

From Mao Thought to Xi Thought: On the Enduring Importance of Chinese Communist Ideology (and of those who once studied it seriously)

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The Chinese politics field can take pride in a record of impressive empirical research and theoretical contributions across a wide range of important topics: revolution, nationalism, political participation and contention, political culture, central-local relations, bureaucracy, factionalism, state-led development, urbanization, social welfare, and much more. An impediment to cumulative progress, however, has been a tendency for the study of particular topics to be concentrated in brief time periods under hegemonic but ephemeral overarching approaches. In the period just since 1989, for example, the field has pivoted, almost in lockstep, from a focus on seeds of development and democratization to a fixation with authoritarian resilience. These transitory paradigms have generated spirited but short-lived debates on such topics as TVEs, village elections, popular protests, NGOs, legal reform, media and information control, and so forth. Only rarely have the discussions sought to connect new findings and arguments to previous generations of China scholarship.

There are doubtless multiple reasons for this state of affairs. One factor may simply be a tendency to dismiss earlier scholarship as old-fashioned and out of step with the latest methodological and theoretical advances in the discipline; as a consequence, we are conveniently absolved from having to read it, let alone engage with it. Another factor is surely the tremendous change that the CCP itself has experienced and engineered over the course of its tumultuous, nearly century-long history, lurching from revolutionary struggle to regime consolidation, Great Leap Forward, Cultural Revolution, Reform and Opening, and now the 19th Party Congress. The dizzying pace of seemingly discontinuous change has had the effect of making past scholarship appear irrelevant to current concerns.

Whatever the explanation, the inclination to ignore earlier work on earlier periods of Chinese politics has come at some cost. In a political science discipline in which historical institutionalism and process tracing have gained wide currency in recent decades, the contribution of China scholars to these important developments has been meager. Even if our sole ambition were to explain the particulars of Chinese politics, rather than to claim a seat of honor at the comparative politics table, the disregard of previous studies on previous eras in the PRC imposes blinders on our analytical sights.

Despite its record of seemingly disjointed fast-paced change, the CCP itself takes pains to present its trajectory in path-dependent terms. The 19th Party Congress offered poignant

reminders that even in heralding a “New Era,” the CCP self-consciously recalls previous chapters in its eventful past. A banner festooned across the back wall of the auditorium in the Great Hall of the People proclaimed, “不忘初心” (Don’t forget our original intention). To be sure, the Party’s claims to historical continuity are often highly contrived, but one of the more reliable means of assessing their veracity lies in a careful reading of earlier scholarship.

Take the question of official ideology, a central preoccupation of the founding generation of Chinese politics scholars (not to mention the founders of the CCP), which under Xi Jinping has recaptured public notice. The 19th Party Congress concluded with a dramatic decision to insert into the Party Constitution a reference to “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” the first instance since Mao Zedong (in 1945) of the utterances of a sitting CCP leader receiving such recognition.¹ Communist parties are prone to portray their ideology as a blueprint for future action, but classic studies of ideology reveal that it is more usefully regarded as a summation of past and present experience: “The pedigree of every political ideology shows it to be the creature, not of premeditation in advance of political activity, but of meditation upon a manner of politics. In short, political activity comes first and a political ideology follows after.”² In other words, when the CCP spotlights the “visionary” thought of its paramount leader, it is presenting an authoritative outline of what it deems to be proven practical political theory. For this reason, ideology should be of serious interest to all students of Chinese politics.

In trying to plumb the enduring importance of CCP ideology, however, the post-Mao China field until very recently has offered few signposts. For nearly four decades after Mao’s death, political scientists largely acceded to Deng Xiaoping’s famous maxim that the “black cat, white cat” distinction did not matter; under the pragmatic imperatives of market reforms, the ideological correctness of the Mao era had seemingly been relegated to the dustbin of PRC history. In reality, of course, Deng’s formulation of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” carried its own ideological and political implications, as would Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” and Hu Jintao’s “Scientific Development Outlook.” But under Xi Jinping, ideology in the PRC has reclaimed an explicit primacy that scholars can no longer ignore; from Xi’s articulation of a “China Dream” to his latest “Thought for a New Era,” the project of publicizing and popularizing the “visionary” ideas of the top leader again occupies a commanding place on the CCP’s agenda.³ The astonishing amount of Propaganda Department support earmarked for the study

¹ Chris Buckley, “China Enshrines ‘Xi Jinping Thought,’ Elevating Leader to Mao-like Status,” *New York Times* (October 24, 2017).

² Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (New York, Basic Books: 1962): 118-119.

³ Chen Cheng, *The Return of Ideology: The Search for Regime Identities in Postcommunist Russia and China* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016); Zeng Jinghan, *The Chinese Communist Party’s Capacity to Rule: Ideology, Legitimacy and Party Cohesion* (New York: Palgrave, 2016).

of Xi Jinping's "theoretical innovations" attests to the priority that the Party puts on this all-out ideological effort.⁴

While the past forty years of scholarship on Chinese politics provides little assistance in understanding this latest ideological turn, the work of an earlier generation is more helpful.⁵ In fact, the very first debate to animate the then fledgling field of Chinese politics more than half a century ago – the vitriolic exchange between Karl Wittfogel and Benjamin Schwartz over the doctrinal originality of Mao's ideas – is worth revisiting in light of contemporary developments. Presented in the first two issues of *The China Quarterly*, the disagreement hinged in part on the question of whether Mao's stress on the revolutionary role of the peasantry constituted enough of a departure from orthodox Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism to merit the moniker of "Maoism."⁶ The bold title of Wittfogel's article, "The Legend of 'Maoism,'" made clear his skepticism toward any claim of originality. The even bolder title of Schwartz's rebuttal, "The Legend of the 'Legend of Maoism,'" defended his own use of the term "Maoism" as capturing the changed situation of the Chinese revolution after the Long March (1934-35), when "Mao was now sufficiently self-confident to take the initiative in the field of theoretical formulation, . . . intent on proving that developments in China represented a unique and original development in the course of human history and that he himself was a theoretical innovator in the line of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin."⁷ For Schwartz, then, the crucial point was not Mao's *actual* doctrinal innovation, but rather the *claim* to ideological originality on the part of a leader whose political accomplishments had made him confident enough to seek to project his and his country's influence on the world stage.

In Benjamin Schwartz's view, this process of asserting ideological independence accelerated after 1956, following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and Mao's launch of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, as the PRC gradually distanced itself from the Soviet orbit in favor of declaring an alternative "Maoist vision."⁸ Schwartz's characterization of the Maoist vision at

⁴ That more than twenty major Chinese universities within a week of the 19th Party Congress had already established new departments for the teaching of Xi's Thought is further evidence of its political significance. <https://qz.com/1114975/the-19th-communist-party-congress-chinese-universities-are-falling-over-themselves-to-teach-xi-jinping-thought/>

⁵ Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Communism and China: Ideology in Flux* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Chalmers Johnson, ed., *Ideology and Politics in Contemporary China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973); John Bryan Starr, *Ideology and Culture: An Introduction to the Dialectic of Chinese Politics* (New York: Harper's, 1973).

⁶ Karl A. Wittfogel, "The Legend of 'Maoism,'" *The China Quarterly*, No. 1 (January – March, 1960): 72-86; and No. 2 (April – June, 1960): 16-34; Benjamin Schwartz, "The Legend of 'the Legend of Maoism,'" *The China Quarterly*, No. 2 (April – June, 1960): 35-42.

⁷ Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951): 201.

⁸ Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Communism and China*: 171ff.

the time of the Hundred Flowers could easily have been written of the work report delivered by Xi Jinping at the 19th Party Congress: “The vision involves not only a conception of the good society of the future but also a sanctified image of the methods by which this vision is to be achieved. Certainly Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology is one of the main sources of this vision, but this does not preclude the possibility that in some of its aspects it coincides with certain traditional Chinese habits of thought and behavior.”⁹ In his three hour and twenty minute work report, Xi touted the value of “Chinese wisdom” and the “Chinese approach” in crafting political solutions for global challenges: “We have every confidence that we can give full play to the strengths and distinctive features of China's socialist democracy, and make China's contribution to the political advancement of mankind.” Xi took a page right out of Mao’s Hundred Flowers playbook by zeroing in on what he identified as the “principal contradiction” (主要矛盾) currently facing Chinese society; namely, “the people's ever-growing need for a better life” versus the country’s “unbalanced and inadequate development.”¹⁰ Setting a date of 2035 for the full attainment of “socialist modernization,” Xi offered a familiar formula for reaching this future vision: the Communist Party must continue to “lead in everything.”¹¹

Although history does not repeat itself, the fact that contemporary CCP theoreticians and propagandists carefully comb the historical record for ideological inspiration means that studies of the Maoist past are of more than arcane academic interest for those seeking to understand current political developments. Roderick MacFarquhar’s magisterial trilogy, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, leads off with a volume subtitled *Contradictions among the People*, which analyzes the events of 1956-57 as “a major turning point in the history of the People’s Republic” marked by Mao’s advocacy of a “new militancy at home and abroad.”¹² While it would be facile to equate the disquiet generated in the Communist world at that time, due to destalinization and the Hungarian Revolt, with the current disarray in the capitalist world, brought about by Brexit and Trump, catalytic moments of international disorder do seem to create opportunities for the articulation of an alternative Chinese ideological authority.¹³ Such critical junctures merit systematic comparative attention.

⁹ Schwartz, *Communism and China*: 171-172.

¹⁰ http://news.dwnews.com/china/news/2017-10-18/60018047_all.html; on the central role of “contradictions” in CCP ideology, see Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization*: Chapter I.

¹¹ <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/19th-party-congress-7-key-themes-from-president-xi-jinpings-work-report>

¹² Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: Contradictions Among the People, 1956-1957* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974): 317.

¹³ To be sure, the historical parallel is far from exact: at the 8th Party Congress in 1956, Mao’s Thought was dropped from the Party Constitution.

A previous generation of scholarship on Mao Zedong Thought produced a rich literature on the role of ideology in Chinese political thought and practice.¹⁴ But the fact that these studies were focused on the Four Cleans and Cultural Revolution, when interest in Mao's ideas on "class struggle" and "continuing the revolution" reached its peak, limited the questions being explored. Moreover, the lack of first-hand access to China by scholars in that period precluded the possibility of assessing the impact of official ideology on the views of ordinary Chinese.

The re-elevated position of ideology in the PRC today, combined with the advantages of in-country field work and new methodological tools, offers the prospect of building upon earlier insights to address questions that are both familiar and fresh. Recently developed software for text mining and text analytics allows for nuanced content and sentiment analysis on the speeches and writings of top Party leaders, facilitating the identification of ideological variation over long time periods and among multiple actors. Online attitude surveys, analyzed by means of principal component and factor analysis, have revealed salient cleavages in citizens' political preferences.¹⁵ Decades of public opinion surveys, conducted by the Research Centre for Contemporary China at Peking University together with a number of other competent institutions and individuals, have provided valuable time series data for gauging continuity and change in popular political attitudes.¹⁶ Next steps might be to ask whether the "ideological spectrum" found among ordinary citizens aligns with the "contradictions" referred to in official pronouncements, and whether popular political preferences have changed over time in tandem with the ideological efforts of the Propaganda Department.

On numerous occasions throughout his first term as Party General Secretary, Xi Jinping invoked the adage "吃水不忘挖井人" (When drinking the water, don't forget those who dug the well) – a phrase associated with Chairman Mao's revolutionary legacy from the 1930s. At the opening ceremony of the 19th Party Congress, delegates were asked to bow their heads in a moment of silence to remember the contributions of Mao Zedong and other early leaders of the CCP. Taking a cue from those whose politics we study, we too might be advised at this advent of a "new era" (which in certain respects looks remarkably like an older one) to recall the achievements of our own intellectual ancestors.

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¹⁴ See, among others, Stuart R. Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Praeger, 1963); Frederic Wakeman, *History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives on Mao Tse-tung's Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973); John Bryan Starr, *Continuing the Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

¹⁵ Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu, "China's Ideological Spectrum," *The Journal of Politics* (2017).

¹⁶ Wenfang Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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