Norms, Values and Cynical Games with Party Ideology

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Losing the Mandate of History

It has been argued that the ‘mandate of Heaven’ that represented legitimacy for the imperial dynasties was superseded by the Chinese Communist Party’s ‘mandate of history.’ It is further posited that the CCP is vulnerable in the event that popular perception should deem that they have lost this authority. This paper will look at the ideology of the party, and raise the question whether the CCP is about to lose its mandate. It is possible that a bureaucratized party founded on an ideology that lacks any firm linkage to social norms and values, and divorced from any social movement, could be moving towards breakdown. The party is trying to renew and modernize itself, seeking new social moorings and support. It might succeed in reconstructing its ‘mandate of history,’ but there is a clear danger that it might lose its grip on the hearts and minds of the people.

Ideology is to a great extent linked to the image-making capacity of a power structure; indeed, it is a means of defending the prestige structure of a regime. Such a prestige structure depends on the creation and maintenance of an image that will inspire the admiration, fear, hopes and fortunes of its adherents. People must feel that the organization or party that carries this mandate is necessary for their own lives and fortunes. As pointed out by Mark Elvin: ‘Once the image begins to suffer damage, little will happen for a while, but then a process of negative feedback develops, leading to a startlingly sudden collapse.’ The rituals of ideology gain in significance viewed from this perspective. They bolster the façade of the party, and this is key to its success and survival, and its capacity to stay in power. However, there are both ideological and structural processes that have the potential to erode the power of

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1 Mark Elvin, ‘How Did the Cracks Open? The Origins of the Subversion of China’s Late-Traditional Culture by the West,’ Thesis Eleven, no. 57 (May 1999), pp. 1–16.
2 Ibid., p. 3.
the party. Subversive elements might threaten the party from the outside, but there is also a structural threat which comes from within.

The generation that grew up with the Chinese Communist Party, those who were young and malleable in the 1950s and 1960s, were fired by a communist ideology that enjoyed a moral power in some ways similar to that of the great religions of Christianity, Islam or Buddhism. We should bear this in mind when we examine the state of ideology and the much commented upon moral decline in contemporary China. I shall argue that the power of ideology is to a great extent, although not exclusively, built on moral beliefs, social norms and values, and that its effectiveness is linked to the ethos of the society in which it operates. Consequently, when the social fabric starts to erode, so too does the power of ideology. I shall argue that the party’s links to social norms and values have fractured in two crucial places. First, in terms of its being anchored to general social norms and values, unconnected with any social movement as such. Second, it is broken in terms of what Weber called charisma. The party, or its representation through the Ultimate Leader, has been emptied of heroic charisma. What Mao Zedong had in abundance, and Deng Xiaoping had to a lesser extent, does not apply to a Jiang Zemin. Jiang’s popular nickname, Qiang Toucao, is a reference to the grass blowing in the wind, connoting opportunism and unprincipled pragmatism or bureaucratism. Jiang does not possess the charisma won through armed struggle in war and revolution, nor is his name linked to the grand narratives of heroism in any way. Both these ‘broken links’ point in the direction of a waning normative power. Ideology has lost its social and charismatic moorings.

I have elsewhere written on the uses of the norm as the basic element of a control system, pointing out the recurring patterns of Chinese ‘exemplary norms’ of Confucian as well as communist heroism and self-sacrifice. These have always been ideal norms orchestrated from above and used for ideological purposes. However, despite the many examples of resistance against such ‘exemplary norms,’ the ethos of collectivism and the hopes of communism did find support and resonance among the general public to a much greater degree during earlier periods in the history of the People’s Republic of China. It is hardly a controversial standpoint to claim that we have seen an erosion of this ethos during the reforms.

In the latest important ideological campaign (the ‘three representations’ [san ge daibiao]) leading up to the 16th Party Congress, Jiang Zemin addressed the role of the Chinese Communist Party, stating that: ‘It is essential to

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