

The Debates between Liberalism and the New Left in China since the 1990s

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The debates between Liberalism and the New Left, which broke out in the middle of the 1990s, are a phenomenon rarely seen among mainland Chinese intellectuals since 1949. They are large-scale, spontaneous debates without official manipulation or ideological constraint. The debates involve Chinese scholars on the mainland and overseas and have drawn the attention of Hong Kong and Taiwan intellectuals. Several collective papers on the debates have been published and other selected papers are in the process of being compiled and published. The debates are continuing. As an active participant in the debates and as a researcher in the history of Chinese thought in the 1980s and 1990s, I would like to summarize the main issues of the debates and to analyze why Liberalism and the New Left emerged in the 1990s.

First of all, I should point out that the meanings of ‘Liberalism’ and ‘New Left’ in China are not the same as they are in the West, just as ‘liberalism’ and ‘conservatism’ have different meanings in the United Kingdom and the United States. We can understand the exact meaning of these terms in the Chinese context only by elaborating the concrete points of view of the two parties and by exploring their areas of disagreement. However, we will find that the fundamental division is clear and that the controversies between liberals and the New Left originated from different evaluation of individual liberty, the market economy, globalization and other related concerns.

Secondly, I should mention that many scholars refuse to be designated as ‘New Left’. Some think that the term is too simple and masks important differences, and others think that the term is a trick of discourse to prejudice the public against their views. I admit that ‘left’ has had a bad reputation in China since the Cultural Revolution, but on the other hand, ‘New Left’ has an air of ideological safety, and in contrast one can see ‘Liberalism’ as heterodox and dangerous. In the end, I have three reasons to think that the term ‘New Left’ is appropriate. First, Chinese New Left writers obtain theoretical resources from contemporary western New Leftists, such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin and Edward Said, and Chinese New Left articles are often published by journals of the western left. Secondly, like the Chinese old left, they oppose capitalism and the market economy and do not oppose despotism and dictatorship. Thirdly, like the Chinese old left, they maintain a positive evaluation of Mao Zedong’s radical left line, as exemplified in the Great Leap Forward, the People’s Communes and the Cultural Revolution, and claim themselves to be custodians of the ‘socialist heritage’.

I

On almost every important political, social and cultural question in contemporary China, liberals and New Leftists hold opposite positions. Their disputes, however, can be seen to focus on the following seven issues.

The first issue concerns the market economy and social injustice. China is now in a period of social transition in which startling problems of corruption and social injustice have greatly concerned Chinese intellectuals. Liberals and New Leftists disagree over the explanation of this injustice. The New Leftists hold that the problems come from the market economy itself and that the market economy should therefore be criticized and boycotted. The liberals maintain that the injustice arises

because the market in China has not broken free from the control of the old system of power and is not mature and appropriately regulated. For them, the way out is to develop and consummate the market economy.

One New Left writer says:

On ‘the road to serfdom’, the free flow of capital seems to strengthen the privileged classes and to enslave the masses, but not to enlarge democracy.¹

The same author describes the situation in China as if China has already become a typical capitalist society:

We must not allow a few financial groups to monopolize the common resources in the world, to set monopoly prices in employment and the market and to enslave us and produce an anti-market financial crisis in which the rich do not buy for they owe too much and most people cannot afford to buy for lack of money. We must strive for power for the working class, small and middle enterprises and peasants.²

In response, a liberal writes:

No matter how serious the problems of China’s approach to the market economy, we must go ahead and never take the road back to the time when clothing, food, housing and travel were tightly controlled and when farming in the fields, manufacture in plants and factories and sale in the market were determined by the instructions of authority.³

He argues for China

first, to carry on a real market and real free competition, to make just rules and for everyone to follow them and to expel political power from the market; second, to establish the rule of law and to complete a system of law, for example, to protect legitimate private property by means of amending and supplementing the existing constitution, to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor by means of legislation, to punish and rectify corruption by law.

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The second issue concerns globalization and China's entry into the World Trade Organization. New Leftists oppose China's positive attitude towards globalization and the World Trade Organization and maintain that these developments will bring China into an unjust capitalist world system. They hold that the western capitalist countries developed their economy by exploitation and enslavement of other countries from the very beginning and that they now dominate the whole world just as they did earlier in colonial times. One of them writes:

The existence of capitalism depends upon and produces a global hierarchical structure of polarization between rich and poor countries every day. ⁵

He holds that the development of the third world in present historical conditions can only be an unjust, even suicidal development, for

a disastrous combination of modern technology and backward capitalist development will produce unimaginable destruction both to human being and to the environment to an extent much worse than in colonial times.⁶

The author concludes that the only task for developing countries is to launch a worldwide battle against capitalism.

In refutation, a liberal says:

What is said above is equal to the claim that ‘it is suicide to develop now’, ‘development in one country is impossible’ and ‘revolution first, then construction’, all of which is very ridiculous and dangerous. Underdeveloped countries, if they believe this, will indulge in the illusion and fantasy of ‘world revolution’ and be backward forever. As a result, the gap between rich and poor countries will grow wider and wider. The fact that some countries and regions have made rapid economical progress in last two or three decades proves that challenge and opportunity coexist in the time of globalization and that international co-operation is beneficial to developing countries.⁷

The third issue concerns the analysis of the internal condition of China. Some representatives of the New Left attempt to prove that Chinese society is a capitalist or market society and that foreign capital plays a decisive role in China’s national economy. This account, of course, is not easy to maintain, so what they say is only that

when China's economic reform has led to the basic formation of a market society and overseas and co-operative capital enterprises have made up more than half of the gross national product (GNP), we can no longer regard social issues of China as issues of socialism.⁸

They argue that the criticism of Chinese state autocracy should give way to an analysis of the change of state behavior under market conditions and that China's problems should be seen at the same time as problems of the capitalist world market. They argue that our diagnosis of issues regarding China should be part of a critical diagnosis of the issues of an increasingly globalized capitalism.

Liberals respond to this thesis by holding that it originates not from the reality of China, but from theory.

Chinese New Leftists distort and excise the conditions of China in order to apply contemporary western New Left and new Marxist conceptions of global capitalist system to China.⁹

Liberals point out that China as a whole is not a capitalist market society in terms of its economic constitution, its pattern of investment, its structure of employment or in terms of the status of private ownership in its constitution and laws, although the market has been developed and a metropolitan bourgeois tendency has grown. 'Taking China as a market society and as part of transnational capitalism' should give way to criticism that is 'led from inside to outside'.

The fourth issue concerns the evaluation of Great Leap Forward, the People's Communes and Cultural Revolution. New Left writers are unhappy with criticism of the Cultural Revolution and criticism of the radical left policies of the 1950s to 1970s. One has a positive evaluation of the People's Commune:

The system of People's Communes that unified administration and power after 1958, although not so flexible as today's system of contracted responsibility that links remuneration to output, laid an essential foundation for today's democratic autonomy of villagers: the collective ownership of land truly created a favourable precondition for the democratic autonomy of villagers. ¹⁰

The same person advocates the importance of the experience of Dazhai and claims that the most advanced 'post-Fordian' management in the West today is the same as Mao Zedong's Angang Constitution and that the west learned from Chairman Mao. Furthermore, he demands that we 'succeed and enhance the reasonable elements of Cultural Revolution' and appeals for China to have a Cultural Revolution every seven or eight years:

Today, we should make Mao Zedong's call 'There should be a Cultural Revolution every seven or eight years' a system of regular, nationwide general election. It is nothing but the essence of the people's democratic dictatorship or proletarian dictatorship. ¹¹

This point of view was totally rejected by liberals, who argued that praise and advocacy of the Great Leap Forward, the People's Communes and the Cultural Revolution are based on ignorance of the Chinese past and its real history:

Presently, some young scholars, starting from their own preferences, attach their imaginations to Chinese history and reconstruct the Chinese past with their ideals.¹²

The fifth issue concerns the evaluation of the Mind Liberation Movement in the 1980s and the May Fourth New Culture Movement. Some New Leftists attempt to negate and belittle the 1980s enlightenment, which, in their opinion, demonstrates the unconditional subordination of Chinese intellectuals to western discourse and their indulgence in the discourse of enlightenment and an infatuation with modernity. Others negate the advocacy and pursuit of enlightenment, rationality, democracy and freedom in contemporary China by tracing it back to the May Fourth Movement:

The May Fourth cultural movement, generally speaking, only copied European enlightenment discourse. The scholars of the May Fourth generation lowered their guard to the fact that western enlightenment discourse had contained colonial discourse. Many of them accepted the colonial discourse while accepting enlightenment discourse. If we admit that China used to be a colonial country, we should squarely face the fact that the mind and outlook of the Chinese intellectuals were semi-colonized.¹³

Liberals defend the enlightenment of the Mind Liberation Movement in the 1980s and the May Fourth New Cultural Movement. They argue that in the two movements, Chinese progressive intellectuals did not mechanically follow western discourse, but pushed forward mental liberation based on Chinese reality in order to solve China's practical problems. While we cannot say that the two movements failed, we should admit that their goals have not been achieved and that enlightenment is an uncompleted task for China's modernization.

The sixth issue concerns the modernization of China. In the West, modernization has been criticized since the beginning of modernity, but the criticism has become increasingly fierce and systematic recently. Many Chinese intellectuals apply anti-modernist thought to China. Some maintain that there is no such problem as the setback of China's modernization, but rather that the danger faced by China is the possibility of again becoming a colony:

We should rather say that we live in new colonial times than in post-colonial times.¹⁴

They hold that terms such as 'internationalization', 'market mechanism' and 'competition' are colonial discourse and that China should use its own criteria to judge issues of human rights, market economy and intellectual property rights in order to challenge and reject western dominating discourse beginning at the most fundamental level.

Liberals disagree with this anti-modernist position and argue that it arises from misapplying western theories to China. Western theories were produced in conditions different from Chinese conditions, and a critical and radical theory in the

West can play a conservative role in the specific conditions in China. Chinese people have striven to realize modernization for over 100 years, but have not yet reached this goal. Although we may talk about the maladies of modernization or modernity, these are not serious problems for China, at least in its present condition.

The seventh issue concerns international relations and radical nationalism. The views of the Chinese New Left and radical Chinese nationalists partly overlap, and both groups frequently support the Chinese government in condemning ‘hegemonism’ when issues arise between the China and western countries, especially the United States. In this area, the typical opposition between liberals and New Left concerns the relationship between human rights and state sovereignty. The New Left shared the view of the official media in charging NATO with hegemony masked by the excuse of human rights when NATO intervened in Kosovo. After the September 11th terrorist attack, the New Left argued that the origin of the emergence and spread of terrorism was American hegemony and its diplomatic policy in the Middle East. Furthermore, a New Left economist claimed that terrorism emerged from America’s primacy as a consumer and waster of energy and its policy of using any means to control the oil resources of the Middle East.

In contrast, Liberals emphasize the importance of human rights and the need to be on guard against radical nationalism. One argues that blind nationalism is one of the big mistakes pursued by Chinese intellectuals since May Fourth, and others hold that the violation of human rights by despotic government cannot be legitimated by an excuse of state sovereignty.

II

Now let us consider why the trend of liberal thought emerged in the 1990s.

First and of primary importance, the market economy was introduced by the Chinese authorities and developed very quickly in China. To some extent, the liberal economy has gained a legitimate place in Chinese discourse. Economists could discuss classic liberal economics and the positive role of the ‘invisible hand’ and could criticize various shortcomings of the centrally planned economy. For example, in an article ‘What is Economic Liberalism’, an economist wrote:

Planned economy or free economy: it has been a great topic causing disputes since the beginning of twentieth century. The doctrine of the planned economy got the upper hand due to the great depression in the capitalist world in the 1930s, and a centrally controlled economy of state ownership came into being. A population of almost 2000 million became victims of this belief. Tens of millions people died of hungry and over 1000 million were deprived of the opportunity of sharing the achievements of human civilization.¹⁵

Secondly, a dramatic change took place in the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist countries. Although the official propaganda blamed the collapse of socialism in Soviet Union and Eastern Europe on the strategy of peaceful evolution by western imperialism and on the betrayal of socialism by Gorbachev, and although many persons criticized the ‘end of history’ thesis, it is very clear that in the long-term confrontation between freedom and democracy and dictatorship, the former defeated the latter. What followed was a new wave of democracy in the world, and Chinese liberals believe that it is impossible for China not to be involved in this mainstream.

Thirdly, the great sufferings and lessons of Cultural Revolution woke up the Chinese, and some of them turned to Liberalism. A good example is Gu Zhun who represented rethinking and returning to Liberalism by Chinese intellectuals of the generation who participated in the communist revolution in 1930s and 1940s. Gu Zhun took part in the revolution led by Communist Party of China in his early years and held a senior position after 1949. He lost his position because of his independent opinion of taxation policy. After became a scholar, he was branded as a ‘rightist’ in 1957 for advocating a positive role for the market. During the Cultural Revolution, Gu suffered greatly, but he persisted in studying the problems of China and was especially concerned to determine why the Chinese ‘democratic revolution’ changed into a comprehensive dictatorship in the Cultural Revolution and to consider what political doctrines should provide the fundamental principles of our state. In the end, he supported liberal principles and expressed his views in very precise liberal language criticizing Stalin and Mao Zedong’s totalitarianism and approving western democratic constitutional systems. His posthumous manuscripts indicate that he thoroughly studied the Anglo-American empiricist tradition and the French romantic tradition in western political philosophy. His works were published in 1990s and have had a great influence among Chinese intelligentsia.

Fourthly, the liberal heritage was retrieved in the 1990s. There was a flourishing liberal movement in China in the 1930s and 1940s, and this heritage was thoroughly studied and enhanced in the 1990s. Many twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals who had been educated in England or America held liberal positions on political, social and cultural issues and formed the third force, independent of the Guomintang and the Communist Party. The Communist Party used these intellectuals in the fight against the Guomintang, but after seizing power the Party

vilified them as running dogs of American imperialism. Hu Shi was the most important representative of Chinese Liberalism. The Communist Party named him on its list of war criminals and launched a large-scale campaign to criticize him. But in the 1990s, the situation was totally changed. Many scholars reconsidered the period of earlier Chinese liberal thought and re-evaluated the roles of Hu Shih and others. In *The Hardship of Liberalism: A Contemporary Explanation of Hu Shi's Thought*, a scholar wrote that Hu Shi

dedicated his whole life to the construction of a democratic polity and the defense of the basic principles of human rights, rule of law, freedom of thought and others...[H]is historical position will be established and the orientation of modernization embodied in his thought will be accepted along with the movement of modernization that develops broadly and deeply. ¹⁶

Yin Haiguang, another liberal, who fought for freedom and democracy in Taiwan and was suffered greatly in the 1950s and 1960s, attracted attention and praise on the mainland. His works were published and promoted the spread of liberal thought.

Fifthly, the experiences and achievements of Taiwan were highly valued. As early as the 1980s, the economic achievements of Taiwan were not only praised by intellectuals and ordinary people, but were also acknowledged by the mainland authorities. Afterwards, Taiwan's achievements in constitutional democratic construction were understood and praised by intellectuals on the mainland. These intellectuals were encouraged and inspired by Taiwan's lifting the ban on association and publication, by its realization of direct presidential elections and by its peaceful transfer of power from the ruling party to the opposition. Some people had excused

the prohibition of democracy and freedom in China on the grounds that China had a different cultural tradition from the West and it would be inappropriate to transplant Western values to China. Now many say: ‘People in Taiwan share our ethnic and cultural identity. Why can something be done in Taiwan but not in the mainland?’

Sixthly, there was the impact of translation and publication. From the middle of 1990s, a new surge of translation and publication took place in China. Many liberal classics were published and had great influence. Among the most influential were F.A. von Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* and *The Constitution of Liberty* and Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemy*. Major works by other liberal thinkers were translated, published and widely reviewed: such as Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, Robert Nozick and Ronald Dworkin.

III

Now, we can turn to the reasons that New Left thought developed in the 1990s.

First, from the 1990s, many people came increasingly to believe that in addition to the political evil of dictatorship another oppressive evil and social injustice had emerged through the power of money or capital. The old form of political oppression through dictatorship had existed for several decades and formed a reality from birth that for many was too familiar to dwell on. Except for very few, people enjoyed extremely limited freedom and, in most cases, bore this shortage of freedom. In these circumstances, the psychological impact of newly available money was much stronger. When people saw that anybody among their neighbors, colleagues, friends or relatives had bought a car, moved into a new house or traveled abroad, they would lose their psychological balance. Because few Chinese had read *Gulag Archipelago* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn or *The New Class* by Milovan Djilas,

a profound understanding and criticism of political oppression in the name of socialism was not widely known, but Chinese were familiar with the exposure and criticism of capitalist evils by a series of classic works from *The Communist Manifesto* to the novels of Balzac. In consequence, they had ready-made language to express their hatred of the evil of money. A profound philosophical principle is that language not only is an expression of feeling, but also is a cause of the formation of feeling. What I want to say is that many Chinese intellectuals have different responses to the evils of political oppression and economic inequality.

This interpretation can be supported by examining Chinese traditional culture and thought. There are rare elements of individual rights and liberties in a Chinese political tradition that has been dominated by holism, nationalism and statism. Although Chinese society has never been equal, Chinese culture has had a strong ideology of equality. From ancient times, Chinese people have accepted the sage's injunction: 'Do not worry about shortage, worry about inequality'. In modern times, a new tradition with a tendency toward socialism has opposed capitalism, Liberalism and the market economy. As the American sinologist Guy S. Alitto argued:

There is an interesting phenomenon about socialism in China: all the important thinkers and political leaders in the twentieth century -- including the Communist Party, Nationalist Party, Sun Yat-sen and other small parties, and figures of secondary rank such as Yan Xishan, Fong Yuxiang, Fu Hanming and others, all of them advocated without exception a certain form of socialism. In fact, among Chinese figures, no matter what their ideological tendencies were, almost nobody advocated laissez-faire capitalism.¹⁷

I do not say that we should not criticize the evils of money and capital. On the contrary, it is very important to see that another form of oppression and inequality has emerged. The key point is whether this new form of oppression and inequality has replaced the old form and whether it is independent of the old form. We must determine whether the fundamental problem of China is political dictatorship or capitalist exploitation. We must also determine the relationship between these two evils. I think that the main problem is political dictatorship and that in China capitalist exploitation depends on political dictatorship.

Political and social issues have become increasingly complicated since the social transition of China began in the 1990s. This development demands that people should have a sound sense of reality when they discuss issues of China. By this, I mean that we should not only see some subtle problems, but also weigh them properly. From early on, commentators have noticed that many mainland New Leftists study literature and that their way of observing the problems of China is characteristic of literature. They are very sensitive to certain trends and symptoms, but are not good at analyzing problems quantitatively and through statistics. It is true that the oppression of money and capital has emerged as a new phenomenon that is worth noticing, but this recognition does not go far in proving that China has changed into a capitalist society, whose main issues are those of capitalist exploitation within the capitalist world system.

Furthermore, criticism of capitalism is very safe under the ideological condition of China. When we criticize totalitarianism, our reference is definite and unmistakable, but New Leftist criticism of capitalism refers to nothing definite and concrete. Sometimes they even say that what they criticize is international capital or

Hollywood films and MacDonald's hamburgers rather than something closer to home.

The popularity of New Left perspectives in universities indicates that the old-fashioned ideological instillation remains effective. For a long time, a comprehensive and sophisticated myth has imposed on young Chinese students a distorted explanation of history and the world. For example, most Chinese still believe that the Korean War was launched by America in an attempt to use Korea as a springboard to invade the Northeast China. When the liberal-New Left debates began, I argued with a young New Left literary critic who is a clever man with a critical spirit. In his article reviewing Liberalism, he affirmed that Liberalism 'intrinsically contains a road to despotism and dictatorship' and that Hu Shi and other liberals were sincere followers and supporters of the despotic Guomintang regime. It was obvious that this man was ignorant of liberal doctrines and that his knowledge of modern Chinese history was seriously distorted. He never again would argue with me after I showed him how his claims were based on distortion and ignorance.

Interestingly and ironically, some scholars became recruits to the New Left after they obtained doctorates and taught in American universities. In America they learned various New Left, postmodernist or post-colonial theories. While their teachers applied these theories to criticize western and capitalist societies, they applied these theories to Chinese reality, and for this purpose, they took China capitalist society to be the appropriate object of their theoretical analyses.

I am not qualified to evaluate the use of New Left theories in western society, but I want to argue that some western scholars are irresponsible in the use of their theories regarding China. What they think about is only to extend their theories to China, while ignoring the difference of conditions between China and the West.

While they enjoy material prosperity and freedom of speech in western society and criticize what they enjoy -- of course it is their right to do so, and any system is not perfect -- they fail to see that a good level of material life and freedom of speech are what China should strive for. Perhaps the Chinese will start to criticize these conditions after they have enjoyed them for some time, but the problem is that these western scholars encourage their Chinese students to refuse what they and their students enjoy at this moment. I appreciate the attitude of some western scholars who warn Chinese readers to notice the great difference between the social reality of China and the social conditions in which their theories were produced when their works are introduced in China. Douwe Fokkema is a good example. He co-edited *Approaching Postmodernism* and wrote in his preface to the Chinese version of this book that postmodernist literature cannot be imitated, but rather belongs to a special and complicated tradition. The luxurious living conditions of dominant western figures are the experimental basis of the postmodernist imagination, and this basis is totally different from the experience of regions in which basic food and clothing are wanted.¹⁸ As we know, Chinese New Leftists often cite communitarian criticism to prove that the liberal thesis of individual rights is wrong and outdated, but over 50 American communitarians jointly declared:

The basic communitarian quest for balances between individuals and groups, rights and responsibilities, and among the institutions of state, market, and civil society is a constant, ongoing enterprise. Because this quest takes place within history and within varying social contexts, however, the evaluation of what is a proper moral stance will vary according to circumstances of time and place. If we were in China today, we would argue vigorously for more

individual rights; in contemporary America, we emphasize individual and social responsibilities.¹⁹

Finally, I have to say that it is a pity that there are few people with such sober minds among both westerners and Chinese.

Notes

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