The Chinese Communist Party and the politicization of traditions : introduction

Special Section: The Chinese Communist Party and the Politicization of Traditions

Ralph Weber, Simona Grano and Philipp Hetmanczyk

Introduction

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party, religion, politics, traditions, Marxism, Confucianism, Buddhism

DOI 10.1515/asia-2015-0012

It is perhaps natural that those studying religious and philosophical "traditions" in the People's Republic of China (PRC) are eager to highlight and overcharge with meaning any respective policy, comment or hint coming from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). What is more surprising – and much more telling – is that those studying the CCP have come to think of "traditions" as an important aspect for deciphering how the party works and how it runs China. Such deciphering attempts are notoriously difficult in light of the CCP's secretive nature; therefore academics have been more than happy to leave this field of inquiry to experts in think tanks and to journalists relying on their "sources". Looking at this body of literature, the topic of traditions and the role they play for the CCP has clearly gained in importance in recent years. In fact, while Richard McGregor (formerly with the *Financial Times*) has had very little to say about traditions in his 2010 bestseller *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers*,[1] Rowan Callick (the Asia-Pacific editor for *The Australian*)

1 The little he said, however, was pointing towards a new importance: "To buttress its legitimacy, the Party has also cloaked itself in Chinese governing traditions. The revival of Confucius in the last decade, the ancient sage reviled under Mao as a symbol of backward feudalism, and the methodical refurbishing of other cultural canons, is symbolic of a broader trend, of the Party re-packaging its rule as a natural continuum of the most enlightened eras of China's imperial

Ralph Weber, University of Basel, Institute for European Global Studies, Gellertstrasse 27, 4020 Basel, Switzerland. E-mail: ralph.weber@unibas.ch
Simona Grano, University of Zurich, Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, Sinology, Zürichbergstrasse 4, 8032 Zürich, Switzerland. E-mail: simona.grano@aoi.uzh.ch
Philipp Hetmanczyk, Hetmanczyk, Philipp, University of Zurich, Institute for the Study of Religions, Kantonsschulstrasse 1, 8001 Zürich, Switzerland. E-mail: philipp.hetmanczyk@uzh.ch

devotes no less than an entire chapter to the topic in his 2013 report *The Party Forever: Inside China's Modern Communist Elite*.

Callick stresses the fact that, beyond a wide-spread belief in China's golden future, Chinese citizens differ much in *how* to achieve that future: "They believe in the family, in their teachers and professors, in owning property, in Christianity, in Buddhism, in Confucius, in Mao, in good health, in good luck, in travel. And they can pursue all of these beliefs, in moderation – and as long as they do so along the signposted routes."[2] Indeed, Callick adds, the staunchly atheist party has become more tolerant given that "it is better to permit and control religious behavior than to let it flourish dangerously underground".[3] Focusing his remarks on Christianity and on Confucianism, Callick sees the party being skeptical about the former – and about religion in general – while partially supporting the latter, since it is "safer" and "fits more comfortably with Beijing's twenty-first-century focus on quality of life, balanced development, and social cohesion".[4] Furthermore, Christianity is of foreign origin, while Confucianism is indigenous to China. As for the skepticism about Christianity, Callick relates the story of an Italian orchestra, set to perform Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Apparently, the orchestra was told that the music was fine but that in order to pass the censorship, all references to Jesus and God better be purged from the lyrics.[5] On 29 September 2013, Reuters journalists Benjamin Kang Lim and Ben Blanchard, basing their news on statements by "three independent sources with ties to the leadership", reported that Xi Jinping, the new president, is willing to bestow on "China's 'traditional cultures' or faiths – Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism" – a special moral role in the fight against corruption. In that same report, they also speculate that Xi and his family "have feelings for Buddhism".[6] If this gossip were true, then we would have to start giving serious consideration to the more general question of the influence of traditions over individual party members, from the Central Bureau down to local officials, running the whole

---

history. With no ideology left to speak of, selective historical antecedents provide single-party rule with an indigenous imperial lustre" (McGregor, 2011: 32–33). Yet, there is no mention, e.g. of Christianity or Buddhism in McGregor's book, and religion only emerges as a topic in the context of the State Council's knock down of the US direct sales giant Amway and suspected Falun Gong activities. McGregor comments that "the Party's management" of religion, NGOs and also of Amway "is founded on the same principle, to prevent them developing into rival centres of power" (McGregor, 2011: 211).

2 Callick 2013: 132.

3 Callick 2013: 133.

4 Callick 2013: 134.

5 Callick 2013: 134.

6 Lim/Blanchard 2013.

gamut of "surreptitious believers", "hardline opponents" and several "pragmatists".[7] The party and its take on traditions is therefore, from the point of view of contemporary politics, certainly a most timely object of academic study.

More recently, the contours of Xi Jinping's take on traditions have emerged more clearly, as party discourse became dominated by anti-Western polemics, redeployment of Marxism-Maoism and a conscious embrace of Chinese tradition *tout court*. In a much noted speech in front of the members of the International Confucian Association (printed in *Renmin Ribao* on 25 September 2014) and on the occasion of their celebration of the 2565th birthday of Confucius, Xi had of course something good to say about Confucianism, but the most prominent notion clearly was "China's traditional culture" (*Zhongguo chuantong wenhua* 中国传统文化). The most interesting part of Xi's speech was his characterization of the members of the Communist Party of China as Marxists who are "neither historical nihilists, nor cultural nihilists" (*bu shi lishi xuwuzhuyi zhe, ye bu shi wenhua xuwuzhuyi zhe* 不是历史虚无主义者也不是文化虚无主义者). Even more to the point are Xi's assertions of "contemporary China as the continuation and development of the China of the past" (*dangdai Zhongguo shi lishi Zhongguo de yanxu he fazhan* 当代中国是历史中国的延续和发展), of "the ideology and culture of contemporary China as the continuation and sublimation of traditional Chinese ideology and culture" (*dangdai Zhongguo sixiang wenhua ye shi Zhongguo chuantong sixiang wenhua de chuancheng he shenghua* 当代中国思想文化也是中国传统思想文化的传承和升华), of "the central elements of Chinese ideology and culture having formed the fundamental cultural genes of the nation" (*zhe xie sixiang wenhua... qizhong zui hexin de neirong yijing chengwei Zhonghua minzu zui jiben de wenhua jiyin* 这些思想文化... 其中最核心的内容已经成为中华民族最基本的文化基因), and of "the Chinese communists as all along faithful inheritors and promoters of the country's outstanding cultural traditions" (*Zhongguo gongchandangren shizhong shi Zhongguo youxiu chuantong wenhua de zhongshi jicheng zhe he hongyang zhe* 中国共产党人始终是中国优秀传统文化的忠实继承者和弘扬者). In a presentation entitled "Weaving Confucianism into the CCP's Political Discourse – Reevaluation or Instrumental Use" delivered in October 2014 in Ljubljana, Mugur Zlotea of Bucharest University meticulously analyzed Xi Jinping's speech and noted that the president avoided the name of Confucianism whenever he could and was quick to emphasize that Confucianism is but one of many Chinese traditions whenever he could not avoid mentioning it explicitly.

While several articles, books and special issues in academic journals on the issue of the Party's usage of traditions have already been published, our special section differs from all of them in its primary focus. For example, the *China*

7 Callick 2013: 134.

Perspectives' issue 2009/4 on "Religious Configurations in the People's Republic of China" centered on how religion is now more openly acknowledged and how it has been bestowed with a more positive role by the CCP, trying to understand the complex forms of these new practices of religious configurations; the later issue of *China Perspectives* 2011/1 on "The National Learning Revival" analyzed in depth the association of *guoxue* (Traditional Learning) with a Confucian revival, trying to capture the different facets of it. In contrast, our special number seeks to shift the emphasis to the category of *tradition*. Traditions are an important object of study not only due to their current revival, which is a remarkable and interesting fact as such, but also because their political use in the PRC is highly ambiguous. For the CCP, they are a powerful political resource, but they also challenge the Party's self-presentation. This ambivalence does not only apply to religious or philosophical traditions, but perhaps just as much to the traditions of Marxism or Maoism, say, as potential obstacles to change and innovation. All this indicates that the politicization of tradition is a contested and sensitive process, in which the limits and justifications for the promotion of certain traditions seem to be under constant negotiation.

The ambivalence of tradition

In theory, the CCP has entertained a remarkably antagonistic relationship with "tradition", culminating in the Cultural Revolution decade, as *the* time in which traditions and customs had to be eradicated and destroyed at all costs; in reality, early statements by Mao Zedong and others clearly point towards a more checkered history than what hardliners would like to admit. But with the death of Mao and the ensuing opening and reform policies by Deng Xiaoping and his successors, "traditions" have re-emerged as a factor for the party to reckon with both practically as well as in ideological terms. Throughout the CCP's volatile history, whenever it seemed appropriate to tame dogmatic antagonism, Marxist theorists have come up with ever different ways of coming to terms with what might be useful about "traditions", despite their general backward orientation. In his 2008 study of Confucianism in contemporary Chinese academic discourse, John Makeham lists several such theoretical attempts under the following labels: "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative", "abstract inheritance", "selecting the constant way", "critical transcendence", and "critical inheritance and synthetic creation".[8] From this point of view, "tradition" is a well-established category in CCP

8 Makeham 2008: 242–250.

discourse – and it does not matter which specific tradition is juxtaposed to the party and its concerns; that it is a tradition is enough to be of concern.

Tradition, it turns out, is a rather ambivalent issue for the CCP. The Party's handling of philosophical and religious traditions demonstrates this. On the one hand, the CCP applies references to traditions as a main resource for its communication on domestic and foreign policy issues. Examples are the use of Confucius as a Soft Power strategy, the reference to Confucianism in the context of cadre discipline, the labeling of temples and religious festivals as "cultural heritage" or the welcome, philanthropic commitment of Buddhist groups to social work and health care, relieving the State of some burdens. Yet, on the other hand, there is a tension between the party's projected image of itself as China's "modernizing-progressive force" and its "traditional" conception of religious and philosophical traditions as "backwards", "feudal" and "superstitious". Episodes such as the removal of the Confucius statue from Tiananmen Square, the repeated statement (Zhu Weiqun 朱维群, *Quanguo zhengxie minzu zongjiao weiyuanhui zhuren* 全国政协民族宗教委员会主任, in: *Qiushi* 求实 2011) that "party members cannot be religious believers" (while entrepreneurs can be party members since 2002), and occasional crackdowns of "evil cults", Protestant house churches, and more recently, in 2014, even officially recognized Christian churches across Zhejiang province, as well as the continuing restriction of religious practice in Tibet and Xinjiang, highlight the Party's ambivalence in the usage of philosophical and religious references. It is in this sense that the focus on what we call the "politicization of traditions" may allow for revealing analyses of a specific aspect of the CCP's ideological discourse. This is especially so, because when it comes to the problem of tradition(s), the ideological positioning of the CCP is much less coherent than the apparently-monolithic party communication would suggest. It means that the tension between the Party's self-conception and the religious/philosophical traditions renders the politicization of traditions a highly sensitive process, in which the limits of the reference to philosophical and religious traditions are endlessly contested and stretched. The ensuing organization of party discourse thus crumbles precisely when the political recourse to traditional resources collides with the socialist self-understanding of the party or when that self-understanding is stretched to accommodate philosophical and religious references in order to fit the broader realpolitik agenda.

However, the problem of politicizing traditions is not confined to religion and philosophy. The significance of Marxism-Maoism is no less contested within the Party. To what degree it should serve as a guideline for current policy decisions or rather as a "tradition" of sorts, meaning that it still might be of value for shaping the Party's official discourse even though it belongs to the past, Party officials are unclear about. This implies that references to Marxism-Maoism might occasionally

appear as just as much a "backward"-oriented hindrance for the actual development of the country as any other tradition; at the same time, references to Marxism-Maoism still serve the purpose of legitimizing different political goals. In this regard references to Marxism-Maoism seem to be just as ambivalent as references to religious or philosophical traditions.

This leads to a series of fundamental questions: how far can references to traditions go without assuming the identity of that tradition, say, of turning the Chinese Communist Party into the Chinese Confucian Party (CCP)? How is the above-mentioned ambivalence framed in ideological terms? How is the tension between Marxism and religious/philosophical traditions solved? What are the possibilities and limits of transforming Marxism-Maoism from a party-program into a tradition?

Tradition as a research focus

The problem of tradition has been addressed in different ways, and differently in different disciplines, most prominently concerning religious and philosophical traditions as for instance the revival of religious activities at the grassroots level or of Confucianism in political discourse. In contrast, the papers dealing with the problem of religious and philosophical traditions in this special section are not primarily interested in the adaption of those traditions to the CCP's shifting policies. Instead they focus on the opposite process, which could be termed "the party's adaption to the revival of religious and Confucian traditions". André Laliberté analyzes in his article how the Party adapts to the trend of enforced religious activity through the expansion of regulatory mechanisms. The paper by Philipp Hetmanczyk deals with the question of how this space – opened up by the government for the activity of religious traditions – has been included in the Party's ideological constructions. Finally, Nele Noesselt analyzes the synthesis of the references to Confucian tradition with Chinese Marxism and Maoism as means of a legitimization strategy for the Party.

The emphasis that has hitherto been given to the religious revival and political Confucianism has turned a blind eye to the fact that the CCP's ambivalent relation to "tradition" also applies to Chinese Marxism. On this reading, Chinese Marxism appears to be at the same time a resource of political legitimization and an obstacle for the party's opening policy, irrespective of whether the latter aspect concerns the political integration of capitalism, Confucianism or religion. Therefore the process of turning Marxism into a tradition deserves special attention, since it not only renders the Party's historical progressive

view on achieving a communist modernity a mere reference to the past, but it also needs to be modeled according to actual political goals. On this regard, Giorgio Strafella focuses his contribution on the Party's discursive strategy of constructing a Marxist tradition, with the purpose of justifying policy changes while overcoming factional struggles.

Making use of the concept of tradition allows transcending intra-disciplinary discourses on the party and its respective take, say, on Marxism, on Buddhism or on Confucianism. Our suggestion is that the party grapples with each of these traditions for no other reason than that each is precisely that: a tradition, while trying to find a way to turn the ideological problem into a political resource for its own purposes. An excellent study taking *tradition* (and *history*) as a fundamental category to analyze Chinese politics is Jyrki Kallio's *Tradition in Chinese Politics*.[9] Kallio explains the turn to tradition in terms of an effort on the side of the Communist Party "to anchor its right to rule to something more permanent than economic growth"[10] and leaves no doubt about the effort being made from taking "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" more towards a "Chinese tradition with socialist characteristics".[11] The general thrust of Kallio's study is a sustained argument that instead of *guoxue* being the midwife for a Confucian revival, Confucianism is revived in an attempt to make *guoxue* and, even more to the point, Chinese tradition serve an important function in legitimizing the party's right to rule.[12] Kallio's study also features an interesting example for the variety of actors (and agendas) involved in the politicization of tradition in a section on the Guodian texts (a set of texts on bamboo discovered in 1993) and scholarly attempts to reset the focus from "studying the classics" to "political action" (as suggested by Liang Tao).[13] Whatever the merits of the arguments given by Liang and others, Kallio points out that the Guodian texts appear at least partly to be "coloured by political instrumentalization" and it is "no wonder, then, that interpreting the texts today has become a politicized issue".[14]

Still, there is no denying that there are important differences between and among contending versions of traditions. The potential for constituting a political challenge to the Party's rule is merely one of them. Making cuts to *St. Matthew's Passion* in somebody's eyes certainly seems a politically sensitive

9 Kallio 2011.
10 Kallio 2011: 7.
11 Kallio 2011: 8; 125.
12 Kallio 2011: 125–129.
13 Cf. Kallio 2011: 111.
14 Kallio 2011: 114.

thing to do, while the chanting of slogans taken from the Confucian *Analects* appears to be politically innocuous. What is more, any academic treatment of the question about the CCP's position on traditions is of course also likely to be informed by concepts of "tradition" beyond the context of the Party and its history. If the title of this special section, "The CCP and the Politicization of Tradition", includes a reference to politicization, then this is because we assume traditions to be always immersed within some changing political context. It should be emphasized that our understanding is not one of immaculate tradition, which for some devious reason suddenly becomes politicized. That a tradition is politicized is not what this special section is interested in; the interest rather lies with the question of *how* it is politicized, by *whom*, with *what* motives and in *which* ways. This interest, it is needless to say, points far beyond what is possible to cover with a few contributions. It is, however, our hope that the presented contributions may help fill in some important pieces into this much larger puzzle.

The papers assembled in the present special section hark back to earlier versions presented at a workshop held in June 2013 at the University of Zurich, which was greatly supported by the University Research Priority Program (URPP) Asia and Europe and the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies. We also note with gratitude the generous financial support of the Graduate Campus of the University of Zurich. It is thanks to them that this special section has been made possible.

References

Callick, Rowan (2013): *The Party Forever: Inside China's Modern Communist Elite*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kallio, Jyrki (2011): *Tradition in Chinese Politics: The Party-State's Reinvention of the Past and the Critical Response from Public Intellectuals, FIIA Report 27*. Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

Lim, BenjaminKang/Blanchard, Ben (2013): "Xi Jinping hopes traditional faiths can fill moral void in China: sources", Reuters Beijing.

Makeham, John (2008): *Lost Soul: "Confucianism" in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press.

McGregor, Richard (2011): *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers*. New York: Harper Collins. http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/29/us-china-politics-vacuum-idUSBRE98S0GS20130929 (11/01/2015).