

CHINA'S CRISIS OF IDEOLOGY*

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Introduction

Since Deng Xiaoping declared that “to get rich is glorious,” the Chinese are gloriously amassing money. Many are rapaciously doing so, all too often compromising the integrity of society, the state and the ecology. To many Chinese, money-making has become the supreme goal in life.

Deng Xiaoping's Second Revolution has brought about initial progress and prosperity, but it has also robbed China of three important features of statecraft: a strong, charismatic leader, a tight central control, and national ideology. China is dying of chronic moral decay. With Confucianism largely discarded and Marxism now discredited, China needs another national ideology to fill the spiritual void. With the widespread egotism, social malaise, and lawlessness, China could, one day, implode unless the current regime can propagate a core of norms and moral values that will define behavior and govern the people's myriad,

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and often clashing, socio-economic activities.

The greatest changes have come in personal relations, lifestyles, and world outlook, especially among the 300 million Chinese between ages 14 and 28. The Me generation, mostly single-child youths, is a band of brash, cynical, and individualistic people who are personally and professionally liberated. This generation has enthusiastically embraced free enterprise and modernity, defying old mores and traditions on love, sex, marriage, and careers. While political freedom still remains taboo, the young people with the will and skill, take advantage of economic reform to seek their fortune, their mate and their own identity. They are the children of relative affluence and relative peace, unaffected by earlier spasms of war and famine and political campaigns, too young to have served as Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution. Many, in fact, cannot remember much of life before the onset of Deng's reforms. People in their 20s have a mind-set starkly different from that of their predecessors. Their ideas are largely influenced by rock and roll, MTV, sports and internet.

This ME generation espouses a lifestyle that underlines the profound changes in life and mores in New China. Casual premarital sex has become more common. According to one survey, over 20 percent of married couples admit to sexual experience before marriage. Extramarital sex is on the rise (some 69 percent condone it). Divorce is now 10 percent nationwide - up ten-fold from the 1960s. Unwanted pregnancies are soaring; about half of performed abortions are on unwed women. The sexual revolution sweeping China has sparked sex shops, radio hotlines, and campaigns against prostitution and pornography.

Prostitutes are doing a brisk business in the People's Republic, openly soliciting business almost everywhere. Some hotels offer male guests VIP massages with extra service. Most main highways are lined with motels where truckers can find a hot meal, a bed, and a prostitute. With drug-abuse, also on the rise, AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) is spreading alarmingly.

Since the urban youths are now freer to fall in love and choose their spouses, they are turning romance, courtship, and beauty into a growing cottage industry. There has been a proliferation of flower shops, lovers' cafes, lovers' bars and lovers' seats in the cinema, and karaoke bars. For those ill-equipped with social skills and networking, state newspapers and television stations offer "placement" services. For a fee, they offer to run an infomercial about applicants looking for a soulmate.

What do youths look for in a mate? A recent survey in Guangzhou showed that some 80 percent rated sex appeal as the most important criteria, followed by character (72.3 percent), appearance (72.2 percent), and income (64 percent). The youth's quest for material success and individual gratification has brought about juvenile delinquency. Nationwide, young people under 25, who account for 40 percent of the population, committed 70 percent of crimes last year. And not all of them were poor. They had enough to eat; they simply wanted more money for entertainment. To enjoy themselves, they steal.

Class struggle persists. Since greed is fine in boom-time China, Deng's reforms have brought forth the *dakuan* (yuan millionaire) class – there are over a million of them now, says the Chinese press – who unapologetically flaunt their wealth in the face of the less fortunate. In stark contrast to their garish wealth is the grinding poverty in the countryside, where close to 100 million peasants are barely subsisting with government subsidies. Nearly 100 million surplus farm-hands surge into the cities each year to look for new opportunities. The side-walks of major urban cities are choked with blue-jacketed country-folks in search of work. Experts estimate that some 200 million rural workers will be "redundant" or "underemployed" by the year 2000.

The growing invidious income gap is creating severe social tensions. Crime, prostitution, gun-running, and drug use are on the rise, and even government functionaries and officials have turned to lining their pockets. "People do not feel absolutely safe

anymore,” admits a retired cadre in Hunan province. “We can’t perform good deeds anymore. When strangers ask for directions, we don’t dare help for fear that they are muggers.”

The socio-economic inequality has led to social ferment and, in some isolated cases, sparks of violence. Three years ago, thousands of farmers in Renshou Village in Sichuan province took to the streets to protest onerous taxes and levies imposed by corrupt local officials. When the people’s armed police lobbed teargas to disperse them, the farmers rioted.

Underneath this array of social ills lurks the more critical problem of *xinyangweiji* (crisis of ideology), which even the Beijing government publicly acknowledges. Confucianism was soundly repudiated from the early 20th century through the communist revolution. Maoism, the nativistic version of Marxism, has likewise lost currency in the 1980s. The idealism and collectivism that marked the earlier period of the communist rule have dissipated. The communists only have themselves to blame. The jarring reversals in the party line, the unpalatable revelations about party leaders, and the tragedy inflicted on millions of innocent people during Mao’s periodic purges turned away even the most devout Communists.

Ideology is now vestigial, yet the Chinese seem to still yearn for a spiritual anchor on which to moor their insecure lives. Where can they find the new ideology? The rudderless populace is turning to religion, cultism, and even raw nationalism. There has been a marked resurgence of various sorts of religions, from officially sanctioned “patriotic churches” to illegal “house churches” to superstitious underground sects. Charismatic cults, secret societies, and triads have resurfaced in villages and towns while clan feuds have erupted in rural areas. It is estimated that there are at least 20 million Protestants – perhaps as many as 50 million – and at least seven million Roman Catholics, who gather in some 20,000 churches and private meeting places known as house churches.

Party ideologues are scrambling to find credible alternatives. Some have prescribed nationalism, or neo-nationalism, which appeals to Chinese who lament the fact that China has been left behind, weak, poor, and bullied by the more affluent and stronger global powers. Others have suggested the propagation of traditional culture, as typified by the massive construction of theme parks replicating the cultural symbols of the formerly glorious Middle Kingdom. A group of scholars in Shanghai advocates *guoxue* (national learning), a non-socialist, Confucian hybrid. Attracted by the possible link between Confucius' philosophy and way of life and the rapid economic growth in the Confucian states of Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore, Beijing's communist leaders are unabashedly promoting the study of Confucianism. The result is ideological confusion. To the leaders, the lack of a unifying ideology is especially worrisome because it affects socio-political stability and, ultimately, their own political survival. To the led, it is disconcerting because they feel alienated, bereft of social cohesion and direction.

The document on the building of a spiritual civilization, Jiang Zemin's latest pet-project, that was unveiled last October is apparently meant to uplift the people's spirit and offer guidelines on what is acceptable behavior. Analysts in Beijing do not think it is a panacea. "A plenum and a document will not solve the problem of spiritual civilization," says a political analyst in Beijing. "It will take longer than my lifetime to give full meaning to that slogan." Others think it is better than nothing.

Not all Chinese bemoan the demise of singular national ideology. While conceding that a society without *xinyang* (an ideology) is in the long run bound to collapse, US-based political dissident Ruan Ming resists the temptation to impose a hegemonic thought. "We shouldn't have a singular national ideology," Ruan explains. "We shouldn't see a return to the days when everyone believed in Mao or Confucius. We should let different beliefs and ideologies coexist."

Like Ruan, some Chinese think greed, crime and social malaise are an acceptable price to pay for economic prosperity and social liberation. They predict that as China moves towards a free market system, the excesses of modernization will be tempered by an improved legal system, transparency and accountability. Through long-term moral and civic education, the populace could be inculcated with an enlightened sense of self-interest and civic consciousness. Such a process could take a generation or two. For now, China remains a 1.2 billion nation spiritually adrift.