

MARXISM ENTERS A CONFUCIAN REALM: THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHINESE HISTORY

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The last forty years seem infinitesimal when viewed against the backdrop of China's almost four thousand years of history. On a time line showing the years from 1700 B.C. (when diviners began inscribing Chinese characters upon oracle bones) to the present, they would be represented by little more than a line across the bottom of the page. Nevertheless, because we are creatures of the present, the long past shrinks away into the distance, the events of the last hundred years loom large in our consciousness, and we search the foreground for its distinguishing features or its continuities with the past.

This is not a new pastime occasioned by the fortieth anniversary of the Communist victory. As early as the 1920s it was fashionable in some quarters to emphasize the differences between Chinese tradition and Communist revolutionaries. Neither Chinese nor Western commentators in the treaty ports hesitated to declare that bolshevism would never become a significant force in China. The hold of Confucianism upon the Chinese mind was too tight, and Chinese animosity toward anything foreign was too strong. Forgetting that tenant farmers made up the majority in most villages, these commentators were sure that revolution was impossible since the Chinese peasant would never yield his piece of the earth. On the other hand, throughout the decades, there have always been those who found hope in what they perceived to be communism's revolutionary departure from the traditional path or its ability to extricate China from a twentieth century quagmire.

After the Communists came to power in 1949, however, finding continuities became more fashionable. Some saw a parallel between the new government in Beijing and past dynasties that had reunited the empire after periods of division and civil war or had restored Han Chinese rule after expelling dynasties of frontier origin. Once again, they said, a respectable government has emerged in China, one capable of resuscitating the national honor and rectifying the injustices within the realm.

Although both Marxism and Western liberal thought were foreign and different, neither was necessarily unacceptable. The adoption and the adaptation of foreign views, expertise and material goods were not unprecedented in China's history. There have been several such episodes, one of the most

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important being the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism. By the end of the third century A.D. this exceedingly alien view of the world had taken root in China, and it flourished there for more than 500 years.

In some respects, liberalism and Marxism were less alien than either Buddhism or Christianity. By the time the former reached China, its scholars had been committed irrevocably to the Confucian variety of secular humanism for a thousand years. Insofar as these Western political philosophies were secular and at least claimed as their goal the creation of an ideal world on this earth, they were compatible with Chinese predilections. As a world view, Confucianism was (and is) comparatively optimistic both about the natural world and human nature. The human infant was born with an inclination toward good, which was defined as the identification of the self with the species. One naturally identified with those who were close, and education made it possible to extend this identification to all under the heavens. There was no belief in original sin, nor did they think that the affairs of this world necessarily corrupted the spirit. The ideal life required engagement, not withdrawal.

Neither Confucius (551-479 B.C.) nor his cultural descendents were concerned about supernatural phenomena. When asked about the propriety of participating in local rituals, Confucius replied that one should do whatever was necessary to propitiate the spirits, so as not to provoke them. Beyond this, one need not become involved. His response is thus reminiscent of the answer that Jesus of Nazareth gave when asked about a Christian's responsibilities to the Roman Empire — render unto Caesar what is Caesar's — except that the priority between humans and divinities is reversed. When Confucius was asked what happens when a person dies, he replied that if we do not yet understand life on this earth, which we have experienced, how do we propose to understand any life that might come after death, which we have not experienced. In a Confucian realm secular humanism never would have been used as a pejorative epithet, and slogans against a "godless communism" would seem more like a recommendation than a condemnation.

Secular humanism has never been uniquely Western. Three separate varieties emerged, in China, India, and Greece, more or less at the same time (around the fifth and sixth centuries B.C.), and of these three the Chinese has been uniquely successful. Although it never went unchallenged, the humanistic world view of Confucius fared better than its counterparts in India and Greece. Indeed, though the man has been dead for more than 2300 years, his spirit is capable still of causing much mischief, even in the twentieth century. Why else would people need to mount anti-Confucius campaigns in the 1920s and again in the 1970s? Campaigns against the ideas of Socrates and other classical philosophers were last heard of in Greece in the sixth century A.D., and surely anti-Plato or anti-Aristotle campaigns in the twentieth century are inconceivable.

The unusual staying power of Confucianism was closely related to the uniqueness of its history. The secular or human-centered point of view that emerged in India during the Upanishadic period (ca. 800-500 B.C.) and persisted for some time after the life of the Buddha (537-486 B.C.) was

overwhelmed eventually by Mahayana Buddhism with its deified Boddhisatvas and by devotional Hinduism that worshipped the Lord Gods Shiva and Vishnu. At least by the time of the Kushana ruler Kanishka (first century A.D.), and possibly even before, political legitimacy in India had become inseparably linked to the rulers' relationship to the divine. In both Greece and China, on the other hand, secular humanism persisted for several more centuries. Greek philosophy had a significant place in Mediterranean society throughout the period when Rome ruled the empire, and the significance of Confucian learning was enhanced during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 221), when emperors and scholars allied against the power of local aristocracies.

Even though regional aristocracies controlled much of China when Confucius lived, he advised rulers to give more consideration to individual talent than to social rank when choosing officials. This was rather startling in its day, and there is no indication that any ruler heeded this advice during his lifetime or for several centuries thereafter. Then at the end of the third century B.C., the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.) unified the realm for the first time in Chinese history by defeating all contending aristocratic houses. In an effort to break the power of the hereditary nobles, the self-styled First Emperor removed them from their domains and collected them at the capital, rather like Louis XIV did at Versailles some eighteen centuries later. He and his advisors also developed a hostility toward Confucian scholars and the classical literature and in 213 B.C. engaged in a massive "burning of the books" that was supposed to rid the realm of their influence. Such measures, however, did not succeed and after the death of the First Emperor, the Qin Dynasty fell apart. The Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 221) picked up the pieces and, determined not to make the same mistakes, sought the aid of Confucian scholars, regardless of their rank.

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In an effort to ensure that imperial unity would not dissolve and that the interests of the center would be served throughout the various parts of the realm, the Han emperors employed talented Confucian scholars at the court and in local administrative positions wherever possible. In order to select the most talented from among the many candidates, they began to hold informal oral examinations on the classical canon. The imperial center thus was strengthened, and Confucian scholars whose rank in society was not sufficiently high to ensure them any position in an aristocratic house could obtain important positions by serving the imperial center.

Confucianism thus became a legitimating force for imperial rule and for centrally appointed administrators who had been selected for their outstanding

intellectual abilities. The Confucian notion of virtue justified both. Just as virtuous fathers set an example for their families, a virtuous emperor set an example for all under heaven. The scholars, those whose identification with people near and dear to them had been expanded by their education to include all people, would administer the realm according to a set of principles consistent with the Confucian sense of virtue. It was the enlargement of their perspective from the small group to the large, from a preoccupation with selfish, local interests to a commitment to the greater public interest that qualified them for public office. This feat of enlargement could be accomplished only by a value-laden education in the moral and political philosophy expounded in the ancient histories and literature.

The most important distinction that they made was between the impartial scholar who acted according to principle and those who remained partial and acted according to their own interests. The Confucian world view did not condemn merchants in search of profits, experts who studied the material world, nor soldiers who defended the realm. It simply argued that individuals who had not demonstrated their mastery of the Confucian canon were not qualified for public office. Implicitly it argued against rule by local aristocrats who were not also Confucian scholars, since an accident of birth into a certain class did not provide the necessary qualifications.

By the fourth century A.D., however, both the Greek and the Chinese varieties of humanism met the same fate as the Indian. Not long after the fall of the Han Dynasty, Mahayana Buddhism became the dominant world view in China. In A.D. 312 the Emperor Constantine is said to have seen the Christian cross emblazoned in the sky prior to his victory at the Milvian Bridge near Rome, and thereafter he converted to an imported religion, beginning the transformation of the Roman Empire into Christian Byzantium.

China's uniqueness lay in the comparatively early and complete comeback of its humanistic world view. During the Tang Dynasty (618-906) Confucian scholars regained the ground that they had lost to the Buddhists, and by the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) Confucianism was once more the predominant world view. Within the bounds of intramural China, Buddhism no longer absorbed the attention of scholars, although popular versions of the faith did continue to flourish outside of elite circles. Thereafter, many schools contended, but the Confucian foundations went unchallenged until the end of the nineteenth century. Mediterranean humanism also made a comeback during the Italian Renaissance, but by that time the Confucian variety had already been back in place for about five hundred years, and it was not until the eighteenth century Enlightenment that the European image of the world approached the secularism of the Chinese.

One of the reasons that Confucianism was able to make its early comeback was that the rulers of the Tang Dynasty, confronted by recalcitrant nobles, once again resorted to the use of Confucian scholars and began to use written examinations based on the Confucian classics to select them. By the time of the Sung Dynasty the examination system had taken on its fully developed form, the elaborate operation that was still in use a thousand years later at

the turn of the twentieth century. Almost any man who had managed to acquire an education, regardless of family background, could take the examinations and once having passed the second level, was entitled to office. If he went on to pass the third level, he was eligible for the highest offices in the land (except for that of the emperor).

The only ones excluded were those that Confucianism frowned upon, such as barbers and actors, who made up less than 2 percent of the population. (One might point out here that Ronald Reagan would have been among the few not allowed to participate.) Obviously those who were poor had a hard time getting an education, and it was an advantage to grow up in the sort of environment that a family with a scholarly tradition could provide. Nevertheless, the examination system did ensure mobility, both upward and downward, on a regular basis. Thus, from the tenth century until the seventeenth century when parliamentary democracies began to emerge in Western Europe, China was the only polity of much size that offered to any man access to the highest offices in the land simply on the basis of individual ability.

The revolutionary nature of the individual opportunity provided by the examination system was little remarked upon by its creators. The legitimacy

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of the system continued to rest upon the emanation of virtue from the center. The impartiality acquired through a Confucian education remained the *sine qua non* for public office. Indeed, the Rule of Avoidance, which stated that no official could serve in his home province, was designed to protect the official's impartiality by removing him from temptation, and officials were transferred from one jurisdiction to another on a regular basis to prevent them from developing local relationships that might compromise their impartiality.

As early as the Sung Dynasty the examinations became the most important route to political power and prestige, not to mention economic security. The local aristocracies lost their political and social significance, never to regain it. Thus in 1215 when King John of England was signing the Magna Carta, recognizing that feudal lords were entitled to their place and their privileges simply because of their birthright, the Chinese had already accomplished at least one of the goals of the eighteenth century French Revolution. They never again had to tolerate the arbitrary and capricious behavior of sword-wielding

aristocrats whose only qualification to rule was an accident of birth. In that China was, therefore, the first polity of size to find a workable alternative to aristocratic power, one might say that for approximately seven centuries Confucianism was the ideological justification for the world's most advanced and most moralistic political system.

It was not until the nineteenth century, after the freetraders of the industrial revolution had forced their way into China, that Chinese intellectuals began to question the soundness of the system. Although it is often portrayed as such, this was not a confrontation between China and the West per se, but between China and the newly industrialized powers (not only Britain, but Japan as well). Prior to the industrial revolution, when Britain's China trade had been carried out by the East India Company, there had been no serious problems. It was only after the free traders had persuaded Parliament to abolish the Company's monopoly in 1833, and British forces on the China coast had acquired two brand new technologies — the steam ship and the percussion cap for muskets and rifles — that hostilities began.

After the defeats by the industrial powers in 1842 and 1860, the necessity of acquiring the new Western weapons became clear. It was not until Japan had defeated China in 1895, however, that China's self-confidence was sorely shaken and some Chinese accepted the notion that China was backward. In 1898 a group of Confucian-trained scholars, influenced by Western political thought and Japan's example, persuaded the Guangxu Emperor to carry out a reform movement. It lasted little more than a hundred days. The conservatives coalesced around the Empress Dowager; she placed the emperor under house arrest, and the reformers were forced to flee the country. For two years the conservatives had the upper hand, but after the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 ended in the foreign occupation of the capital, the conservatives were discredited, and almost everyone agreed that something basic had to be changed.

In 1905, after Japan had defeated Russia and rebellions had occurred in Russia and Iran against governments accused of backwardness, the Empress Dowager decided to send a committee off to Europe to study constitutions. In that same year Zhang Zhidong, a renowned scholar-official who had been the most adamant defender of Confucian education, signed a memorial that led to the abolition of the one-thousand-year-old examination system, in order to force students to study modern subjects. Nevertheless, in 1911 the Qing Dynasty was overthrown after it proved unwilling to implement constitutional reforms and unable to manage the modernization of China to the satisfaction of the provincial elites, the military, the reformers, and the republican revolutionaries.

The Revolution of 1911 was supposed to overcome backwardness by establishing a republic, a constitution, and a parliament. But these institutions, believed to be the secret of Western strength, did not have the same effect in China. Quite the contrary, what followed was a series of civil wars. From the point of view of the Chinese intellectuals, the situation reached crisis proportions in 1919 when they learned that the powers at the Versailles peace conference had decided to let Japan keep the German concessions in Shandong

Province, which it had seized in 1914, immediately after declaring war on Germany. For the first time in China's modern history, on May 4, 1919, students took to the streets by the thousands, demanding that the government repudiate the treaty and that those responsible for the diplomatic disaster resign.

The May Fourth Movement was a pivotal event in Chinese history. For some, already disappointed by the failure of republican institutions in China, the betrayal of Chinese interests at Versailles brought their faith in liberal ideas and institutions to an abrupt end and convinced them that socialist revolution was the only solution to China's problems. Others, equally disappointed by the turn of events, decided that something must be terribly wrong with China. A bankrupt system had traded in its heirlooms, its most venerable institutions, one after the other, including the examination system, all in the name of modernization, and yet the high-priced imports that had replaced them did not work. They concluded that something must be fundamentally wrong with the Chinese character, with Chinese culture, and particularly with the Confucian world view that had shaped them. Many of the latter were neither socialists nor revolutionaries, but they were convinced that the old ways, the old customs, all had to be extinguished so that a modern nation could be born.

Amid all the clamor there were those who raised awkward questions. What was going to replace all the old things that were being tossed out? And what would be left of China after everything tainted by Confucianism was gone? Was there an essence of China that was not Confucian? There was at least one revolutionary who was not worried. Mao Zedong never doubted that China would remain China regardless of how much it changed. In 1937, in an article called "On Contradiction," he resorted to a barnyard metaphor of brooding hens and eggs in order to respond to those who suggested that the Communist revolution was a foreign creation. One might paraphrase his point as follows: a brooding hen may sit on an abandoned duck egg, but that egg will never become a chicken. A duck egg will always hatch a duck, even if a chicken sits on it.

Although many were inspired by Western political philosophy, it did not have magical powers capable of wiping away all Confucian values and habits of mind. Few, if any, Chinese were convinced by Adam Smith (whose *Wealth of Nations* was translated into Chinese around the turn of the century) that each individual's pursuit of selfish interests would somehow add up to the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Although they had no problem with the idea of competition on literary examinations, they otherwise found it an inappropriate and wasteful way to do things. The adversarial approach to truth-finding or progress smacked of trial by combat.

Western individualism also had a limited appeal. The Chinese rarely thought of the individual as pitted against the state, especially after 1918 by which time the central government had lost control of the nation and various and assorted warlords were constantly fighting for hegemony. When it was employed, it was usually directed against the patriarchal family. While the

May Fourth Movement was at the peak of its popularity, its advocates still were shy about asserting individual interest against group interest. Even when some condemned the patriarchal family for suppressing the full development of individual potential, and thereby seemed to be asserting a right to self-centered or individualistic aspirations, they almost always justified such assertions by placing them within the context of liberating the individual from family obligation in order to fulfill some higher obligation, such as dedicated service to the nation.

In 1918 when Li Dazhao engaged in the first significant Chinese encounter with Marxism, there were several aspects of it that he found problematic. Disturbed by how often a development was reached or a goal was to be obtained through a process of competition or struggle, he felt no reluctance in asserting that human survival had depended not on individuals who were superior contestants, but on the species' ability to cooperate. Class struggle in the end might be necessary, but it should not be seen as the sole means toward progress. He had no serious objection to the notion of historical materialism, but he also thought that it lacked something, and that, as a theory of history, it would be much improved if human-defined moral principles could somehow be incorporated into it.

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Nevertheless, serious problems remain, and the sense that China is backward has not gone away. The generations that have grown up since 1949, especially the urban educated, feel alienated from the majority of their compatriots who still reside in the villages. Indeed, the backwardness of the countryside embarrasses them, and when students call for democracy, they do not have in mind turning the reins of power over to this peasant majority. Although their notion of a proper education has been expanded to include a knowledge of things material as well as moral, the conviction that decision-making power is best reserved for the educated has not withered away.

They also feel stymied by the bureaucratic ways of the government. In the West, many would attribute such difficulties to Marxist-Leninist notions of the dictatorship of the proletariat and democratic centralism, but in China the problem seems more complicated. It is difficult to make a bureaucracy responsive when ideological legitimacy has not been extended to individual agendas or local constituencies, when the interests of the locality are presumed to be partial and any attempt to assert them can be dismissed as an attempt

to circumvent the public interest which the central government presumes to represent. Indeed, the notion of representation is more likely to be understood as the impartial administration of the government's legitimating principles than as a strong defense of local prerogatives and privileges.

When the Chinese envision a democracy they do not see a multitude of constituencies vying for their own interests, and they certainly would not expect such behavior to produce the greatest good for the greatest number on a regular basis. Perhaps the closest anyone has come to recognizing the legitimacy of contending constituencies is Mao's notion of non-antagonistic contradictions among the people: conflicts of interest between different groups of people which are not class-conflicts and which can be resolved without slapping the label of *class enemy* on any of the involved parties. It is possible that the Chinese may never believe that trial by combat in a political arena is an acceptable way of making political decisions, and they may eventually find another way to ensure a responsive government.

In the meantime, however, one might consider looking back upon the aristocratic traditions of Western Europe in a different way. Perhaps it was not so bad that they persisted for such a long time. Merely by sustaining the legitimacy of local interests and defending the principle that even the totally unqualified have a right to participate in politics due to nothing more than the accident of their birth, those good-for-nothing aristocrats may have been good for something. After all, having a former actor as President, even one that cannot tell the difference between Brazil and Bolivia, may be embarrassing, but it is not the end of the world.