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Cultural Dynamics in China: Today and in 2020

Fenggang Yang

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 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay focuses on three ideological currents presently underpinning the Chinese cultural sphere: *Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (MLM)*, *socio-political liberalism*, and *Confucianism*. These three major streams have all made considerable advances over the past twenty years, updating their rhetoric and in some cases reshaping their doctrinal foundations to be more accessible to both the masses and the ruling elite:

- Since MLM continues to reap the support of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), largely by providing an ideological basis that legitimizes Communist rule, it is unlikely to be abandoned anytime soon.
- Socio-political liberalism, meanwhile, has been pushed forward by the growing intelligentsia, the emergence of non-profit organizations and the spread of Christianity.
- The growing popularity of religious Confucianism—evidenced by the restoration of Confucius temples and memorial rituals throughout the country, the widespread of reading Confucian classics among school children and adults, and the proliferation of *guoxue* or Confucius institutes—provides a counterweight to the first two cultural currents.

By 2020 a combination of these ideologies, rather than a single one, will likely prevail. The interaction of these forces will have major implications not only for China's cultural realm but for the political and economic realms as well, and can be conceived broadly as combining in three main possible ways.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

- *MLM + Confucianism Hybrid* \approx The MLM heritage will continue to provide nationalistic legitimacy for CCP rule, complemented by Confucian values and mores. Individual liberty may increase within boundaries, but progress toward democracy will stall and the growth of Christianity in China will halt.
- *MLM + Socio-political Liberalism Hybrid* \approx Socio-political liberalism does not challenge CCP rule but rather acts in concert with it, rallying for greater constitutionalism, individual freedom, and rule of law within the existing political framework. Economic growth may continue, and Christians in China may both benefit from and support the cause.
- *Socio-political Liberalism + Confucianism Hybrid* \approx Rising Confucianism may provide legitimacy for continuous CCP rule on the basis of cultural nationalism, while socio-political liberalism may provide legitimacy on the basis of modern, universal norms and values. The social space for individual freedom is enlarged even though the CCP maintains control.

The many developments and undercurrents in the socio-cultural sphere of China today are too numerous to be summarized in a brief account. Moreover, unlike economic and political changes that have clear signposts—such as China joining the World Trade Organization or holding the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress every five years—cultural changes are very capricious.

On the one hand, cultural change in China may be a result of political or economic changes. The constant economic growth has boosted national confidence and pride, as manifest in literature, arts, mass media, and scholarship. Political repression may, however, have pushed certain cultural currents beneath the surface; detecting such undercurrents requires careful observation and imagination.

On the other hand, China's rapid economic growth has brought about myriad social problems. The social problems seem to point to the iron grip of the repressive political system. Underlying this political bottleneck of change is ideological bafflement and the societal loss of moral and spiritual values. Thus, some of the cultural changes in turn bear profound implications for further economic growth and political development.

If political ideology is the critical element in a culture that dominates political life, religion is then at the core of the culture that shapes everyday life. Ideology and religion provide the broad world-views that undergird various cultural currents. This essay focuses on these broad world-views, discussing three major cultural streams in China today that will likely have important impacts in domestic social life and international relations in the next two decades: the persistence of the ideological orthodoxy of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (MLM), the advance of socio-political liberalism, and the rise of Confucian fundamentalism.

The Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (MLM) Orthodoxy

In the view of many China observers, Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (MLM) is dead, or has become merely rhetorical without substance. The political machine of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), however, is greased by this ideological orthodoxy. MLM orthodoxy legitimizes CCP rule. Claims to MLM orthodoxy give the current regime the appearance of legitimacy as inheritor of the legacy of the revolution-era CCP. In a country that appreciates long history, maintaining high rates of economic growth alone does not give the ruling party sufficient claim to legitimacy. Besides, economic growth is entangled with myriad social problems, including a high unemployment

rate, growing wealth disparities, increasing corruption among government officials, and environmental pollution.

The reaffirmation of the CCP legacy is the reason behind the first public acts of the party's current top leaders—namely, visiting the “revolutionary shrines.” These public visits by top CCP leadership appear to have ignited a trend for today's young and middle-aged Chinese to walk the routes of the Long March of the Red Army in the 1930s. In addition to the Long March routes, the party has developed many sites associated with the CCP during the revolutionary era and the anti-Japanese War. This “red tourism” (*hong se lü you*), engineered and propagandized by the CCP, has become popular under the current regime. The CCP Central Committee and various central government agencies have made powerful propaganda efforts to promote such activities—publishing related books, organizing artistic events and celebrations, sponsoring movies and TV programs, and so on. Many work-unit “worker's unions,” CCP branches, and Communist Youth League branches have financed such tourist trips. Red tourism is also actively promoted by local governments that hope to derive from such revolutionary shrines or sites both economic and political benefits. Under the influence of the propaganda through mass media, many young and middle-aged people seem to have partaken in red tourism as a kind of pilgrimage, sincerely seeking meaning and understanding of the self and the nation.

The current regime under President Hu Jintao has also launched research and publishing projects to boost MLM, providing large sums of funds for university scholars as well as party theorists to update textbooks, popular readings, and specialized monographs on MLM. In the 1980s and 1990s most MLM scholars felt a sense of loss and resentment because of their marginalization—their former glory and prestige were lost due to the shift of attention to economic reforms and the pragmatic orientation of the central party leadership. Today, however, MLM research and publishing once again has become rewarding for both one's career and material life. At a time when publishing academic books is becoming increasingly costly for scholars, MLM specialists have abundant financial and political resources upon which to draw. Many provincial CCP schools have upgraded their physical facilities and increased salaries and benefits for their teachers. These party schools and university scholars specializing in MLM form a large interest group that should not be neglected when charting the cultural development of China. This interest group will advocate MLM in competition with other interest groups within and beyond the CCP.

At the grass-roots level, Mao's influence persists in a different way. Throughout China, for example, hundreds if not thousands of "memorial halls" enshrine the legacy of Chairman Mao. These temples, much like folk religious temples, are conceived, built, and tended by village people without state funding, although cadres at the grass-roots level might be involved in sponsorship. Evidence suggests that Chairman Mao is well on his way to becoming a "real god," joining the pantheon set out by traditional Chinese folk religion. Meanwhile, Mao statues remain standing on many university campuses.

Yet underneath the rhetoric of the MLM ideological orthodoxy the substance has been gradually changing. Some of these changes are profound. For example, although the CCP still maintains its proletariat rhetoric, under former president Jiang Zemin the party opened doors to welcome capitalists, merely re-labeling them as a progressive production force. Under Hu Jintao the core MLM notion of class struggle is being replaced by the new doctrine of "constructing a harmonious society." Instead of abandoning MLM orthodoxy, the party has made such revisions in the name of further developing and strengthening MLM. Given the elasticity of MLM in the Chinese context, even more radical revisions could conceivably be made under the name of MLM. For example, the CCP might re-label some religions as cultural forces for social stability or social progress, thus admitting religious believers into the party. The MLM orthodoxy will not likely be abandoned any time soon.

Also important to realize is that the CCP machine has been running quite effectively, as reflected in the passing down of the core leadership's orientation and policies to the grass-roots CCP branches. The political campaigns once every few years have effectively helped to realign CCP membership with the current central leadership. It is also important to realize that an effective CCP machine can be an asset for maintaining social stability and a smooth transition. The real question is: a transition to what?

Socio-political Liberalism

Internal to the MLM heritage are elements of liberty and democracy. This connection was especially true for the young Karl Marx and the CCP before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Over the years some liberal-oriented officials and theorists within the establishment have continued to espouse such elements within the parameters of MLM. Such officials and theorists once formed a strong, substantive political force that supported political reforms and an "opening up" to the world. Some of the

most articulate advocates for socio-political liberalism were purged from the CCP in the late 1980s and again in the mid-1990s. In the current stifling political atmosphere, such people are not easy to identify. It is important to remember, however, that socio-political liberalism is somewhat internal to MLM, and such liberal-oriented officials and theorists will continue to emerge within the CCP establishment. The latest manifestation is the publication of the book “Democracy Is a Good Thing” (*minzhu shi ge hao dongxi*) by Yu Keping, the associate director of the Translation Bureau of the CCP Central Committee. Yu is but one of the many liberal-oriented theorists within the CCP who strive to get their voices out to the public and attempt to influence the direction of change.

Outside the CCP establishment, socio-political liberalism has been widely accepted by educated Chinese or the whole intelligentsia. Under the current repressive political atmosphere, the majority of intellectuals seek to maintain a low profile to avoid complications and immediate problems. Chinese intellectuals are, however, creative in expressing and publicizing their views through nonpolitical writings, classroom teaching, public lectures, conferences, and, increasingly, blogs.

The few who dare to make public challenges face the risk of being purged from universities or the academies of social sciences—or even serious difficulties in daily life—but most of them have been able to survive by relying on personal savings or private support and remain outspoken. The freelance essayists Liu Xiaobo, Yu Jie, and Jiao Guobiao are examples. There are also economists, political scientists, sociologists, novelists, and others (such as Liu Junning, Mao Yushi, Qin Hui, Xu Youyu, and Yuan Weishi) who operate on the margins between the established and private institutions—maintaining a position at an established institution but carrying out most of the work outside the establishment. More significantly, in the last few years an increasing number of lawyers have made considerable strides in defending civil rights and human rights within the parameters of existing laws. These broad categories of intellectuals, joined together with liberal-oriented mass media gatekeepers (editors and reporters of newspapers, magazines, journals, publishing houses, internet portals, etc.), form a substantial force for socio-political liberalism. Although the authorities try hard to muffle these voices—by punishing those who dare publish articles and books and by closing down blogs and BBS websites—modern technologies and greater social space (by-products of the country’s economic reforms and opening up to the outside world) have made it difficult for authorities to have total control over these mass-media channels. The cat-and-mouse chase has become constant.

Emerging Chinese non-profit organizations (NPO) and international non-governmental organizations (NGO) are also part of the force for socio-political liberalism, contributing to the slowly expanding civil society. These organizations push China toward greater integration into the advanced world and encourage playing by the rules of liberty and democracy.

At the grass-roots level, the continuous growth of Christianity can be regarded as a growing force for socio-political liberalism. The connection between socio-political liberalism and Christianity may or may not be clear to many China observers in the West. Given the rise of Christian fundamentalism and the political controversies surrounding this movement in their own country, many people in the United States are doubtful about or even outright reject the idea of this connection. However, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* may help to elucidate the connection. Moreover, Christianity in China is not part of the long tradition, but has been perceived by many in China as a modern and liberating force. Christianity in China is now often positively associated with the unbinding of women's feet, the introduction of both a modern education system and modern Western medicine, establishment of charities, and advocacy for social equality. It is interesting but not surprising to see that the majority of the civil rights and human rights lawyers mentioned above are Christians—most, in fact, newly converted ones who have found meaning and strength in the Christian faith for being who they are and doing what they do.

Some journalists and Christian scholars have boldly predicted that within the next thirty years one-third of the people in China could become Christian.¹ One prominent historian also observed that “on any given Sunday there are almost certainly more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe.”² In the 1980s this growth of Christianity took place mostly in the rural areas. Since then, the growth has become an increasingly urban phenomenon, including the widespread appearance of Bible study groups and house churches on and around university campuses. The number of underground, unregistered, or house churches has become so large that the efforts of control apparatuses (e.g., the religious affairs bureau, the “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” Committee, the police, and the state security bureau) seem to be receding in their suppression. In the past, such Christian

¹ See, for example, David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2003); and Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions* (London: Monarch Books, 1999).

² Daniel H. Bays, “Chinese Protestant Christianity Today,” *The China Quarterly* 174, no. 2 (June 2003): 488–504.

gatherings were often forcefully disbanded and their leaders were often jailed or sent to the re-education-through-labor camps. Nowadays, more and more commonly, such churches are left alone.

Confucian Fundamentalism

Whether Confucianism is a religion or not has been debated for more than one hundred years. In the beginning of the 21st century, however, the debate has taken a sharp turn. A strong social movement has begun to revive Confucianism as a religion in China. Moreover, some people are trying to make Confucianism the state religion. The advocates, enthusiasts, and reluctant supporters of Confucianism include academic scholars, college students, economic and social entrepreneurs, and government officials. In the view of some scholars who still do not like the “religion” label because of the perennial anti-religious indoctrination by the CCP, Confucianism ought to be the main body of Chinese culture with everything else subordinate.

This social movement is still new, little noticed by scholars and China watchers. Yet evidence of the movement abounds in the elaborateness of government-sponsored public celebrations of Confucius’s birthday, the erection of Confucius statues on university and school campuses, the restoration of temples devoted to Confucius, the spreading of Confucian scripture-reading classes and institutes devoted to the study of *guoxue* (the “learning of the nation”), the emergence of traditional-style Sishu schools, the promotion of Han dress (*Han fu*), and the abundance of Confucian BBS’s, blogs, and other websites. A few key events may be illustrative of this rapid development:

In 2003 Confucianist Kang Xiaoguang published an article entitled “An Outline for the Cultural Nationalism” in which he made four suggestions: (1) Confucian education must enter the official education system from elementary school to high school, from universities to CCP schools; (2) the state must support Confucian religion by making it the state religion, establishing its status by law and financing its programs; (3) Confucian religion must enter the daily life of all the people through standardizing and developing doctrines, scriptures, rituals, organizations, buildings, and activity sites; and (4) Confucian religion must be spread overseas through NGOs. Whether

coincidental or deliberately planned, all of these suggestions appear to be being implemented.

In 2004 a group of renowned China scholars authored the *Jiashen Manifesto*, calling for a return to Chinese traditional culture. In the same year the annual commemoration ceremony of Confucius's birthday at his birthplace in Qufu, Shandong, became state-run, and the Ministry of Education began to establish Confucius institutes abroad. According to a Xinhua News Agency report³, by the end of 2006 there were 123 Confucius Institutes in 49 countries all over the world. Instead of being supported by NGOs, as suggested by Kang Xiaoguang, the Confucius institutes have been sponsored directly by the Ministry of Education through the newly formed State Office of Chinese Language Council International.

In 2005 the Center for the Study of Confucian Religion was established at the Institute for the Study of World Religions (ISWR) at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Those scholars who criticized Confucianism as a religion, such as Li Shen, a former student of Ren Jiyu (the founding leader of the ISWR) who elaborated Ren's position of criticizing Confucianism as a religion, lost their influence and moved out of CASS. The director of the new center was Chen Ming, who has been one of the most vocal advocates for "cultural conservatism" and for the establishment of Confucian religion.⁴ The chief of State Administration of Religious Affairs, Ye Xiaowen, attended the opening ceremony of the center at the ISWR, giving his blessings for this endeavor. Also in 2005, Renmin University of China established the first guoxue college, followed by the emergence of guoxue institutes or classes at other universities, high schools, and elementary schools. The Taiwanese entrepreneur Wang Yongqing set out to establish 10,000 "Mingde" elementary schools throughout China between 2005 and 2015. One of his requirements is that the Mingde schools must teach Confucian scriptures daily.

In September 2006 the Ministry of Culture released the "Outline of Cultural Development in the 11th Five-Year Plan."⁵ One chapter is devoted to the "protection of national culture," calling for a number of measures: compiling and publishing cultural classics, revitalizing traditional holidays and commemoration ceremonies for the first ancestors of the Chinese

³ "2006: Kongzi xueyuan chengwei zhongguo 'ruan shili' de zui liang pin pai" [2006: Confucian Institutes Become the Brightest Brand of China's "Soft Power"], *Xinhuanet*, January 1, 2007, http://news.xinhuanet.com/overseas/2007-01/01/content_5556842.htm.

⁴ In late 2006 Chen left the CASS for the Capital Normal University; the significance of this move is not yet clear.

⁵ See the complete text at <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/22226/71018/4814170.html>.

nation, and increasing classic scripture reading and classic arts education in elementary schools, high schools, and universities.

The revival of Confucianism seems to be well received by many among the general population. In 2006 two Confucian “televangelists” became extremely popular. The latest one is Yu Dan, a female professor at Beijing Normal University, who became well known through her lectures on the *Lunyu* (The Analects of Confucius) on China Central Television (CCTV). Her book of Confucian exegesis sold more than 10,000 copies within eight hours at a book signing in Beijing, and the first print of 600,000 copies sold out within four days.

In the current Confucian revival the ardent Confucian fundamentalists, though still few in number, have been making waves and attracting increasing numbers of followers. The Confucian fundamentalists proclaim the superiority and uniqueness of Chinese culture centered around Confucianism, emphasize the uniqueness of the Chinese social situation, and reject liberty, equality, and democracy as notions of Western culture. These fundamentalists are unapologetically elitist and have offered cultural and nationalistic justifications for political authoritarianism. They have also generated some popular sentiments against Western cultural influences in China, including Western socio-political philosophies, especially liberalism. Most recently, ten PhD students at elite universities signed an open letter against Christmas celebrations. Thus far, the rhetoric has very much pointed to Western culture and its religious core—Christianity. This letter received wide attention from Chinese newspapers, magazines, television stations, Internet news portals, BBS’s, and bloggers. If this trend continues without restraint, the Confucianist revival movement will likely make Christianity the direct target of attacks, as occurred in the Boxer Rebellion around 1900 and the anti-Christian movement in the 1920s. History is likely to repeat itself.

Possible Scenarios by 2020

If any single trend described above prevails in the coming decades, Chinese society is bound to fall into turmoil.

The exclusive monopoly of MLM is not entirely unimaginable. After all, the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) is not a distant past. There are rumors that Hu Jintao confided to his associates his praise of Cuba and North Korea for their political success. This raises fears for a regress to the political measures of the Cultural Revolution.

The chances that MLM will be replaced by Confucianism as the exclusive cultural orthodoxy are remote. The Confucianists are hoping, however, to

rally Buddhists, Daoists, and other nationalists, including those in the core leadership. The Confucianist movement has gained momentum. The use of Confucian terms and concepts has increased in the speeches of top leaders and recent policy initiatives. Externally, rising Japanese nationalism and Shinto fundamentalism could also spark fires to accelerate the rise of Chinese nationalism.

Socio-political liberalism may not achieve an exclusive monopoly without the collapse of the CCP. Yet internal pressures—such as massive protests and liberal strides—and the external pressures of hostile forces toward the MLM and CCP are mounting. An abrupt revolution is not completely improbable.

The predominance of any single cultural force, however, is very unlikely. Economic and political changes can be dramatic and abrupt and some cultural effervescence can be theatrical, but the undergirding world-views will persist with some level of certainty and tenacity. The more realistic scenarios involve the combination of two of the three major cultural streams joining together to dominate Chinese society.

One of these possible scenarios is that MLM orthodoxy and Confucian fundamentalism join in force. Within the MLM heritage lie integral elements for dictatorship. The rising Confucianism may, on the one hand, provide nationalistic legitimacy to CCP rule and, on the other hand, tame the CCP to benevolent authoritarianism. Individual liberty may increase within boundaries, whereas progress toward democracy will stall and the Christian growth will halt. Though the combination of a market economy, an authoritarian polity, and traditionalist culture may seem strange, it is possible. Such an amalgamation means that an alternative mode of modernization is becoming a reality, after so many years of scholastic deliberations in fantasy.

The second possible scenario is that MLM orthodoxy and socio-political liberalism join forces. If the liberal wing within the CCP manages to gain power, mobilize public opinion, and rally with liberalists outside the CCP, these forces together may be able to push for greater individual liberty and constitutional democracy. Without challenging CCP rule, constitutionalism and rule of law can become the shared goals of these two forces jointly striving for a smooth political transition while maintaining economic growth. Christians may not only benefit from such development but may also help to expand the societal base for such change.

The third possible scenario is that socio-political liberalism and Confucianism join forces. The commonalities and intersections of Confucianism and socio-political liberalism may not be immediately obvious. In the course of its long history, however, Confucianism has assumed many

shapes and forms. The primary or original Confucianism contains seeds for democracy and liberty, a view espoused by Confucian philosophers in the modern West (William Theodore De Bary, Robert Neville, John H. Berthrong, and Tu Weiming). Chinese Christians also commonly maintain Confucian moral values, albeit selectively and transformatively.⁶ The precondition of this scenario is that, barring the possibility of CCP collapse, the liberal wing within the CCP becomes strong enough in its strides for constitutionalism, rule of law, and democratization, thereby ensuring continued enlargement of the social space for individual freedom, including the freedom of religion. While unlikely, such a scenario is nevertheless not outside the realm of possibility. Whether or not such a turn of course develops will depend on the interactions of Confucians, socio-political liberals, and Christians. The hard-core MLM dogmatism has been dying, if it is not already dead. In this context, a rising Confucianism may provide legitimacy for continuous CCP rule on the basis of cultural nationalism, whereas socio-political liberalism may provide legitimacy for continuous CCP rule on the basis of modern, universal values and norms. ◆

⁶ Nicole Constable, *Christian Souls and Chinese Spirits: A Hakka Community in Hong Kong* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); and Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999).