

# From Confucianism to Communism and Back: Understanding the Cultural Roots of Chinese Politics\*

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*After decades of rapid economic growth that brought significant improvement of the living standard and expansion of personal freedom, China has not moved closer to democratization as many predicted and anticipated. The conventional wisdom in political sociology that economic development and more individual freedom will spur political liberalization seems not to hold in the case of China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s abilities to exert stricter social and political control seem to have increased with economic growth and prosperity, not diminished. If anything, Chinese political system seems to be moving further away from becoming a democracy. This paper argues that political institutions are culturally rooted; non-indigenous institutions need to be planted or transplanted to another culture in order to grow. Liberal democracy is an institution deeply rooted in the European cultural tradition that spread to the rest of the world in modern time with the spread of the Western civilization, just as plant and animal species indigenous from one continent spread to other continents with globalization. The wholesale-style westernization movement in China during the Republic era in the first half of the twentieth century was short-lived and its cultural influences on Chinese society were largely erased and overwritten by communism during the first thirty years of the PRC. The CCP has been consistently vigilant not to allow the same Western cultural influences to occur, at least not in the political area, over the past forty years as it implemented the reform and opening policies, and it has been rather successful in this regard. As an alternative, the CCP is increasingly looking to revive the traditional, conservative Confucianism to replace the radical, revolutionary communism as the ideological foundation for the collectivistic statist political system, the diametrical opposite of liberal democracy. It is not so much politically naive, but theoretically wrong to assume that*

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*economic liberalization would inevitably lead to political liberalization and democratization.*

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## Introduction

Trying to predict the trajectory of China's politics has become a professional pastime of sort for China watchers over the past forty years. Were it a betting game, most would have lost multiple times? What proved to be most perplexing about Chinese politics to the China watchers is the Chinese Communist Party (the CCP)'s remarkable ability to defy all predictions and remain in control while most former communist regimes fell. As Elizabeth Perry observed in one of her latest papers on Chinese politics: "the China field has largely retreated from predictions of imminent democratization in favor of resignation to authoritarian endurance" (Perry 2015).

The fact that Chinese politics failed to fit any categories or labels neatly (Oksenberg 2001) and we are running out of relevant examples to compare China with (Walder 2004) suggests that maybe something more fundamental is wrong with our understanding of Chinese politics. Maybe some of the basic assumptions we make about Chinese politics are wrong. For example, in summarizing the political and economic conditions of China thirty years after Mao, Perry stated: "... while political progress appears to have stalled, the Chinese economy continues to demonstrate impressive growth" (Perry 2007) implying the two were somehow related.

While economic growth is rather unambiguous and can be measured in every economy, it is unclear what political progress even means. In political science literature of course it means progress toward democratization, but on what bases can we say every society has a "political progress toward democratization" to be measured, just as every society has an economic growth number to report every year?

Perry pointed out the challenges: "The answers to these questions are far from clear, in large part because we have such limited understanding of what holds the contemporary state structure together and thus allows the political system to function as effectively as it does. Moreover, there are no obvious counterparts elsewhere in the world to the situation that China currently faces" (Perry 2007).

This paper argues that politics are culturally programmed, to understand a country's politics we have to unpack the cultural codes embedded in the political tradition. At the center of the Chinese political tradition are two cultural genes that are still active in the Chinese political system and explain much of the behavior of Chinese politics: the zero-sum "mandate of heaven" concept, and the strict pious-loyalty ethics based on the family-state world view. The two combined to create a potent statism that is equally intoxicating to the government as well as the people. This is essentially the ideological force that is holding the Chinese society as well as the state structure together. Without replacing these cultural genes underlying Chinese politics, any hope for political progress amounts to forever wondering why an acorn is not hatched into a goose.

## Mandate of heaven and pious-loyalty

Much has been made of the central importance of the concept, "mandate of heaven", in the Chinese political tradition. Perry has directly linked Mao's political thinking and politics in contemporary China to Mencius who first explicated "mandate of heaven" as the foundation of political legitimacy more than two thousand years ago (Perry 2008). As the central concept of Confucianist political philosophy, what mandate of heaven means are fourfold: (1) the ruler had to have the mandate of heaven to be legitimate, (2) lacking a more rigorous way to deduce the mandate of heaven, it had to be discerned from signs, (3) misery and discontent of the subjects were among the negative signs suggesting the ruler had lost the mandate of heaven, (4) in that case, the subjects had the right to revolt.

Because China never had a well-developed mythology or theology at the center of its ancient philosophy or culture as the ancient Greeks or Christianity had, there was no way to deduce political legitimacy by lineage to god or gods, much less a holy scripture to prove it, any dispute over legitimacy had to be settled on the battle ground, and divine authority always went to the winner. The Confucian scholars who served as advisers at the king's or emperor's court deserved credit though for linking the mandate of heaven to the people's wellbeing. Using metaphors like, the people were the water, the emperor was the boat, as the water could carry the boat, it could also bury it, the more conscionable ones among them tried to counsel moderation against the rulers' natural inclination for excesses.

But it was intrinsically a zero-sum concept—heaven would never want a

divided government—whoever won the battle to claim the mandate, claimed it completely and would never share a bit with anyone. This is why throughout Chinese history, there were many occasions after prolonged fighting, someone (usually the losing side) would propose a compromise to split the country in two, along the Yangzi River, and be ruled separately; it was either never agreed to, or never held for long. The stronger side would always try to completely terminate the rivals and claim the mandate of heaven over the whole territory. The mandate to rule was the mandate to rule all China and not an inch less, not a single person could escape. Thus the mantra: “All under heaven is the king’s territory; all people on the territory are the king’s subjects (普天之下，莫非王土；率土之濱，莫非王臣).”

In practice, the unitary nature of the mandate of heaven meant zero tolerance for dissent or competition, which resulted in one of the most consistent behavior of every single ruler in every dynasty—relentless pursuit of any political rivals, and ruthless suppression of different voice, all in the name of maintaining social harmony under heaven. But paradoxically, with total monopoly of power, came total responsibility. By claiming it all, the rulers came to own it all too. And because they claimed to rule in the name of heaven, anything went wrong with the weather led directly to the suspicion that the rulers had lost the mandate of heaven.

So one of the most important part of the emperor’s job description in the Ming and Qing dynasties was to lead the rituals at the Palace of Heaven to pray for nice weather and good harvest. Sometimes for multiple times a year, the emperor had to walk, as the protocol required, from the imperial palace inside the forbidden city all the way to the Palace of Heaven on the southern part of Beijing, a whopping three miles, on foot, fully clothed, to pray and ask for heaven’s help. But heaven did not always respond in kind, and something would always go wrong somewhere in the huge country with a big population; someone, somewhere would always start to question the emperor’s expansive claim to the mandate of heaven, and plot to overthrow him and claim the mandate to himself.

The second concept that was central to Confucianist political philosophy was pious-loyalty based on the family-state world view. According to Confucianism, farming families were the bedrock of a society. An ideal-type Confucian family would be the one who owned a small piece of land that was inherited from its ancestors and continuously tended by each generation. It would be a multi-generation family living together under one roof where the elderly parents and grandparents were tended and obeyed by the younger generations. It produced everything it needed from the land, and it could

sustain itself generation after generation forever. If a society was consisted of families all like this, the society would maintain perfect social order and harmony forever too.

The state was simply the extension of this family-based social structure and was the largest family of all. The emperor would be the patriarch of this big family, therefore, should be treated with the utmost respect and obedience as you would afford to your own parents and grandparents, hence the East Asian societies' shared habit of calling the political leader "dear father" or "dear grandpa". As every child's most important duty at home was absolute filial piety to the parents, every subject's most important duty in the society was absolute loyalty to the emperor.

It was a thoroughly collectivistic world view and ethics that left no room for individuality and individual enterprise. The very prospect of free roaming, free enterprising individuals was perceived as a threat to the tightly woven social fabric of Confucianism, whose continuation depended on every individual being woven into the thread. This is the reason for the Chinese culture's deeply rooted hostility to individuality, individualism, and any talk of individual rights. Nobody had any right to individuality also became a self-reinforced prohibition that nobody else could have it either. Anyone dared to question the conventional wisdom of collectivism or ask for individual rights and freedom would be treated as heresy and burned on the stake, just like the religious intolerance of medieval time. This is because the underlying logic is the same. In the medieval time, a body strayed from the church was a soul lost to the devil; in the collectivistic Chinese society, every abled body not staying on the land was a son not serving his parents and a subject not serving the emperor, or a daughter not producing offspring for the family and the empire. Neither society could afford to lose many of them before the society itself unraveled.

It is the pauper-to-prince first emperor of Han dynasty, Liu Bang, who first recognized the value of Confucianism and the value of services provided by the Confucianists after they volunteered to teach and train the unruly court officials and generals, who were more comfortable in their battle armors than in plain clothes and routinely drew their swords and fought each other in the court, of proper manners in front of the emperor. After months of rehearsals, the Confucianists led the officials and generals in a performance of court ceremonies for the emperor. Everyone followed the protocols and behaved themselves and toasted good health to the emperor. The emperor was so impressed and delighted, he remarked that this was the first time he actually enjoyed being the emperor. He retained the Confucianists

who he used to despise and rewarded them handsomely (Liu 2005).

Since then, emperors and dynasties came and went, Confucianism stayed, and Confucian scholar officials served in every single emperor's court for well over two thousand years. Confucian classics were established as the core curriculum of the exams to become court officials, a practice lasted for more than one thousand years. Confucianism's status as the official religion of the court came under attack only at the end of Qing dynasty which in 1905 finally ended the official examination system that was the single most powerful and effective mechanism that propagated Confucianism as the official ideology for thousand years.

After the founding of the PRC, the CCP launched the most violent and sustained campaigns against Confucianism and anything traditional during the first thirty years of its rule. Confucianism completely disappeared from school curriculum and social life during this period. But over the past two decades, Confucianism made a powerful revival as the CCP turned to love and embrace Confucianism again. In recent years, the CCP increasingly grew fond of speaking of its mandate to lead China to its great revival, and the need for the people to be pious and loyal. Confucianism is like the tail of a lizard, it always grows back. It's in the genes. The most important two genes are the mandate of heaven and pious-loyalty.

## The dynastic cycle in Chinese history

With relatively early adoption of iron tools, animal power, and the development of various cultivation techniques, farmers in ancient China were able to reach the level of subsistence farming that allowed them to survive on the relatively small scale of family farms. This mode of production (in the general sense, not the Marxian sense of the term) allowed the families to settle down and sustain themselves on the land indefinitely if not disrupted by other forces.

Large number of subsistence farmers who were attached to the land and steadily replicating and growing in size were the economic foundation of the development of early Chinese states because they provided a large and stable tax base, and a large pool of able bodies for the army. The emergence of Confucianism as an ideology that emphasized the primary importance of family and farming as the foundation of a society was largely a reflection of the political economy of the time and served the need of the state to fix the farmers on the land.

What was called the China proper referred to roughly the eastern half of

modern China, that was the most fertile and productive part of China, roughly the size of continental Europe. Because of the sheer size of the territory and the size of the population it could sustain, it was not an exaggeration to say that before the world entered industrial age, whoever controlled China proper would be presiding over the largest economy and population under one polity in the world. This simple fact meant that for most rulers of the unified China proper, as long as they could defend the territory and maintain control over the population, it was more than enough to support whatever luxurious life style they might fancy, but also more than enough to keep them occupied or even awake at night.

Using a combination of a number of diplomatic and defensive strategies, each dynasty tried their best to keep the enemies around China's borders pacified. The biggest threat had always come from the north. The northern nomads were like the Vikings on horses, with similarly superior fighting forces and ferocity, routinely poured over the northern borders to plunder and burn. On two occasions, they were able to completely conquer the whole China proper and beyond and establish their own dynasties—Yuan dynasty from 1279 to 1368 by the Mongols, and Qing dynasty from 1644 to 1912 by the Manchus. But also like the Vikings, they settled down and gradually adopted the agrarian life style of the conquered people and lost their military superiority and were eventually overthrown as overlords. They later became almost indistinguishable from the people they had early conquered, but not without leaving a large influence on the language, food, clothes, culture, and some would even say gene pool of the southern farmers.

Except for these two prominent episodes though, most of the time the challenges to the mandate of heaven came from within. By unifying such a vast territory and sizable population under one centralized authority, the rulers of every Chinese dynasty faced a daunting challenge in how to maintain social order and harmony. By assuming the role of the ultimate patriarch for all he ruled and demanding absolute loyalty and submission to him as if to their own parents, the emperor and the court had taken on a vast and unshakable responsibility of taking care of the people, just as the parents had to take care of the children.

Left to their own, subsistence farmers were actually quite docile and easy to please. The productivity was high enough that with a good harvest, an average family could live comfortably through the year until the next harvest, but it was not high enough to produce a lot of surplus to support prolonged adventures away from the land. For its part, Confucianism was the perfect subsistence farmers' ideology that preached the proverbial farmers' ethos of

diligently tending the land and crops, year after year, generation after generation, carefully following the seasons and rituals, cherishing the land and heritage, content with what they had.

But they were never left alone because they were the most important tax base for the court, the whole state enterprise was built on their back. In order to effectively collect tax revenue from a big population spread on a large territory, the Chinese state had developed a centralized state apparatus very early on, and it kept expanding and evolving over two thousand years. The state apparatus had two primary functions, keeping social order and collecting tax. But maintaining this huge state apparatus from the capital down to every village was never cheap. Throughout history, whenever the central government had a budget problem, it tried to cut the officials' salaries, but not power, because it still needed them to work. If there is one single lesson to be learned from the whole two thousand years history of the dynastic cycles, it is that putting a powerful state apparatus in the hands of underpaid officials, is the most effective way of stirring peasant uprisings.

When the weather was bad and the crops failed, and the authorities invariably came knocking and squeezed even harder, the farmers and peasants who were never very far from the edge, would rise up and revolt. When your livelihood was threatened, it took very little to sow doubts in the minds of the farmers and peasants of the court's claim to the mandate of heaven, then anything could be a negative sign. It just took one clever person to come up with one catchy phrase as a slogan and put it on a flag, to attract a following of desperate peasants like children following the Pied Piper.

So peasant rebellions were regular events in every dynasty, and could happen anytime during the dynasty's reign from the beginning to the end. They caused severe drains to the state's coffer, contributed to the chronicle decay of every dynasty, and almost always played a hand in causing the dynasty to fall. In the case of Yuan and Qing dynasties, which were hostile takeovers by northern invaders, the previous dynasties, Song and Ming, were both infested by chronicle peasant uprisings. As a matter of fact, the last emperor of Ming dynasty was driven out of his palace and hung himself on a tree by the peasant rebels, before the Qing's army even entered China proper.

After the dust settled, whoever managed to outlast the others and ascend to the throne, would start anew by making up its own story of divine authorization and claim the mandate of heaven and demand absolute loyalty from everyone again. While the new emperor continued to hunt down every remnant enemy and started to purge the political rivals, he would also implement some new policies aimed at helping the peasants and farmers to



return to their land and start farming again because especially after a prolonged period of dynastic struggle, the new dynasty would always be in dire need of stable tax revenue.

The farmers and peasants would always welcome the end of conflicts and suffering, and be happy to go back to normal, routine life. After a few years of favorable weather and relatively light tax burdens, their lives would be stabilized, the state would also have a stable tax revenue flowing in. The euphoria of a new emperor presiding a new dynasty with a new mandate of heaven could last for a while. But eventually, the emperor and the state would always be tempted to engage in various misguided and expensive adventures, the weather would always turn nasty at the most unfortunate time, and the state apparatus would always turn to the farmers and peasants and squeeze them harder than they could bear, so new slogans got invented again, the hard-squeezed farmers and peasants would file out of their villages and follow the next Pied Piper to the next rebellion.

The Chinese pride themselves for having the longest uninterrupted history among the world's civilizations, maybe deservedly so. But the longest uninterrupted history was dotted with quite frequent, almost regular upheavals and turnovers. If we start from the Han dynasty which was the first to adopt Confucianism as the official ideology, and count Han (which was separated into two periods) and Song dynasty (the same) each as one entity, the average life span of a Chinese dynasty is just about 217.6 years, with an average half-life of 108.8 years; if the two Han and the two Song dynasties are counted as separate entities, then the average life span of the Chinese dynasties is only 172.5 years, with an average half-life of 86.2 years.

Longevity of course is also in the eyes of the beholder. If in the rapidly changing world of internet age, four decades of lacking political progress toward democratization might seem too long to the political scientists and China experts, it might help to bear in mind that forty years are less than half of the average half-life of Chinese dynasties over the past two thousand years. It should not be a surprise to anyone that Chinese dynastic cycles are indeed measured in centuries, not by years or decades.

Nevertheless, it is rather ironic that for a political system that put so much emphasis on the longevity of the regime, that the Chinese equivalent of "Your majesty" was literally "Your majesty who would live for ten thousand years", not only a single emperor manages to live that long, but also not a single dynasty lasted for more than three hundred years, if both the two Han dynasties and the two Song dynasties are counted as separate entities, which they really are. Out of the past ten eras when China was unified, two (the Sui

dynasty in the sixth century and the Republic era in the twentieth century) lasted less than forty years, one (the Yuan dynasty) is less than one hundred years, only four lasted more than two hundred years. But even for these longest lasting four, the West Han, Tang, Ming, and Qing, all of them had to deal with frequent disruptions, from small scale rebellions to civil wars, almost from the beginning to the end.

The frequent upheavals were not without cost. The end of a dynasty was usually marked by bloody civil wars that caused widespread destruction and suffering that took decades to repair and heal, and it was not uncommon for rebellions and civil wars to break out as soon as a new dynasty started and continued to occur throughout the life course of the dynasty. If anything, the combination of the all-or-nothing mandate of heaven and the phony pious-loyalty ethics that ran deep in the Confucianist political philosophy was more toxic than a formula for stable government. They are the very reason behind these periodical upheavals.

In practice, Confucianism as an ideology worked almost exactly the same way Christianity worked during the medieval time as the state religion. It gave the state divine pretensions to rule with absolute power, and it goaded the subjects to be absolutely loyal and submissive to the state. For the church, the stick was hell, and the carrot was salvation; for the Chinese family-state, the carrot was paternal love, and the stick was banishment from the family or from the state. But just as the medieval church-states became terribly corrupt, and the people eventually became doubtful of god's benevolence, the benevolent Chinese family-state was every bit a sham as well, and the peasants would sooner or later realize it.

But one big difference between the medieval church-state and the Confucianist family-state is that Christianity as a monotheistic religion, once its world view was cast into doubt by Renaissance, science, secularization, and modernization, it could never regain the credibility and reestablish the same kind of theocracy as in the medieval time again. Skepticism is a mental process that once let out of the bottle, cannot be put back in. It is also a social process that once the drip became a torrent, it cannot be reversed.

This is why modernization is a one-way street for the West civilization. It is safe to say after Renaissance and modernization, Europe would never go back to the medieval time. It is this progression from theocracy to liberal democracy, the steady liberation of the human spirits over the past half millennium in the Western world that created the sense of unidirectional progress of history in the West and gave Fukuyama's famous conclusion of "the end of history". Just as in physics, the sense of direction is created by a

reference system without which we cannot even define motion. The reference system that gave the West the sense of progress is inherently Cartesian in nature, with a well-defined origin point set by the man himself, from which one can travel through medieval time all the way back to antiquity in one direction, and through Renaissance, modernization, to postmodernity in the other. The line is called from mythology to theocracy through skepticism to enlightenment, which is entirely unique to the Western culture.

There is no such line in the Chinese culture. The Confucianist mandate of heaven is not monotheistic, it is not even really divine, it is just mystical. Confucianism does not even have a theology; the master himself even hated to talk about gods or ghosts. In reality, it only took someone to invent some stories to claim it, and it only took someone else to invent some other stories to discredit it and start anew. Therefore, there is no skepticism or enlightenment could wake up the masses because they never took the stories that seriously in the first place; and there is no single rebellion could shake the foundation of the religion of Confucianist statism because it would simply replace one discredited son of heaven with another freshly invented son of heaven of their own.

Progress is entirely an imported concept and an imaginary mission, with an imaginary goal that was never there. Chinese culture was never about progress, but all about renewal, like a lease, the state was the landlord, people the tenant. The traditional Chinese dream had two parts, the emperor always dreamed to be the landlord forever, people always dreamed someday became the new landlord. So Chinese politics do not progress, they recycle.

## The crisis of Confucianism and the rise of communism

The Qing dynasty came to power after the Ming dynasty was brought down by the latest peasant rebellion in the mid seventeenth century. The Qing army was let in through the gates of the fortress that guarded the eastern start of the Great Wall by the Ming general whose father was kidnapped by the peasant army, and his favorite concubine was taken by the leader of the peasant rebellion. The Qing installed itself as the new rightful ruler of China and its army swung through the whole China to rid it of any holdout resistance from the Ming court, to make sure that its claim to the mandate of heaven would never be challenged.

It adopted the whole trappings of Confucianism and actively enlisted prominent Confucian scholars to serve in the court. The official examination

system continued with the same Confucianism canons as the core curriculum. The emperors even issued royal decrees elaborating on the Confucianist virtues of filial piety and loyalty as the standard texts to be preached to the masses, i.e., assuming the role of the pope in the church of Confucianism.

This is remarkable because the Manchus were traditionally northeastern nomads outside the China proper and beyond the realm of the Confucianist family-state. Their wholesale acceptance of the Confucianist doctrines from the mandate of heaven to pious-loyalty as the new state's official ideology testifies to the usefulness and strength of the Confucianist statist ideology as a tool to the rulers regardless whoever came to rule China. After all, who wouldn't like an ideology that gave you divine cover to rule supreme, and goaded the masses to kneel and worship you as god?

It is also worth noting that even though the Manchus are no more distinguishable from the rest of Chinese today than the Vikings from the rest of Europeans after centuries of blending together, they were feared and hated as foreign and barbarian invaders about four hundred years ago by the Chinese just as the Vikings were feared and hated by the Europeans initially. As a way to subjugate and humiliate the Chinese subjects, the Manchus forced the Chinese men to shave their foreheads and braid their hair (which was sacred and not to be hurt according to Confucianist tradition) in the back in the Manchu style, any resistance would be punished by execution (Spence 1990).

But this agonizing "hair or head" dilemma turned out to be fleeting. By the end of Qing dynasty in the late nineteenth century, when Western civilization was gradually introduced into China and spread, and began to challenge the traditional Confucianist way of life, some Western-minded people began to cut off the braids and put on Western clothes, the braids then became the very symbol of the cherished traditional Confucianist way of life to many ordinary Chinese people who became to love and defend their braids as fervently as their forbearers used to resist them, and despised whoever dared to cut them off as heretics. Confucianism and the pious-loyal collectivism turned out to be at the heart of the people as much as of the rulers, whatever hair style happened to represent it. Later in the second half of the twentieth century, the PRC would have another episode of the collectivistic mob jumping on those with disagreeable hair style and forcefully trimming it off in public to safeguard communist morality.

For the Manchus, it turned out forcing the Chinese men to shave their foreheads was the more difficult task than selling them the new mandate of heaven stories and demanding the same absolute pious-loyalty from them,

especially after the Qing army had completely terminated any resistance even in the remotest parts of China. The early emperors of the Qing dynasty, especially Kangxi and Qianlong, whose combined reigns approached 125 years, almost half of the Qing era, did what early rulers of previous dynasties would usually do to pacify the population by lightening tax burdens, encouraging population growth, and opening up mobility opportunities by recruiting Confucian scholars into the ranks of the ruling elite through the official examination system. Meanwhile, they were also as ruthless as the rulers of any previous dynasties in their suppression of dissents and persecuting rivals. But these were relatively peaceful time befitting the first half of a great dynasty, and both Kangxi and Qianlong became revered in the history book as among the greatest emperors of all time.

But soon after the end of Qianlong's reign, China's agrarian society's way of life and the Confucianist political economy that had remained largely unchanged for thousands of years came under severe pressure by the newly industrialized West arriving at the door. The Confucianist agrarian state was simply too inward-looking for too long that it had completely missed the rise of modern Europe and failed to grasp its consequences. China used to dwarf its peripherals simply by the sheer size of its territory and population, now facing the industrialized West's global empires, without a navy, without a modern army, without any modern industry, China's subsistence level agricultural productivity was just no match in the competition with the West. The pompous court was quickly humbled by the small British navy fleet at the onset of the Opium War and it only went downhill from there (Platt 2018).

Suddenly every aspect of the Confucianist statism tradition was called into question. The tyrannical court, the corrupt state apparatus, the conservatism of the Confucianist culture that had always emphasized farming and discriminated against commerce and any other enterprises, and the pious-loyalty of the family-state that suffocated individuality. Towards the end of Qing's reign, the court was busy reinventing itself by even abolishing the official examination system that was the central pillar of Confucianist statism, opening new schools and universities modeled after the modern school system in Western countries, and introducing math and science as part of the new curriculum. It even announced a timetable to create a constitution and transform itself into a constitutional monarchy after the British model.

It was too little and too late to save itself. The Qing dynasty had run its course from the middle empire under heaven to a defenseless country with a six-year-old boy sitting on the throne in less than three hundred years. The

Republican revolution in 1911 overthrew the Manchu court and the Republic era began with an ambitious plan to catch up with the West by wholesale westernization. It abandoned the Chinese traditional calendar and adopted the Gregorian calendar, created a republic form of government, abolished the practice of kowtow and foot binding, created a western style education system, and drew up plans for infrastructure and industrial development, etc. It encouraged people to cut loose the braids that symbolized the old Qing era, but did not threaten to cut off people's heads if they wanted to keep the braids, although progressive mobs went around and cut off plenty of braids.

The relatively quick collapse of the Qing regime left China in a fractious state that was typical of the end of dynasty before. The Nationalist government hastily formed after the Republican revolution faced tremendous challenges picking up the pieces and was barely holding up. From 1912 to 1918, it went through no less than sixteen cabinets in just six years. The continued turmoil and weakness of China only further emboldened Japan's imperial ambitions on China. It seemed the Nationalist government would not have the time it needed to put its act together and to successfully implement its national strengthening project in time to fend off the Japanese encroachment. Japan had a half century head start and beat China decisively in the westernization and modernization race by the early decades of the 20th century. China was going to be overrun by its powerful and hostile neighbor and simply helpless to stop it.

It is against this historical background that the CCP, with significant support from the Soviet Union, rose to become a political rival to the Nationalist incumbent. Marxism and communism were introduced to China in the early decades of the twentieth century when all things western were introduced and admired and imitated by the intellectuals and social elite in China in a frenzy to cast off the backwardness of traditional Confucianist way of life and thinking, all in a hurried attempt to save China from the imperialist powers. The founder of the CCP, CHEN Duxiu, who was a Chinese literature professor at Peking University, was a champion for the so-called New Culture Movement as well as Marxism and communism.

Founded in secret in 1921 in Shanghai, the CCP initially followed a doctrinaire path under the direction and support of the Soviet Union and tried to organize strikes and rebellions in the cities with disastrous results. The Nationalist government dealt with the communist instigators severely and pursued them politically and militarily with determination. If would have been completely stamped out were it not for Mao's leadership that led the CCP to switch its strategy to start the revolution from the countryside.

Marx, who was never a China expert, was probably not thinking of Chinese peasants when he famously said the French peasants were “much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes”. But it was taken as an article of faith by some later Marxists, that peasants were too disconnected from one another to launch a revolutionary, which by itself is probably just a harmless mistake. What turned out to be disastrous was Marx’s other analysis about the readiness of the industrial workers to revolt if the intellectual instigators could just wake them from their false consciousness was also taken as an article of faith and turned into zealous instigations by the young communists.

Marx, the scholar, was both a philosopher of the German tradition and a pioneer political sociologist. The political sociologist of him was mostly trying to solve what is known in contemporary political sociology literature as the mobilization problem of collective action and social movement, revolution being the most spectacular of them. His most important discovery is that he realized by bringing factory workers together in such large numbers, in such close proximity to one another, and in such squalid conditions, the capitalists just unknowingly solved the mobilization problem for the workers. All it needed was a spark by the intellectual instigators to wake the workers and unite them as one class to launch a revolution. Hence the slogan at the end of *the Communist Manifesto*, “Workers of the World, Unite” (Marx and Engels 2002).

Marx wrote this a full century before the nuclear age. If he were to know how fission and chain reaction would work in physics, the scientist of him would definitely appreciate the similarities between revolution and nuclear explosion. What he discovered in political sociology is the equivalent of what would be called criticality in nuclear physics one hundred years later. What he called the workers’ false consciousness is the passive barrier that separates the nuclear fuel from reaching critical mass, and it takes a spark and small explosion to blast the barrier away to trigger criticality, and you get a revolution that is every bit as powerful and destructive as a nuclear explosion.

Marx might be the Einstein in sociology who invented the equation, it still takes a team of tens of thousands scientists and engineers to actually create a nuclear explosion. A proletariat revolution as Marx envisioned has never happened, but many other revolutions happened under its name. Mao is the greatest engineer in this trade. He realized that industrial workers were not the only fuel for revolution, and not an ideal one in China because their numbers were small and scattered; the peasants were a far more abundant material and no less potent. As an avid reader of Chinese history, he was fully aware of the well-established track record of peasant revolutions throughout



Chinese history. Mao redefined the word “proletariat”, which was translated into Chinese as *wuchan jieji* (无产阶级) which literally means “propertyless” rather than “working class”, to include the poor farmers and peasants, therefore with one ingenious stroke of a pen, expanded the communist revolution base to the largest majority of the Chinese population.

And the Chinese farmers and peasants never had a mobilization problem as the French farmers did. Quite the contrary, they had always been a perennial pacification problem nagging every ruler of every regime. As the bedrock of the traditional Confucianist society, Chinese farmers and peasants were never a sack of potatoes, but tightly woven together in the collectivistic Confucian family clans whose sizes would dwarf the number of workers in most midsized factories. Even today, it is not unusual to find rural villages that are single-surname communities of more than ten thousand people that could verifiably trace their common ancestry all the way back to three hundred or five hundred years ago.

How to prevent this large amount of volatile mass all over the country from accidentally reaching criticality had always been the biggest headache of the rulers in every dynasty. Mandate of heaven and pious-loyalty were the Confucianist equivalent of false consciousness that served as the mental barriers preventing the fission material from reaching critical mass. But then it took only one catchy slogan invented by one clever semi-intellectual to supply the spark and blast away the mental inhibitors and start a rebellion.

So Marxism and communism were only new to the Chinese peasants for the foreign sounding names, otherwise they might as well be natively born. For thousands of years, the Chinese farmers and peasants, brought together in large numbers by the Confucianist state, their material conditions were never far from ignition. They rose whenever they had nothing to lose but chains, in other words, they were real Marxist long before the workers were. Marx’s theory of proletariat revolution, therefore, is a special case of a general theory of revolutions. Revolution happens whenever the mobilization problem is overcome and there is enough amount of mass to reach criticality and there is no container strong enough to hold the explosive energy.

Marx’s theory of class struggle and his communist ideal were simply another new story that was used to challenge the old regime’s claim of the mandate of heaven and pave the way for the winner to claim a new mandate of heaven after victory. In this sense, it was not fundamentally different from the revolutionary ideologies that provided the theoretical foundations for past peasant rebellions. It might be more scientific and less superstitious than previous ideologies, but not that the revolutionary peasants would have



cared.

A short seventy years ago, another frustrated semi-intellectual from Guangxi province, Hong Xiuquan, simply declared himself the *little* brother of Jesus and started the *Taiping* rebellion. Noticing an opening, two of his top lieutenants would feign god and Jesus themselves from time to time to give him a scolding or even caning in public just to get even with him. One could say their methods were much less scientific, but together they managed to command a peasant army large enough to take over almost half of eastern China and establish their own kingdom that controlled about thirty million people. It took fifteen years for the already struggling Qing court to garner enough strength to put it down, but not before it further weakened the Qing's rule and contributed directly to its collapse fifty years later.

It took a true student of Chinese history like Mao, who counted Hong Xiuquan as one of his personal heroes, to recognize the revolutionary potentials by grafting communism to the huge size of peasant population in China. The egalitarianism and collectivism that underlied the communist ideology would have sounded familiar to the Chinese audience from the beginning because they were present in almost every slogan that was invented to rally the peasant troops from the first recorded peasant rebellion in the third century BC to Hong Xiuquan's Christianity flavored messages of the *Taiping* rebellion just seventy years ago.

The Chinese peasants embraced the messages of communist revolution with open arms and they spread like wild fire in the countryside. In 1949, after almost thirty years of armed struggles, the CCP successfully drove the Nationalist off the mainland and founded the PRC to claim the latest mandate of heaven to rule over the whole China again. The communist revolution succeeded by way of the time-honored road of peasant rebellion under a new ideology that made the rebelling Chinese peasants feel right at home.

## The return of Confucianism

After the founding of the PRC, the CCP launched a systematic program to completely transform the Chinese society from head to toe in the image of the former Soviet Union which at the time was the only patron and benefactor of the new regime. It started with a thorough land reform in the countryside that fulfilled its pre-revolution promise to the peasants by redistributing the land and properties and other excesses from the landlords and richer farmers to the landless and poor farmers and peasants who

supported the revolutionary cause. Families of those who served in or supported the CCP's army were duly rewarded in the process, a large number of people who were accused or suspected as class enemies were severely punished or killed or killed themselves.

The land reform campaign took three years to finish, by which time any real or potential or imagined oppositions to the new regime in the countryside would have been completely eliminated. The thoroughness would have matched if not exceeded the pursuit of resistance by any previous newly established regimes, except that this time it was done in the name of eliminating class enemies which was the only new concept in this repeated exercise.

But before long, the land that was redistributed to the poor farmers were taken from them again when the farmers themselves were organized into collective communes that became the foundation of the state command economy modeled after the Soviet Union, that allowed the PRC to implement its ambitious industrialization program before everything ground to a halt in 1966 at the start of the Cultural Revolution.

A socialist transformation of business ownership in the cities under the name of "public-private partnership" started as soon as the land reform was finished in the countryside. By the time it was over, all privately owned businesses, big and small, were incorporated into public ownership. The abolishment of private ownership was now complete.

While these material transformations were going on, the CCP was also busy shaping what was inside people's heads by launching various reeducation campaigns targeting different groups of the large population. The goal was to cleanse the Chinese society of the western cultural influences left by the wholesale westernization during the short-lived Republic era and by the traditional Chinese culture and replace them with pure communist morality and culture which meant a wholesale imitation of the Soviet Union.

The cultural eradication and replacement zeal worked itself to a collective frenzy at the start of the Cultural Revolution with widespread and systematic destruction of priceless traditional cultural heritages across the country. It also brought extended disruptions to the whole school system. The whole generation came to age during this extended period of chaos, who were born and grew up in an already culturally depleted era, lost their best learning years that could never be made up, and entered adulthood severely malnourished culturally. The effect of this still ripples through Chinese society today, now that this generation have finally ascended to the apex of power and are firmly in control of every aspect of Chinese society. In their

mid-sixties now, their rule will last for another twenty years given the much slower metabolism of Chinese politics and the habitual emphasis on longevity of power.

The Cultural Revolution lasted for ten years from 1966 to 1976 when Mao died. For nearly thirty years since the founding of the PRC, through ceaseless political campaigns, the CCP succeeded in transforming the economy into a completely state command economy that gave the state complete control of every single individual's life. Farmers in the countryside now would wake to the bell and march in formations to the field and earn points for the day's work in exchange for food rations. Families in the cities would receive coupons based on the number of people in the households, all daily necessities were rationed. Everyone would need the authorities' permission and carry the official credential to travel anywhere inside China.

The totalitarianism under Mao's rule was created by grafting the imported radical and even more absolutist collectivism and statism of communism to the milder and more conservative collectivism and statism of Confucianism. Although severely suppressed on the surface, Chinese traditional Confucianism actually meshed very well with communism. And the old cultural habits were never far from the surface either. With pure communist revolutionary passion, the worshippers just couldn't help but burst into collective chanting, "May Chairman Mao Live for Ten Thousand Years!"

The most profound social and political consequence of the communist totalitarianism that the CCP imposed on the Chinese society is that it blasted away any intermediary layers of society that used to wrap around the individuals like the blanket of atmosphere wrapped around a planet that allows life to exist. In the traditional Confucianist family-state, the state did not directly manage individual farmers' daily lives. The family-clan villages were basically self-ruled and self-regulated. The local authorities relied on the family-clan structure's cooperation to collect taxes and supply labor and draftees, and generally leaned on the families to keep the individuals in line. This in turn gave the clans and villages certain power to protect the individuals and bargain with the local authorities and the state. But it also allowed the villagers to organize and mobilize undiscovered by the state until it was too late.

By organizing every individual directly into a hierarchical production system that was managed by a centralized political structure, every person came to face the state's power and direct gaze alone, nothing stood between the individual and the state, and nothing could protect or save him/her from the state's overwhelming force. This effectively eliminated the possibility of

anyone instigating and mobilizing under the radar, therefore, solved the millennium-old problem of frequently reoccurring peasant unrests. The CCP learned that the best way to prevent the reemergence of a peasant rebel army was to organize every single person into an army of peasants and march them to work in unison everyday under watch.

But not even the CCP could quite manage an army of eight hundred million soldiers and control every aspect of their lives. The state command economy was crashing under its own weight by the late 1970s and the CCP was forced to loosen control over the economy and start market reform. The rapid economic growth over the past forty years brought significant freedom to the individuals on how to live their lives, but the state's capabilities to watch every individual directly have only enhanced especially in recent years with the massive deployment of sophisticated surveillance technologies. And the state has never relaxed its political control to allow any intermediary layers to form that could possibly shield and protect the individuals from the state's direct and intense gaze.

In other words, even though the state command economy that made the totalitarian state possible is gone, the social and political consequences of totalitarianism remain. The authoritarian state today retains most of the social and political control capabilities over the individuals, without the need to manage everyone's life anymore. The authoritarian state, therefore, grew stronger with economic growth, not weaker. This is the secret of how the state structure can hold itself together and be effective as it is.

The CCP does face one dilemma though. Communism is a radical revolutionary ideology. When it was used as the new, exciting ideology to mobilize the Chinese peasants for revolution, it worked wonderfully because of the common threads of collectivism and statism underlying both communism and Confucianism. Chinese take comfort from and pride in Confucianism as an expression of Chinese values, traditions, and culture. But seven decades later, when the CCP has completely established itself as the ruling party, an overtly radical revolutionary ideology could now become a problem. Revolution is always the underdog's dream, but the ruler's nightmare. The CCP was the underdog, now it is the ruler.

Confucianism, on the other hand, has always been the ruler's best friend. The mandate of heaven has always gone to the winner, and it has always preached pious-loyalty to the emperor. It is hard to imagine for a ruler what not to like about Confucianism. Therefore, over the past twenty years, the CCP found itself increasingly drawn to the Chinese traditional cultural heritages, especially Confucianism, that it tried so hard to destroy. So much

so that it erected a giant statue of Confucius on the Tiananmen Square at the heart of Beijing a few years ago. Given the fact that his very name was turned into an insult a short fifty years ago, this is a remarkable turnaround. Even though it was later removed, the symbolism and significance of the act were not lost on anyone. Confucianism is officially back, as it always was in every new dynasty ever since Liu Bang the first emperor of Han dynasty recognized its values and embraced it.

It is safe to say that a state that embraces the mandate of heaven and pious-loyalty of traditional Confucianism as part of its new official ideology might not embrace liberal democracy at the same time, no matter how rapidly the economy might continue to grow. There is no reason to believe that the people are asking for it either. Political progress might be the only foreign concept here, otherwise, it is the height of a new era, everyone feels right at home.

At the same time, however, there is some room here to consider the tension between the enduring state-centered policies of the PRC on the one hand and the sustained individualistic lifestyle pursuits and empathetic concerns of Chinese people on the other. Social Empathy approach compels us to consider what local actors actually have experienced rather than simply associate the existence and possibility of social change with the European and American civilizational framework. It is Confucianism that Chinese people understand people by perceiving their life situations, and as a result develop social empathy with insight into structural inequalities and disparities (Segal 2011). Increased understanding of social and economic inequalities can lead Chinese people to pursue social and economic justice and societal well-being (Hoffman 2011).

## Conclusion

The second paragraph of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that opens with the sentence, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please", almost sounds like he was talking about the Chinese communist revolution one hundred years after he penned the famous piece. "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." Except that it might not always be nightmare but the sweetest dreams.

"And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such

epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.” Only one word need to be changed—replacing “world” history with “Chinese” history—the whole story of the Chinese communist revolutionary fits perfectly.

“Thus Luther put on the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789-1814 draped itself alternately in the guise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, and the Revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793-95.” (Marx 2008) If he were to edit this today, he would most definitely add, “and the CCP looks better than ever in the Confucianist robe.”

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please”, just like acorns grow into their own trees, but they do not grow into any trees as they please, because both history and trees are genetic beings. Inside acorns, it is the genome; behind history is culture. It should not be so hard to fathom that Chinese politics is going back to Confucianism after communism, instead of moving toward liberal democracy, because it is genetically (culturally) programmed to do so. The genetic materials for liberal democracy introduced during the Republic era were wiped out completely by communism after the revolution through repeated political campaigns; waiting for something to bud is simply wishful thinking. Taiwan finally democratized in the 1990s under the Nationalists’ watch because the Nationalists carried the wholesale westernization genes with them to Taiwan, and never cleansed them from their system.

But one should not despair. China is not an isolated middle kingdom under heaven all by itself anymore. China and the rest of the world have come to live in the same world synchronized on the same internet time after China came out of its self-imposed isolation about forty years ago. Whenever cultures come into contacts with one another, they diffuse and spread into each other’s territories, just as when two continents come into contacts, seeds are carried into each other’s fields. Some plants and ideas readily spread like weeds, such as consumerism; some might take a long time to take roots and grow, such as liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy is a very culturally unique institution that is deeply rooted in the European cultural tradition. It has spread to a large part of the world nowadays because of the influence and dominance of the Western civilization in the modern time, just like wheat or coffee have spread to much of the world over the past centuries. It can take roots and grow in East Asian

soil as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have demonstrated, but that is only because the seeds were planted and had the chance to germinate in these societies, each through quite arduous ordeals. We should stop pretending that the seeds for liberal democracy are universal in every culture and that the same liberal democratic institutions would simply spring up in every society if we just water it more often. They are not. Unless the seeds are planted and nurtured, nothing will grow out of thin air.

China might still democratize, but not before the same planting and germination process somehow manages to run its full course. With the CCP trying its utmost to dig out every single seed and kill it over the past seventy years, there is very little if anything at all left under the ground to germinate. Insisting on the universality of liberal democratic values does not make them so. Ignoring the fact that politics are highly culture-dependent enterprises, we risk forever wondering why bamboo roots never grow into oak trees.

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