From Marxism to nationalism: The Chinese Communist Party's discursive shift in the post-Mao era

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese Communist Party's dramatic shift from Mao Zedong's Chinese Revolution to Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream remains under-examined and even misunderstood or misrepresented despite its enormous impact on every aspect of national life in the People's Republic of China. There is a clear need for in-depth analysis of the extent to which the CCP has departed from the philosophical foundation of Marxism and Maoism, abandoned socialism and communism, inverted its long tradition of iconoclasm, transformed its own identity and altered its subject position. Part of the CCP's philosophical departure from Marxism and Maoism is its increasing conversion to nationalism. The new nationalism underpinning the Chinese Dream, in particular, operates against the grain of Marxism and Maoism, and vice versa, and is logically irreconcilable with the latter — so much so that the CCP cannot be nationalists and Marxists, Maoists or communists at the same time. The contradictory logics between nationalism and Marxism can be best seen from their respective conceptions of permanence and change, the unity and conflict of opposites, and conceptions of, and approaches to, tradition and the past, which have had major ramifications in political-cultural change in post-Mao China, especially in Xi's New Era.

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1. Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) dramatic shift from Mao Zedong's Chinese Revolution to Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream remains under-examined and even misunderstood or misrepresented despite its enormous impact on every aspect of national life in the People's Republic of China (PRC). It is commonplace for economists to view the shift as a systemic transformation from command economy to market economy, from socialism to capitalism, and from economic closure to openness. Macro research on political and social change in the PRC typically focuses on its shift from totalitarianism to post-totalitarianism, post-socialism and authoritarianism. However, characterisations of this type do not reveal the full scale or the depth of the change. There is a clear need for in-depth analysis of the extent to which the CCP has departed from the philosophical foundation of Marxism and Maoism, abandoned socialism and communism, inverted the Party's long tradition of iconoclasm, transformed its own identity and altered its subject position.

Curiously, there are still persistent perceptions that the CCP's ideology is essentially the same despite four decades of "reform and opening-up," that the Party continues to believe in Marxism, Maoism, socialism and communism. No small number of Western politicians, journalists and commentators continue to refer to the PRC as "communist China." For
example, John Garnaut (2017), a well-known Australian journalist who joined the government as a speech writer for former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and as a China policy advisor, spoke of “the unbroken thread that runs from Lenin through Stalin, Mao and Xi.” In Garnaut’s view, Xi “is pushing communist ideology at a time when the idea of ‘Communism’ is as unattractive as it has been at any time in the past 100 years,” and he is not merely paying lip service to Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism and Maoism but “talking seriously and acting decisively to progress a project of total ideological control.” To be sure, Xi has stepped up ideological control and makes frequent references to Marxist and Maoist concepts and theories, but contrary to Garnaut’s general point, Xi and the CCP have actually broken with those ideologies, although they continue to hang on to limited elements. Indeed, “reform and opening-up” and the Chinese Dream are nothing but radical departures from Marx’s World Revolution and Mao’s Chinese Revolution.

Part of the CCP’s philosophical departure from Marxism and Maoism is its increasing conversion to nationalism. The new nationalism underpinning the Chinese Dream, in particular, operates against the grain of Marxism and Maoism, and vice versa, and is logically irreconcilable with the latter — so much so that the CCP cannot be nationalists and Marxists, Maoists or communists at the same time. The contradictory logics between nationalism and Marxism are particularly manifest in their respective conceptions of permanence and change, the unity and conflict of opposites, and conceptions of, and approaches to, tradition and the past. Nationalists, especial cultural nationalists, cherish the traditionalist “piety for what actually, allegedly, presumably has always existed” (Weber, 1948: 296), treat specific contents of traditional culture as valuable in themselves and mobilise these contents for present purposes (Calhoun, 2007: 23). Marxists, by contrast, proceed from the assumption that both the past and tradition will and should be “negated” in the incessant forward march towards the ideal society. They see change as revolutionary change which eventually alters the identity of subjects and objects. This conception is profoundly unacceptable to nationalists who subscribe to notions of evolutionary change. Still more unacceptable to them is the Marxian idea of the conflict of opposites and class struggle, which disrupts the continuity of tradition and damages national unity and identity.

The CCP leaders of the Xi Jinping era are nationalists rather than Marxists on each of these questions. The fact that they continue to call themselves Marxists and claim to be committed to socialism and communism is the result of an unsolvable dilemma. Though the CCP has lost faith in Marxism and communism, it continues to make believe that its ideology remains unchanged and refuses to rename itself and revamp the Party and state constitutions in line with its action and conviction. But its claims should not blind anyone to what actually guides their action. Needless to say, what Party leaders and propagandists say is not the same as what they do or believe in, and what they say at different times and places is not always consistent either. None of this means that their pronouncements are entirely meaningless, have no consequences and therefore can be ignored. Rather, a nuanced understanding of the CCP’s discourse begins with a careful analysis of the consistencies and inconsistencies.

This article examines the contradictory logics of Marxism and nationalism in the Party-state discourses. What is most striking is a couple of deep contradictions therein and the CCP’s contrasting articulation of two sets of competing elements. The contradiction in the Party’s dis-synchronised value structure is exemplified by glaring inconsistencies and illogical reasoning. The contradiction in its value-environment nexus arises from the failure of the Party’s stated ideology to provide its members with a consistent, coherent and credible set of guiding ideas and to legitimise its pragmatic, experimental and ad hoc reform measures and responses to diverse, unanticipated problems encountered in “reform and opening-up.” The discursive practices articulate nationalist elements into moments whilst intentionally turning elements of Marxism, socialism and communism into empty and meaningless signifiers.

2. Emptied elements in the dream discourse: Marxism, socialism and communism

Western politicians, journalists and commentators have good reason to call the PRC “communist China” or insist that the CCP remains committed to Marxism, socialism and communism. After all, the CCP is the PRC’s ruling party and uses Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, among other theories, as its guides to action. According to the constitutions of the CCP and the PRC, “The Party’s highest ideal and ultimate goal is the realization of communism” (Xinhua, 2017), and that the country’s polity is “a socialist state under the people’s democratic dictatorship” (National People’s Congress, 2018).

However, it appears evident on closer examination of official discourses that such elements as Marxism, socialism and communism are reduced to empty signifiers in contrast to elements of nationalism. In fact, the Party-state abandoned Mao’s Chinese Revolution without admitting it when it embarked on “reform and opening-up.” Its historical mission in the post-Mao era is not the construction of an increasingly advanced socialist society or progress towards communism, but economic development by means of partial marketisation and partial privatisation. For each CCP leader since Deng Xiaoping, the Mao era is not the construction of an increasingly advanced socialist society or progress towards communism, but economic development by means of partial marketisation and partial privatisation. The goal of economic development is the creation of wealth and the improvement of productive forces, economic efficiency and living standards: it does not entail the revolutionisation of the PRC’s economic-political system. Moreover, the clock is turned back, so to speak, as the PRC’s economic base is downgraded to a bygone stage of development — the “primary state of socialism” — where less socialism and more capitalism can be and is allowed. The backward move is not represented in the CCP’s articulation as regression, of course; nor is the Party ready to call a spade a spade or to admit its adoption of capitalist elements. Instead, it has chosen to paper over the glaring contradictions by redefining key elements so that it remains to be seen to be loyal to Marxism and committed to socialism and communism when it is not.

The element of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” has been explained in terms of “three advantages” since the Deng era. That is, socialism is “advantageous to the development of productive forces, or the labour and material means of
production, to increasing the comprehensive strength of a socialist country, and to raising people's standards of living” (Deng, 1993: 372). Now that the advancement of productive forces, instead of Mao's Chinese Revolution, has become the CCP's overriding objective in the reform era, the Party is freed from the shackles of socialist production relations and socialist modes of production, or the basic principles of socialism as understood in the PRC before 1978. For pure productive forces, or the ability to use tools to act upon nature, are neither socialist nor capitalist but ideologically neutral. Non-socialist forms of ownership are thus acceptable, and so are non-socialist modes of production and everything else that affords the “three advantages.”

Though socialism as rearticulated in the Deng era is retained in the CCP's current discourse of the Chinese Dream with some revision, another “Chinese characteristic” is added to socialism. A sentence inserted into Article 36 of the Party's current constitution explicitly states what the CCP leadership had assumed all along: “The defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the leadership of the Communist Party of China.” (Xinhua, 2017) What is also revised is the role of socialism. Instead of speaking of a system complete with a corresponding economic base and ideological-cultural superstructure, Xi Jinping has downgraded socialism to a means by which the Chinese Dream is to be realised. He also takes pains to draw attention to the long time span of the “primary stage of socialism,” stressing repeatedly that this stage will last at least a century. It is as though Xi and the CCP are not in a hurry to move forward irrespective of their avowal to do so, but is keen to prolong the stage indefinitely. Here, the Party is able to play with words and define socialism as suits its current agenda and to pursue economic development without being bound by Marxist doctrines while making believe that it remains committed to socialism and communism.

For that reason alone, it is inconceivable that “socialism with Chinese characteristics” will develop into advanced stages of socialism and communism. In fact, this socialism probably looks more like capitalism in the eyes of Maoists who define socialism in relation to a mode of production characterised by public ownership, planning and egalitarian distribution. The Maoist notion was consistent with Marx's conception as a phase of economic development and a corresponding set of social relations superseding capitalism in the schema of historical materialism, although it fell short of Marx's blueprint. In essence, Marxian socialism is a mode of production where the only criterion for production is use value, which is coordinated through planning and meant to directly satisfy human needs instead of generating profit. As production is divorced from exchange value and as exploitation through the extraction of surplus value is eliminated during the transition from socialism to communism, class struggle inevitably comes to an end. The working class as a whole comes to own the means of production and to enjoy the economic output according to the principle of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his contribution.” The ultimate goal of this system is the maximisation of human freedom — the freedom from individuals' alienation as a result of material scarcity and forms of social control, which force individuals to work for mere survival through selling their labour power to the exploiting classes.

In Marx's articulation, the defining features of capitalism include private ownership of the means of production, the extraction of surplus value, market-based production and consumption, the advancement of capital, and the dependency on wage labour by the majority of the population (Marx, 1990). The sole purpose of production is to generate exchange value and to gain a net profit income through exchange and circulation in the market. No CCP leader in the reform era admits to the Party's adoption of any elements of capitalism, the existence of exploitation in the PRC, or the emergence of a new bourgeoisie. But there is no denying that what makes the PRC's “socialist market economy” tick is the profit motive, the extraction of surplus value, and market-based production and consumption geared towards exchange value rather than use value. There is no denying either that there are new classes who own no means of production and new classes who do and live off the surplus value produced by the working classes. Equally undeniable is the inevitability of abolishing private ownership, which now figures more prominently in China's GDP growth and employment, before the PRC can become a communist society. Yet, the constitution of the PRC stipulates that “The State protects the lawful rights and interests of the non-public sectors of the economy such as the individual and private sectors of the economy.” (National People's Congress, 2018)

The Party cannot deny that private ownership is an essential feature of capitalism on account of Marx's emphasis that it is the capitalist mode of production that produces capitalist private property (Lenin, 1965: 221–22). Nor can it assert that the PRC will become a communist society without having to get rid of private ownership. For the theory of the Communists may be summed up in a single phrase: “Abolition of private property.” (Marx and Engels, 1969: 22) This is not something the Party wishes to advertise because it will jeopardise social stability if private entrepreneurs panic, as happened in 2018, following the publication of a couple of articles which suggested that private ownership had reached its use-by date (Zhou, 2018; Wu, 2018). The credibility of the articles derives from the logic of communism and the Party's avowed commitment to it. Xi and CCP propagandists moved quickly to assure private entrepreneurs that the official policy for protecting private businesses had not changed, but they cannot promise the policy will never change. To do so is to openly renounce communism. Hence, private entrepreneurs can never rest assured as long as the CCP claims to be committed to communism, while the Party's faith in communism will always be in doubt before it ceases to allow private ownership.

The CCP's claims about its faithfulness to Marxism, socialism and communism are even more doubtful in the light of its waning interest in the philosophical cornerstones of these ideologies, most notably dialectical and historical materialism — the Marxist outlooks on nature and on human societies. Once again, Party leaders deny this to be the case regardless of the fact they have turned Marxism in general and dialectical and historical materialism in particular into empty signifiers just as they have made socialism and communism largely meaningless. They have done this through two discursive practices. One is the use of a handful of isolated concepts which are associated with materialism, although the concepts take on different
meaning as they are detached from Marxist frameworks. The other is the extrusion from these concepts the meaning that Marx and Mao articulated.

The discursive practices are clearly at work in Xi’s speech to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Marx’s birthday (Xinhua, 2018b), which offers the most comprehensive review in the CCP’s history of the communist pioneer’s life and work. In it, Xi lists four defining characteristics of Marxism:

1. Marxism is a scientific theory which creatively expounds the pattern of development in human societies.
2. It is a people’s theory; for the first time, it provides a body of ideas about how to achieve the people’s self-liberation.
3. It is a theory of praxis for guiding the people’s transformation of the world.
4. This open theory incessantly develops and stands at the forefront of the times.

Xi goes on to stress the importance of studying nine aspects of Marxism, including theories about the developmental pattern of human societies, the role of the people in making history, the relationship between productive forces and production relations, people’s democracy, cultural construction, social construction, the relationship between man and nature, world history, and party-building. In the nine long paragraphs elaborating on these aspects, Xi only mentions dialectical and historical materialism once and only in the context of explaining that communism can only be realised gradually in stages. In the other parts of his speech, he reminds the Party not to forget that productive forces and the economic base of a society determine its production relations and superstructure, although the latter have significant impact on the former. His unmistakable point, consistent with the reform-era Party line, is that the advancement of productive forces is the Party’s overriding objective, whereas anything that fetters productive forces must be reformed or removed.

Xi’s discursive practices of “emptying” dialectical and historical materialism and other foundational Marxist creeds also pervade his comments elsewhere, which reinforce the very same messages. More surprisingly, Xi did not go into any detail in his explanation of historical materialism even at the Politburo’s 11th group study session on 3 December 2013, which was meant to focus on the topic (Xinhua, 2013). Equally surprising were Xi’s comments on dialectical materialism when the Politburo dwelt on it at its 20th group study session on 23 January 2015. He boiled it down to the proposition that material determines consciousness, that the material world develops according to objective laws, and that nature can be transformed by people’s subjective will, and vice versa (Xinhua, 2015). Applying these principles to Chinese realities, Xi impressed on the Party the need to proceed from objective realities instead of subjective will without forgetting the potential impact of consciousness on the material world. The most basic objective reality and national condition in the PRC, he noted, was its current stage of socialist development, where the productive forces were not advanced. The Party therefore should not have unrealistic expectations about transforming production relations but must work hard to advance productive forces.

Xi’s remarks on Marxist concepts and theories, like everything else he says, are routinely echoed and expounded in official communications and the mass media. However, his and the Chinese media’s references to Marxism should not be automatically taken as evidence of the CCP’s continued loyalty to Marxism. Not only have Party leaders and propagandists fixed key elements of Marxism in such a way that their meaning is altered dramatically, but they have left out much of the substance of Marxist concepts and theories as well. Particularly significant is the CCP’s silence on the three laws of dialectics underlying both dialectical and historical materialism, which betrays its disinterest in these laws and its adoption of a diametrically opposed historical outlook on continuity versus change and on unity and harmony versus conflict, which underpins the Party’s new nationalist worldview.

3. Marxist conceptions of revolutionary change and class antagonism

In the past four decades, the meaning of change itself has changed dramatically in the CCP’s discourses of “reform and opening-up” and the Chinese Dream, as the Party’s historical mission is no longer the creation of New Culture, the construction of an increasingly advanced socialist society or progress towards communism but economic development. Given the latter entails the gradual and accumulative improvement of productive forces and living standards rather than the revolutionisation of the PRC’s economic base and cultural-ideological superstructure, revolutionary change has given way to evolutionary change as the preferred modus operandi. History has thus ceased to be an incessant, forward march from socialism to communism. The new cultural-historical outlook and worldview articulated in the Dream discourse are traditionalist in that the nation’s past and tradition are to be cherished and made to serve the present and future as a basis for a national mode of communication and socialisation, which, in turn, maintains the nation’s autonomy, unity and identity and enhances its self-confidence and soft power.

Though Party-state leaders and propagandists in the Xi Jinping era have never openly renounced revolutionary change, their new “historical outlook” (lishiguan) hinges on cultural homogeneity, unity and continuity instead of diversity, conflict and change. History in their current articulation is envisioned as a constant flow comparable to a mighty river, a continuous process of the nation’s evolution and development, and the accumulation of national essence. In Xi’s own words: “[h]istory is a continuous movement from yesterday to today and then tomorrow. It is impossible to sever the ties between the present and the past. It is always on the basis of inheriting the legacy of their forerunners that people move forward. There are no exceptions anywhere in the past or present.” (Xinhua, 2018a)
History, he adds, can be divided into periods or stages, which, despite the relative independence of each, are interconnected and interrelated. He stresses further that historical continuity as a whole cannot be disrupted no matter how many twists and turns history might take as it moves forward. This idea of continuous history is consistent with the Party-state’s current view of the Chinese civilisation, which is widely accepted among ordinary Chinese as well. In this view, China, Egypt, Mesopotamia and India are the world’s oldest civilisations, while China stands out as the “only continuous civilisation” lasting five millennia. It is debatable whether that description is warranted given significant ruptures throughout Chinese history; what should be noted here though is how much the CCP’s conceptions of the past, tradition and change in the Xi era differ from Marxist and Maoist notions.

Marxism’s “scientific” account of change is premised on dialectics, a totalising theory of development and the philosophical foundation of Marxism and Maoism. Dialectical materialism holds that the material world, with human beings included, is not stable or immobile but exclusively consists of matter in motion. Friedrich Engels reduced the theory to “three laws of dialectics,” namely the law of the unity and conflict of opposites, the law of the passage of quantitative changes into qualitative changes, and the law of the negation of the negation (Engels, 1987). The essence of the first law is the splitting of a single, organically connected and integrated whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts. In the process of perpetual flux, the unity of mutually exclusive opposites, or negative and positive sides, is invariably conditional, temporary, transitory or relative, whereas the struggle of opposites is absolute (Lenin, 1976). The struggle between antagonistic forces is the primary cause of motion, change and development. The struggle and contradictions also furnish the key to forward leaps, to the break in unity and continuity, and to the destruction of the old and its replacement by the new.

According to the second law, the process of development begins with quantitative change, that is, increases or decreases in the thing or gradual change in its dimensions or magnitude. Such change does not go indefinitely, however; rather, leaps and bounds in the sum total of the properties that gives something its identity take place when change moves beyond a certain point. The inevitable outcomes of this process are breakthroughs and the transformation of a thing’s identity, following which a thing ceases to be itself. The third law can be seen as a restatement of the second, but negation differs from qualitative change in that it characterises the direction of progressive and ascending development. What is negated is situated at a lower level of development along the same scale, while its replacement is a qualitative state on a higher level.

Admittedly, the concepts of qualitative change and negation by no means rule out continuity altogether. It is inconceivable that the materialist worldview of Marxism would contravene the law of the conservation of matter to contend that all the intrinsic properties of a thing will ever entirely disappear. In fact, the Marxian concept of sublation acknowledges the recurrence of some elements of the old in the new and the preservation of what is positive, progressive or useful in the higher-level qualitative state. Still, dialectical materialism is more concerned with discontinuity than continuity. This concern stems from the Marxian preoccupation with “revolutionary practice,” which is aimed at the negation of capitalism by socialism and communism. As Marx states, “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.” (Marx and Engels, 1969: 13) By “change” Marx and Engels meant systematic change: that is, to change anything is to change everything, as all social processes and institutions are interconnected. Hence, “revolutionary practice” demands nothing short of the transformation of a thing’s identity so that it becomes something else no matter what and how many elements of the old are retained.

This idea of change and negation is central to historical materialism, in that the latter posits human societies’ continuous progress. The primary cause of social change is contradictions between forces of production and relations of production — the sum total of relations that individuals enter into in social production. As the productive forces advance, existing modes of production become obsolete and hinder progress, eventually inducing a crisis that precipitates a revolutionary transformation of society. From the perspective of historical materialism, the contradictions between the two sides of the mode of production manifest themselves as class struggle.

Under the capitalist mode of production as Marx and Engels saw it, class struggle takes place principally between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The former owns the means of production and exploits the proletariat by extracting surplus value, while the latter, owning no productive property, only have their labour power to sell. Those “warring classes of capitalism” do not simply play complementary roles in the social organisation of labour but occupy diametrically opposed positions in relations of exploitation, domination and subordination (Engels, 1934: 37). It is their struggle that drives history forward, propelling human societies from capitalism to socialism. Thus, viewed through the prism of Marxism, social antagonism is not only inevitable in class societies but also desirable.

Mao Zedong endorsed dialectical and historical materialism and rejected traditional Chinese metaphysics (xianxue) as early as the 1930s. The latter, he observed, saw things as isolated, static and one-sided, as exemplified in the saying that “Heaven changeth not, likewise the Tao changeth not;” he regarded change as merely “increase or decrease in quantity or a change of place.” (Mao Tse-tung, 1965a,b: 312) He affirmed the “universal truth” of Marxism that “there is nothing in this world except matter in motion,” and that the development of the contradictions between the productive forces and the relations of production, between classes and between the old and the new “pushes society forward.” (Mao Tse-tung, 1965a,b: 314) He went on to analyse at length the contradictions in the “colonial, semi-colonial and semi-feudal” Old China. The principal contradictions in Old China that Mao identified were between imperialism and the Chinese nation and between feudalism and the working class.

In Mao’s articulation, the superseding of Old China by New China meant a series of qualitative changes and negations that made up the continuous Chinese Revolution, namely the negation of imperialism and feudalism during the “democratic revolution,” the negation of feudalism and capitalism during the socialist revolution, and the transition from socialism to
communism. Indeed, the destruction of the old and the construction of the new are inseparable parts of the same process in Mao’s vision. As he argued forcefully in his comments on China’s old society and culture, “There is no construction without destruction, no flowing without damming and no motion without rest; the two are locked in a life-and-death struggle.” (Mao Tse-tung, 1965a, b: 369).

Mao’s idea of revolutionary change and negation is obviously consistent with the philosophy of progressivism, be it Enlightenment discourses of progress, May Fourth iconoclasm or historical materialism. Politically, his notion of social change entailed the destruction of the dictatorship of bourgeoisie, landlords and rich peasants and the establishment of a “people’s dictatorship,” where the exploiting and exploited classes would both turn into their opposites. The proletariat and poor peasants would become New China’s ruling class, whereas the old ruling class were to be suppressed by means of “revolutionary violence.” Economically, increasing importance would be attached to the state sector owned by the democratic republic and the co-operative sector owned by the working class. Culturally, the old, feudal and bourgeois ideas, beliefs, values and practices would give way to a new, socialist alternative.

The Cultural Revolution, in particular, was “a great revolution that touches people to their very souls” (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, 1966: 6). Its focus on the “transformation of the people” meant the complete reconstruction of the Chinese national identity, as it comprised cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural dimensions, encompassing beliefs about how the world was constituted, enduring predispositions to norms and values on which the beliefs were premised, and everyday practices. This thorough and far-reaching transformation was an indispensable part of the construction of the socialist cultural-ideological superstructure and of the Chinese Revolution. Its result was the revolutionaryisation of Old China into New China and a brand new national identity. The Chinese in the PRC became “working men and women with socialist consciousness.” At the same time, whatever was labelled “old” was automatically considered bad, and everything that was deemed to be good was described as “new.”

This Maoist discourse and its revolutionary meaning system began to crumple when both were virtually negated as the Party-state changed track and embarked on “reform and opening-up.” Liberal-minded scholars began to challenge Marxist and Maoist conceptions of radical change as early as the 1980s. In a much cited conversation published in the prestigious journal Literature, History and Philosophy (Wenshizhe), eminent scholars slammed “ultra-leftism” in historiography as exemplified in the belief that revolutionary violence was just and justified while innovation and evolutionary change were not worth mentioning (Hu et al. 1983). Renowned philosopher Li Zehou (1995: 29) published an article in 1994 which was entitled, without beating about the bush, “Revolution Is Not Necessarily a Good Thing in China.” His target was not just the revolutions in China from 1911 to 1978 but also what he identified as the source of these revolutions, namely, intellectual and political radicalism since Tan Sitong. He and Liu Zaifu (1995) went further to excoriate revolution in their book Farewell to Revolution, a catch phrase widely believed to have encapsulated an emergent trend in China’s discursive field in the 1980s. Their definition of revolution was so comprehensive as to cover the revolutions in modern China and the French Revolution. Their message was straightforward: China must turn away from the radical revolutionary discourse and towards cultural conservatism, as the nation had been led astray from its own natural path as a result of a century of revolution. The CCP leadership refrained from challenging the burden in part because the Party’s ambivalence towards the idea and practice of revolution and in part because its reluctance to prohibit academic debates for fear of damping the reformist ethos in the country or being perceived to be conservative.

4. Nationalist notions of historical continuity and social harmony

China’s cultural nationalists continued to articulate the same anti-revolution message between the 1980s and 2012, when the CCP tolerated disparaging views about the Chinese Revolution to a larger extent than since 2012. Not only was revolution deprived of discursive legitimacy during the three decades, it was also denied historicity, as it was commonly described as a historical aberration. In consequence, the Taiping and Boxer movements were nearly “forgotten” in much of the rewritten history and historical research, while the proletariat and peasantry, cornerstones of the PRC’s progressive revolutionary identity, were sidelined in the emerging discourses. In its repudiation of the Marxists’ conscious break with Chinese tradition, the new historiography gravitated towards an emergent “new history” (xin shixue), which highlighted historical continuity and focused on the evolution of China as a nation and the lasting characteristics of the nation. Consequently, reversals of judgments on historical figures and events “take place as easily as pancakes are turned over in the pan” (Gong, 1995: 36).

New Confucians, too, took exception to Marxist and Maoist notions of revolutionary change. It is stated in “the mainland New Confucian Manifesto” that China’s most serious crisis as a result of decades of radical change is the total dissipation of the national spirit and the lack of spiritual anchorage for the whole nation. In the original words, “[o]ver a billion Chinese are deprived of spiritual guidance, and over a billion souls wander aimlessly on the mainland.” (Jiang, 1989: 64) The cause of this, according to the Manifesto, is that “foreign heterodoxy” in the form of radicalism, which prevailed under the tutelage of the Party-state, led China away from the Confucian Orthodoxy. As alien ideologies of revolutionary change discredited and disrupted Chinese tradition, the Manifesto charges, China’s moral degradation and spiritual desolation have plumbed the depths today, leading to the dissipation of national unity, identity and autonomy.

Cultural nationalism kept gathering force, especially in historiography, Confucian studies, cultural linguistics and post-colonial cultural studies, not least because the top CCP leadership refrained from banning the debates (Guo, 2003). The most slashing critique of dialectical and historical materialism, particularly conceptions of qualitative change and class struggle, came from New Confucians, who enjoyed a more congenial political environment from the 1980s to 2012 than other
cultural nationalists, as the CCP had allowed Confucius and Confucianism to return to China’s discursive field. They do not see change as the negation of the old by the new but as taking place gradually and in the means rather than the end, utility rather than principle, or usages rather than essentials, so that self-identity is maintained regardless of the change. Put differently using Marxian terminology, Confucians envisage quantitative but not qualitative change.

The conservative preference for historical continuity is inherently attuned to nationalism as far as the conception of the nation and national confidence are concerned. From a conservative and nationalist viewpoint, the national community is a historical entity formed over a long period in relation with its natural environment and on the basis of common myths, historical memories, values, and institutions which evolve through the wisdom of many generations. Conservatism and nationalism also share an organic conception of community in which the collective is not a loose collection of individuals but a living organism comprising interrelated and interdependent members. Central to the conception is the intersecting spheres of loyalty (Levin, 1966), where the family, church, local community and national community are made congruent in an unbroken chain or an interlocking web of affective attachments and discursive linkages. The social vision of New Confucians in the PRC is consistent with that of classical Confucians.

The Confucian cosmology is one of permanence in change, i.e., the individual things in the universe are in perpetual flux but the universe as a whole is eternal and self-creating (Guo, 1952: 210). The human world, as part of the universal macrocosm, conforms to this pattern. In the words of Hsün Tzu (ca. 298—ca. 238 BC), “Past and present are the same. Things that are the same in kind, though extended over a long period, continue to have the self-same principles.” (Hsün-tzu, 1928: 73–4) A common New Confucian hold view that what gives philosophy meaning and significance is the search to differentiate that which does not change from that which does (Mou Tsung-san, 1985: 78). Another common view maintains, drawing on Plato’s Idea, that “any changing phenomenon presupposes an ‘unchanging Idea,’ without which it is impossible to judge whether any change has taken place.” (Mou Tsung-san, 1985: 78) Thus, white is white according to the Idea of “white;” square is square according to the Idea of “square;” and Man is Man according to the Idea of “Man.”

The Confucian idea of Man is understood in relation to the Confucian Orthodoxy and assumes a link between the Orthodoxy, which is believed to approximate the Way of Man (rendao), and the Way of Heaven (tianda). As such, the Orthodoxy embodies the will of, and is sanctioned by, Heaven. It constitutes a Heaven-ordained path that past, present and future generations must follow. This path best manifests itself as a spiritual ideal that is embodied in a system of values and attitudes of mind. Underlying these values and attitudes is the central concept of humaneness, which is a “sublime moral attitude, a transcendental perfection attained only by legendary heroes” rather than a naturally endowed human quality (Waley, 1945: 28). Confucians past and present are unanimous that the Way of Man is a something constant, unchanging, universal and timeless, even while political power changes hands and dynasties come and go, and that individuals and societies which deviate from the Way are bound to suffer dire consequences: losing the mandate of Heaven, going astray, or incurring social and moral chaos.

What the concept of the Way of Man does in terms of national identity is at least threefold. Firstly, it becomes the primary criterion by which Man is defined, and since “Man” is by and large equivalent to “Chinese,” or vice versa, “Chinese” is also defined with reference to humaneness. This is not just a Confucian conviction; Chinese cultural nationalists and conservatives in general share the same belief that the Way of Man embodies memes — the cultural parallel to biological genes — which, more than anything else, define the Chineseness of China (Ma, 1997; Sha, 1998). Secondly, the belief in it and the practice of benevolent conduct are seen as the only means to maintain and perfect humanity and Chineseness. Finally, individuals are encouraged to place themselves in a historical perspective and to see themselves as members of a community of men and women united by the same spiritual ideal and the practice of the same benevolent conduct. The concept thus supplies a framework in which the national community can be imagined without much need for “print capitalism” or any other aids to national imagining. It should come as no surprise therefore that New Confucians in the PRC are adamant that only when the Confucian Orthodoxy was restored to China would the Way prevail across the land, that only then would the nation be blessed with order, harmony, stability and prosperity. To restore the Orthodoxy, so goes their argument, is to re-establish historical continuity, return to the Heaven-ordained path from which China has strayed, and identify the nation to itself.

Still more abhorrent to New Confucians in the PRC than revolutionary change are the Marxian and Maoist notions of opposites, contradictions and antagonism. For the Confucian ideal of harmony rests on an organic conception and interpretation of nature and society, in contrast to dialectical and historical materialism. The natural and human world in the Confucian articulation is one where dualisms, or component elements, are not hostile or incompatible but merge into unified harmony and co-exist peacefully in mutual interdependence. Thus, yin and yang have their own indispensable functions and complement each other to form a balanced cosmic hierarchy. With few exceptions, Confucians regard opposites as “cosmic partners without whose joint activities the universal process would be impossible” (Bodde, 1967: 47–48).

Human society is likewise an ordered hierarchy whose components complement and co-operate with each other to fulfil their respective functions. In such a co-operative and harmonious world, modes and relations of material production are essentially irrelevant to moral relations, while antagonism is entirely unnecessary, unjustifiable and undesirable. The welfare of the national community, or the social organism, depends on the co-operation between all the individuals and units of the community, and cultural and moral values are capable of uniting the nation. If “all under Heaven” (i.e., the Chinese world) has the Way, moral principles prevail, and there is total harmony — harmony between individuals, within the family and society, between the nation and state, and between states. Thus Confucius taught, “Let the lord be a lord, the subject a subject; the father father; and the son son.” (Leys, 1997: 57) If society operates like a harmonious organism, its members, however high or
low, will work in harmony for the common good. This emphasis on social harmony is by no means unique to Confucianism; it can be found in most other Chinese schools of thought.

It is inconceivable that this Confucian worldview can be reconciled with dialectical and historical materialism, especially the idea of class antagonism as a desirable motive force for social progress. In fact, there are New Confucians in the PRC who believe China’s unity and identity have been badly damaged under the impact of historical materialism, a theory for wars and revolutions (Tang, 1989: 15). Others hold class struggle responsible for all the traumatic political movements since 1949, which have upset the traditional moral-cultural order, where people are expected to fulfill their obligations according to their social position, and torn up the social fabric by setting sons against fathers, wives against husbands, sibling against sibling, classes against classes (Luo and Chen, 1994). Marxism and Maoism brought about social disorder and chaos, they argued, and jeopardised the moral health of society, national unity, national identity and social harmony. The social disorder and chaos, as cultural nationalists saw it, was a deviant state of affairs that reflected a political failure, a series of ill-advised and misguided revolutions that led the nation away from its traditional moral order into chaos and spiritual ruin.

In contrast, the CCP leadership and nationalists in the Party-state cannot openly blame historical materialism or May Fourth iconoclasm for China’s current moral chaos and social disorder. They relate various social ills, such as “endless greed for materialistic satisfaction and luxury,” “unrestrained extreme individualism” and “ever-degrading ethics,” to Westernisation and foreign influences excluding Marxism (Xinhua, 2014d). All the same, they concur with cultural nationalists that the best remedy to China’s social malaise is the rediscovery and restoration of the traditional value system, especially the Confucian cardinal virtues. They are agreed too on the indispensable role of tradition in maintaining and enhancing national unity and social harmony vis-à-vis social atomisation, fragmentation and centrifugal forces. As Xi Jinping reiterates, the fine elements of Chinese philosophies have contributed tremendously to “the formulation and preservation of the political situation of unity and unification of China as a country,” “the formation and consolidation of China as a big harmonious family of dozens of nationalities,” “the inspiration of Chinese men and women to safeguard national independence and resist foreign aggression,” and “the balancing of social interests and relations in China” (Xinhua, 2014d).

CCP leaders are all too aware of the usefulness of the Confucian code of conduct and the Confucian notion of communal identity to the Party-state. Their new nationalist conception of the nation is premised on the assumption that the members of the community are what they are due to the ideas, beliefs, values, norms, skills and other cultural resources they have inherited from their ancestors. As Xi Jinping states, “We’re Chinese first and foremost because of our distinct Chinese spirit and the values we practise every day without realising it.” (Xinhua, 2014d) He notes elsewhere that “[r]eflecting the Chinese world outlooks, philosophies of life, values and aesthetics that have been shaped and inherited from one generation to another, the core elements of Chinese ideology and culture have formed the fundamental cultural genes of the nation, which are unique hallmarks that distinguish the Chinese from other nations.” (Xinhua, 2014d)

Evidently, Xi’s historical outlook and worldview proceed from an evolutionary rather revolutionary notion of change, which accentuates the critical importance of historical continuity and national heritage to national unity, autonomy and identity. Moreover, the Chinese Dream is a dream of harmony, among other things, where class struggle and any other form of social antagonism have no place at all. In this, the Xi leadership and state nationalists in the Party-state have no disputes whatsoever with Chinese cultural nationalists.

5. Ramifications of the CCP’s discursive shift

The CCP’s re-articulation of such essential elements as the past, tradition, change and continuity is part and parcel of its dramatic conversion in the past four decades, especially in the Xi Jinping era, from radicalism to conservatism, from anti-traditionalism to traditionalism and from Marxism to nationalism. This article has demonstrated that Marxist and May Fourth notions of social change are set on their heads and deprived of discursive legitimacy in the CCP’s official discourses. In consequence, the delegitimised Marxist and iconoclastic ideas of social change and revolutionary progress are unable to guide the CCP’s collective action or national life. Furthermore, it has become undesirable and unfeasible to carry on Marx’s World Revolution, Mao’s Chinese Revolution or the May Fourth project of enlightenment. Whatever elements of Marxism the CCP continues to hang on to and however it claims adherence to Marxism, the Party is not a Marxist political party committed to communism but a national party imbued with nationalism. It is a communist party in name only, while its claimed allegiance to communism is little more than empty rhetoric.

The CCP’s discursive shift has enabled the core elements of nationalism to acquire hegemony as never before in the PRC and since the beginning of China’s “Century of Humiliation.” The past is now almost invariably represented positively across its discursive field. It is hard to find negative descriptions of Chinese tradition. Instead, tradition is predominantly referred to as national essence and a repository of ethnic symbols, myths, values and traditions which bind the national community together and have a critical role to play in national revival. It is also widely seen as a reason for the nation’s fitness, China’s rise, a critical motive force for national rejuvenation and a remedy for the side effects of modernity. More importantly, what is at stake in China’s discursive shift is not just the meaning of its past and tradition; it also concerns its present, for “the shape of the past gives meaning to the present” (Schoppa, 2020: 6). Additionally, the shift has far-reaching implications for the Party’s and the country’s future given it has altered cultural evaluation dramatically and reversed the anti-traditionalist trend in China.

Foremost among the ramifications is, as has been reiterated previously, the endorsement and promotion of the traditionalist “piety for what actually, allegedly, presumably has always existed,” treatment of specific contents of traditional
culture as valuable in themselves, and mobilisation of these contents for present purposes. Coupled with this is the recognition of, and emphasis on, the unity of the nation’s past, present and future, and the need to treat specific contents of traditional culture as valuable in themselves, rediscover and preserve these contents, and mobilise them for present purposes. As Xi Jinping (Xinhua, 2014d) has stressed time and over again, “Reviewing the past generates new insight. Knowledge handed down from our predecessors has accumulated the significant understandings and experiences of the relations among man, society and Nature. Knowledge created by today’s people embodies their wisdom and exploration in coping with the problems of our time. Both aspects of human knowledge are crucial for the inheritance of civilisations.”

Still more profound ramifications ensure from the nationalists’ rejection of linear models of history which became entrenched in China’s discursive field from the 19th century to the 1980s. It is typically assumed in such models that traditional societies invariably progress towards modern ones, or superior conditions of mankind. Though the philosophy of progressivism has not been discarded completely in Party-state discourses or China’s discursive field in the post-Mao era, social progress has been narrowed down considerably. It includes advances in science and technology, economic development, rising living standards and better material conditions, but not political and cultural transformation following superior models or towards more advanced stages of development along a progressive scale.

In fact, the CCP’s evaluation of political systems and culture contrasts starkly with its scientific, technological, economic and material evaluation. While the Party continues to assert the superiority of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” to any other political system, it has now rejected the dichotomisation of cultures and civilisations into traditional and modern or advanced and backward. Instead, it considers tradition to be part of modernity and to exist in the latter in the form of a continuum enmeshing the past and present, and represents cultures and civilisations as equal (Xinhua, 2014a). Various notions of political modernisation and cultural progress, including Mao’s project of “cultural revolution” and the May Fourth project of enlightenment, have consequently become meaningless and unjustified. The CCP is thus able to assert that there is no need or reason to embrace political and cultural ideals and values that are widely considered to the hallmarks of modernity, including constitutionalism, liberalism, democracy, individualism, mobility and social progress.

All in all, the synthesised nationalism is pushing China away from Marxist and anti-traditionalist historical outlooks and the philosophy of progressivism more generally. This thrust of the new nationalism is coupled with the insistence on the nationalisation of the Party and Party-state as well as the Sinification of China’s meaning systems and political institutions. Under the impact of nationalism, China has been taken out of Marxist and other linear-progressive meaning systems by and large and steered off the course that Marx, Mao and May Fourth intellectuals have marked.

That gives one a clear idea as to where the CCP and China are not going. But which way are they headed? Only time will tell what may or may not happen in the future, but the major effects of nationalism are already beyond doubt and indicate the trajectory of future developments. Some of the effects on China’s current and future direction follow from the CCP’s conversion to conservatism and traditionalism and the hegemony in the China’s discursive field. The emergent conservatism is akin to the self-conscious conservatism that developed in Europe as a social force in reaction to Enlightenment and the French Revolution (Beiser, 1992: 281), although China’s conservatism is an immediate reaction to the Chinese Revolution and May Fourth anti-traditionalism.

Like the European precursor, China’s emergent conservatism is an approach to human affairs which is sceptical of both a priori reasoning and revolution but trusts experience and the gradual improvement of tested arrangements (O’Hehir, 1998; Kekes, 1997). It is therefore anti-utopian and pragmatic, “unable to appeal to any future that is not already present and past,” (Scruton, 1980) as opposed to historical materialism and other forms of social engineering. Chinese conservatives, like conservatives in general, put their trust in traditional frameworks for conducting human affairs and look upon time-honoured institutions as embodying accumulated historical experience in institutional reason (Hampsher-Monk, 1992). They cherish and advocate such characteristics of traditional societies as social stability, harmony, interdependence, group cohesion, group welfare and time-honoured institutions. They are especially keen to take advantage of the intersecting spheres of loyalty in traditional Chinese thinking, which harmonise the family, local community and national community. Indeed, the Party-state is doing just that.

Chinese nationalists’ renewed attention to social harmony and the intersecting spheres of loyalty agrees with functionalist theory, which emphasises social order instead of social change and views society as consisting of interdependent parts that work together to maintain the equilibrium of the whole like the human body. Their social vision, traditional Chinese thinking and functionalism are completely agreed that it is an ideal state where all members of society perform their roles and accept the moral values of their society, where social order is achieved through complex processes of socialisation, education and sanctions. Here, the concrete rules of behaviour attached to various social roles and institutionalised norms guiding the allocation of roles are inspired and legitimised by the values of the social system (Parsons, 1964; Johnson, 1966). The function of the state is not to ensure and enforce the oppression of one class by another, as Marxism and Maoism postulate, but to integrate and harmonise society by mobilising social roles and institutions that perpetuate, assert or demonstrate the basic values integrating the system and by appealing to conscience or invoking the moral standards of right and wrong (Parsons, 1964). It is exactly national integration and social harmonisation, instead of class antagonism, which are the Party-state’s current top priorities.

Finally, significant ramifications arise from the Party-state’s new evolutionary conception of change. Underlying this conception is Darwin’s idea of the survival of the fittest, which assumes that different cultural traits confer different rates of survival, that cultural accumulation, adaptation and selection take place in a historical process whereby Chinese culture and the national community become better able to survive in their changing habitat, and that survival-enhancing cultural traits
are passed from generation to generation. Change thus conceived resonates with dual inheritance theory, or gene—culture coevolution. The theory treats human behaviour as a product of two different and interacting evolutionary processes — genetic evolution and cultural evolution — and postulates that, as human genes and culture continually interact in a feedback loop, changes in the former lead to changes in culture, which then influence genetic selection, and vice versa.

Sure, CCP leaders have not yet gone so far as to explicitly embrace the idea of gene—culture coevolution or describe the Chinese as a “chosen people.” But it is evident that they now prefer evolutionary change to revolutionary change, and nobody reading between the lines of official communications is likely to miss the message that the fact China has survived intact for so long is sufficient proof of its superior fitness and that the fitness stems from their “cultural genes.” As Xi Jinping states, “China is still here after five thousand years of difficulties and hardships, and China will be here forever.” (CCTV, 2015) It is possible for CCP leaders, and Chinese nationalists, to argue further, following the same logic, that healthy cultural genes have affected the biological evolution of the Chinese. This is not simply an argument for validating and valuing the past and tradition, it also has notable implications for cultural confidence among the populace.

Thus, they stress repeatedly that national heritage must be valued because it has enabled China to survive for five millennia, because history is “the best teacher” and “the best textbook” for the CCP and nation as it is a source of useful lessons and of inspiration for future development (Xinhua, 2013; Xinhua, 2014a; Xinhua, 2014f). They also encourage the Party and nation to rediscover all the fine elements of traditional culture which “have formed the fundamental cultural genes of the nation” and “contributed tremendously to the cultivation of the Chinese civilization,” to “its uninterrupted continuation in the past thousands of years” and to “the generation and enrichment of the Chinese national spirit” (Xinhua, 2013; Xinhua, 2014a; Xinhua, 2014f).

In the light of the evolutionary conception of change, especially cultural adaptation, accumulation and selection, it is possible and almost inevitable for Chinese to conclude that they have been well served by their cultural genes, that China’s “economic miracle” and “China’s rise” vindicate cultural Chineseness and demonstrate China’s cultural fitness. Therefore, there is no need to look for the root causes of weakness and engage in soul-destroying introspection or cultural negation. There is no need either to galvanise the nation into self-strengthening action by continually reminding them of the “Century of Humiliation.” On the contrary, time has come for them to offer cultural explanations for China’s economic success, feel proud of their superior cultural fitness, and convert it for greater soft power.

There are good reasons to applaud China’s confidence and pride in its own tradition, although it is advisable to guard against any superiority complex. There are also good things to be said about the inclination to find inspiration and guidance in the national self. Hannah Arendt (2006), for one, argues for redeeming from the past its lost or forgotten treasure — those elements that are still able to illuminate the present situation — and for re-establishing a linkage with the past. Without the critical reappraisal of the past, she observes, people are deprived of the dimension of depth in human experience, and their temporal horizon becomes disrupted, their experience precarious, and their identity more fragile. De Bary (1975: 32) commended the same inclination in Neo-Confucians as a healthy instinct and lamented its frustration as an unfortunate aspect of the modern experience of the Chinese. For it caused “a temporary loss of their self-respect and a denial of their right to assimilate new experience by a process of reintegration with the old.” “To have seen all value as coming solely from the West or as extending only into the future, not also as growing out of their own past,” he added, “has hindered them in recent years from finding that Way or Tao within themselves.” Nevertheless, he believed that the process of growth was hidden rather than stopped, and he predicted optimistically that the new experience of the Chinese people would be seen in significant part not just as a revolution inspired from without but as a growth from within. The Xi leadership and New Confucians in the PRC may not have read de Bary, but they appear to be following the very track that he marked.

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