

UNIVERSAL TRUTH VERSUS CHINESE EXCEPTIONISM: AN IDEOLOGICAL DILEMMA

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Abstract: This is an analysis of a moral and ideological dilemma facing the Chinese authority, with a focus on its shifting position on so-called "particularity of China". Originally the Chinese communists were Universalists who rejected their various rivals' arguments about Chinese "particular national conditions" in order to justify their belief in and application of Marxism in China. In those revolutionary years there was genuine rigor in their intellectual exploration, in spite of Marxist-Leninist dogmatism. The recent embracement of the concept of "Chinese characteristics" and attacks on the "universal values", however, seem to indicate that the universalist position has been abandoned altogether to justify the current political system in a special manner. It remains to be seen whether this effort will succeed in establishing an enduring political ideology for a "rising China" or otherwise quickly vanish into oblivion just as countless ideological catchphrases before it.

I. Marxism as "Universally Applicable Truth"

IT IS AN AMUSING as well as painful irony that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) based on Marxism has become eulogists of the Chinese peculiarity, as refutation of Chinese exceptionalism was an intrinsic part of the development of the CCP itself and Marxism itself in China. Originally, as an alien political party and alien ideology imported to China from abroad, both the CCP and Marxism had to justify their relevance to China on the basis of universalism rather than Chinese exceptionalism.

The birth of the CCP and Chinese Marxism was a by-product of the historical process of "learning from the West" by progressive Chinese during the modern times, although a combination of extraordinary circumstances led to the shift from "learning from the West" to "taking Russia as a teacher" (Mao, 1969, 1359-1360).

The founders of the CCP and Chinese Marxism, Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942) and Li Dazhao 李大釗 (1889 - 1927), in particular, were typical Universalists. Chen Duxun insisted that "learning by definition is an instrument of humankind without difference between the past and the present or the difference between China and foreign countries. Only those who understand learning in this way are qualified to talk about learning. Precisely because there is no such a difference, the only criterion to evaluate learning is its quality, regardless of its origin in any country any time" (Chen, 1984, 259). In response to Goodnow's proposal based on his assessment of Chinese "national conditions" for the revival of the monarchy and Yuan Shikai's conversion from the President of the Republic of China to the emperor

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of China, Li Dazhao argued that Goodnow made a mistake in taking “the national conditions of the past” as “the national conditions of the present”. According to Li Dazhao, whereas political apathy prevailed in China during the ancient times because the social life was centred around families and clans and facilitated by rituals and customs, political participation and contestations for political power have become a dominant trend in modern times because of the penetration of the state in social life through extensive taxation, laws and regulations; whereas people submitted to authorities during the ancient times, modern citizens in a republic have developed their capacity to obey laws and resist tyranny irrespective of the countries in the West or in the East (Li, 1984, 110-113).

Mao Zedong (毛澤東 (1893–1976)), and his followers promoted “Sinification of Marxism” during the Yan-an Rectification Campaign in the late 1930s and the early 1940s. That was a campaign to establish and consolidate Mao’s supremacy as a spiritual as well as a military and political leader of the CCP, marginalizing those Chinese communist leaders who had the experience as a “returned student” and better command of the Marxist theory. However, Mao’s “Sinification of Marxism” never challenged the universality of truth, but instead sought to faithfully put the “Marxist universal truth” (*pubian zhenli* 普遍真理) into practice in China. In order to make the application of the “Marxist universal truth” more effective and easier for the “broad masses”, Mao also practised the “Chinese style” and the “Chinese manner” in elaborating the Marxist theory. (Mao, 1969, 500) Mao’s promotion of the “Chinese features”, the “Chinese style” and the “Chinese manner” also served the purpose of boosting the patriotic credential of the CCP.

Ai Siqi (艾思奇 (1910–1966)), the most respected professional philosopher of the CCP in the 1930s and the 1940s, took part in the cultural debates on the “wholesale westernisation” during that time and thoroughly repudiated Chinese exceptionalism. “All reactionary thoughts in China since the modern times”, declared Ai Siqi, “shared a special tradition which can be named as the doctrine to close the country to international intercourse.No matter how many times they have changed their external forms, their basic contents are as follows: after laying emphasis on Chinese ‘national conditions’ and Chinese ‘peculiarity’, and denying the general laws in human history, they have asserted that social development in China will follow the Chinese own special laws only; that China will take only its own road; and that China’s own road is exceptional to the general laws in human history”. Ai Siqi also pointed out that since the modern times “the thesis of Chinese particular national conditions” was an ideological weapon essential to the traitors of the country and the people; that these traitors, also borrowed heavily from foreign technologies and tricks to advance their interests, actually rejected foreign thoughts and cultures which were helpful for the Chinese to achieve progress and freedom”; that “Sinification of Marxism is possible precisely because Marxism is generally correct, universally valid and omnipotent”; and that “Marxism is an internationalist theory by nature” (Ai, 1941).

II. The Chinese Communist Version of Chinese “Particular National Traditions”

Ai Siqi was certainly right in generalizing the Chinese conservative particularist arguments of opposing progressive theories, be that liberalism or Marxism or both. Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916), and his American advisor Frank Goodnow were among the first to play up the particularist rationale in the 1910s for opposing democracy and republicanism on the basis of the “national conditions” characterized by Chinese people’s alleged lack of desire and political ability for a democratic republic (Goodnow, 1914); Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988), was well-known for his assertion after the 1920s that Marxist theory of class analysis was not applicable in China simply because China was not a class-based society but an “ethics-based society”;¹ in 1935 a group of professors issued the ‘Manifesto of Constructing China-based Culture’ to reject “westernisation” and called for a unique Chinese ideology to satisfy the unique needs of China;² Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石 (1887–1975), and his Nationalist followers claimed in the 1940s that “the ideologies of liberalism and communism have been fashionable in China since the May 4,but in reality their views and propositions are fundamentally incompatible with the psychology and disposition of our nation” (Jiang, 1943, 145).

Ai Siqi and other Chinese Marxist theoreticians during the Republican period would never imagine that Chinese communists would become eulogists of the Chinese peculiarity or Chinese exceptionalism themselves. During the Mao years from the 1950s to 1970s, despite of the fact that the nationalist project of “building the wealth and power of China” was increasingly prevailing over the internationalist project of “liberating the proletariat in the world”, Chinese communists were still universalists in the sense that they maintained their belief in the universal truth of Marxism and the theory that the Chinese Revolution was nothing but part of the world revolution with common trajectory and objectives.

However, with the collapse of communist regimes in the former USSR and Eastern Europe, and with the waves of democratisation sweeping across of all cultures, including the so-called “ring of Confucian culture” in East Asia, the banner of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” has been raised in China to reject “Western democracy” on the basis of the particular Chinese “national conditions”.

It must be pointed that the original meaning of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” was fundamentally different from the later connotation of the phrase. When Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 (1904–1997) first introduced the phrase in his opening speech to the 12th Party Congress in 1982, “socialism with Chinese characteristics” meant socialism with a lower level of development in productive

¹For a thorough analysis on the thought of Liang Shuming, see Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shuming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity*, University of California Press, 1979.

²Wang Xinming, et al, “Zhongguo benwei de wenhua jianshe xuanyan [Manifesto of Constructing China-based Culture]”, *Wenhua Jianshe* [Cultural Construction], vol.1, no.4.

force and productive relations, justifying the introduction of capitalist measures, foreign capital and technologies for Chinese economic development, and the introduction of institutions and ideas from democracies for Chinese economic and political development (Deng, 1988, 370-373). This argument was further supplemented by the theory of the “primary stage of socialism” put forward at the 13th Party Congress in 1987.

It was Jiang Zemin who summarized the ideas of Deng Xiaoping and gave the phrase “socialism with Chinese characteristics” the new interpretation of rejecting democratic institutions and ideas on the basis of the particular “Chinese national conditions.” In his speech delivered at the meeting in commemoration of the 70 anniversary of the establishment of the CCP on 1 July 1991, Jiang Zemin elaborated on the “Chinese characteristics” in a systematic way. He defined these “characteristics” mainly from the negative perspective (*bugao*): not taking the capitalist road, not carrying out privatization, not introducing Western parliamentary system, not introducing Western multi-party system, and not introducing ideological pluralism (Jiang, 1993, 1638-1644). By invoking the concept of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” or the “primary stage of socialism,” Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915 – 1989) and Zhao Ziyang 趙紫陽 (1919 – 2005) aimed to minimise the resistance by the conservative forces and advance the cause of reform and opening in making up for the tasks such as developing “commodity economy” and introducing basic democratic institutions and values. These tasks, according to the Marxist framework, should have been accomplished through the bourgeois revolution or capitalist development. Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang in the 1980s were by no means liberals, but they were following the suppressed tradition within the CCP regarding democracy and human rights as compatible with or intrinsic to socialism (Feng, 2009). Their attempts to play down dictatorship and protect liberal forces.

Within the current CCP top leadership, Premier Wen Jiabao 溫家寶 (1942 –) is closest to the liberal legacy of the Party. In last few years he repeatedly trumpeted “universal values” and the pressing need to resume political reform. Premier Wen Jiabao took the lead in openly embracing the universal values of freedom, equality and human rights and calling for meaningful democratic reform. In a speech published in 2007 Wen Jiabao wrote that “science, democracy, rule of law, freedom and human rights are not unique to capitalism, but are values commonly pursued by mankind over a long period of history” (Wen, 2007). In a media interview on 23 September 2008 Wen Jiabao defined the scope of democratic political reform in China in three areas: “No. 1: We need to gradually improve the democratic election system so that state power will truly belong to the people and state power will be used to serve the people. No. 2: We need to improve the legal system, run the country according to law, and establish the country under the rule of law and we need to build an independent and just judicial system. No. 3: Government should be subject to oversight by the people and that will call on us to increase transparency in government affairs and particularly it is also necessary for government to accept oversight by the news media and other parties” (Wen, 2009). In another widely publicized interview in September 2010, Wen Jiabao summarized his objectives for

Chinese political reform as follows: “No political party, organization, or individual should be above the constitution and the law. All must act in accordance with the constitution and laws. I see this as a defining feature of a modern political system. I have summed up my political ideals in the following four sentences: to let everyone lead a good and dignified life, to let everyone feel safe and secure, to create a fair and just society and to let everyone have confidence in the future” (Wen, 2010).

Chen Kuiyuan, president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, asserted that in the “competition between China and the West for the commanding ground (*zhigaodian* 制高點)” in humanities and social sciences “we must establish our confidence and eliminate blind worship [of the West]. We cannot respect Western values as so-called universal values and cannot play down the values of our Party and state as disputable values (*linglei jiazhi* 另類價值)” (Chen, 2008). Jia Qinglin, Chairman of the People’s Political Consultative Conference of China urged all political parties and groups in China and Chinese people of all nationalities and all social strata to closely follow the leadership of the CCP and “strengthen the line of defence against the harassment by the two party system, multi-party system, parliament system, tripartite separation of power and other wrong ideas of the West” (Jia, 2009). Wu Bangguo, Chairman of the National People’s Congress of China, reaffirmed in his report to the 2nd Plenary of the 11th National People’s Congress (NPC) on 9 March 2009 that China should never copy the West and never practise multi-party competition for power, tripartite separation of power and bicameral parliamentary system (Wu, 2009). Again in his work report to the Standing Committee of NPC on 3 October 2011 Wu Bangguo reiterated Jiang Zemin’s “July 1st Speech” in 1991 and claimed that China has completed the process of establishing a legal system with Chinese characteristics defined by five rejections (*bugao*), namely rejecting multi-party system, ideological pluralism, tripartite separation of power and bicameral parliamentary system, federalism and privatization (Wu, 2011). Some Chinese sociologists worry that when exceptional measures are taken to “nip destabilizing elements in the bud” and impose artificial “stability”, progressive elements in Chinese society can be eliminated and China is experiencing a “social decay”, with serious symptoms such as the structural corruption and runaway power (Sun, 2009).

Conclusion

During the revolutionary years the Chinese communists at least claimed to be true believers of Marxism as universal truth, although they were increasingly selective in their application of Marxism and abandoned whatever did not fit their agenda and interests. From the 1920s to the 1940s the Chinese communists were fighting at the forefront against Chinese exceptionalism of all shades. Apart from the theoretical rigour of universalism, there was an imperative for the Chinese communists to dismiss Chinese exceptionalism, simply because the Chinese communist movement was an extension of the world communist movement originated in the West.

The practical rationale for the CCP to change from universalism to exceptionalism is not hard to see. This change has functioned as a cushion to ease the pressure for regime change when “brother parties” in the world have followed the general trend to give up the communist one party rule since the 1990s. According to this rationale, China has to be an exception; otherwise there is no ground for China to reject this powerful general trend across the entire world. However, it is hardly possible to find a sound epistemological justification for the CCP to maintain the communist one party rule on the basis of Chinese exceptionalism, precisely because China (or the “Chinese value”) is not the origin of this political system. The embarrassing dilemma is that neither universalism nor exceptionalism provides intellectual justification for the Chinese communist rule.

In this age of globalisation and under the policy of “reform and opening to the outside world”, China since the 1980s has embraced all aspects of modern technology, many aspects of the market economy. This development is a conscious choice by the Chinese ruling elite and should not be explained in line of cultural determinism. Modern technology, the market economy and constitutional democracy are all imprinted with a mark of the West, but all of them have drawn the experience and accumulated knowledge far beyond the West and should be regarded as common achievement of humankind. It is intellectually inconsistent to embrace modern technology and the market economy as universal but dismiss constitutional democracy as “Western”.

Country specific institutions in contemporary world are products of country specific circumstances, especially when different countries are in different stages of development in terms of industrialization, urbanization and democratization. However, these specific institutions and circumstances always find their counterparts in other parts of the world, past, present or future. Values, learning and human capacity cannot be divided according to national or racial boundaries. There is no cultural ground for the dichotomy of China versus West. This dichotomy was an ignorant construct during the early encounters between Europeans and the Chinese. There is profound complementarity of autocratic cultures in the West and the East, just like the profound complementarity of democratic cultures in all parts of the world. More often than not, the claims of national uniqueness or distinctiveness against shared humanity are racist claims in one way or another.

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