

CHINESE POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

Today's Chinese political ideology is the result of nearly two hundred years of deep, chaotic change in Chinese political, social, and cultural life. The modern ideology is still robustly laced with China's early Confucian philosophy and a recurrent theme is and has been how to have Western style modernity but with Chinese characteristics.

Before the modern period, China had historically taken in and absorbed various foreign knowledge from astronomy to mathematics to Buddhism. The British military incursions in the Qing Era in the early 1800s that installed foreign trading outposts were not merely commercial ventures but also China's exposure to modernity, leading to introspection about identity and character that have had lasting transformational power. European prosperity, technologies of war and new modes of political order gave Chinese elites pause in what had otherwise been an ethnocentric worldview.

The "self-strengthening movement" was the initial result of the reevaluation and led by scholar-officials who held that European success emanated from industrialisation and militarisation. As such, they encouraged China to adopt Western scientific education to enable the production of weapons and to industrialise. One of the scholar-officials leading the movement called this "learning from the barbarians' skills as a means to control the barbarians." Another slogan of the day said: "Chinese learning for substance (*ti*), Western learning for use (*yong*)." These sentiments illustrate that the Chinese held their heritage in rather high regard, establishing the existence of a Chinese essence, but they were able to see the use of Western technology as necessary to their growth.

During the early 1900s, writers such as Liang Quichao connected flourishing democratic nation-building to a social-psychological reawakening of people's consciousness. Linking personal practices of self-betterment to the development of the larger political structure is a long-held Confucian conviction and Liang believed that before political institutions could function as they were meant to, societal and individual thinking and practices had to be retuned to a modern, democratic wavelength. Along with Liang, other radicals were of the same mind that "saving the nation" required cultural change first rather than the construction of certain political institutions or installation of empty practices.

The revitalised urgency for cultural transformation came following the 1911 revolution after which a purportedly democratic regime was set up. In the resulting May Fourth Movement, radicals cited Enlightenment rationality to advocate for the liberation of individuals from the restraints of traditions, such as rituals affiliated to filial piety and mourning, traditional Chinese medical remedies, arranged marriage, and veneration of ancestors. The radicals, however, pointed out that this impulse to do away with tradition was not out of a servile deference to the West, but rather it was a response to a new paradigm presented by the modern world whose ideas and methods would facilitate the resurgence of an ancient civilization.

In the 1920s and 30s, as the May Fourth Movement began to be questioned by conservatives and moderates, some of whom had seen war-torn Europe, it suffered a crisis of confidence in visions of Western technology and progress. Some, like Liang, advocated a return to Confucianism with its creed of harmonisation which he believed was the highest and final of the three phases of progress which could circumvent the pitfalls of the other two, the Indian (spiritual) and the Western (materialist).

Chinese Communism

May Fourth radicalism and the subsequent conservative turn led the way for China's adoption of Communism but within a Chinese rubric. Some of the first analysts of Bolshevism approved the socialist components of Marxism but believed in an individual's capacity to effect change counter to historical materialist thought. They held that although Marx had stipulated industrialisation as a prerequisite for revolution, the Chinese, a peasant society, could begin immediately to work on strengthening the nation. This appeal for prompt action made a mark on Mao Zedong who would go on to Sinicise Marxism. He made peasants the dynamic vanguard of the revolution in the absence of an industrial proletariat insisting that Communism must develop and evolve through knowledge of the challenges faced by rural peasantry. He also endorsed a type of "New Democracy" with echoes of May Fourth reformism calling on China to have a culture that was calibrated with global trends.

Ultimately, Mao transferred the duties of the vanguard to China's youth resulting in the Cultural Revolution. As ever, culture, understood as elite, higher learning, and literature, was identified as the wheels upon which political reformation would turn. The youths who went on to violently dismantle the "feudal" ideas of their teachers and elders, Mao believed, were doing work crucial to China's socialist evolution. After Mao's death, many drew attention to the omissions of Communist praxis and the failure of Maoism to bring to fruition any iteration of Communist egalitarianism.

Reform

China remains officially and bureaucratically Communist although with significant economic liberalism. While debate is suppressed, a robust Sinophone ideology has continued to develop. Neo-Confucianism is held up as the marriage of the best of conventional Chinese morality to contemporary Western science and technology.

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