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CHINESE EXCEPTIONALISM

Linguistic Construction of a Superpower

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The concept of Chinese exceptionalism draws on rich literature of “American exceptionalism” (Tocqueville 1835; Weber 1905; Lipset 1997), and it recently begins to circulate in primarily academic circles of international relations and foreign policy studies. As is widely acknowledged, this Chinese exceptionalism has a deep cultural roots and claims as follows:

Most Chinese people . . . think of historical China as a shining civilization in the center of All-under-Heaven, radiating a splendid and peace-loving culture. Because Confucianism cherishes harmony and abhors war, this version portrays a China that has not behaved aggressively nor been an expansionist power throughout its 5,000 years of glorious history. Instead, a benevolent, humane Chinese world order is juxtaposed against the malevolent, ruthless power politics in the West.

(Walt 2016)

It is arguable that literary, cultural, and ideological traditions, from antiquity to modernity, lay the foundation for Chinese exceptionalism. As China has inevitably risen to a leading world power, the claims of its uniqueness and particularity from the universal values (or universalism) have been heatedly debated. The focus of the debate shifts from how China can integrate itself into the existing world order, in the historical passage to modernity since the mid-nineteenth century to the present, to what Chinese values can add to, modify, expand, and eventually reshape the values, worldviews, and ideologies that we have taken for granted for centuries. In other words, the issues have become more tied to the current issues of politics (or Realpolitik) than merely scholarly or intellectual inquiries.

This chapter, however, is not intended as a study of contemporary international politics from which Chinese exceptionalism arises (Zhang 2013; Callahan 2014; Walt 2016; Düben 2018). Rather, in keeping with the general guidelines of the *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Language and Culture*, this chapter attempts to offer an overview of the linguistic and cultural formation of Chinese exceptionalism. Of course, since the concept itself is part of ongoing debate, this chapter is not intended as a comprehensive or definitive description but as an inquiry of controversial issues. In what follows, I first present a historical overview of Chinese language and the origin of Chinese exceptionalism. Second, I review the rise of modern Chinese language

and culture from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. The focus is on the vernacular (*baihua*) reform, particularly on the assimilation and integration of Western concepts and ideas into modern Chinese. Third, I outline the radical cultural and ideological revolutions, ruptures, cleavages, and discontinuities of Chinese language and culture during the period of Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 1921–), before and after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC, 1949–). Finally, I discuss the linguistic and cultural changes since the Reform and Opening Up (1978–present), as the latest stage for Chinese exceptionalism as the guiding political ideology of the CCP.

A principal assumption of this chapter is that language plays a crucial role in shaping our perception and understanding of the world. We may look into the ways in which the perception (or self-perception) of China as a superpower, or Chinese exceptionalism, has been formed through linguistic changes. There is no denying that linguistic change is only a part (albeit an essential one) of the construction of Chinese exceptionalism. Inquiries into the changes of language in this chapter are meant to suggest some possible venues to explore the larger picture, namely, the political, ideological, and social dynamics underlying linguistic and cultural changes. Hopefully, readers may find it useful in expanding their interests in understanding the political and ideological roots of Chinese exceptionalism.

The emergence of Chinese exceptionalism is not only a cultural and ideological justification for China as a superpower. Rather, it is a part of the global “political climate change” that we face today. It ought to be emphasized from the outset that while we may claim diverse racial, ethnic, gender, and historical differences from each other, we ultimately live under the same sky with shared interests and values as human beings. This commonality, or universality, of humankind is expressed in a myriad of tones, inflections, and scripts, which are ultimately intelligible and communicable. The Tower of Babel in this regard can be construed as a metaphor not so much for the unified origin of all languages, as a shared commonwealth of living species with various colors and sounds. The global political climate today unleashes a maelstrom of segregated, fragmented, fiercely contending tsunamis of ideas across the world. Various kinds of exceptionalisms, including Chinese exceptionalism, are all but the latest expressions of such seismic changes of the cultural environment. This chapter hopes to show that the battle of universalism vis-à-vis exceptionalism is misguided, based on false assumptions of dichotomous oppositions. Chinese language, especially in its modern form, is inseparably mingled with world languages, and as such, it deconstructs the myth of Chinese exceptionalism that it sets out to create.

This chapter’s view of Chinese exceptionalism as a linguistic construction is informed primarily by the theoretical insights of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), Russian-Soviet philosopher of language and culture. It draws particularly on Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia as a central thesis to understand cultural change. Heteroglossia (разноречие, divergent-speech-ness) is a term to describe the existence of conflicting discourses within any field of linguistic activity and variety. It is a central concept in Bakhtin’s theory of cultural change from the ancient Greek-Roman era to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the twentieth century (Bakhtin 1981). As such, it helps us understand cultural history of China through the prism of linguistic changes.

1. Chinese Language and Chinese Exceptionalism: A Historical Overview

Chinese language refers to both a diverse variety of spoken languages (over 80) and written languages (30) used by over 50 different ethnic groups (the official PRC account is 56). *Han* ethnic group is the majority (91.59%) of China’s population, and their language, *hanyu*, in both spoken and written forms, is most commonly regarded as the Chinese language (Chinese Academy of

Social Sciences 2012). This chapter adopts this common usage. Yet a caveat is necessary here. In its seemingly straightforward and uniform designation, the concept of Chinese language as *hanyu* may mislead readers into believing that Chinese language is just one single and homogeneous entity. Since the inhabitants in China now are as diverse as those living in countries with large population of many ethnic groups, the notion of *hanyu* as the single, unitary language of China is certainly false. Moreover, China acquired its current name only after the 1911 Republican Revolution that declared Republic of China a modern nation-state. It was previously called the Qing Empire, the Ming Empire, etc. for hundreds of hundreds of years. The discussion of Chinese language in this chapter, therefore, begins with a self-conscious query about the assumption of linguistic homogeneity and unity. Even though for the most part *hanyu* is the focus of discussion, I hope to remind my readers and myself that there is no such single, unitary language as the Chinese language, and the discussion of *hanyu* in this chapter is meant precisely to question such misconceptions.

There are many other kinds of misunderstandings about Chinese language. Timothy Light, an American scholar of Chinese language and culture, warns that “few things in Chinese culture are more widely misunderstood outside of China than the Chinese language” (Light 2016). He then lists a series of “myths” about Chinese language: that Chinese scripts are like pictures, and is monosyllabic; that Chinese think in radically different ways from Westerners because of their hieroglyphic and monosyllabic language that differs fundamentally from most of the phonetically based, alphabetic languages. Other misconceptions include that the Communist government abandoned Chinese characters and replaced it with an alphabetic language, virtually eliminating Chinese language itself (Light 2016). Light contends that

each of these beliefs and assumptions is false. Each of them is in its own way outrageous, since taken together they suggest that the capacity for language among the world’s largest national-ethnic group is somehow different from that of all other human groups, a suggestion for which there is no evidence.

(Light 2016)

He takes pains to demystify the notion that Chinese language is fundamentally different, unique, and peculiar, from the language families of the world. Comparing diverse language (and dialectal) varieties and complex historical evolution in China with those of Romance languages, Light effectively dispels the misconception of Chinese language as being unitary and singular. Meanwhile, he acknowledges the unique features of *hanyu* that distinguishes this most commonly spoken and written language in China from Romance and other language families, particularly the non-alphabetic writing system. Because Chinese is not alphabetic, its writing does not reflect differences and changes in speech. Even though two speakers of different Chinese languages cannot understand each other (and thus may have to resort to a foreign language such as English for oral communication), they can write in Chinese and thereby understand each other.

It is often claimed that the unitary and singular Chinese language or *hanyu* is what has unified China over several millenniums. The unification of Chinese writing system is usually credited to Qin Shihuang, the first emperor of Qin, who unified imperial China for the first time. The historical continuity and longevity of Chinese culture is often attributed to the singular and unitary writing system of *hanzi* (Chinese characters). Ge Zhaoguang, a Chinese historian, considers *hanzi* the foremost feature of Chinese culture that has lasted thousands of years (Ge 2018). Ge Zhaoguang (1950–) is known for his relentless critique of the myth of Chineseness as a unifying, homogeneous entity. In his view, however, most hieroglyphic languages have disappeared, but *hanzi* retains

its pristine features of pictograph (*xiàngxíng*) that graphically depicts the objects and logical aggregate (*huìyì*) that yields composite meaning by combining two or more parts, and phonetical complex (*xíngshēng*) that uses different parts (radicals) of a character to denote semantic meaning and phonetic register respectively. The grammar of Chinese is thus relatively simple, and association of meaning and contextual way of expression underscore Chinese mode of thinking. The hieroglyphic Chinese language has not been disrupted, and for centuries it has continued to affect Chinese mode of thinking. Its impact, Ge argues, can be felt in East Asian cultures such as Japanese and Korean, as a “*hanzi*-centered cultural sphere” (Ge 2015).

Nonetheless, many modern scholars like Ge Zhaoguang now consider changes of Chinese language and culture in modern times more important than its continuity, longevity and unity, long being regarded as the defining features of Chinese culture. Ge argues that serious consequences of the radical changes in Chinese language in the modern vernacular movement is, first, the disappearance of traditional values of cultivated distinction (*dianya*) or elegance (*jiaoyang*) and, second, the hybridization of modern *hanyu* with Western vocabulary and concepts, affecting Chinese mode of thinking (Ge 2015). Moreover, the PRC government launched the language reform campaigns of the simplification of the writing system since the 1950s. The campaign has been accompanied by a massive effort at literacy training and an intensive campaign to promote Mandarin, the standard dialect, as the national language.

Taking the language as the key to understand culture and ideas, a brief summary of the linguistic roots of Chinese exceptionalism from the antiquity to the modern times is in order. As American Sinologist Lucian Pye famously argues, “China is a civilizational state, pretending to be a [nation-]state” (Pye 1992: 235). The cultural or civilizational foundation has been seen as the ultimate *raison d’être* of the Middle Kingdom’s longevity and unity. However, it should be noted from the outset that in its formative years Chinese language and culture were diverse and multidimensional. The Spring and Autumn and Warring States period (770–480 BC) is generally understood as the formative time of Chinese culture. It was the time when the Chinese sages such as Confucius, Lao Tsu, Sun Tsu, and Mencius lived, and “Hundred Schools” of Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, Moism, and a garden-variety of indigenous shamanism contended for political, intellectual, and ethical powers in an era of feudalistic, diversified, and independent warring kingdoms (Hsu 1990: 545–586). It is known as the Axial Age (eighth–third century BC), coined by German philosopher Karl Jaspers, when ideas of religion and philosophy emerged in China, India, Persia, and Greco-Roman world, paralleling each other without actual contacts (Jaspers 2010). From the northern kingdoms, ancestor worship evolved into the Confucian ideas of *ren* (love of kinship, love of parents and ancestors, and *li* [rites, rituals as externalization of *ren* or love of ancestors]). Almost at the same time in southern China, shamanism or *wu*, the worship of natural and supernatural deities, emerged, and later absorbed and adopted by Taoism and other indigenous religions and superstitions. Gradually, ancestor worship (*ren/li*) and worship of natural deities (*wu*) became two of the most important pillars in Chinese cosmology. The Qin and Han dynasties (221 BC–AD 589) established the unified and highly centralized monarchy with absolute power, effectively ending feudalism in China for the next two millennia. Meanwhile, the Qin and Han empires erected a unified, singular cosmology of *tianxia* (under the heaven) and world order by canonizing Confucianism. In so doing, they effectively closed off the debates of the contending “hundred schools” the next two millennia (Fairbank 1983; Ropp 1990; de Bary and Tu 1998). This is the time when Qin Shihuang unified the Chinese writing system. This historical period in China witnesses the long battle between centripetal and centrifugal forces of language and culture. The canon of Confucianism is the foundation for Chinese exceptionalism in ancient times. However, Confucianism as the single,

unitary language of truth, to borrow Bakhtin's comments on the language of medieval church, "at every moment of its linguistic life is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 1981: 270). The Confucian orthodoxy came to an end at the dawn of Chinese modernity from the late nineteenth century on.

2. Modern Vernacular Reform and Modern Chinese Culture in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

Modern vernacular reform since the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century was at the forefront of modern Chinese cultural transformation. When the Qing dynasty finally collapsed at the advent of Western-induced modernity, the foundation of Chinese exceptionalism crumbled to the formidable maelstrom by which all that is solid melts into air (Berman 1988). To recap the story of China's passage to modernity as "a struggle between a proud empire or ancient civilization and the external pressures call the maelstrom of modernity" (Liu 2012: 499), Bakhtin's description of the European Renaissance and the birth of modern novel as a metaphor of the Enlightenment, is apt here:

It [the novel] begins by presuming a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world, a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness, which no longer possesses a sacrosanct and unitary linguistic medium for containing ideological thought. . . . [It is] the fundamental liberation of cultural-semantic and emotional intentions from the hegemony of a single and unitary language, and consequently the simultaneous loss of a feeling for language as myth, that is, as an absolute form of thought.

(Bakhtin 1981: 367)

Indeed, hundreds of thousands of novels, poems, political and philosophical treatises from all over the world, modern west in particular, all rushed into China. The massive translation of Western culture opened up a kaleidoscope of novel ideas, values, and emotions. Consequently, the age-old Confucian tradition as a "single and unitary language", vested in the classical Chinese written language *wenyan*, crumbled. Then the May Fourth (1919) Cultural Movement promised a brave new world for the ancient Middle Kingdom, to come to terms with a Western-dominated modern world, and regain its lost sense of self-esteem. The 2019 centennial of the May Fourth Movement was celebrated in Beijing as primarily a political movement that paved the way for the Chinese communist revolution. But its impact on modern China can be felt in almost every aspect. "The atmosphere and political mood that emerged around 1919", as Rana Mitter puts it, "are at the center of a set of ideas that has shaped China's momentous twentieth century" (Mitter 2004: 12). One of the lasting legacies of the May Fourth Movement is the vernacular (*baihua*) language reform.

Translation, however, is of the foremost importance. From the late nineteenth century, most modern ideas, concepts, practices, and institutions were translated and then transformed in China. The late Qing Reform period (1870s–1910s) saw massive translations of modern Western works into Chinese. One of the most important intellectual leaders of the reform, Yan Fu (1867–1921), is China's foremost translator whose translations of major modern Western works from Adam Smith *The Wealth of Nations*, to John Stuart Mill's *A System of Logic* set the standard for translating modern Western ideas, and indeed Yan Fu's translation theory then became the classical criteria of translation (Schwartz 1964). In the meantime, Japanese engaged in massive translations of the European works into Japan, using Chinese characters or *kangji* extensively

to render English, German, French, and Latin concepts and terms into what is known now as *wasei-kango* (Japanese-made-Chinese). The Chinese, in turn, borrowed profusely these *wasei-kango* terms, or Chinese terms that Japanese used as translations of European terms. It's estimated that about 70% of Chinese terms for modern Western concepts, especially those abstract and central nouns such as “society”, “revolution”, “science”, “nature”, “democracy”, just to name a few, are then retranslated or borrowed from those *wasei-kango* (Japanese made Chinese) (Wang 2000; Lackner 2001; Shen 2010; Chen 2019). This in itself is a significant topic concerning Chinese modernity, insofar as modernity in China is translated and imported from the West, and the Japanese mediation through *wasei-kango* is an indispensable and integral part of understanding Chinese modernity. The recent studies by Shen Guowei and Chen Liwei are invaluable (Shen 2010; Chen 2019).

The translations by Chinese such as Yan Fu and others, and Japanese *wasei-kango* of modern Western concepts, which then became predominant in China, inevitably bear the imprints of their respective linguistic, cultural traditions and reflect the political and ideological contingencies and circumstances. More often than not these specific circumstances prevailed in the understanding and rendering of Western ideas and concepts into the target languages, namely, Chinese and Japanese, or Chinese mediated by *wasei-kango*. As Shen Guowei puts it,

the new Chinese vocabulary [*wasei-kango*] are the bearers and transmitters of western culture, and often become part of western culture. . . . They transcend the boundaries of individual languages such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, and become the common media with the *hanzi* cultural sphere.

(Shen 2010: 5)

The vernacular reform of the May Fourth era, spearheaded by the U.S.-educated, liberal-minded Hu Shi and others, can be understood as an effort to bring modern Western culture to bear on Chinese culture, a continuing expansion of the scope of Chinese language. Victor Mair touts lavishly Hu Shi's role in vernacular reform:

In the test of time, however, I predict that Hu Shih's most lasting and transformative gift to China will be his elaboration of a theoretical and practical basis for the establishment of the vernacular as the national language for all the people, in contrast to Literary Sinitic/Classical Chinese, which belonged to the tiny percentage of literati who had mastered it during the previous two millennia and more before his time.

(Mair 2019)

Over time, however, we would see the irony of “the national language for all the people” that Hu Shi and his cohorts of liberal, cosmopolitan intellectuals promoted eventually transmogrified into the political and ideological instrument for the Chinese communist revolution. The vernacular reform and the massive translation of Western culture during the May Fourth era are the two cornerstones of China's modernity. They indeed brought what Bakhtin would have called “the fundamental liberation of cultural-semantic and emotional intentions from the hegemony of a single and unitary language”, that is, from the classical *wenyan* reserved merely for the ruling elite of imperial dynasties. Meanwhile, these May Fourth intellectuals inculcated a nationalist, and populist sentiment in the minds of the millions of disenfranchised Chinese people, a sentiment that ultimately paved the way for the radical and violent political revolution throughout the twentieth century Chinese history. It is in the name of the liberation and creation of not only a national

language but an entire “brave new world” for the Chinese people that the Chinese communist revolution has been launched.

3. Impact of the Communist Revolution on Chinese Language: Modern Chinese Exceptionalism

The emergence of Marxism-Leninism as a powerful political ideology for the CCP quickly helped changing modern China’s course of history in less than half a century, primarily by means of violent political revolution. In the meantime, a localized, indigenous version of Chinese Marxism, or Maoism, gradually evolved into a new revolutionary universalism of a Chinese brand. During the Mao era (1949–1976), Maoism was canonized not only as the ideological orthodoxy for the Chinese population, a single, unitary language of truth, an absolute form of thought, but also intended as a new gospel for worldwide communist revolution. Embedded in Chinese exceptionalism of its Marxist phase is Mao Zedong’s acute sensitivity to the need of localization or “making Marxism Chinese” or a Sinicized Marxism (Liu 2000).

For Mao this is precisely a question of language, an aesthetic as well as ideological issue of *form*—transformation and reformation of a universal, albeit foreign, language into an indigenous and national one. As early as in the Yanan years of the 1940s in the throes of Sino-Japanese War, Mao realized that the magic word for making Marxism Chinese was “national form”:

Being Marxists, communists are internationalists, but Marxism can only be realized through a national form. There is no abstract Marxism, there is only concrete Marxism. . . . For communists who are part of the great Chinese nation, tied to this nation by flesh and blood, to talk about Marxism apart from China’s characteristics is merely abstract, vacuous Marxism. Therefore, the most urgent issue that the whole party must understand and resolve is the sinification of Marxism that will endow every manifestation of Marxism with a Chinese character, that is to say, applying it according to China’s characteristics. . . . They [foreign and abstract ideas] must be replaced by the refreshing, lively Chinese styles and airs that are palatable to the tastes and ears of the common folks of China.

(Mao 1967: 209–210)

The “national form” or a “new national language of the people” that Mao’s revolution created served as a mediation or translation of Marxist-Leninist theories into Chinese, through political, ideological writings as well as arts and literature. It is the core of “Marxism with a Chinese character” or Chinese exceptionalism during the Mao era. From the beginning of the People’s Republic of China (1949) until now, mediation through “national form” and translation of anything foreign (abstract and universal theories) into Chinese (concrete practice) has always been the foremost preoccupation, or obsession, of Chinese state cultural establishment. China’s Reform and Opening up of the last 40 years has not renounced but rather continued this mode of thinking, even though Maoist ideological domination has been irrevocably eroded over the years.

From the beginning of the founding of the PRC, the Chinese government launched two major campaigns to simplify the writing system and standardize speech. In 1952, the state began a series of movements to simplify the written Chinese system. The simplification of writing system became part of the anti-illiteracy campaign as a major political objective of the CCP for the creation of a new socialist culture. The anti-illiteracy campaign began shortly after the PRC was founded and has continued as a national policy objective until now. The achievement is quite impressive, reducing the illiteracy from more than 80% of the population in the early 1950s to about 4% in

2010, according to the Chinese Sixth National Population Census (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2011). The campaign to standardize spoken Chinese was launched in 1955 by the PRC government, although the Qing imperial government and then the Nationalist government of the Republic of China began to promote Chinese or Mandarin from the late nineteenth century (Hayford 2008: 147–171). Today the Mandarin Chinese, which is called *putonghua*, or common speech in PRC, and *guoyu*, or national speech in Taiwan respectively, serves as a powerful linguistic tool to standardize and unify the great variety of *han* Chinese dialects across the Chinese-speaking communities in the world.

Apart from reforms of the writing and speaking systems, more significant aspects for the new revolutionary language can be found at syntactic, semantic, and stylistic levels, manifested in news reports, political treatises and statements, and in works of literature, cinema, and the arts. One salient example is the so-called “red classics” (*hongse jingdian*). It refers to the cultural production of the literary and artistic works, as an ongoing campaign to promulgate the CCP’s political ideology. The “red classics” are produced for the masses, and aimed avowedly at creating a kind of new language and new aesthetic experience for the masses (Liu 2009: 329–347). Kai-yu Hsu, a U.S. scholar of Chinese origin, noted in the early 1970s the issue of “new literacy” in the revolutionary literature. Hsu observes that

the awesome energy of eight hundred million people, when finally harnessed for a unified purpose, burst forth in many startling ways. . . . Nationwide campaigns in increase production on the literary front and corresponding drives to improve literacy spurred the publication of thousands of volumes in all genres.

(Hsu 1975: 39)

The revolutionary culture and language started with Mao Zedong’s 1942 *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Arts*. Rather than following Stalinist doctrine that views literature and arts as merely “reflections of social reality” and tools ancillary to politics, Mao always emphasizes the centrality of culture in Chinese Revolution and the didactic function of literature and arts in fostering revolutionary consciousness or “thought remolding”. “Thought remolding” lies at the heart of Mao’s project of Chinese exceptionalism, intent on creating a socialist collective as both a material condition of existence and a communist utopian lifestyle (Starr 1979). Class struggle was elevated into the center of literary representation in revolutionary literature, as the Chinese revolution took class struggle as its driving force. In the long period of revolutionary wars, class struggle took the form of violence and bloodshed, against domestic and external enemies. This antagonistic and militant nature of class struggle, however, betrays its historical limits. When pushed to the extremes, it proved to be fatally fallacious during the relatively peaceful years of economic reconstruction. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao expanded class struggle to all aspects of social life, including the culture and consciousness. In hindsight, Mao’s ceaseless “class struggle” in the end undermined the goal of building a socialist state. The so-called Maoist discourse, replete with hyperboles, superlatives, and vulgarities, amounted to a “linguistic engineering” that created an ideological foreclosure during the entire Mao era (Ji 2004).

4. Chinese Exceptionalism Today: Linguistic Construction of a Superpower

In China, there has been no scholarly discussion of Chinese exceptionalism. However, “socialism with Chinese characteristics” since Deng Xiaoping’s era has been a dominant political tenet of the CCP. In 2018’s nineteenth National Congress of the CCP, “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with

Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” has been enshrined into the Constitution of the Communist Party of China as its new guiding ideology. Now the historical narrative may sound more like a Sino-centric view of history as eternal cycles or *déjà vu*, rather than a Hegelian-Marxian history as dialectical progress. In other words, history seems to repeat itself in China, at least in political, ideological realm. Mao’s Cultural Revolution plummeted China into the abyss of catastrophic self-destruction. Maoist language or linguistic engineering, or indeed, the wholesale social engineering, created an ambience of cultural terror and suppression, only comparable to the medieval European “Dark Age” of Grand Inquisition. In China, the brutality of Mao’s repression in cultural arena can only be matched by the repressive, autocratic regimes of Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.

The death of Mao (1976) and Deng Xiaoping’s return to China’s power center promised a new start. When China “reopened its door” to the world at the beginning of the period of 1979–1989, a general feeling of euphoria permeated China’s cultural scene. After the Maoist dominance, the Pandora Box was ripped open, and a plethora of novels, poems, films, and ideas of Western liberalism, conservatism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism were devoured by Chinese intellectuals and young students. In general, Chinese people at almost all social sectors celebrated in a festive and fervent mode of emancipation and creativity. The 1980s is known as the decade of Culture Fever or Culture Reflection. Its principal objectives are rethinking and debunking the age-old tradition from Confucianism to Maoism. The massive translation of foreign literature, arts, and introduction of Western ideas and concepts banned during the Mao era, all seemed to signal the arrival of a new era of China’s integration into the world of globalization. Again, to borrow Bakhtin’s term, the 1980s China embraced a genuine state of heteroglossia, which “washes over a culture’s awareness of itself and its language, penetrates to its core, relativizes the primary language system underlying its ideology and literature and deprives it of its naïve absence of conflict” (Bakhtin 1981: 368).

The reality is, however, that the conflicts can be readily eradicated by not so naïve means, and heteroglossia can be as fragile as fallen leaves blown by an autumn storm. The bloody crackdown of the 1989 Tiananmen democracy movement did not entirely reverse the course of economic reform and opening up. The CCP’s pragmatic policies in the following decades actually reignited the economic boom. China’s economy rapidly grew into the second largest in the world, less than 20 years after joining the WTO in 2001. The post-Tiananmen China under Deng Xiaoping has taken a truly unique way of stepping up market economy and integrating into the economic globalization, while steadfastly holding up the CCP’s political and ideological grip. This is the thrust of Deng Xiaoping’s Chinese exceptionalism, or “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. Deng Xiaoping ushered in the era of reform for the last four decades, and China’s phenomenal rise from an isolated communist state to an economic powerhouse and then a major world power coincided with globalization and information revolution. Deng Xiaoping theory or “socialism with Chinese characteristics” is a discourse that legitimates a project of modernity fundamentally at odds with its revolutionary legacy, from which Deng Theory derives ideological and political legitimization. In other words, the rhetorical and ideological formation of Deng Theory is still enmeshed in Mao’s legacy, which Deng tried to dismantle (Liu 2004: 46–77).

In the realm of popular culture, the tension and contradiction between Mao’s revolutionary legacy and Deng’s pragmatic policy became quite visible. Global cultural trends, mostly starting from the post-industrial North America, western Europe and Japan, have inevitably penetrated into China since the late 1970s. Media culture of images, sounds, and spectacles through traditional form of radio, television, cinema and the new media of the internet, and more recently, mobile communications, have changed Chinese society ever since. In the post-revolutionary era,

popular culture became a testing ground for new cultural identities of the Chinese public, caught between a discredited ideological past of idealistic collectivism on the one hand, and individualism, or egotism on the other. While consumer popular culture tends to encourage individual expressions and desires, self-consciousness, mobile, multiple and personal identities marked by novelty and trendiness, the state-sponsored cultural institutions promote either traditional Confucianism, or “core socialist values” set forth by the CCP in 2013. The “core socialist values” include national goals of prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony; social goals of freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law; and individual values of patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship. However, ideological differences and clashes often mark China’s popular cultural scene, especially in the now ubiquitous social media and mobile communications of smart phones. Universally shared values such as individualism and personal success are often at odds with the Chinese state, which insists on its exceptionalism of “China Dream” or “socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

The post-Deng CCP leadership headed by Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao largely continued the Deng theory with some variations. From Deng Xiaoping on, it became habitual for the CCP “core leader” to produce a theory bearing his imprint, then inscribed into the CCP Constitution as his legacy. For Jiang Zemin, whose tenure as the General Secretary of the CCP lasted from 1989 to 2012, the “theory of three represents” became his official trademark. The theory claims that the CCP represents “the development demands of China’s advanced productivity, the forward direction of China’s advanced culture, and the fundamental interest of China’s broadest populace” (Jiang 2002). While Jiang’s rhetoric remains within Maoist discursive framework, he tries to outline a charter of some corporate culture in terms of the management, organization, leadership, and performance capabilities, its representation of the CCP as a new corporate conglomerate, as it were (Liu 2003: 86–107). Jiang’s successor Hu Jintao (tenured as the general secretary of the CCP 2002–2012) produced a theory of “scientific outlook on development” that emphasized the need to create a “socialist harmonious society” which would fulfill the goals of scientific socialism, sustainable development, social welfare, a humanistic society, and increased democracy (Hu 2012). Both Jiang’s and Hu’s formulations contain the language and ideas of corporate and business management readily available, for example, in Harvard Business School’s curriculum. Moreover, as the generation of technocrats in CCP leadership (both Jiang and Hu earned college degrees in engineering and worked in industrial sectors for years prior to their promotion to the political leadership), their theories exhibit certain degree of cosmopolitanism, which is largely absent in their successor Xi Jinping’s ideas.

The year 2013 marked the beginning of the Xi Jinping era. New efforts have been stepped up for “revitalizing the great Chinese civilization” or Chinese Dream, and consequently, various versions of Chinese exceptionalism have reemerged, redeeming the specters, indigenous deities of the bygone past, the imperial glories and rituals. The resurgence of indigenous rituals and thoughts have been accompanied by the increasingly bellicose nationalism and intellectual xenophobia, sanctioned by the state to prevent “malignant infiltration” of Western conspirators under the guise of “universalism” and “historical nihilism”. It becomes obvious now that Xi Jinping’s leadership marks a clear return to Maoist era that prioritizes ideology and absolute power monopoly of the CCP. In Xi’s own words:

Socialism with Chinese characteristics is socialism. It is not any other sort of “ism”. The foundational, scientific principles of socialism cannot be abandoned; only if they are abandoned would our system no longer be socialist. . . . Which ideological system a country implements depends on one crucial issue: can this ideology resolve the historical problems

facing the country? It is Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought that guided the Chinese people out of the darkness of that long night and established a New China; it is through socialism with Chinese characteristics that China has developed so quickly.

(Xi 2014: 46)

It was commented that

one of the most striking aspects of this speech is the language Xi Jinping invokes: party members must have “faith” (*xìnyǎng*) in the eventual victory of socialism; proper communists must be “devout” (*qiānréng*) in their work; and Party members must be prepared to “sacrifice” (*xīshēng*) everything, up to their own blood, for revolutionary “ideals that reach higher than heaven” (*gémìng lǐxiǎng gāo yú tiān*). Behind this religiously charged language is a man deeply worried that the cadres of his generation are not prepared to make the sort of sacrifices their parents and grandparents did for China’s revolutionary cause.

(Greer 2019)

This certainly displays one façade of Xi’s ideology. On the other hand, Xi Jinping proclaims the mission of “Adhering to Path of Peaceful Development and Constructing a Community of Common Destiny with Mankind”, as the part on international policy in his speech at the nineteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (Xi 2017). The “community of common destiny” is an ideological call for Xi’s ambitious new type of international order, to be based on such principles. The CCP now aggressively promulgates across the world a Chinese model, in what Xi claims as “the Chinese wisdom, and the Chinese approach” that promises a unique solution “to the problems facing mankind” (Mardell 2017). In the realm of international relations, Xi has practically abandoned Deng’s longtime strategy of keeping a low profile and not engaging in interventionist diplomacy.

To sum up, Chinese exceptionalism as the linguistic construction of a superpower began with Mao’s Chinese Marxism. Mao’s revolutionary ideas were initially conceived of as an indigenous theory of revolution, and when it was being canonized from the mid-1940s onward, Mao Zedong Thought then became the central part of modern Chinese Exceptionalism. During Deng Xiaoping’s Reform era, Chinese Exceptionalism acquired the name “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, or Deng Theory. During the nineteenth National Congress of the CCP in November 2017, the CCP Constitution enshrined “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”. More specifically, with the warfare of universalism vis-à-vis relativism/exceptionalism raging around the world today, can Maoism be seen as a revolutionary universalism, or is it an indigenous and nationalist ideology of Chinese Exceptionalism? Western-dominated universalism based on liberal ideas of free market economy, multiparty electoral democracy, and human rights have been challenged by rising nationalism and radical ideologies from both right and left extremists. Pro-globalization liberals have suffered a series of setbacks, from Brexit to Trump’s “America First” policies. Political autocracy, rather than democracy, seems to hold sway across the continents, while the political left has been on the defensive during this new interregnum. Mao’s legacy, including global Maoism and the canon of Mao and its appropriation in China, henceforth pertains to the current conditions in at least two terrains, namely, that of a revolutionary universalism and a nationalist ideology of Chinese Exceptionalism. It is arguable that Maoism from its inception was a revolutionary universalism meant to stretch beyond Chinese borders, in the sense that it was not only created by Third World revolutionaries and the Western intellectual Left, but also appropriated as a universal theory of revolution and alternative modernity. The canon of Mao

in China, however, has waxed and waned since the start of the post-Mao era, mostly as a vacuous icon severed from its radicalism of ceaseless class struggle and revolution. Even so, it has never been rejected outright by the CCP and remains its guiding principle and indispensable source of ideological legitimacy.

Today Xi Thought stands on equal footing with Mao Thought, whereas Deng Theory has only been accorded secondary status in the hierarchy of political nomenclature. In the rigid CCP naming system, “ism” is supreme, reserved only for Marxism and Leninism; Mao refused to accept the title of “Maoism” out of deference to Marx and Lenin and preferred the title “Mao Zedong Thought” instead, and thus the application of the term “Thought” to a particular theory became the highest accolade in China. Xi Thought, however, retains the bulk of Deng Theory, namely, “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”. The way in which Mao Thought is morphed into Xi Thought deserves serious scrutiny. It is clear that Xi Jinping’s version of Chinese exceptionalism is a continuation of Mao’s ideology as it serves the rising Chinese nationalism and legitimizes the role of Chinese Communist Party. What remains to be seen, however, is how this latest version of Chinese exceptionalism competes in the changing political climate today.

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