

The Rise of China's New Left

by Leslie Hook

Wang Shaoguang, a professor of politics at Chinese University in Hong Kong, leans forward in his chair, beaming, and says that China is at a tipping point. "I call it the 'great transformation,'" he exclaims. "In addition to economic policy, for the first time China now has social policies." Before economic reform it was not necessary to have a separate social policy, he says, because society and economy were deeply intertwined.

For Mr. Wang this shift, long overdue, is good news. This articulate former Yale professor is one of a loose grouping of Chinese intellectuals, dubbed the "new left," who point to rising income inequality and argue that the country's emphasis on economic growth should be leavened with social democratic policies that redistribute wealth. And that is precisely what is starting to happen.

The social policy trend is linked to a revival of central government power. In 1995, the government's tax revenue as a share of GDP reached a nadir of 9.9%. After a concerted effort to improve collection, last year the figure reached 18.1%, roughly the level of 1987. And of course real GDP has tripled in that same period, meaning the government has plenty of cash to beef up the military, invest in infrastructure and still spend more on social welfare.

The rebound in fiscal muscle tracks with Mr. Wang's diagnosis of the current transformation. "Economy and society were embedded during socialist times, then became disembedded and now they are becoming re-embedded," he says. "You see this in health care and education especially." He explains that state withdrawal from areas like health care and education during the heady economic reform of the 1980s and 1990s left huge inequities that are now beginning to be filled.

China's policy track record bears out this observation. The annual legislative plan released Feb. 27 in anticipation of the National People's Congress put it thus: "Because China now places economic growth and social development on an equal footing, there will be more laws dealing with social issues in the next few years." And in his opening speech to the NPC on March 5, Premier Wen Jiabao pointed out that last year government spending on education and health increased 39.4% and 65.4%, respectively, from the previous year.

But the shift goes beyond just spending money on the poor. That is clear from the contentious debate over the Property Law that has haunted the NPC for years. The legislation was tabled and failed to pass six times at the annual Congress—setting a record in China's legislative history—before it went through with substantial changes this

year. Even now the law remains controversial because it codifies the individual's right to own land in a state that was founded on the principle of communal ownership. And within society, enthusiasm for free enterprise seems to have peaked.

Since 1992 when Deng Xiaoping made his Southern Tour and reinvigorated the reform process, pragmatism has been the order of the day. The conflicts within the upper echelons of the Communist Party were between rival patronage networks, not policy factions. So it is striking that today, even though the leadership is still dominated by technocrats, ideology is making a limited comeback.

The debate rages not just on the floors of the Congress, but across China's intellectual circles: How to successfully reconcile open markets with the country's communist legacy? The days of dismissing contradictions by invoking Mr. Deng's catchphrase "socialism with Chinese characteristics" are over.

Rise of a Movement

In the five years since Communist Party Secretary Hu Jintao's rise to power, the new left has emerged with a range of prescriptions for a troubled society. Although the name is something of a misnomer—left and right are understood quite differently in China than in Europe or the United States—the term generally describes people who oppose a neoliberal market economy, want increased social welfare, argue for greater democratic participation (but without formal elective democracy), and support more assertive foreign policies.

"Its basic features include caring about the poor and the underprivileged and being critical of runaway development," says Zhang Xudong, a professor of comparative literature at New York University who has been identified as new left. Mr. Zhang, who was reached in a telephone interview, also cited the rise of the nouveau riche, official corruption, pollution and the "destruction of the countryside" as primary concerns for this group.

The new left has been talking about these issues for long time, but the dramatic deterioration of China's environment and rural areas in recent years has thrown these topics into the national spotlight. In 2004 over 70,000 incidents of rural unrest, many due to illegal land seizure by corrupt officials, were reported, and the social fabric of China's countryside continues to decay as able-bodied men and women migrate to cities to seek employment.

The increasingly dire situation has undoubtedly been a boost to the new left. Prof. Wang says that six or seven years ago universities in China were almost complete dominated by liberals, but that is no longer the case. "Why? Because society changed. People think about issues that they didn't before." Others described the new left as having "a lot of appeal."

The term new left itself is problematic, though. Some who bear the label cringe at its associations with the “old left” hardliners who genuinely wish for a return to Mao’s era. “In the very beginning, ‘new left’ was not a word I used myself, it was a word other people used to criticize me,” says Wang Hui, a professor in the department of Chinese language and literature at Tsinghua University and co-editor of the influential monthly magazine Dushu.

The reasons behind intellectuals’ reservations towards the label are linked to the seismic shifts in China’s political climate over the last decades. Mr. Zhang identifies three stages in the development of the new left: “When it first emerged it was purely academic, and referred very specifically to overseas Chinese students who studied with American or European leftist intellectuals. They were very critical of marketization, privatization, the rolling back of the welfare state.”

During the second stage, when these students returned to China, they felt that China was going through the same process of “capitalization” other countries had experienced, says Mr. Zhang, and they were bitingly critical of the direction of the reforms. As a result, “they were viewed with profound suspicion at home,” he says. During the 1980s, when China was accelerating its program of economic reform, Deng Xiaoping famously said that the Communist Party had to guard against radicalism from the left more than from the right.

However, as China’s economy boomed and society became more stratified, these suspicions were overcome. “Now at the most recent stage the new left has become a pretty broad-based social movement. Maybe it’s an exaggeration to call it a movement, but it’s certainly a trend of like-minded people,” Mr. Zhang says.

Still, there remains great difference of opinion over what the new left stands for. One of the most central divisions is between thinkers who define the new left in terms of opposition to neoliberalism, which advocates free market capitalism, and those who see it as opposed to classical liberalism, which advocates individual freedoms. Wang Hui espouses the former view. “This is not a debate with liberalism, he says, explaining that the new left draws on a variety of intellectual resources including the liberal tradition. In his view the new left is really debating neoliberalism, and he suggests the term “critical intellectual” is more precise.

Alternatively, Wang Shaoguang defines these camps in terms of Isaiah Berlin’s two concepts of liberty: “Liberals advocate a kind of 19th century freedom—freedom from, rather than freedom to. So they just want to be left alone by government control or intervention.” He describes the new left as advocating the opposite. “Not just freedom from government intervention, but freedom to have an equal chance at health, education, and many other things.” This group is more likely to include students of Marxist and Maoist thought.

Further along the spectrum, some thinkers fall between the new left and the now largely irrelevant hardliners, or old left. One example is Gong Xiantian, a 72-year-old professor

at Peking University Law School whose criticism is a big factor in the delay of the passage of the Property Law. An ardent Marxist, he describes China's current political direction as finally tired of capitalism and ready to "go back to the good old days."

Yet unlike leftist hardliners—whom one source described as old, marginalized and bitter—Mr. Gong is hardly irrelevant. His main bone of contention is that private-property rights are unconstitutional in China, a state founded on the idea of collective ownership. And when he speaks out, China's leaders take note. "In [August] 2005 when I posted my essay [online], Wu Bangguo [chairman of the standing committee of the NPC] called me right up and we spoke for a long time," he recalls. "And on Sept. 26 of that year they made an announcement concerning publicly owned property, emphasizing that China is still based on collective ownership."

As a result of such objections the law was amended to improve protection for public property, and a clause stating the law must not contradict the constitution was added. Interviewed the day after the seventh version was discussed in a closed session of the NPC, Mr. Gong said he had already seen the new version (which had not been made public at that time) and supported the changes and the draft.

Mr. Gong's experience suggests that communist ideals resonate deeply with China's decision-makers. However, such an ideologically charged debate is the exception rather than the rule. Most of those interviewed for this article lamented that ideology was increasingly irrelevant to policy decisions.

"The country is basically run by a bunch of engineers, the technocratic class," says Mr. Zhang, the professor of literature at New York University. "The college students are less and less political," he adds, expressing disappointment.

Some see this as a crisis of cultural leadership. "The current leaders are really just feeling the stones to cross the river," says Han Yuhai, an associate professor of literature at Peking University, referring to a well-known Deng Xiaoping dictum about gradualist reform. "We sometimes joke that the leaders walk with their heads down because they are looking for money lying on the ground," says Mr. Han, whose academic work is influenced by Maoism. "The political crisis lies exactly here—China has no governance. The economy is the only government.... Money is the only ideology."

But while the new left is critical of neoliberalism, they are not advocating return to a centrally planned economy. "They are not calling for a direct return to Mao's countryside. Instead of that they are calling for a middle-of-the-road approach—a Scandinavian social model, the British welfare approach, or the U.S. model, the New Deal," says Mr. Zhang.

Several new leftists see the reforms as initially beneficial, but less so as the human and environmental costs of China's development increased. "The early economic reforms were a positive-sum game," says Wang Shaoguang, "but by the late 1990s economic reform had become a zero-sum game." As the state forced sectors like health care and

education to become more market-driven, many people were simply left without the services they once enjoyed.

Wang Hui's description of problems brought on by an overly eager embrace of open markets draws on the liberal tradition: "Market freedoms are only possible under the control of a government. So they can never be unlimited. China's problem is that our lives have been too closely controlled. We need more autonomous space. We can't have our lives controlled by the market." He advocates greater "economic democracy" as a solution, for example by improving workers' rights.

One area of particular concern for new leftists has always been the countryside, which they point to as a prime example of market-economy failures. Wen Tiejun, an agricultural economist at Renmin University, describes how he perceives China's reform as having robbed the countryside of its labor and its capital, thwarting the necessary "three productivities"—Adam Smith's land, labor and capital. He argues that China is a typical dual society, where the vast difference between urban and rural environments necessitates different policy approaches for the countryside and for the cities.

The reforms backfired because policy makers treated the countryside too much like the cities, he says. "Rural industrialization combined with rural townshipization is a valuable way to increase farmers' incomes," he says, adding that rural incomes grew faster than urban incomes in the 1980s. "There were no protests, no social conflicts [in rural areas]. The 1980s were a golden age. The social conflicts started because in the 1990s we didn't progress in a way that was compatible with the realities in the rural areas. The implementation of the legal system, for example—this cannot really work in the countryside."

New leftists see China's rural woes as vindicating the positions they have held for a long time. Wang Hui smiles as he explains how his journal helped break the story on rural Chinese poverty. "In 1999 Dushu printed a piece about the sannong ("three rural") problem [referring to agriculture, farmers and the countryside]. At that time, the government did not even admit that the three rural problems existed, but two years later it was on the agenda of the NPC."

Support From the Top

In a sharp departure from the eras of Deng and Jiang, Messrs. Hu and Wen have differentiated their leadership style with symbolic gestures bound to please the left. After Mr. Hu was appointed president in 2002, one of the first places he visited was Xibaipo in Hebei province, the last place the Communist Party occupied before seizing Beijing in 1949. And Mr. Wen made headlines a few months ago by visiting farmers' homes in the countryside of Liao-ning province on the eve of Chinese New Year, echoing his visits to coalminers on the same day of the lunar calendar in 2005. These expressions of solidarity with the working class and visits to revolutionary heritage sites pay homage to the country's socialist past in a way that China's leaders have not done for decades.

While this has undoubtedly helped the rising popularity of the left and the new left, many point out that it is too early to tell whether Mr. Hu truly shares leftist convictions, or if his policies and political gestures have just been motivated by pragmatism. “For the time being he’s just maintaining the status quo, so we’ll have to wait and see what he really believes in,” says a young woman in a leftist bookstore who asked to be identified by her screen name, Red Star Beauty.

Others think that Mr. Hu has already shown his colors and will stick to them. Mr. Zhang describes the slogan “harmonious society” and Mr. Hu’s visits to communist heritage sites as “a very smart way of indicating a mild break from the Zhu Rongji model, which is very pro-business and very focused on the coastal regions, and a very good way to achieve some type of political identity.”

Mr. Han, the professor of literature at Peking University, sees Mr. Hu as similar to Mao Zedong in that both are homegrown intellectuals who began their careers at the grass-roots level—Mr. Hu spent 14 years working in Gansu province, one of China’s poorest areas. “Hu will be the most like Mao, compared to Deng and Jiang,” he concludes. Cynics, however, say Mr. Hu’s defining characteristic is a lack of vision, and that his apparent choice of political hues is simply the safest option for someone in his position.

Democratic Traditions?

Like Mao, the new leadership is emphasizing “democracy.” In the Communist Party context the word does not mean one person one vote, but rather greater mass participation in politics. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng moved the Party away from broad-based movements that mobilized activists. Nobody expects a return to the bad old days of struggle sessions and Red Guard rallies. But many leftists would like to arouse more enthusiastic involvement in implementing Party policy.

“We want to go back to the original meaning of democracy—rule by the people,” says Prof. Wang. In practical terms, new leftists have a variety of opinions about how this could be achieved. Prof. Wang describes scenarios of choosing a jury of citizens by lot to approve major policy initiatives, or participatory budgeting whereby town or village residents have a say in allocating the municipal budget.

Others describe a democracy with a hint of socialism. “Democracy is not about procedure only,” says Mr. Zhang. “When you talk about democracy you have to talk about it in substantive terms like democratic distribution of wealth, or democratic distribution of social power.” Mr. Zhang sees this concept of democracy as being very different from the Western-style democracy advocated by Chinese liberals. “In China opponents of the new left tend to say, let’s have rule of law, let’s have elections, let’s play by the rules. That is a partial understanding of democracy.”

Thinkers across the new left spectrum criticize Western-style democracy, and many say they hope to learn from the mistakes that democratic countries have made. And by refusing to embrace elective democracy, new leftists believe they have the best interests

of the masses at heart. “Corrupt officials are the ones who would benefit from Western-style democracy. In the future there is a chance that the nouveau riche could take advantage of capitalist-style democracy,” warns Mr. Gong.

Mr. Zhang expresses similar reservations: “The new left advocates a sort of deeper democracy—it has to reach the masses, instead of only benefiting the urban middle class. Whereas the Chinese liberals have to equate democracy to rule of law, all of which is meant to legalize their newly gained social positions.”

Some new leftists perceive China as already moving toward the model of democracy they advocate. Wang Hui points to the discussions over the Property Law. “Several things are changing about the way China’s laws are being made,” he says. “In the past, policies were made from inside the government, but now more of those [policy initiatives] are coming from society.” He lists a number of factors that he says fundamentally changed the way society and government interact: the Internet and broader access to information; more intellectuals participating in critical debate; and economic growth. “When social conditions present the opportunity for such a discussion [as took place over the Property Law], that’s a good thing.”

Despite these reassuring sentiments, contradictions emerge on topics like human rights and press freedom. Since Mr. Hu has come to power the state has progressively tightened its grip on journalists, and Beijing’s top universities have reduced the space for public expression of opinions. The Internet continues to be tightly monitored and restricted. And at this year’s NPC, discussion of the Property Law was conducted in closed meetings, and as of the time of writing the law still had not been made public.

Mr. Gong says that an increasingly transparent legislative process and public involvement in debate over legislation are signs of “progress,” but he shakes his head at the way the NPC dealt with discussions of the law during the latest Congress.

“The fact that they’ve shut down debate indicates that they’re trying to avoid ideological discussion,” he says, a fact that others have linked to Messrs. Hu and Wen’s desire to avoid controversy in the run-up to this October’s 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, a once-in-five-years event that will most likely herald changes in China’s top leadership positions. Mr. Gong called the drafting process of the law “too secret” and said the way the NPC had gone about it “wasn’t right.”

New leftists have a variety of reactions to discussions of press freedom, underlining the diversity of people to whom the label is applied. On the more moderate side, Wang Hui advocates ever greater space for discussion and suggests he has experienced firsthand how difficult media censorship can be. “I’ve been an editor for 11 years. I can’t use casual language to describe this experience,” he says, pausing. “Only by continuing to express your views can you expand the space for discussion.”

Others seem less sure of where they stand, however. Like Wang Hui, Wang Shaoguang also said everyone should be allowed to engage in free speech. However when asked

directly about China's censorship of the Internet censorship, he gives a look that suggests surprise. "I have no such experience, and most of my friends in China can use the Internet in extremely productive ways." And leftist hardliners go so far as to express their support for government intervention in the press. "There is definitely control of the media," Red Star Beauty, a self-identified Maoist, tells me before excusing herself to join colleagues for takeout dinner in the back of the bookshop. "But this is necessary. It's quite different from the U.S.—we need some guidance."

Human rights are also not something new leftists bring up very often. "Human rights were not part of Mao Zedong's worldview," says Mr. Han, in the context of a discussion about China's foreign policy, shortly before referring to a book famous for its anti-Western sentiment, *China Can Say No* (China Industry and Commerce Associated Press, 1996).

The irony is that only because human rights have improved in China do such intellectuals have the freedom to voice their dissatisfaction with a government that has largely succeeded in sidelining ideology. As the values of liberalism become more strongly entrenched, those who pine for the days of less economic and political freedom are able to reassert their views. Whether or not China's leaders sympathize, this poses an added challenge to them.

The question then becomes what sort of "great transformation" China is facing. In addition to having social policies, the country now has a debate over what they should be. The poor masses' demands for greater social equity could lead to demands for a real say in how it is achieved. That is something neither the national leaders nor the new left would like to see.

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