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Continuation, Transition, and Challenge: Collectivism in China after 1949

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issue 17

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Continuation, Transition, and Challenge

Collectivism in China after 1949

Minqing Zhou on Jan 23 2002

issue 17

Collectivism in China has gone through major transitions since the establishment of Communist China in 1949. This article discusses how "political collectivism", imposed by the communists, differs from traditional "cultural collectivism", practiced in China for thousands of years. The essay describes the effects of these different styles of collectivism on China's culture. It also analyzes the impact of ideologies emphasizing individuality that result, for example, with the introduction of a market economy.

Continuation, Transition and Challenge
Collectivism in China after 1949

Since the establishment of Communist China in 1949, the world has witnessed China's struggle to implement a Western ideology in an ancient Eastern land. Until the mid 70s, Party leaders initiated a series of movements, attempting to replace old ideas with the new in an attempt to increase productivity and the standard of living. Party cadres saw collectivism not only as the ultimate moral of society but also the energy for generating productivity. Many government decisions and measures reflected this way of thinking. Yet, collectivism is not foreign to the Chinese. Ancient philosophies and religions have nourished a collective culture over the past two thousand years. After 1949, Chinese collectivism continued in its traditional dimension, yet added a new one imposed by the Communist Party. For differentiation purposes, this paper later refers to the traditional as cultural collectivism, and the imposed as political collectivism. In the past fifty-two years, each dimension has had its own continuation as well as transition. The two consistently interfere with and penetrate each other. In recent years, with the rise of a market economy and the decline of central planning, Chinese collectivism is facing new challenges, but this time from the outside.

In his book, Individualism and Collectivism, social psychologist Harry Triandis defines that "collectivism is a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives". A collectivist individual subordinates her/his goal to a collective's goal and consents to duties required by the collective. A collective can be a tribe, nation, race, family or work group. In contrast, "individualism is a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives". An individualist takes action based on her/his own preference or benefit, and sees her personal goals above the goals of others.

Eighty percent or more of the Chinese population live in rural areas--the majority of them still live in relatively poor conditions. Under these circumstances, people have learned to depend on each other to better survive. In Chinese history Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism contributed significantly to Chinese collective culture. Confucianism sees filial piety as the foundation for achieving ultimate humanity, stability and peace. Through respecting seniority within a family unit, one learns to free self from being opinionated, from dogmatism, obstinacy, and egotism--thus becoming a better human who is considerate of others. This family ethic further applies to one's relationship to the community, country and universe. Buddhism believes in no-self. The individual ego is merely an illusion. Fortune, social position, family, body, and mind are

[Rivets + Denizens]
Collaborative Curatorial Models
in Theory and Practice
Curated by Ron Goldin
Introduction
Natalie Bookchin
Heath Bunting
Ron Goldin
Beryl Graham
Patrick Lichty
Lev Manovich
Mark Napier/Liza Sabater
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Benjamin Weil
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momentary manifestations of life. They do not represent self as people may think. Buddhism uses ritual to demolish ego, to free oneself from the ordinary world and to potentially reach enlightenment, Nirvana. Taoism believes all beings and things are fundamentally one. Elements of the Whole depend on and influence each other. From philosophy to religion, the three simultaneously overlook the self and value connection with others. Penetrating Chinese culture for more than two thousand years, the three construct a solid foundation for Chinese collective ethics and behavior.

Since 1949, the Communist Party has reinforced collectivism consciously and aggressively in the belief that collectivism is the highest noble moral of communist ideology. This ideology sees humans as social beings. Social historical conditions and social relationships constrain an individual's needs. Only through maintaining public order, safety and benefits, can one receive a true personal benefit--a country's public and personal benefits are fundamentally the same. In order to populate this high moral, the Chinese government has used different means, among which is publicizing collectivist heroes such as Lei Feng of the 1960s and Li XiangQun of the 1990s. Lei Feng, a young soldier who died in an accident at work, had seen helping others as an obligatory social duty. Stories about him include volunteering in a construction, fighting a flood in spite of physical pain, donating money for disaster recovery, buying a ticket for a woman who lost money and ticket... His famous remark, "a person's life is limited, but serving people is unlimited. I am willing to devote my limited life to unlimited service for the people..." describes his very noble collectivist thinking. Later, Mao ZeDong wrote: "follow after comrade Lei Feng", Lei Feng became a collectivist icon in contemporary China. More than thirty years later the Party used a similar strategy to promote socialist collectivism. Li XiangQun, also a young soldier, ignoring his sickness, insisted on fighting a severe flood for days and nights. In the end, he died from a combination of exhaustion and illness. The Central Military Committee honored him as a "heroic soldier of the new era". Chairmen Jiang Zemin also issued an order that all military personnel should follow in Li's footsteps, devoting themselves to the Party, country, people and military. Using propaganda and organized study, the Party spreads collectivist spirit by way of real life models. Besides raising people's collectivism awareness, the Party executes socialist collectivism through central planning and state ownership. Formation of communes during the Great Leap Forward, collectivization of land, business and industry, public sharing of working materials, were a series of decisions meant to increase efficiency and productivity. History has proved they failed. Aware of past mistakes, the Party has shifted away from an extremely leftist position in recent years and loosened its role in economic development. Nevertheless, the Party still underlines the significance of central planning in the current so-called socialist market economy, and emphasizes state ownership of key industries such as transportation and telecommunication.

Let's get back to Harry Triandis' examination of collectivism and individualism. By differentiating combinations of type of self: independent or interdependent, same or different, he divides each, collectivism and individualism, into the horizontal and vertical. Horizontal collectivism defines self to be interdependent and same whereas vertical collectivism to be interdependent and different. Applying this analysis, Chinese collectivism tends to be vertical. Confucian collectivism values loyalty and obedience to authority such as parents, officials and emperors; therefore it doesn't recognize equality among members. Communist's public sharing and public rights to decision making is horizontal in theory, but in practice decisions often come from top to bottom, representing only a small number of administrator's opinions. By imposing socialist collectivism on people, the government in fact denotes authority and superiority. The Communist Party inherited (maybe unconsciously) the traditional administrative style that it intended to oppose, whereas the majority of Chinese comfortably accepted Party authorities as in the past. Whether culturally or politically, Chinese collectivism inhabits a hierarchical structure, thus it appears vertical.

Collectivism hasn't been static in China since 1949. Execution of collectivism, especially on the political level, has gone through transitions. One example is the Party's policy on agriculture. Between 1949 and 1958, collectivization of land occurred gradually, so family oriented farming still played a major role. From 1958 to 60, the Great Leap Forward completely forced communism on peasants in order to accelerate socialist productivity, with commune peasants sharing land and farming materials. Because of short-term visions, some agricultural projects ignored the ecological system, eventually causing severe natural disasters and death of countless people from famine. The Great Leap Forward failed—however, the commune system was retained for many years after. Not until the 1980s did the Party initiate farmland reform to decrease collectivization. A household then could take control over the output after meeting sales and taxation requirements and paying for collective services. The household responsibility system then became the main form of agricultural organization. There was a return to family oriented farming. Another transition results from the Party's shifting view on Chinese socialist economy. The thirty-year implementation of central planning policy since 1949 has failed the original expectation of improving productivity and people's living standard. In 1984, the Party passed a decision on urban economic

reform. The decision denies that a planned economy conflicts with the market economy, and proposes that the Chinese socialist economy is a planned market economy based on public ownership. It concludes that a market economy is necessary for a socialist economy and a premise for Chinese economic modernity. The state separates itself from private business, so that state owned industry becomes a relatively independent producer and manager. In addition, the original central pricing system has become limited, so that prices reflect market change. In spite of these transitions, collectivism on the political level maintains a certain continuity. For example the Party advocates a socialist collective moral as aggressively as before. Fearing a market economy may bring about individualism, Party cadres have repeatedly sent out message to advocate collectivism. Collectivism as the sole correct value in the socialist market economy has been written into a textbook. Despite the economic shift, the Party stresses that the market economy ultimately depends on planned directing, adjusting and organization to avoid confusion.

In spite of frequent and harsh disruptions in politics after 1949, traditional collective values survived. Mao ZeDong truly believed old ideas, old culture, and old bureaucracy obscured the realization of communist ideology. As a result, he initiated the Cultural Revolution, but it led to complete social chaos. Mao's failed attempt demonstrates that a cultural transition in a country that has a five thousand year history cannot possibly happen overnight through top-to-bottom enforcement. In fact the majority of Chinese, especially those who live in rural areas, care less about abstract ideology than they do about day-to-day family life. The excitement shown by the Chinese in their return to family farming since the 1980s, indicates their continuous love affair with the traditional family orientation. The traditional cultural collectivism not only survived but also penetrated Chinese political life after 1949 as it did in the past. The communist bureaucracy maintains the Confucian style of authoritarian order. Mao, to many Chinese, was equivalent to the emperor. Moreover, after years of rejection from the communist Party, Chinese traditional philosophies and religions are experiencing a celebrated comeback. The emergence of annual Confucian culture festivals and accelerated repairs to a growing number of ancient Taoist and Buddhist temples signal that tradition continues and traditional collective values still live on.

In the process of transition and continuation, Chinese collectivism has been facing new challenges in recent years. Individualism is becoming popular if far from being prominent, especially with the younger generation. Tong, who lives in China, told the author about an interesting incident. One day Tong bought Ling, her 3-year-old son, a bike. With excitement Ling immediately shared it with friends, but being the youngest and softest among all, he didn't get an opportunity to ride it for the whole play day. Since then, Tong's neighbor who has a 5-year-old, criticized her for teaching Ling ideas of sharing. In addition, this neighbor praised her own 5 year old for not only his refusal to share toys with others but also his capabilities of taking advantage of other children's toys. This selfishness contradicts the ever-valued collective ethic, and surprisingly it receives positive recognition for child education in some cases. What might have caused the individualist tendency in contemporary Chinese society? Possible answers are the recent transition to a market economy, culture exchange with the West, mass media, and the one-child policy. As mentioned before, the current Chinese economy is adapting to a capitalist market strategy. The separation of state and enterprise broke the "iron rice bowl" that had lasted for 30 years. The state no longer guarantees a business's survival and worker's wage. Private enterprises emerge and market competition becomes the norm. The profit-driven nature of a market economy inevitably conditions self-centered values and behaviors. In recent years, increased cultural exchange has brought in some Western ideology including individualism. One channel of the exchange is through Chinese students studying abroad. In order to catch up with foreign modernization, since the early 1980s the Chinese government has allowed enormous numbers of Chinese students to study overseas, especially in U.S. The students brought back Western ideas and values as well as Western science and technology. Some have become critics of extreme leftist collectivism that ignores human as well as individuals' rights. Another channel for the exchange is through increasing numbers of Western businessmen, politicians, intellectuals, educators, and tourists visiting China. Their perception and concept of the world fascinates the Chinese like fresh air. In addition, mass media such as print, radio, TV and now the Internet contribute to the introduction and spread of individualism at a faster pace and to a broader audience. Moreover, the one-child policy from the early 80s may have directly or indirectly planted the seeds for today's individualism. Loving children is considered a traditional ethic and enjoyment of life. When there is only one child in the family, parents and older generations' unconditional love often spoil the child. In many cases, he/she becomes the "little emperor" of a family. Growing up in a very self-conscious and self-centered environment, he/she naturally feels less connected with others.

As Triandis points out, collectivism and individualism are coexisting social patterns whether in a region, a race, a nation or a culture. For example, the U.S., a country overwhelmed with individualist attitudes, has made 'collaboration' and 'teamwork'

fashionable words in the corporate world as well as in the art world. By contrast, China, an enormously collective country on both cultural and political levels, is experiencing individualism's tease. In an age where different values increasingly intermingle with each other, observing those values closely and finding their contexts become necessary for an objective evaluation. This paper cannot possibly attempt to cover 'the' story of Chinese collectivism after 1949. What fascinates me is that collectivism, like an organism, has a life of its own. 50 some years is only a wink in China's history, but the country's complex social condition has provided a unique nutrient for collectivism to inhabit, interact and transform intensively. Because it has a life of its own, interfering or manipulating with collectivist ideologies without consideration of their nature and patterns can be risky and disastrous. The Chinese government has done that. In that sense, it failed to be collectivist.

Notes

- 1 Harry C. Triandis, *Individualism and Collectivism* (Boulder: West Press, 1995), 2.
- 2 Triandis, 2.
- 3 Lei Feng, <http://zhengzhi.fsji.net/CAI/jzqx/lf/lf1.htm>

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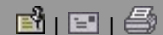
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