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The Tenacity of Chinese Communism

How the party revived an ancient philosophy to extol order and compel obedience.

By Ian Buruma

When Chairman Mao Zedong stepped forward in Tiananmen Square on Oct. 1, 1949, and proclaimed — in standard Chinese but in a thick Hunanese accent — the founding of the People's Republic of China, many patriots rejoiced. A large number of Chinese who were not Communists were still happy that after years of humiliation by foreign powers, a vicious Japanese invasion and a bloody civil war, China was now finally united. For the first time in roughly a century the Chinese had regained their dignity. Mao was widely credited for this.

Many Chinese patriots would one day regret their enthusiasm. Mao not only turned against what he called "class enemies," or indeed anyone who did not follow him slavishly, but he also unleashed greater violence on the Chinese people than even the Japanese had. The Cultural Revolution, during which it is believed that up to two million people were murdered, was just the last of his great purges.

And yet, Mao's feat of unifying the country and restoring national pride is still a reason for many people in China to respect his legacy, and for the Chinese Communist Party (C.C.P.) to justify its continued monopoly on power. The fear of violent disorder runs deep and is consistently drummed into Chinese of all ages. Party propagandists insist that China without Communist rule would descend once more into chaos and fall prey to hostile foreign powers.

There are, however, other reasons the C.C.P. is still in power in China, even after Communist rule has collapsed almost everywhere else.

The party has adapted extremely well to capitalism. Seeing what happened to the Soviet Union after Mikhail Gorbachev's democratic reforms, China's rulers refused to follow his example. After the Chinese who demanded similar reforms were brutally crushed during the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, the C.C.P. made a tacit deal with the educated urban class from which most of the protesters came. One-party rule would create the orderly conditions for people to become wealthy, in exchange for which they would refrain from political protest.

In this sense, China is not so different from Singapore, where a similar deal has been struck, if in a somewhat less oppressive manner. In fact, Deng Xiaoping, considered to be China's great modern reformer and the man who cracked down on the dissidents in 1989, was an admirer of the Singaporean way of combining capitalism with autocracy.

But there is a deeper historical reason for the success of Communist Party rule in China. Imperial power in China was always backed by a quasi-religious dogma. Chinese emperors, acting as mediators between heaven and earth, were treated as semi-divine figures, holy popes as much as earthly rulers. Confucianism, originally a moral as well as a political

philosophy, became an ideology imposed to instill obedience to authority — from fathers in families to clan chiefs all the way up to the emperor.

This may not have been what Confucius, or his follower Mencius, had originally intended. They were more interested in the cultivation of virtue in scholar-officials and the proper observance of ethical rules: Ancient Confucianism is a kind of blueprint for harmonious social order. And the recent protests in Hong Kong, as well as a vibrant democracy in Taiwan, show that many Chinese are actively opposed to authoritarianism — notably in places where traditional Chinese culture has generally been better preserved than on the mainland.

But rulers have used Confucianism, today no less than a thousand years ago, to support social hierarchy and autocratic rule. Official promoters of the creed have put an authoritarian spin on what started as a humanist philosophy.

This closed system based on orthodoxy was difficult for modern reformers to challenge, or disentangle. It was not enough to topple a particular imperial regime. To stage a real revolution in the name of democracy, which was attempted in the early decades of the 20th century, Chinese reformers felt it was necessary to sweep away the orthodoxy along with the sacred rulers.

That was the main point of the so-called May Fourth Movement of 1919, when students and intellectuals marched through the streets of Beijing under the banners “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy.” Confucianism, the ideology that had held Chinese culture and politics together for thousands of years, had to go. Science became for some Chinese thinkers a new kind of dogma, something that explained everything.

Many Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth generation were attracted to Marxism for that very reason. It filled the post-Confucian vacuum with an alternative, modern political and scientific orthodoxy with a strong moral component. Liu Shaoqi, one of the early Communist leaders (who was later purged and left to rot in prison during the Cultural Revolution), wrote in 1939 a tract titled “How to Be a Good Communist.” His description of the ideal revolutionary, with its stress on “self-cultivation,” sounded remarkably Confucian.

Even after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, the separation of church and state did not happen. Mao behaved like a divine emperor whose thoughts had to be learned by rote and revered like a classic Confucian text. Disrespecting or even just ignoring Mao’s “Little Red Book” in the 1960s was treated as a form of blasphemy, for which a person could be sent for re-education in a gulag — that is, if he or she had not been already executed.

After Mao died, and especially after Deng’s capitalist reforms, Maoism and Marxism began to lose their potency. Party members paid lip service to the party orthodoxy, and children were still taught it at school, but nationalism, and even bits of warmed-over Confucianism, began to replace the old Communist dogma. This, too, created what some Chinese and experts describe as a “spiritual vacuum.”

One way of filling the void has been conversion to Christianity, or joining spiritual groups like the Falun Gong, which party leaders view with great dismay. The reason the government tries so hard to crush religious organizations that operate independently from

party control is precisely because dogmas that compete with the state orthodoxy are by definition subversive.

President Xi Jinping is very aware of this problem. That is why he is trying to tighten the party's grip on ideology, as well as revive Maoist thought, while cracking down on dissident thinking in universities, mass media and online. His personality cult, stressing firm paternal leadership, as well as the authority of his philosophic thoughts, is widely seen as a way to reinstate the Communist variety of imperial rule after years of government by a succession of bland technocrats.

Mr. Xi is no Chairman Mao, however; he lacks the charisma to be a modern emperor. But a harsher version of the Singaporean model could succeed for quite a long time. The C.C.P. will continue to justify its rule by standing for order, national greatness and something called "Socialism With Chinese Characteristics" while (some of) the people continue to get rich. The exact nature of this type of socialism is not so important, nor is whether people really believe in it. There were many schools of Confucianism, too. The important thing is that this form of socialism compels obedience. And as long as the party remains in power, state control of spiritual and intellectual life will prevent people from coming up with any viable alternative.