
The Crisis of Ideology in China

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One autumn night in 1992, Xie Wanying, a Marxist economics professor at Peking University, turned suicidal when he heard over the radio that Communist Party chief Jiang Zemin had given a ringing endorsement of the “socialist market economy,” which can be described as capitalism in disguise. Outraged, he took out a copy of the Party’s theoretical journal and scribbled across the front page, “Communism will certainly triumph!” Moments later he jumped to his death from his fifth-floor apartment. Xie’s suicide dramatized the crisis of communism in the People’s Republic. Haunted by the transition in guiding ideology, a Peking University student explains, “the good professor simply could not cope with the changes.”

Since Deng Xiaoping proclaimed that “to get rich is glorious,” the masses have been complying eagerly. Suspecting that the chance to amass wealth is short and temporary, the Chinese are rapaciously making money by any means possible, all too often compromising the integrity of society, the state, and the ecology. To them, money-making has become the supreme goal in life; the yuan, the dollar, and the yen have become the holy trinity while all the rest is *feihua* (empty talk). Intellectuals and China-watchers have characterized this phenomenon as *xinyang weiji* (a crisis of ideology).

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bankrupt ideology. While many Chinese welcome the concomitant freedom and pluralism, some worry that China, now devoid of a unifying national ideology, is dying of chronic moral decay. Will Chinese society one day implode—a casualty of egotism, social malaise, and lawlessness? With Marxism

and Maoism now discredited, China lacks another national ideology to fill the spiritual void. The Chinese people need to propagate a core of norms and moral values—if not an official ideology—that will define proper behavior and govern the people's myriad, and often clashing, socio-economic activities.

The New Cultural Revolution

Fifteen years ago, Deng Xiaoping's reforms released an epochal burst of energy which has brought prosperity to millions of ambitious and enterprising Chinese. However, at the same time, this "second revolution" has set off centrifugal forces that are unraveling what used to be a seamless network of Party control over a growing population. Party rule is eroding. Communism is hollowing out. The apparatchiks are trying to keep control of the media, but technological advancement is peacefully subverting the party's monopoly on information. Short-wave radios, satellite dishes, and fax machines are now bringing global information into millions of living rooms and offices; attempts to limit their use are proving futile. This has resulted in a more open, anything-goes China.

Many entrepreneurs have become overnight millionaires, often by selling dubious wares. Shopping malls abound, selling imported goods that only fifteen years ago would have been condemned as bourgeois junk. Fashion in big cities has exploded with colors and styles, prompting a veteran China-watcher, who recalls doing "skirt counts" in Beijing in the 1970s, to remark that "a sort of cultural revolution is going on."

The greatest changes have come in personal relationships, lifestyle and world outlook, especially among the 300 million people between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight. The "Me" generation is brash, cynical, and ultra-individualistic. This generation has enthusiastically embraced free enterprise, defying old mores and traditions on love, sex and marriage.

Class Struggle Continues

Less than twenty years after Mao's death, however, social classes exist and class struggle continues. The *People's Daily* warned of the widening income gaps: "Since the 1980s a new class has been formed that is outside the direct control of the government or work-units, the beginning of a 'people's society.' Their wealth not only gives them influence on their own workers but also facilitates their participation in many activities."

Since greed is fine in boom-time China, the reforms' biggest beneficiaries are the "dakuan" (yuan millionaires)—the new coterie of real estate magnates, foreign currency speculators, gun runners, car smugglers, and other deal-makers. These "nouveau riche"—the Chinese press estimates there are now over a million yuan millionaires—unapologetically flaunt their wealth. They drive around in Ferraris and Benzes wearing chic imported suits and jewelry. They live in luxurious villas and keep pedigree dogs.

In stark contrast to their garish wealth is the grinding poverty in the countryside, where close to 100 million farmers still live just above the starvation level. Some 50 to 60 million surplus farmhands surge into the cities each year to look for new opportunities. Experts estimate that 100 million rural workers are "redundant" and that the figure will double by the year 2000.

The growing, invidious income gap between haves and have-nots is creating severe social tensions. Crime, prostitution, and drug use are all on the rise, and even government functionaries have turned to lining their pockets. Indeed, *guandao* (official corruption) is said to be the worst in four decades. Violent crime was up by 17 percent last year. "The security situation in many rural areas is chaotic, crimes committed by gangs in the cities and towns are serious, and the populace does not feel safe," China's Procurator-General Zhang Siqing told the national legislature last March.

Crisis of Ideology

Underneath this array of social ills lurks the more deadly problem of *xinyang weiji* (a crisis of ideology). Confucianism was soundly repudiated in the early twentieth century. Maoism, the nativistic version of Marxism, has likewise lost currency in the 1980s. The idealism and collectivism that marked the earlier period of the Communist rule have dissipated. The communists only have themselves to blame: the jarring reversals in the party line, the unpalatable revelations about party

leaders, and the tragedy inflicted on millions of innocent people during Mao's periodic purges turned away even the most devout Communists. "The Cultural Revolution wiped out the good communists: very few of them are left."¹

Ideology is now vestigial, yet the Chinese seem to still yearn for a spiritual anchor on which to moor their daily lives. "In short, habits of language, memories of history, and other cultural tendencies continue to ask that a publicly-accepted moral ideology play a role in Chinese life."²

Where can they find the new ideology? The rudderless populace are turning to religion, cultism, and even to raw nationalism. There has been a resurgence of all sorts of religions, from officially sanctioned "patriotic churches" to superstitious underground sects. Charismatic cults, secret societies, and triads (organized crime gangs) have resurfaced

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in villages and towns while clan feuds have erupted in rural areas.

Party ideologues are grappling with the crisis but have yet to find any credible alternative. "The most attractive and viable

option seems to be nationalism, not as a coherent and well-defined ideology but as a historical ensemble of discursive practices meant to legitimize and delegitimize ideologies."³ Some have prescribed the propagation of traditional culture, as typified by the massive construction of theme parks replicating the cultural symbols of the Middle Kingdom. A group of scholars advocates *guoxue* (national learning), a non-socialist, Confucian hybrid. Intrigued by a possible correlation between the Sage's teachings and the astonishing economic growth in the Confucian states of Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore, Beijing is unabashedly promoting the study of Confucianism. A big international conference was held in Beijing last October.

At this point, however, the Chinese leaders are bereft of fresh ideas. "You have a situation where people are conscious they've lost what they had, but they haven't yet found what they're looking for. And you have a regime that would much prefer having answers that they can just give to people but doesn't have them."⁴ To the leaders, the lack of a unifying ideology is especially worrisome because it affects socio-political stability and, ultimately, their own survival. To the led, it is disconcerting because they feel no sense of social cohesiveness and direction.

But not all Chinese are fretting over the demise of a national ideology. While conceding that a society without *xinyang* (an ideology)

is bound to collapse. US based political dissident Ruan Ming resists attempts to impose a hegemonistic thought: "We shouldn't have a singular national ideology," he says. "We shouldn't see a return to the days when everyone believed only in Mao or Confucius. We should let different beliefs and ideologies coexist."

Some Chinese like Ruan think greed, crime, and social malaise are an acceptable price to pay for economic prosperity and social liberation. They predict that as China moves toward a free market system, the excesses of modernization will be tempered by an improved legal system. Through long-term moral education, the populace could be inculcated with an enlightened sense of self-interest and civic consciousness. Such a process could take a generation. For now, China is a 1.2 billion nation spiritually adrift. ❧

Notes

¹ Syracuse University Sinologist Marwyn Samuels. Interview with the author, November 26, 1994.

² Perry Link, Chapter: *China's "Core" Problem*, *China in Transformation*, 195.

³ Pennsylvania State University's Kang Liu: Paper read in a symposium on Globalization and Culture, Duke University, November 1994.

⁴ Beijing Diplomat: background briefing, Spring 1994.