

Unpacking Chinese Identity, the View From Tiananmen

Written by Robert Potter

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/28/unpacking-chinese-identity-the-view-from-tiananmen/>

ROBERT POTTER, OCT 28 2013

When outside observers take in the Chinese narratives, what they digest is almost as important as the signals they receive. For hawks like Minxin Pei, President Xi has taken over the legacy of Bo Xilai in evoking a contemporary return to Maoism. There is certainly evidence to support such a conclusion. However, the bend toward Mao cannot be plucked out along from amongst the many ideologies and policies being tested by the government in Beijing. It was no all that long ago, when the same commentator posited that Mao 'must be turning in his grave', as a status of Confucius was unveiled in Tiananmen Square.

By looking to Tiananmen Square, one can see a whole menagerie of ideas competing for the soul of contemporary China. Each of these ideas finds a constituency within the ruling Communist Party and many are ideologically irreconcilable with the other. Chinese people flock to Tiananmen, laden around the square are historical monuments of long history of China like the Forbidden City. Although Mao, who himself sits on display nearby, unleashed a cultural revolution targeting capitalism and much of the country's cultural heritage. Large monuments also stand to the great struggle against the Chinese Nationalists, however the lions share of local patronage to the Square focuses on the historical landmark of the Forbidden City and Chinese citizens, visit in thongs, the monument to the People's Heroes which is laden with plaques that send a nationalist message about China's 'century of national humiliation'. Concurrent with these messages and near the center of Tiananmen Square sits a modern advertisement for the capitalist Mecca of Shanghai. Nearby to the body of Mao sits a statue of Confucius, who represents the cultural history of the Chinese people. Then there is the hidden history of the square which although it has no plaques certainly maintains a constituency, that of the 1989 protests for political reform.

Experts of all fields pluck narratives from amongst the plethora on offer in order to present their own conclusions. Much the same process is occurring within the Chinese Communist Party itself. Maoism as an ideology might be opposed to the cultural heritage of China and to its modern capitalist leanings but he maintained a strong line on corruption. It is no surprise then that the leaders in Beijing would look to him in their efforts to develop a broad anti-corruption policy, which given the levels of corruption within the Party is presently being rolled out. Mao's focus on self-criticism has found a place in the leadership's policy towards dissidents and underperforming functionaries.

Those experts that take a more benign view of China focus on the economic narrative. The mention of reform by Yu Zhengsheng at the upcoming Plenum was interpreted immediately by Forbes to mean economic change to drive internal consumption. Reuters too interpreted the reforms to mean land reform, household deregulation and internal migration. Although all are interesting issues each of the narratives could be used to unpack what is meant by reform in different ways.

President Xi, aside from applying Maoism to combat corruption has also solicited the help of one of Mao's bitter foes, Confucius. Reuters in its discussion of the recent anti-corruption effort focused significant attention on the traditional cultural values of the Chinese people. President Xi's actions are interpreted through the cultural lens rather than the Maoist but both are used to discuss his efforts to crackdown on corruption.

This shows the ideological flexibility of the ruling party but also the significant confusion at the heart of contemporary China. It is presently Confucian, Maoist, Nationalist, Capitalist and Statist and all at the same time. Each view has its own constituency, often in the same man. The President can at once be both Maoist and Confucian, evoking selected

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parts of each and ignoring their logical incompatibility if applied in total. This piecemeal attitude towards the identity of China complicates its direction going forward. There is little doubt that the Communist Party is experience difficulty being all things to all people. It cannot be entirely Maoist and entirely Capitalist so it chooses to be what it hopes is the best of each. Commentators use each as a lens, depending on their world-view and what they are attempting to explore. However, each is in its own way utterly correct and at the same time incomplete. China has not decided what it will be, the Communist Party seems to be embracing and trialing many ideas at the same time, evoking the old, the very old and the new in the hope that they can both forge an identity going forward and achieve their goal of staying in power. Whatever works, is internalized, whatever doesn't is pushed out but even then, never fully. What emerges from this is a confused China and a confused party. Which identity will triumph is anyone's guess but to use only one lens as a predictor is to indulge in selection bias as it colors the evidence that will be discovered and interpreted.

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Robert Potter *is currently a PhD student at Flinders University.*