

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/11/04/recursive-politics-the-20th-century-roots-of-chinas-return-to-monarchy/>

CHRISTOPHER BOOSE, NOV 4 2019

From the destruction of an empire and the rise of warlords to foreign invasion and communist revolution, it is clear that China faced immense change in the 20th century. When looking at these developments, especially the rise of the People's Republic in 1949, it may appear as if the underlying motives and values animating Chinese politics had departed greatly from the imperial age. The party-led campaigns and Cultural Revolution have no apparent analogue in China's pre-Mao history. The supposed infusion of Socialist thought into China gave rise to terms like "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," and "Mao Zedong Thought." Despite these stark contrasts, this does not represent the formation of a *new* political culture.^[1]

Rather, the evolution of Chinese political culture stems from a *reorganization* of preconceived ideas to fit contemporary circumstances. These evolutions result from inherent tensions in the long-standing political culture and have occurred *throughout* Chinese history. Developments during and since the 20th century have been more pronounced than in the Imperial age, but they ultimately rest on the same ideological fault-lines as their predecessors.

Defining China's Imperial Political Culture

This can be shown by first defining and analyzing the core beliefs of China's political culture during the Imperial age and then re-applying these ideas to the political ideas that have flourished since the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the start of the People's Republic. This Imperial Political Culture can be best defined through five principles: the unity of the Chinese people, the idea of "all-under-heaven," the omnipotence of the emperor, the management of the people, and the incorporation of the literati. Yuri Pines' work, *The Everlasting Empire*, summarizes this:

"The emperor should be omnipotent and his rule should be universal; the bureaucracy should be staffed by men of proven talent and merit; and the commoners deserve utmost concern but should remain outside policy making."^[2]

The first of two of these principles, "unity" and "all-under-heaven," were shaped by the tumultuous Warring States period. In the context of hundreds of years of war and destruction, the scholarly leaders of the time (e.g. Confucius, Mengzi, Xunzi) saw need for a singular authority under which the whole of the world (i.e. Chinese civilization) would find peace. As Pines points out, the failure of multistate solutions and the brutal conditions of war "exacerbated the sense of despair, eventually fueling the quest for unification."^[3] Mengzi captured this idea in proclaiming that "stability is in unity."^[4] It was no longer a question of whether or not all things under Heaven should be unified, but *how* to unify it.^[5] Subsequent Chinese dynasties would use this as justification for their consolidation at home and influencing of neighboring regions.^[6] For future discussion, these two principles can then be defined as the belief that (1) China should be a unified state under one national authority and (2) this national authority should extend over the known world.^[7]

The great emphasis placed on singular authority is also present in the mythos that developed around the emperorship:

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

"In theory, the Chinese emperor was the single most powerful human being in the world. His exaltedness was, above all, symbolic: by the mere fact of his singularity, the emperor personified the supreme principle of the realm's unity, while in his capacity as the "Son of Heaven," he acted as the sole mediator with and representative of the highest deity, Heaven."^[8]

This adoration of the emperorship helps to explain the institution's durability across thousands of years until the 20th century. China's monarchist tendencies were not absolute, however. Not all emperors would be as capable as expected. This gave rise to a situation in which official unwavering support for the emperorship could exist alongside extreme criticisms of individual emperors. This natural tension in the Imperial Political Culture allowed for different actors (i.e. the emperor and the bureaucracy or court) to act against each other while still calling upon the same root values.^[9]

These official contradictions were present in other aspects of the Imperial Political Culture as well. Most notably problematic was the position of the common people in relation to the government. This fourth principle held that the people were "root of the polity and the kingmakers" but should also be "firmly excluded from participation in political processes."^[10] From this principle, intellectuals would recommend that the government listen to the people, but they would never approve of allowing citizens to voice dissent on their own.^[11] This inconsistency was held up by the claim that while the people *themselves* had no right to overthrow or reform the government, *Heaven* did and would do so *through* the common people. These contradictory positions created a political atmosphere in which protest and rebellion was illegal but would become legitimized firstly by its existence and secondly by its success.^[12] British Sinologist Thomas Meadows generalized this when he declared that "of all the nations that [have] attained a certain degree of civilization, the Chinese are the least revolutionary and the most rebellious."^[13]

The last principal relationship that defines the Imperial Political Culture is the government's incorporation of the literati and other politically relevant social classes as circumstances required (e.g. the merchant class). On one hand, the educated civil service was meant to serve the emperor in carrying out *his* will. The emperor was (officially) so much greater than even the highest bureaucrats that he was not to be looked upon. "Officials were expected to bow their heads and hold before their faces tablets" to ritualistically show that the emperor existed above their own human level.^[14] At the same time, the educated elite was expected to serve as the moral guides of the emperor, to curb his worst impulses and move him in the proper direction.^[15] Nonetheless, literati participation in the political process was dominated by imperial control, and this top-down style of incorporation extended to other social classes as well.

The merchant class often operated at the approval of the central government. The Imperial government's monopoly on the salt trade is one example of this. Even as the merchant class grew in importance with the eventual arrival of European merchants, the central government remained crucial to their legal operation. During the Qing dynasty, "the...government issued licenses and regulations...to the scale of craft shops."^[16] The dynasty also "sought to ally itself with economic associations by granting official recognition and protection," but this was done mainly to keep the merchant class under imperial control.^[17]

Lastly, it is worth noting this complex and flexible system of beliefs had established itself as the ideological hegemon in China. The political culture established by the educated elite provided those same elites with access to the centers of power (i.e. the court and bureaucracy). This power was then used to maintain this political culture.^[18] Future dynasties, regardless of background, vied to maintain this system—not to change it—because of its success in governance, its dynamism and flexibility, and the lack of ideological justification for another form of governance.^[19] Historian Macabe Keliher analyzes this through *li*, translated as 'rites' or 'rituals,' which he posits is "the organizational principle of moral and social action in China."^[20] He provides a brief overview over the flexibility of *li* in the Imperial period:

Han political actors introduced a cosmological component to *li* when building an empire...Tang emperors adapted and adjusted state ritual to accord with a shifting meaning of sovereignty...Song thinkers grappled with the question of to whom an adapted emperor should offer sacrifice...and Ming officials changed imperial marriage rituals...to manipulate...familial relations.^[21]

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

The variety of ways that ritual can be modified while still considered orthodox can best be explained by viewing *li* as indeterminate and flexible.^[22]

Sun Yat-sen and the Search for National Strength

In the context of this flexibility, the innovations of Sun Yat-sen more logically follow Imperial Political Culture than would originally be assumed. It is also crucial to take into account the root motivations behind his work: the strength of the nation. In his earliest lecture, he declared that the Three Principles,^[23] his system of beliefs, "may be briefly described as a doctrine for the salvation of the nation."^[24] This runs evident through his discussion of the importance of Nationalism in restoring China as a nation and can be likened to the old desire for unity and even to the "all-under-heaven" principle. Sun Yat-sen affirmed the belief that the "unification of the country [is] regarded as the normal phenomenon, and the separation of the country as an abnormal phenomenon."^[25]

It is from this aim of national unification and salvation that the rest of his beliefs followed. His rebuke of the emperorship, while at odds with the Imperial Political Culture, does not stand for its own sake. In his lectures he noted that "the very fall of...autocratic governments is the strongest evidence of the power and influence of the democratic political tendency."^[26] His faith in democracy is more a pragmatic choice than an ideological preference for liberty. In fact, political scientist Ling Yu-Long wrote that "Sun theorized that the Chinese...had enjoyed too much individual freedom in the past."^[27] Furthermore, Sun developed an idea of the people's livelihood in which "material security was not a personal responsibility, but the responsibility of the government."^[28] This contrasts with the western (specifically, American) view of personal responsibility and reaffirms the importance of the powerful state.

Taking this view, the relationship between Sun Yat-sen's principles and the Imperial Political Culture is problematic but not diametric. His emphasis on strong government and relative disregard for liberalism in China follows the older themes of unity and statism. While his turn to democracy was novel, it was a pragmatic decision. On top of this, its radicalism is tempered by the fact that the people were always, though just formally, the "root" of the Chinese polity. Sun Yat-sen also perpetuated the role of the literati in government by advising that the government trust them, not unlike the Imperial government's relationship with the confucian bureaucracy.^[29]

This provides an ideological explanation for the more dissenting and liberal beliefs of the New Culture movement. As a challenger to the Imperial Political Culture, it was unsophisticated and unsuccessful. Harvard and Beijing Normal University Professor Edward X. Gu went so far as to say that "we cannot find any words beyond...a naive perception of democracy in Chen [Dixiu]'s essays until the end of 1919. What we can find is his...totalistic attack on the entire cultural heritage."^[30] This suggests that 'democracy' was a poorly understood idea that was used to express frustration and a desire to strengthen a beleaguered nation. This different understanding of democracy was noted by American authors. Creighton Lacy, writing in the 1940s, believed that China had democratic potential but noted that the Chinese conception of democracy was rooted in the simple idea that "it is the people that count," and not in meaningful structures for democratic participation.^[31] Moreover, to the degree that the New Culture Movement was an earnest break from the Imperial Political Culture's legacy and an embrace of liberalism, it was a failure. Dissatisfaction with Chen Duxiu's "Mr Science" and "Mr Democracy" grew following the continuation of abuses from the West.^[32] The attention of intellectuals had turned decidedly towards the socialist experiment underway in the Soviet Union.

Nationalism Before Socialism: Mao's Revolution

Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles and the failure of the New Culture Movement sets the ideological backdrop to Mao Zedong's 'socialist' revolution. Maoism has typically been heavily defined by his reliance on the peasantry as a revolutionary force and his program during the Great Leap Forward. To capture a more faithful understanding of his political values, however, it is necessary to turn first to his writings rather than his policy. One of his earliest writings, *On New Democracy*, outlines his view of a new China, specifically, a 'New-Democratic Culture.' In brief, he describes this as being "the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal culture of the broad masses; today it is the culture of the anti-Japanese united front."^[33] His characterization of the future of China as anti-imperialist and anti-feudal is much more a position against the weakness of the nation than in favor of a specific communist future. Like Sun Yat-sen, he

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

is motivated first by national salvation. This theme returns in a later passage in which he declares that “revolutionary culture is a powerful revolutionary weapon for the broad masses of the people.”^[34] Culture is regarded as a ‘weapon’ rather than something existing for itself. Specifically, it is a weapon for mobilization of the people. Mao’s writings in *On Protracted War* both affirms this point and highlights how different the Maoist perception of democracy is.

A proper measure of democracy should be put into effect in the army, chiefly by abolishing the feudal practice of bullying and beating and by having officers and men share weal and woe. Once this is done, unity will be achieved between officers and men, the combat effectiveness of the army will be greatly increased.^[35]

Mao is not advocating that soldiers vote on military operations. His perception of democracy is defined by the benevolence of authority to its subjects, not by participation. This fits with previous perceptions of democracy and is consistent with Imperial Political Culture. Dissent, however, is not permitted in the Maoist ‘democracy.’ This, he labelled ‘ultra-democracy.’ In *On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party*, Mao identifies this problem:

“In the sphere of theory, destroy the roots of ultra-democracy. First, it should be pointed out that the danger of ultra-democracy lies in the fact that it damages or even completely wrecks the Party organization and weakens or even completely undermines the Party’s fighting capacity, rendering the Party incapable of fulfilling its fighting tasks and thereby causing the defeat of the revolution.”^[36]

Mirroring Sun Yat-sen, Mao asserts that unity and mobilization is more important than participation, and dissent from “hostile elements” is regarded as treason.^[37] This view would echo through his policies once in power. The urban danwei (work unit) system of having neighbors report on each other was used as a method to maintain social unity and quash dissent—one that had its roots in the self-policing policies of the Song dynasty.^[38]

In this way, socialism was fitted to serve Imperial Political Culture’s purposes of unity and “all-under-heaven.” Admittedly, this did entail the introduction of other ideas that have no analogue in the Imperial Political Culture: namely class struggle. But just as with democracy, it is necessary to look closely at what is meant by class struggle and its relevance to the rest of the political culture. The land reform campaigns, hallmarks of the class struggle, were targeted mainly at land owned by Manchus, wartime traitors, and tax evaders.^[39] While representing the landed class, these groups also represent political enemies and suspected imperialists. This casts doubt on how much class struggle motivated the land reform, suggesting that class struggle was a convenient cover for the elimination of political opponents.^[40] This would be consistent with the many other mass campaigns conducted by Mao’s government, ranging from the anti-rightist campaign to the anti-Confucius campaign which was used to remove Lin Biao.^[41] This trend also explains Mao’s anti-elitist stance towards experts, who could pose a political threat to his rule.^[42]

In *In Mao’s New World: Political Culture in the Early People’s Republic*, Professor Hung Chang-tai argues that Mao established a new political culture in China but concedes that reality often deviated from political theory. He writes, with regards to Tiananmen Square, that “the revolutionary planners chose open, horizontal, outdoor space to represent an open society,” but that “the square never belonged to the populace, nor was it open to the public in the sense that it was free and without control.”^[43] These contradictions between Mao’s theory and Mao’s practice result from a fundamental misunderstanding of his intentions as a leader. The CCP under his leadership benefitted from a “moral confidence” in their actions, but Mao’s policies were built on a base of “flexibility and adaptability.”^[44] Mao was an ideologue to the extent that it was pragmatic for himself, and then asserted ideological continuity in all cases.

Over time, this ideological act was drawn out to the point of losing meaning. Writing for *Pacific Focus*, *Inha Journal of International Studies*, Yeonsik Choi wrote that “Marxism was introduced into China with the desire for national salvation, but it degenerated over the years and became a political dogma for the personal cult of Mao Tse-tung.”^[45] This cult of personality elevated Mao to the status of a living god. In Mao’s unending political drama, the Chinese people were an enraptured audience, “shouting ‘three loyalties’ and ‘four boundlessnesses’.”^[46] In this situation, comparisons to the Imperial visions of the emperor come easily. In reality, monarchism had persisted the whole time in the omnipotence that the party at-large held. Mao’s personality cult was merely an obvious representation of this theme.

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

From this discussion it should be taken that, from Mao's writings to his height of power during the Cultural Revolution, Mao's political culture was not in complete opposition to Imperial Political Culture, but rather it was a reorganization of it. The imperial value of unity expanded to include the importance of national mobilization in the face of outward aggression. The PRC's drive to 'liberate' all of China is a direct reincarnation of the "all-under-heaven" theory. Monarchism, while latent, manifested in a strong and morally confident party and, ultimately, the godlike Mao. Traditional relationships between the government, the people, and the literati were admittedly overturned in the "class struggle," but not strictly in the name of socialism. They were overturned either in service of the previous continuities (such as in the case of invoking mass participation for national salvation) or political expediency.

Emergence of a Technocrat-Emperor

This Maoist reorganization would not last forever however. Just as much as the Cultural Revolution was the height of Mao's influence on the political culture, it was also a war between the Maoist elements of the CCP and the more technocratic^[47] faction of the CCP. Professor Ahn Byung-joon attributed this tension to two conflicting Leninist legacies: "first, that the highest Party authority defines the 'correct' ideology; second, that the party, as the highest form of the proletariat, must maintain its unity at all costs."^[48] This no doubt has Leninist parallels, but this tension can be better framed in the age-old tension in the Imperial Political Culture: first, that the emperor figure is omnipotent and infallible; second, that the educated bureaucracy must act to maintain proper governance in spite of the emperor.

Tensions such as this allowed for the creation of two different political cultures that were both descendants from the Imperial Political Culture. After Mao's death, this alternative political culture would take root with the reforms of Deng Xiaoping. Under Mao, Politics was "a constant drama...in tiresome Chinese style," but this was replaced with subtle governance by behind-the-scenes technocrats.^[49] Lucian W. Pye's description of Deng is underwhelming:

"It is said that he is five feet tall, but that is surely an exaggeration. He awkwardly greets his guests; his handshake is limp, without life, almost as though the nicotine stains had taken all the strength from his fingers....his sandalled feet barely touch the floor, and indeed hang free every time he leans forward...He doesn't bother to communicate any emotion."^[50]

Pye makes sense of this by likening him to the mandarins of Imperial China. In this view, "Deng was behaving like a conventional Chinese political leader."^[51] His manners were unassuming, his virtues were held privately, and he refrained from the over-the-top oratory of Mao or typical western politicians.^[52] And just as the leadership adopted a more muted tone, so did the government's interaction with the people.

The chaotic Cultural Revolution deterred Mao's successors away from his unstable mass campaigns and mass 'democracy.'^[53] The reform-era relationship between the people and the government has tread much closer to the original Imperial Political Culture. The people were largely subdued with the assumption that the government would act for their general benefit. This was of course not always the case. Here, the Democracy Wall movement of the late 1970s provides an interesting look into dissent in the reform period. The movement was rife with different voices: young and old, peasant and cadre.^[54] Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard points out, however, the absence of the intelligentsia, which he attributes to both the weakness of the academic class at the time as well as Deng Xiaoping's efforts to co-opt them to prevent their opposition.^[55] This alliance of protestors filled the streets with big-character posters with commentary on the government's actions. Their writings reflected both gentle admonishments of the government to condemnations of the system as a whole, such as the essays posted by Wei Jingsheng.^[56] This latter message is noteworthy for moving beyond the confines of the Imperial Political Culture by following more closely Western values of democracy and human rights.^[57] Nevertheless, this should be considered the exception and not the norm. Following a crackdown on the movement in 1979, the matter of 'democracy' would not return to the national consciousness until ten years later (i.e. at Tiananmen Square).

The reform period's most obvious consequence—the economic liberalization of China—also reflects a return to more typical political cultural attitudes. As Deng carried out his reforms, the space between the private sphere and the government widened. To bridge this space, mechanisms were created to keep often coercive relations with business interests specifically. In his work, *"Bridges": Private Business, the Chinese Government and the Rise of New*

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

Associations, Professor Jonathan Unger illustrated this point.

“A very large number of associations accordingly were established, usually on the government's own initiative, to serve as intermediaries between the state and diverse constituencies and spheres of activity. These range from associations for different sectors of the economy, to science and technology associations, religious councils, cultural and social welfare groups, and sports associations.”^[58]

These associations, such as the Self-Employed Labourers Association and the Private Enterprises Association, were not open and transparent.^[59] At least officially, these associations were state corporatist: “the state [recognized] one and only one organization for each constituency, the state [took] charge of maintaining each organization, it...even granted itself the right to assign and remove...leaders at will.”^[60] As previously noted, this held true for academia as well. Still reeling from the anti-rightist campaigns of Mao, the intelligentsia acquiesced to Deng Xiaoping's plans for a greater role for them.^[61] Regardless of how effective specific associations were at co-opting different interests, their mere existence is proof of the central government's efforts to establish the parameters of political participation. This is in line with the Imperial Political Culture's attitude towards establishing top-down participation channels for the educated elite and the merchant class.

These reforms, completed and carried out over the course of a few decades, should be seen as a monumental shift from one modernized version of the Imperial Political Culture to another. To that end, Deng can be considered as much of a revolutionary as Mao or Sun Yat-sen. Maoist mass democracy was replaced with no democracy at all. Unity remained a core value but was made more subtle than Mao's dramatic mobilization. Where Mao had blurred the lines between political actors (i.e. the government, people, and literati) for political gain, Deng redrew old demarcations for political stability.

Few revolutions are bloodless, though, and the changes seen under Deng Xiaoping could not appease all members of society. Upset with inflation, corruption, and the shameful end to Hu Yaobang's life and career, students took to the streets in 1989 to launch the Tiananmen Square protests. The strength and scope of the movement, as well as the ferocity of the government's response, immortalized it in Western memory as a pacifist liberal-democratic movement which met an unjust end. Reality does not line up with this view. The innocence with which the West perceived the Tiananmen protests was not shared by Deng's government. To understand why, it is necessary to view the tensions within the protestors themselves.

Most of “the students, intellectuals, and other citizens who filled the square largely saw themselves as loyal servants to the regime.”^[62] Their goal was not to create a typical western democratic system, though democracy was an excellent word to capture their sentiments. What they did argue for was “something in between the current state and a full-blown democracy, with many arguing that...intellectuals like themselves should have a greater role in running the country.”^[63] They went so far as to reenact ancient rituals as a way of building legitimacy in the eyes of the people.^[64] Professor Randolph Kluver described them as assuming the role of the “conscience of the nation.”^[65] This is a direct connection to the role academics played in the Imperial Political Culture.

Nonetheless, there was a significant minority who did not take this position. The soft rhetoric of cooperation and inclusion was contrasted with biting words of rebellion. One leader decried that “those who should have lived, have died, while those who should have died, have lived,” in reference to Deng Xiaoping's government.^[66] Another threatened that “the Communist Party's day of reckoning [was] about to arrive.”^[67] These words reference a starkly different political culture heritage: the common people's right to rebellion. As previously discussed, rebellion always existed between legitimacy and illegitimacy. Success was the hallmark of a justified rebellion. For the government facing this rebellion, any concession to the students would thereby legitimize the protests and delegitimize the central government. This gave the central government no choice but to crack down viciously.

But in either case, these protests were not Western-democratic protests but had their roots in the old Imperial Political Culture. On one hand, it was a restoration of the academia's—but not the people at large's—position to power. On the other, it was a rebellion to replace the CCP but not the system it operated in. Just like the Cultural Revolution, this was a clash of uniquely Chinese ideologies, not of East versus West. The victory of the government over the

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

protests and the subsequent cover ups have cemented Deng's interpretation of the Imperial Political Culture as the main influence on the current government.

Future of the Empire

As China has become more stable, it is worth looking into current and recent administration for the continuity and deepening of this political culture. Rather than analyzing the overarching aspects of current policy, the abundance of press coverage and sources in recent decades allows us to search directly for the Imperial Political Cultural themes.

Unity and national strength's crucial role in the political culture has been preserved through the quashing of dissent both in general and particularly over social media. The most glaring example of this being the planned social credit system where one's credit is determined "based on past behaviour, taking in misdemeanours...and court records."^[68] The Financial Times reported this as having the potential to "jeopardise [someone's] university place, rule out certain jobs, and even limit travel."^[69] This incredibly powerful tool for enforcing social conformity reinforces an already entrenched collectivist ethos. One Chinese-national studying at Georgetown University went so far as to say that the desire to establish personal property protections from the government as "selfish."^[70]

This unity is further enforced by the government's grip on media through censorship. In a piece about government censorship, three Harvard professors describe the size and strength of the PRC's censorship program as "unprecedented in the recorded world history."^[71] Internet providers, tasked with monitoring online discussion, employ hundreds of private censors in addition to a thousands strong government internet police force.^[72] This trend runs heavily throughout other forms of media as well. China's largest news agency, Xinhua, is government run. The film industry is also heavily censored, being likening to that of the former Soviet Union.^[73] Just as much as the industry obeys market demands, it must meet the government's demands.

This points to another continuation of Deng era policies: the top-down incorporation of special and empowered interests. It continues to extend beyond the mediums of political socialization (such as media and film) towards business and academia. While still set to the backdrop of economic liberalization, key pillars of the economy are heavily dominated by state-owned enterprises and government intervention. In the film industry, for example, two state-owned enterprises have exclusive rights to translating popular western films to Chinese, dramatically increasing their profit margins.^[74] An academic at the University of Hong Kong cautioned that unless the government relaxed its grip on the economy, the private sector would "face difficulty."^[75] His frustration is evidence of the power that the central government still holds in the economy.

Despite individual criticisms such as this, the central government also maintains a strong control over academia as well. *The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: Shaping the Reforms, Academia and China* by Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner discusses the state of the intelligentsia. She believed that since at least the turn of the century "an atmosphere of controlled renewal and guided discussion" has pervaded academia.^[76] For professors and researchers, being a "well behaved scholar offered them much sought-after financial and social security."^[77]

This state-corporatist program has helped shore up the government's authority. While no political leader has attained the same level of adoration as Mao, the government as a whole still embodies the omnipotent power of the emperorship. This may not be constant, however, as president Xi Jinping consolidates his control over his party and nation. His anti-corruption campaigns have attracted attention as potential removals of political opponents. In the media, he has also been described as "the helmsman" of the nation, a title that was previously reserved for Mao.^[78] The removal of term limits has opened the doors to Xi potentially building a cult of personality of his own, but it is still too soon to tell. Nevertheless, the fact that Xi is being discussed in this light points to the latent monarchism in Chinese politics and the tension of a bureaucrat-led government or an 'emperor-led' bureaucracy.

In this political atmosphere, the state of political participation for the average citizen has not developed much further since Deng's reform period. Elements of democratic participation exist at the lowest levels of government through resident and village committees, but it is still regarded as a tool for "mobilizing initiative."^[79] National mass 'democracy' or campaigns have not returned to the political foreground. Among people themselves, attitudes towards

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

politics fit with this larger narrative. When asked if citizens were participating in government, the interviewed student at Georgetown University, replied that “people are participating...[by] doing their job.”^[80] This reinforces the top-down participation structure. Another interviewed person, originally from the Republic of China (Taiwan), responded with the proverb: “as long as there is food, it does not matter who the king is.”^[81] While admittedly biased, this proverb highlights how the long-standing cultural background informs the present atmosphere.

The “all-under-heaven” theory is an example of this, one with growing importance. In response to unrest in the western, majority-Uyghur region of Xinjiang, the government has clamped down; “armed police booths dot street corners.”^[82] These regions serve as testing grounds for much of the surveillance technology that the CCP aims to deploy nationally.^[83] The PRC's ambitions lay beyond their current borders, however. As an economic power, the mainland has integrated itself with neighboring economies to the point of holding influence over those economies. Taiwan, long a target of Beijing's desires, is reliant on China for 30% of its export market.^[84] And as the Chinese military has strengthened over the decades, Beijing has begun to project this strength southward to the crucial South China Sea. They have justified island-building efforts in the crucial trade junction through their national history. During the Imperial age, “trade through the South China Sea seems to have been dominated by junks from port cities in the Middle Kingdom.”^[85] This claim is not unique to the PRC. At the time of its control over mainland China, the Republic of China also sent expeditions to establish sovereignty over the islands.^[86] With the strengthening of the economy and subsequently the military, China has been emboldened to pick up its age-old project of establishing itself as the regional hegemon in Eastern Asia.

What stands out across this entire discussion of political culture is the degree of flexibility that the Imperial Political Culture can accommodate. That flexibility in turn explains the Imperial Political Culture's longevity. Sun Yat-sen adopted a seemingly democratic form of governance. Mao infused elements of socialist rhetoric into his official political culture. Deng and his supporters rebuked individual leadership following the death of Mao. Yet they all did this for pragmatic reasons towards a common goal: the unity of the Chinese nation and its aims to govern “all-under-heaven.” Even as they innovated in their respective ways, the historically typical relationships between emperor, people, and literati influenced them greatly. Cases of even great dissent, such as the Tiananmen Square protests, embody certain fundamental aspects of the Imperial Political Culture. Taking this point of view, this analysis provides three major takeaways:

Firstly, that the differences and changes in Chinese political result from the tensions and contradictions inherent in the original Imperial Political Culture. These tensions provide questions that have remained relevant throughout Chinese history: what is the relationship between the highest authority and the educated bureaucracy? How can China's exclusion of the common people from political participation be reconciled with the idea that government serves the people? If the highest political authority is thought infallible, how can their failures be corrected?

Secondly, this framework serves as a useful tool to contextualize the actions that the PRC will take in the future, specifically domestically.

Lastly, the framework of the Imperial Political Culture is likely to retain ideological and cultural hegemony in Mainland China.^[87] Despite surface level changes, the Imperial Political Culture which was established during and consolidated after the Warring States Period has guided Chinese politics for two thousand years. The “Century of Humiliation” and Communist Revolution have proven how durably flexible the framework is. Given this, it seems likely that the framework will persist into the foreseeable future of mainstream Chinese politics.

Bibliography

Ahn, Byung-joon. “The Cultural Revolution and China's Search for Political Order.” *The China Quarterly*, no. 58 (1974).

Brodsgaard, Kjeld Erik. “The Democracy Movement in China, 1978-1979: Opposition Movements, Wall Poster Campaigns, and Underground Journals.” *Asian Survey* 21, no. 7 (1981).

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

Choi, Yeonsik. "The Evolution of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics": Its Elliptical Structure of Socialist Principles and China's Realities." *Pacific Focus: Inha Journal of International Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, (2011).

Dabringhaus, Sabine. "The Monarch and Inner-Outer Court Dualism in Late Imperial China," *In Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires: A Global Perspective*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, (2011).

Gregor, James A. and Maria Hsia Chang. "Anti-Confucianism: Mao's Last Campaign." *Asian Survey* 19, no. 11 (1979).

Gu, Edward X. "Who Was Mr Democracy? The May Fourth Discourse of Populist Democracy and the Radicalization of Chinese Intellectuals (1915-1922)." *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (2001).

Huang, Weiping. "China's Grassroots Democracy." *In China's Political Development: Chinese and American Perspectives*, 282-307. Brookings Institution Press, 2014.

Hung, Chang-tai. *In Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic*, Cornell University Press, (2011).

Keliher, Macabe. "State Ritual and Political Culture in Imperial and Late Imperial China: Research Reflections on Li." *Journal for Cultural Interaction in East Asia*.

King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *The American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013).

Kluver, Randolph. "Rhetorical Trajectories of Tiananmen Square." *Diplomatic History*, vol. 34, 1, (2010).

Lacy, Creighton. *Is China a Democracy*. (1943).

Ling, Yu-long. "Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Doctrine and Impact on the Modern World." *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 19, no. 1 (2012).

Lucas, Louise and Emily Feng. "Inside China's surveillance state." *Financial Times*, (2018).

Mao, Zedong. "On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party." (1929).

Mao, Zedong. "On New Democracy." (1940).

Mao, Zedong. "On Protracted War." (1938).

Mao, Zedong. "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People." (1957).

Mao, Zedong. "Red and Expert." (1958).

Mao, Zedong. "The Tasks for 1945." (1944).

Michael, Franz. "Is China a Democracy?" *Far Eastern Survey* 12, no. 16 (1943).

Sleeboom-Faulkner, Margaret. *The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: Shaping the Reforms, Academia and China*. Leiden: Brill, (2007).

Spence, Richard. *The Search for Modern China*. W. W. Norton & Company, (2012).

Strauss, Julia. "Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the Early PRC: Regime Consolidation and

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

After, 1949-1956." *The China Quarterly*, (2006).

Sun, Yat-sen. "The Doctrine of Democracy, Democracy At Work, Lecture Four." Guangzhou, April 13, 1924.

Sun, Yat-sen. "The Doctrine of Democracy, Democracy, It's Meaning and History, Lecture One." Guangzhou, March 9, 1924.

Sun, Yat-sen. "The Doctrine of Democracy, Differentiation of Ch'uan and Neng, Lecture Five."

Sun, Yat-sen. "The Doctrine of Nationalism, Race and Population, Lecture One." Guangzhou, January 27, 1924.

Pye, Lucian W "An Introductory Profile: Deng Xiaoping and China's Political Culture." *The China Quarterly*, no. 135, (1993).

Pines, Yuri. *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy*. Princeton, New Jersey; Woodstock, Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, (2012).

"The ties that bind?" *The Economist*. (2010).

Tian, Ye, and Richard W. Wilson. "Commercial Development and the Evolution of Political Cultures: Ming/Qing China and 17th Century England." *East Asia* 19, no. 3, (2001).

Tønnesson, Stein. "Why Are the Disputes in the South China Sea So Intractable? A Historical Approach." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 30, no. 3, (2002).

Unger, Jonathan. "'Bridges': Private Business, the Chinese Government and the Rise of New Associations." *The China Quarterly*, no. 147 (1996).

Wang, Xiangwei. "As Fears of Xi's Personality Cult Deepen, China Must Dial Down the Propaganda." *South China Morning Post*.

Wei, C.X. George. "Mao's Legacy Revisited: Its Lasting Impact on China and Post-Mao Era Reform." *Asian politics and Policy*, vol. 3, no. 1, (2011).

Wright, Teresa. "The China Democracy Party and the Politics of Protest in the 1980s-1990s." *The China Quarterly*, no. 172 (2002).

Yang, Yanling. "Film policy, the Chinese government and soft power." *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, vol. 14, no. 1, (2016).

Zheng, William. "Call for action to back up China's words of support for private enterprise." *South China Morning Post*, (2018).

Footnotes

[1] For this paper, we will be defining "Political Culture" as the core values, motives, and relationships that define and help shape how political decisions are made.

[2] Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy*, Princeton, New Jersey; Woodstock, Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2012, 3.

[3] *Ibid*, 14-15.

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

[4] Ibid, 1.

[5] Ibid, 15.

[6] For more information about China's application of the tributary system onto neighboring countries and two different perspectives on motive, see *Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West* by J.K. Fairbank and *The Tributary System in China's Historical Imagination: China and Hunza* by Hsiao-Ting Lin.

[7] In this case, we are referring to the world known to the ancient and early imperial Chinese dynasties.

[8] Pines, *The Everlasting Empire*, 44.

[9] Sabine Dabringhaus, "The Monarch and Inner-Outer Court Dualism in Late Imperial China," *In Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires: A Global Perspective*, Leiden; Boston: Brill, (2011), 266.

[10] Pines, *The Everlasting Empire*, 136.

[11] Ibid, 138.

[12] Pines, *The Everlasting Empire*, 139.

[13] Ibid, 134.

[14] Lucian W Pye, "An Introductory Profile: Deng Xiaoping and China's Political Culture," *The China Quarterly*, no. 135 (1993), 416.

[15] Pines, *The Everlasting Empire*, 5.

[16] Ye Tian and Richard W. Wilson, "Commercial Development and the Evolution of Political Cultures: Ming/Qing China and 17th Century England," *East Asia* 19, no. 3 (2001), 175.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Pines, *The Everlasting Empire*, 5. Here, Pines notes that "political culture in China was from the beginning designed by the educated elite," and that "this elite retained cultural and ideological hegemony throughout the Chinese imperial age."

[19] Pines, *The Everlasting Empire*, 3.

[20] Macabe Keliher, "State Ritual and Political Culture in Imperial and Late Imperial China: Research Reflections on Li," *Journal for Cultural Interaction in East Asia*: 113-18.

[21] Ibid, 115

[22] Macabe Keliher, "State Ritual and Political Culture in Imperial and Late Imperial China: Research Reflections on Li," 117.

[23] His three principles being Nationalism, Democracy, and the Livelihood of the People.

[24] Sun Yat-sen, "The Doctrine of Nationalism, Race and Population, Lecture One," Guangzhou, January 27, 1924.

[25] Sun Yat-sen, "The Doctrine of Democracy, Democracy At Work, Lecture Four," Guangzhou, April 13, 1924.

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

[26] Sun Yat-sen, "The Doctrine of Democracy, Democracy, It's Meaning and History, Lecture One," Guangzhou, March 9, 1924.

[27] Ling Yu-long, "Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Doctrine and Impact on the Modern World," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 19, no. 1 (2012), 5.

[28] *Ibid.*, 7.

[29] Sun Yat-sen, "The Doctrine of Democracy, Differentiation of Ch'uan and Neng, Lecture Five." Sun specifically says: "In government we must also use experts, and after having engaged them, trust them."

[30] Edward X. Gu, "Who Was Mr Democracy? The May Fourth Discourse of Populist Democracy and the Radicalization of Chinese Intellectuals (1915-1922)," *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (2001), 596.

[31] Creighton Lacy, *Is China a Democracy*, (1943), 148.

[32] Gu, "Who Was Mr Democracy? The May Fourth Discourse of Populist Democracy and the Radicalization of Chinese Intellectuals (1915-1922)," 621.

[33] Mao, Zedong, "On New Democracy," (1940).

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Mao, Zedong, "On Protracted War," (1938).

[36] Mao Zedong, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," (1957).

[37] Mao Zedong, "The Tasks for 1945," (1944).

[38] Louise Lucas and Emily Feng, "Inside China's surveillance state," *Financial Times*, (2018).

[39] Richard Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, W. W. Norton & Company, (2012), 439.

[40] Julia Strauss, "Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the Early PRC: Regime Consolidation and After, 1949-1956," *The China Quarterly*, (2006), 900.

[41] James A. Gregor and Maria Hsia Chang, "Anti-Confucianism: Mao's Last Campaign," *Asian Survey* 19, no. 11 (1979), 1078.

[42] For more on this, read "Red and Expert," written by Mao in 1958.

[43] Hung Chang-tai, "In Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic," Cornell University Press, (2011), 9.

[44] Yeonsik Choi, "The Evolution of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics": Its Elliptical Structure of Socialist Principles and China's Realities," *Pacific Focus: Inha Journal of International Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, (2011), 391.

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] Choi, "The Evolution of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics": Its Elliptical Structure of Socialist Principles and China's Realities," 391.

[47] In this case, the term technocratic is used as opposed to the more common "pragmatic." This is to prevent

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

confusion regarding the discussion of Mao's own pragmatism.

[48] Byung-joon Ahn, "The Cultural Revolution and China's Search for Political Order," *The China Quarterly*, no. 58 (1974), 253.

[49] Pye, *An Introductory Profile: Deng Xiaoping and China's Political Culture*, 412.

[50] *Ibid*, 417.

[51] *Ibid*, 415.

[52] *Ibid*.

[53] C.X. George Wei, "Mao's Legacy Revisited: Its Lasting Impact on China and Post-Mao Era Reform," *Asian politics and Policy*, vol. 3, no. 1, (2011), 19

[54] Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard, "The Democracy Movement in China, 1978-1979: Opposition Movements, Wall Poster Campaigns, and Underground Journals," *Asian Survey* 21, no. 7 (1981): 762-763

[55] *Ibid*, 763.

[56] Richard Spence, *The Search for Modern China*.

[57] Brodsgaard, "The Democracy Movement in China," 769.

[58] Jonathan Unger, "'Bridges': Private Business, the Chinese Government and the Rise of New Associations," *The China Quarterly*, no. 147 (1996), 795.

[59] *Ibid*, 797. *Ibid*, 807.

[60] *Ibid*, 818

[61] Brodsgaard, "The Democracy Movement in China," 763.

[62] Randolph Kluver, "Rhetorical Trajectories of Tiananmen Square," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 34, no. 1, (2010), 75.

[63] Randolph Kluver, "Rhetorical Trajectories of Tiananmen Square," 78.

[64] *Ibid*, 74.

[65] *Ibid*, 80.

[66] *Ibid*, 76.

[67] *Ibid*, 79.

[68] Lucas and Feng, "Inside China's Surveillance State."

[69] Lucas and Feng, "Inside China's Surveillance State."

[70] Other notable comments from the interview: "Dictatorship is okay, so long as the Dictator is good," and that voting rights had to be earned.

Recursive Politics: The 20th-Century Roots of China's Return to Monarchy

Written by Christopher Boose

[71] Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *The American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013), 326.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Yang Yanling, "Film policy, the Chinese government and soft power," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, vol. 14, no. 1, (2016), 73.

[74] Yang Yanling, "Film policy, the Chinese government and soft power," 83.

[75] William Zheng, "Call for action to back up China's words of support for private enterprise," *South China Morning Post* (2018).

[76] Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner, *The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: Shaping the Reforms, Academia and China*. Leiden: Brill, (2007), 284.

[77] Sleeboom-Faulkner, *The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: Shaping the Reforms, Academia and China*, 182.

[78] Wang Xiangwei, "As Fears of Xi's Personality Cult Deepen, China Must Dial Down the Propaganda," *South China Morning Post*.

[79] Huang Weiping, "China's Grassroots Democracy." In *China's Political Development: Chinese and American Perspectives*, *Brookings Institution Press*, (2014), 283.

[80] See footnote 70.

[81] It should be noted that the interviewed woman's father was a member of the Guomindang.

[82] Lucas and Feng, "Inside China's Surveillance State."

[83] Ibid

[84] "The ties that bind?" *The Economist*. (2010).

[85] Stein Tønnesson, "Why Are the Disputes in the South China Sea So Intractable? A Historical Approach." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 30, no. 3, (2002), 572

[86] Stein Tønnesson, "Why Are the Disputes in the South China Sea So Intractable? A Historical Approach," 580.

[87] Admittedly, the history of Taiwan since 1949 and its increasingly liberal democratic practices have proven that this hegemon can be opposed, but the special circumstances facing the Republic of China are beyond the purview of this discussion.

Written by: Christopher Boose
Written at: Georgetown University
Written for: Michael Wall
Date written: December 2018