, i.e. one divides into two and neglect of the law of identity of opposites) as the major source of ultra-leftist mistakes and tyranny.³³ Others like Yan Jiaqi, Liao Gailong, Su Shaozhi and Yu Guangyuan emphasised procedural politics and democratic mechanisms to prevent a recurrence of previous policies and work-style.³⁴

Affirmation of the democratic component in the definition of socialism which began soon after the 1978 third plenum was consistent with the policy initiatives of leaders like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. Their intellectual followers argued that the continued monopolisation of power by the Communist Party was eroding its legitimacy and deepening the 'crisis of faith' in the population. Yan Jiaqi warned ominously, "once the sound of the anguish of the people is silenced by the emperor, the people can express their demands through violence only".³⁵ In his speech at the February 1979 conference Wang Ruoshui argued, "the fact that the masses dare not criticize the party is very harmful to the party and very dangerous".³⁶ The historian Li Shu pointed out that the policy of 'Letting a Hundred Flowers Bloom and a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend' launched in 1956 had failed because 'it remained an idea carrying neither legal protection of the citizens' inalienable democratic rights under the socialist system nor the legal functions punishing those who violated them'.³⁷ Equating democratisation with modernisation Yu Guangyuan joined in the general resurrection of the May 4th spirit by emphasising that what China needed most was science and democracy.³⁸

By the mid-1980s, with the renewed support of the higher levels of the party apparatus, the instrumental view of democracy was being integrated with a more teleological one.³⁹ Unlike Hu Qiaomu and Wu Jianguo who continued to discuss freedom from necessity/constraints of nature (or as working within objective laws), radical reformist intellectuals defined freedom in terms of spontaneity, creativity, self-development, and self-realisation.⁴⁰ Their defence of human

rights, although couched in what Li Zehou perceived as ethical purist terms, were linked concretely to constitutional protection of the 'sanctity of personal freedom and dignity', and the revival of the 'double hundred policy'. This was also true for arch critics like Liu Xiaobo who despite his attraction for Nietzsche and Sartre, defended freedom in a liberal Lockean sense and argued for institutional arrangements based on human rights.⁴¹

Drawing upon the conceptual distinction made between system-legitimacy and the legitimation of a particular regime by scholars of East European societies, one can argue that the critiques offered by radical reformist intellectuals demonstrated that, in China, the system as such enjoyed varying degrees of legitimacy, but not so the regime.⁴² For addressing such a 'derivative' crisis,⁴³ Chinese radical reformers, theorists as well as leaders like Hu Yaobang, preferred to emulate the Hungarian two-pronged strategy of increasing political participation and improved economic performance, with a 'calculated depoliticisation of public affairs and a lower profile for the party'.⁴⁴ Limited political and ideological pluralism would obviate the need for an officially sanctioned and rigidly enforced doctrine and allow the leadership to draw its legitimacy from popular perception of its willingness to respect individual rights and pursue the satisfaction of broadly accepted social needs.

For moderate political leaders, such an ideological reorientation came at too high a price. The ideal for such leaders continued to be 'crypto-politics' whereby the legitimation of the elite was still derived from teleological formulae and the constraints to its rule were normative rather than electoral.⁴⁵ For Chinese moderate reformers, as for their East European and Soviet counterparts in an earlier era, the democratisation demanded by reformist or dissident intellectuals was, at once, too destabilising and too diminutive of the party's role.

The moderate response reflected also their sensitivity to the broader context in which the demands for intellectual pluralism and political democratisation took shape. From the mid-1980s onwards the introspection on the Cultural Revolution and the source of past and present failings in the Chinese socio-political order manifested in a widespread 'culture fever' or cultural reflection.⁴⁶ A surge of artistic and literary creativity marked by a spirit of iconoclasm and defiance strongly reminiscent of the May 4th Movement turned to an exploration of Chinese tradition and

culture for the roots of the repressive ideological and bureaucratic apparatus of the party-state.

The most simplistic, hard-hitting and controversial representation of such cultural critiques was the television series, *River Elegy* aired in the summer of 1988, which focused on the backwardness and decline of Chinese civilisation and underscored the need for its total rejection and replacement with the values and institutions of the modern west. The central argument of *River Elegy* was reflected in the works of younger artists and writers, and critics like Liu Zaifu, Liu Xiaobo, and Gan Yang.

Liu Zaifu's literary themes of subjectivity and multiple composition of character challenged both party sponsored socialist realism, and the demand that literature (and art) serve politics in favour of transcending the limits on cultural expression set by Confucianism and its latter-day Marxist-Leninist variant. Liu Xiaobo, Bao Zunxin, and Gan Yang more openly identified Chinese communism as a continuation of traditional Confucian despotism with its unity of ethics and politics, its preoccupation with social order, harmony, and uniformity, and its repression of the individual for the sake of the collective. For all of these critics the destruction and brutality of the Cultural Revolution as also the tyranny and corruption of the party-state bureaucracy was not a matter of work-style or political institutions, but had pervasive and deeper roots in feudal, peasant-based authoritarian culture.⁴⁷

Jin Guantao argued that the May 4th Movement brought about the adoption of 'reactive values' such as science, democracy, knowledge and equality in place of Confucian ethical centrism and hierarchy.⁴⁸ The deep structure of traditional Chinese culture which consisted of rationality from direct observation, monism of moral ethics, utopianism and sino-centrism, however, remained intact. Under Chiang Kaishek's leadership the Three People's Principles acquired fascist tendencies and became Confucianised. The rise of Mao in the CCP brought about the 'peasantisation' and Sinification of Marxism-Leninism.

Li Zehou's contribution to this debate characteristically avoided extremes, and emphasised the need for a conscious creative transformation of traditional philosophy according to the formula, "Western learning for substance and Chinese learning for application" (Xiti-Zhongyong).⁴⁹ This reversal (suggested originally by the historian Li Shu) of the 19c reformer Zhang

Zhidong's more famous 'Zhongti-Xiyong' formulation advocated a selective appropriation of western philosophy, the concept of personal autonomy, and science for modern Chinese society, culture and institutions. For Li there were elements of traditional culture worth retaining which would be invigorated and balanced by the importation of modern rational western values.

Li further pointed out that the twin tasks of the May 4th Movement had been national salvation and intellectual enlightenment. However, in the decades that followed, the anti-imperialist political imperative overwhelmed the cultural intellectual dimension and the CCP failed to accomplish the complete agenda of May 4th.⁵⁰

For the Chinese communist leadership which considered itself the true heir of the modernising, transformative spirit of May 4th, these were serious indictments indeed. The critiques of tradition, emphasis on subjectivity, and the attempt by newly emerging *avant garde* artists and writers to give the cultural realm a true measure of autonomy were fraught with political implications for they challenged the party's competence, achievements, and representative role. Radical reformist demands for democratisation were received by the political leadership within this broader context of a more fundamental denial of its legitimacy. Against such an onslaught the radical reformist prescription of political democratisation could only have been perceived as a step that would hasten the disintegration of the party rather than ensuring its continued predominance with a socialist human face.

On the eve of the Tiananmen movement reformist discourse had been radicalised to the point where Su Shaozhi could ask:

Is Marxism science or ideology? This has been a controversial issue among Marxists in modern times. In countries where communist parties are in power, we cannot deny that Marxism takes an ideological form because Marxism is recognised there as a guiding ideology. In China, Marxism is one of the four cardinal principles....If Marxism is not a science, and if it can be backed only by state power, then it loses its vitality. If Marxism is a science, we must utilise a scientific attitude towards it...science is not afraid of criticism and may be proved wrong.⁵¹

This usage of the term 'ideology' was clearly closer to the Marxian notion of 'false-consciousness', or the Althusserian conception of 'non-knowledge' as opposed to knowledge, i.e. science. Either way, it implied that the ruling doctrine was a

distortion of Chinese reality, maintained and preserved by a social group that could no longer claim to be representative of the working class. Such a challenge to the party leadership could scarcely go unanswered. The 'victory' achieved by party elders over their reformist rivals was a reflection not of the validity of one reconstruction of Marxism over another, but an unfortunate reminder that quite often in the history of official Marxism the 'seal of authority' in many disputes was provided by the coercive organs of state power.

AFTER TIENANMEN

The democracy movement of 1989 and its suppression have often been described as a watershed. The post-Tiananmen era is more commonly referred to as the post-Deng era. The use of such terminology reflects both a recognition of Deng's relative dominance within China from the late-1970s to the late-1980s and his declining participation since 1992, as also the centrality of the ideological and political conflict between moderates and radicals in the previous period and its replacement by a more complex and uncertain phase of transition beginning in the early 1990s.

There are, however, continuities and similarities between the pre- and post-Tiananmen periods. China's rapid economic growth, the erosion of the planned and state sector, the marketisation of economic life and the pluralisation of society continue as before. Equally significant and cogent as in the earlier period are the attendant problems and concerns over the adverse consequences of reform. The ideological debate in the post-Tiananmen phase has been muted somewhat by the partial silencing within China, and exile of the most strident intellectual voices for radical reform. However, apprehensions regarding an ideological vacuum and the search for a 'new ideology', some sort of coherent framework of beliefs and values to unify and guide the society and state through a crucial phase of transition, continues with the same sense of urgency.

Within the party the passing of the old guard and rising prominence of second generation leaders like Chen Yuan reflects a more conservative or neo-conservative orientation. Since late 1990, and despite the endorsement of fast-paced reform policy by Deng Xiaoping and the 14th party congress in 1992, neo-conservatives have inherited the mantle of moderate reform by emphasising the reassertion of planning and economic and administrative controls. They have also, however, gone far beyond moderate reformism in

their acceptance of market forces and contemporary western economic theories and concepts.⁵²

Intellectual support for neo-conservatism comes, not surprisingly, from previous advocates of neo-authoritarianism like Xiao Gongqin who share the gradual and incremental approach of leaders like Chen Yuan, and place a high premium on a guiding or 'visible hand' of an elite in the process of modernisation.⁵³ Inspired by the evolutionary approach of the late 19c and early 20c reformer Yan Fu, Xiao's strategy for China's transition from tradition to modernity consists of a blend of selective western ideas and institutions (to promote economic rationality, market forces, the emergence of autonomous interests and eventually a middle class), with traditional Chinese values propagated and maintained by a modernising elite.⁵⁴

Xiao's concern for political order and stability is shared by others like He Xin and Wang Huning who deplore loss of central authority and the consequent ideological and political fragmentation that threaten to undermine the Chinese social fabric.⁵⁵ Harshly critical of radical reformers as utopians and romantics and thus unable to comprehend the destabilising effects of the policies they espoused, the neo-conservatives also revive the appeal of a new coherent, officially sanctioned ideology which can be used to unite and mobilise the pursuit of elite defined national, modernisational goals.

The simplistic polemical counterpart to *River Elegy* in the 1990s was a document entitled, 'Realistic Responses and Strategic Choices for China After the Soviet Upheaval', meant for internal circulation but printed by *Zhongguo Qingnianbao* in 1991. This piece, which exhibited a spirit of 'extraordinary Machiavellianism', according to Gu Xin and David Kelly, cynically renounced the Marxist-Leninist legacy as a liability for the party after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and pointed to nationalism as a renewed rallying and cohesive force within an ideological framework combining western rationalism and the 'lofty and noble traditional culture of the Chinese people'.⁵⁶

The nexus between the ideologists of neo-conservatism and their princeling political allies reflects the significant shift in issues and perceptions from the 1980s to the 1990s. In the mid-1980s the party leadership was on the defensive concerning newly emerging socio-economic configurations, and felt vulnerable to indictments such as those of Li Zehou regarding

its commitment to national salvation over Enlightenment values. In the 1990s the backlash against cultural nihilism and wholesale westernisation of the previous decade has allowed the party to recoup a measure of legitimacy on the basis of past achievements in repulsing imperialism, and in the present context to promote itself as the defender of Chinese sovereignty and national interest in a post-cold war global environment marked by the resurgence of a US now poised to contain China.⁵⁷ Western mercantilism rather than Enlightenment values have incited popular imagination in more recent years.

Whereas a displacement of class by individual subjectivity threatened the self-identity and legitimacy of the Marxist party in the 1980s, a decade later a core of leading figures seem to have adjusted fairly comfortably to the image of a modernising neo-authoritarian elite promoting the emergence of diverse autonomous interests that may one day provide the basis for a more democratic system. However, neo-conservatism, as Joseph Fewsmith points out, is not yet a coherent socio-economic political programme for it has provided few specific prescriptions for the problems that it has identified in the realms of politics and economics.⁵⁸

The general disaffection with rising levels of inequality, declining social mores, dislocation and accompanying socio-economic tensions evident in the late-1980s has been magnified in recent years by the scale and intensity of corruption and speculation rife within the system. This gives neo-conservatism its appeal but also supports a revival of other ideas that had been marginalised in the past decade. A notable example is the attention received by the book *Looking at China Through a Third Eye*. Published in 1994 it also focuses on the adverse destabilising consequences of unbridled reform, the loss of central ideological and political control, and the alarming decline of public morality. Unlike neo-conservatives, however, it points to the re-emergence of class conflict and polarisation in Chinese society and advocates a return to revolutionary ideals and Mao Zedong thought as the way out of the current dilemma.⁵⁹

The apprehensions voiced by *The Third Eye* find an echo in more academic analyses as well. The economist Yang Fan maintains:

utilitarian standards replace rational standards as the basis for judging things, the ideological standard of surnamed socialism or surnamed capitalism is replaced by the standard of productive forces, and the standard of morality and

conscience is replaced by the standard of money...Stimulated by a small minority getting rich quickly, people's desire to pursue wealth has become unprecedentedly strong, and the principles of the commodity economy have corroded everything...The activity of the whole society revolves around the word 'money'....It can be said that the secularisation of China's society is complete and that it is developing in an unhealthy direction.⁶⁰

The similarity with Yao Wenyuan's predictions about the consequence of consolidating bourgeois right in 1975 is striking. The Mao fever of the 1990s may have its eccentric, commercial manifestations,⁶¹ but at a deeper, more serious level, it underscores the shortcomings of the radical reformist and moderate ideological reorientation referred to earlier in this article.

The new intellectual currents also demonstrate that the May 4th type 'totalistic anti-traditionalism' seems to be a necessary, but ultimately short-lived, phenomenon in the Chinese discourse on tradition and modernity. On the heels of the Culture Fever followed a new receptivity to the idea of a 'third epoch of Confucianism' introduced by overseas scholars like Tu Wei-ming.

Interest in 'New Confucianism' is a continuation of the search for 'self' and cultural identity that has absorbed Chinese intellectuals since the closing of the Maoist era. The Confucian emphasis on the inherent value of humanity and the moral autonomy of the individual makes it consistent with the humanist and subjectivist orientation of the new discourse and prompts a re-evaluation of the traditional heritage which diverges significantly from that of Jin Guantao, Bao Zunxin and others. The new more balanced assessments look to the concepts of 'self-cultivation' and 'innersageliness' as examples of the Confucian regard for subjectivity as well as acceptance of a basic equality among human beings.⁶² In the concept of 'ren', points out Li Zehou, 'there is not only democratic character but also humanistic character'.⁶³ For scholars like Li Jinquan, the Confucian reciprocal juxtaposition of the sovereign and the subjects (the idea that benevolent government serves and cares for the people also includes the notion of people or subjects being selective in serving the sovereign) along with the basic humanism of Confucian philosophy make it compatible with the development of science and democracy.⁶⁴

In referring to the 1980s cultural self-criticism, He Baogang and David Kelly

commented that 'while defining democracy, legality, and human rights as cultural universals, Chinese intellectuals know that access to them can be gained only in the context of a politically loaded act of cultural critique. They cannot appeal to the symbolic order of European civilisation as their lost spiritual home'.⁶⁵ Tu Wei-ming, on the other hand, argues:

The Chinese intellectual must resolve to face up to the essential intellectual significance of the challenge of the west; this is not merely an economic or military conflict, but a confrontation of fundamental human values. Therefore, to rescue China as a social and political entity, the path would not be simply to kneel in deference to obvious western advantages, or to subserviently emulate them; if the intellectual is to save China from the pitiful state in which it has no strength even to be summoned, he must first attempt to overcome the obstinate illusion that internally (China's) cultural fountain has already dried up completely and that saving grace can only come from some external largesse.⁶⁶

The dilemma between learning from abroad and shaping a consensus on the basis of a shared cultural identity, which characterised much of the intellectual debate in 20c China, may be resolved by a re-affirmation of the living spirit of Chinese tradition urged by New Confucianism.⁶⁷ The idea that Confucianism in its third epoch provides a happier balance between self and community than western liberalism has begun to strike a chord amongst Chinese intellectuals who look beyond the development of productive forces to the challenges posed by modernism and post-modernism.

The emergence of neo-conservatism, the nostalgia for the Mao era, and the receptivity to New Confucianism are part of the ongoing attempt to address what Chang Hao calls an 'orientational crisis'.⁶⁸ Neo conservatism's attempt to provide a new simple cognitive scheme that can re-impose order and provide a sense of direction are understandable, but most likely a futile exercise. The failure of the gigantic intellectual effort aimed at providing a new ideological framework for the post-Mao change of course illustrates that the complexity of the Chinese socio-economic cultural order at this time can scarcely be contained by an official orthodoxy. It is also unlikely that the 'communal critical self-consciousness' that the Chinese intelligentsia has begun to acquire in the past two decades of soul searching will be exchanged for a new 'self-inflicted immaturity' provided by another state sponsored ideology.⁶⁹

The lessons of May 4 were brought home once again in the intellectual re-awakening of the post-Mao period. Regeneration and revitalisation requires acceptance and incorporation of new ideas, concepts and language. But, the new discourse cannot and need not sever itself completely from the old one. Nick Knight emphasises that the study of Mao Zedong thought still constitutes a 'realm of discourse intimately integrated with the structure of power within Chinese society'.⁷⁰ 'Orthodox Marxism', points out David Kelly, 'continues to provide and propagate a discursive field, setting up the ways in which social and political reality is categorised, and thus the ways in which political problems are resolved'.⁷¹ This is true, also of those who have more consciously renounced Marxism like Jin Guantao, Chen Yize and others. Advocates of neo-authoritarianism and neo-conservatism have substituted the capitalist telos for the socialist one but continue to be inspired by economic determinism and a belief in linear progress.

Socialism was adopted by May 4 intellectuals in the 1920s as a model for state building and economic development while avoiding the social conflict, class oppression and exploitation associated with early capitalism.⁷² The critical questioning of this choice in the 1980s prompted much rejection and even total denial. Yet, leading intellectuals like Su Shaozhi, Wang Ruoshui, Li Honglin and Li Zehou still identify themselves as Marxists and profess their commitment to socialist goals. What they reject unconditionally are its distorted and degenerate social and political forms – Stalinist or Chinese ultra-leftist.

One can appreciate the dilemma of these intellectuals by referring to Alex Callinicos's point that, 'as both an intellectual tradition and a political movement, Marxism has operated in two registers, and submits itself to two standards of judgment'. It is the defeat of Marxism as a political project not its complete theoretical refutation as a critical theory that accounts for its current recession.⁷³ While stressing the plurality of Marxism and delegitimising the Soviet Chinese variants, most Chinese Marxist intellectuals refrained from taking the easy way out by separating the critical theory from the political project, i.e. abandoning the latter to save the former. Many establishment intellectuals took tremendous risks to retain the theory and save the project. To question the success of their endeavours is not to undermine the valour of their effort. As Chinese Marxists continue in their attempts to overcome the

'crisis' of Marxism by exploring the possibility of its synthesis with democratic liberalism and Confucian humanism, their intellectual discourse may move beyond post-Maoism to post-Marxism. It will, however, continue to be post-'Maoist' and post-'Marxist' as well.

Notes

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- 2 The quote is Brantly Womack's. See 'Politics and Epistemology in China since Mao', *The China Quarterly*, no 80 (1979), pp 768-92.
- 3 These were: to uphold the socialist road, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the Communist Party, and Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought.
- 4 Jin Guantao and Liu Qinfeng, *Explore a Method Which Unites Natural Sciences and Social Sciences*, Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, Shanghai, 1986, p 59.
- 5 This article employs the term moderate instead of conservative to refer to leaders like Chen Yun, Peng Zhen, Hu Qiaomu, and others. The use of terms such as conservative and reformist in the context of change in Communist Party led countries in recent years is a problematic one. Arif Dirlik points out how such usage fails to distinguish between reforms that are informed by socialist norms and those that simply aim to bring about change. "Anyone who is serious about socialism, or is hesitant to abandon the legacy of the revolution is immediately dubbed a conservative." See Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner (eds) *Marxism and the Chinese Experience*, M E Sharpe, Armonk, 1989, p 22.
- 6 For reformist intellectuals an emphasis on the China's backwardness and feudal characteristics was an attractive explanation of CCP errors. 'Egalitarian ultra-leftism' arbitrary dictatorial policies and the 'cult of personality' as well as problems of bureaucratism and the 're-emergence of feudal privilege' could all be attributed to the overwhelming peasant composition of China's social base. The basic thrust of the focus on feudalism and traditional class forces was consistent with the policy preferences of leaders like Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang who emphasised the adverse consequences of feudal influences rather than capitalist impulses as the main danger to be guarded against in a backward country struggling to build socialism. The moderates understood full well the implications of such arguments for the characterisation of China as a socialist state, the bona fide identity of the Communist Party and the proletarian revolution that it had led. For a further elaboration of these debates see Kalpana Misra, *From Post-Maoism to Post-Marxism: The Erosion of Official Ideology in Deng's China*, Routledge, New York, 1998.
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