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思想改造

Thought Reform

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Thought reform, or ideological remoulding, has been and remains a key tenant of leadership in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The standard phrase in Chinese is *sixiang gaizao*, the reformation or refashioning of *sixiang*—a term that is difficult to render into English in a way that captures its range of meanings, which span from ‘thought’ to ‘ideology’ to ‘way of thinking.’ Thought reform in the CCP has a cultural affinity with deeper pathways in Chinese thought, most notably the Confucian commitment to self-cultivation (*xiuyang*) and the mandate of dynastic rulers to transform the people through state-sponsored education (*yili jiaomin* or *jiaohua*). Nonetheless, communist thought reform is substantially different from these traditional norms and expectations in Chinese statecraft for two reasons. First, technological and geopolitical changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought the model of, and the communication technologies for, mass politics. Second, China’s father of the nation, Sun Yat-sen, adopted the sinews of Bolshevik organisation, including the commitment to an ideological Party—in his case, the Nationalist Party (*guomindang*)—under a supreme leader whose thought should guide all political activity. Then, beginning with the purge of its early leader Chen Duxiu in 1927, the CCP embraced the Stalinist version of a text-based, ideological Party in which ‘thought errors’ (*sixiang cuowu*) or ‘erroneous line’ (*cuowu luxian*) could spell political defeat and personal demise (see the essay by Ishikawa and Smith in the present volume). This model was perfected, if we can use that word, by the Yan’an leadership under Mao Zedong in the 1940s, and it remains a political technology much valued by China’s current leadership under Xi Jinping. Thought reform remains a key component of the ‘pedagogical state’ that Chinese governments since Sun Yat-sen have required of their cadres and have tried to enforce on an unruly and generally disinterested public.

In his now famous 1942 ‘Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,’ Mao Zedong gave what has become the canonical example of revolutionary thought reform—his own:

I started off as a student at school, and at school I acquired student habits, so I felt ashamed about performing any manual labour, such as carrying my own bags, in front of all those students who were incapable of carrying anything for themselves. I felt that intellectuals were the only clean people in the world and that workers, peasants, and soldiers were in general rather dirty. I could wear clothes borrowed from an intellectual, because I considered them clean, but I would not wear workers’, peasants’, or soldiers’ clothes, because I thought they were dirty. When I joined the revolution and lived among workers, peasants, and soldiers, I gradually became familiar with them, and they got to know me in return. Then and only then the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois feelings taught to me in bourgeois schools underwent a fundamental change. Comparing intellectuals who have not yet reformed with workers, peasants, and soldiers, I came to feel that intellectuals are not only spiritually unclean in many respects but even physically unclean, while the cleanest people are workers and peasants; their hands may be black and their feet soiled with cow dung, but they are still cleaner than the big and petty bourgeoisie. This is what I call a transformation in feelings, changing over from one class to another.¹

Thought, in Mao’s testimonial, is more than an idea, it is a fundamental attitude, what in modern Chinese is often called one’s *taidu*, which in English corresponds to concepts such as ‘orientation,’ ‘value assumptions,’ ‘commitments,’ and ‘judgment.’ Most recently, on 29 July 2018 the Organisation and Propaganda Departments of the Central Committee of the CCP announced a new campaign for local Party branches to lead in ‘Promoting the Spirit of Patriotic Struggle and Making Great Contributions in the New Era.’² Their instructions to local Party units reflect the core assumptions of thought reform—implementing government policy (in this case promoting a spirit of patriotism among intellectuals) through propaganda and explanations carried out in small group study under the watchful eye of the local Party officials.

This essay offers an introduction to this key concept from the Mao era with some reflections on its relevance in Xi Jinping’s China. What is thought reform in practice? Why does it matter for Party leaders in the commercialised, globalised, politically-secularised China of the twenty-first century? Is there a life beyond the Party for thought reform? For instance, could thought reform have a role in progressive politics? To address these questions, I offer an introductory history of thought reform in four scenes: prehistory, intentions, experiences, and legacies. This deeper historical perspective exposes the cultural and historical weight of thought reform in China’s modern political culture and suggests alternatives to Xi Jinping’s version that live on from that historical experience.

Reforming the People through the Rites: A Prehistory of Thought Reform

The political application of thought reform, or the modification of assumptions, habits, and values to suit the norms of a cultural or political elite is not new to China. ‘Transform the people through the Rites’ (*yili jiaomin*) is a political maxim recorded in the ancient *Classic of Rites*.³ It endorses the transformative power of correct models. Its constant repetition by Chinese governments and leading thinkers for the past two thousand years reflects a shared belief in the educability of humans to achieve good governance. By the eve of the twentieth century, Chinese scholar-officials continued to ‘reform the people through the Rites’ by propagandising the sacred edicts of the Kangxi Emperor and later Qing monarchs in *xuanjiang* lectures elaborating on the emperor’s moral maxims.⁴ These maxims included general moral injunctions, such as ‘filial piety and brotherly submission’ and ‘instruct sons and younger brothers’ to avoid wayward behaviour, and practical advice to ‘cultivate peace and concord in your neighbourhood’ and ‘show that you prize moderation and economy.’ The maxims included political reminders, as well, to ‘pay your taxes promptly’ and ‘combine in collective security groups (*baojia*) in order to put an end to theft and robbery.’

These lectures were not simply in books. Local magistrates were instructed to recite the maxims and expound upon their meaning in monthly public meetings. Handbooks, such as Li Laizhang’s 1705 *Explanations of the Sacred Edict Lecture System*, literally mapped out how to hold these meetings, down to diagrams showing the placement of the tablets with the maxims and altars, and the locations where both scholars and townsfolk should stand, as well as instruction on how to hold the meeting and fill out the registers of good and bad behaviour.⁵ This was basic political thought reform in Qing China: public education or *jiaohua*. That it was not particularly effective by the end of the nineteenth century did not diminish the appeal or the collective impulse to find and inculcate correct thought to produce good governance.

The Intentions: Awakening the Leaders, Then the Cadres, Then the People

The intentions of thought reform in the CCP leadership have deep cultural resonances about the educability of people, as well as clear and coherent goals and practices suitable to an ideological party. Thought reform in its modern political form emerged in Sun Yat-sen’s constitutional idea of ‘political tutelage’ (*xunzheng*).⁶ This was Sun’s explanation for putting democracy off for another day, because by the 1920s he had come to feel that the Chinese people were not ready for democracy and required instead a period of political education during which his one-party state would inculcate modern civility in the masses. This responsibility (or presumption, depending on one’s point of view) was enthusiastically embraced by his successors—Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist Party, as well as the CCP, most famously under Mao Zedong. Chiang’s efforts were unsuccessful—spectacularly so in the desultory New Life Movement (*xin shenghuo yundong*) of the 1930s.⁷ Mao’s efforts at public thought reform, on the other hand, were effective. ‘Rectification’ (*zhengfeng*) was the political education and reform movement to train Party leaders and rank and file members that Mao perfected in Yan’an in the 1940s.⁸ When undertaken seriously, this form of political training resembles nothing so much as Bible study in small groups run by your local police department (with officers

from the intelligence service and military on hand when needed). Individual study, public confession of your sins, review of your personnel record, and public propaganda about role models (and a few negative role models to show what is to be avoided) define a CCP rectification campaign (see Mertha's essay in the present volume). Rectification was taken to absurd and tragic extremes in the Cultural Revolution, but it has been a staple of political life in the CCP since the 1940s. Xi Jinping's current anti-corruption drive belongs to this lineage of rectification.⁹

Rectification is a political process that Frederick Teiwes has documented as being a 'persuasive-coercive continuum.'¹⁰ That is, the CCP version of political tutelage always ranges from warm and fuzzy advertising and efforts to persuade individuals to change how they think about themselves and the world along with incentives and penalties designed to encourage correct behaviour, to straight up use of force in censorship, arrest, public humiliation, and imprisonment. Thought reform is considered to be part of Party 'thought work' (*sixiang gongzuo*) and operates as much through the Party's public propaganda system as through small group study sessions for Party cadres and government leaders. To see Xi Jinping sitting down at a 'study session' (*xuexi xiaozu*) with senior leaders may look ludicrous to outside observers, but it makes sense to Party leaders as part of a successful model of political training, discipline, and motivation. It worked to bring the CCP to power 60 years ago, so why not now?

Experience: Promise, Penitence, and Punishment

The reality of thought reform naturally varied over time and in diverse contexts, but we can trace a general arc, both for elites and common folk. Early experience suggested something of the promise of thought reform to build consensus, explain revolutionary change, and create a sense of hope and purpose. By the mid-1950s the experience of penitence, of being humiliated and corrected outweighed the promise of thought reform as it became clear that to survive one had to submit. In short, the corruption of power began its work on what had been, at least potentially, a redemptive and community-building technique. When it was voluntary (even with a fair amount of peer pressure), the techniques and goals of thought reform could have a salutary role in a political community. However, when applied with the direct threat of force, and especially by a leadership in a hurry-up mode unwilling to invest the time it takes to make such fundamental changes in one's psychology, thought reform transformed into a particularly nasty form of punishment. By the late 1950s it had already become a tool of political oppression—effective in shutting down unwanted speech (and, to some degree, unwanted thought itself), but useless in building community or coordinating productive effort.

Recent literature on Mao's China, especially the experience of intellectuals, is replete with examples of the political misrule and personal abuse that came in the form of thought reform. Even those who embraced thought reform in the early 1950s as a way to expiate the sin of enjoying a bourgeois life at university while the Chinese working class had suffered and who loyally served changing Party lines, such as the historian Zhou Yiliang, had to submit to the humiliating public criticism and painful denunciations of their own teachers and friends.¹¹ For many others, thought reform under Mao was much worse. Fang Lizhi, the notable astrophysicist who became famous after the

1989 Tiananmen demonstrations and their violent suppression, discovered his faith in democracy and hatred of Party dictatorship precisely through the thought reform ‘labour’ to which he was subjected during the Cultural Revolution. Unlike Zhou, Fang was a product of CCP-controlled universities and had no bourgeois guilt to expiate. When he saw the miserable lives of the coal miners among whom he was thrown at his ‘7 May Cadre School,’ Fang concluded that the Party had flat-out failed to serve the interests of the workers and peasants (see Karl’s essay in the present volume). He gave up on the Party and turned instead to the open scepticism of international science as a better tool with which to judge policy.¹² Ironically, Mao’s vision of thought reform through living and working with China’s labouring masses had also worked in Fang Lizhi’s case, though the revolutionary ‘change in feelings’ produced by the thought reform was not what Mao would have prescribed.

Thought reform has not been limited to intellectuals and Party elites. Stories of local teachers and village officials, and even of urban layabouts and prostitutes brought in to be reeducated by the Party likewise reflect the range of experiences and responses to thought reform.¹³ As was the case with intellectuals, when applied carefully and with some sensitivity to local conditions, this form of political mobilisation could produce positive results, but when applied inflexibly, quickly, and without concern for local conditions, it was little more than personalised tyranny.

Legacies: Public Transcripts and Progressive Potential

Thought reform is still with us in China today. At the National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference in August 2013, Xi Jinping issued a directive to ‘tell China’s story well’ (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*).¹⁴ That means teaching the ‘correct’ version of China’s history and values according to current Party policy. This story not only appears in the public media and propaganda in China, but also forms the content of thought reform study sessions for Party members and government leaders today, as we saw in the July 2018 announcement at the beginning of this essay. Nevertheless, thought reform in contemporary China is inextricably tied up in the persuasive-coercive continuum that has marked it since Yan’an, and even the most reasonable and mild suggestions carry the shadow of the ‘big stick’ that can be brought to bear as needed. The sharp end of the thought reform stick has been tragically demonstrated in the reeducation camps across Xinjiang in which hundreds of thousands of PRC Uyghur and Kazakh Muslims have been forcibly detained over the past year (see also the essays by Yi Xiaocuo and Bulag in the present volume). On 9 October 2018, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region government produced regulations legalising ‘anti-extremist ideological education’ (*qu jiduanhua jiaoyu*) at various ‘education and training centres’ (*jizhong jiaoyu zhuanhua zhongxin*).¹⁵ Party thought reform now extends to ethnic relations in a troubled region.

Given that many Chinese people do not embrace the Party’s version of the ‘China story,’ why does Xi Jinping keep talking about this? The answer, we have seen, is that thought reform is an irreplaceable constituent part of the ideological Party. Such political organisations can no more do without ideological remoulding than the theology of the Church or Uma can do without prayer. The compelling question about thought reform

in China today is: does anyone care? Never mind China's politically secularised society, one can reasonably ask: do the majority of China's some 90 million CCP members take thought reform seriously?

The pervasive corruption in the Party and the brutality of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive suggest that thought reform in the CCP has failed to produce the desired 'noble attitude' among China's Party cadres. Nonetheless, thought reform, study sessions, and punctilious attention to ideological phrasing (*tifa*) are all part of what James Scott identified as the 'public transcript' elites tell each other to bolster their self-confidence and to justify their privileges.¹⁶ More importantly, the fundamental assumptions undergirding thought reform remain vibrant across Chinese society today: that behaviour can be fundamentally shaped by moral education, that the common people broadly lack such a moral compass, and that some elites have the cultural learning and awareness (often couched as *suzhi*, or 'personal cultural refinement') that entitle them to offer guidance in practical ethics to their social inferiors. On the other hand, it is not impossible for an inspired and capable figure outside the elite to harness the mobilisation potential of thought reform to help create a social movement. This possibility alone explains the current CCP leadership's commitment to censorship and intellectual repression.

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