Thoughts Following a Reading of Taisu Zhang, *China’s Coming Ideological Wars: In the reform era, economic growth reigned supreme. But now, a revival of competing beliefs has polarized Chinese society,* Foreign Policy March 1, 2016.

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I very much enjoyed reading Taisu Zhang, *China’s Coming Ideological Wars: In the reform era, economic growth reigned supreme. But now, a revival of competing beliefs has polarized Chinese society,* Foreign Policy March 1, 2016. It very nicely complemented the reading of Jerome Cohen's view into China also published by Foreign Policy 22 February 2016 ([here](#)) and my comments ([here](#)). Both suggest the emerging orthodoxy in approaches to "reading" China that tells us as much about ourselves as it may about the Chinese. Most bracing perhaps for me is the window it opens on the elite project of reading China for consumption by our masses and perhaps theirs as well. Both as well got me thinking about ideology and elites.

1. Zhang's insight is absolutely correct: “By contrast, anyone today who insists that Communist ideals still hold sway over Chinese policymaking does so at considerable risk to his or her reputation as a serious China hand.” Two preliminary points here. The first is ironic. The insight suggests the blinders of American "serious China hands." It appears that, like the priests of any orthodoxy, admittance to the ranks of serious China hand requires allegiance to an ideology with quite specific premises. That, in itself, produces irony in this context. The second is normative. One wonders about the value of an ideology a core insight of which is the premise that positively disregards the possibility of the strength of a Communist (Marxist Leninist) ideology. I might suggest that this would certainly be true enough in the United States among serious China hands, and among certain elements in Shanghai and Beijing.

It is certainly evidence of a crisis among the ruling elites in China; a crisis that parallels that in the United States about the legitimacy and character of the founding ideology of the state and its political order. But discussion about the normative structure of theory does not suggest its rejection. Just as Americans, by discussing the foundations of their own political order, do not necessarily mean to reject it, one can surmise that the Chinese approach the issue in a similar way. That is why, in both states, for the moment, the crisis is ideological and not structural; a matter for developing policy and approaches suitable to current conditions rather than a sign of disorder or decay. It is in this sense that one, somewhat boldly, suggests crisis, it must be understood, in the United States as well as in China, as the process of normative evolution within the structuring frameworks of the ideological order.

I have long suggested the reverse of the orthodox view— and specifically that Communist ideology still holds sway over Chinese policymaking. China has been and remains a highly ideological political society. That the foundations and
performance of this ideology has changed, and changed dramatically between 1927 and today does not make it any less ideological. But those changes—sometimes as dramatic as the change in ideology in the United States as it transitioned, after a bloody civil war, away from an ideology that saw no ideological contradiction in a slaveholding republic of free men—suggest the core strength and elasticity of the founding ideology rather than movements within and beyond such ideologies.

The ideology of Marxist Leninism with Chinese characteristics was as vital a core structural element of the Cultural Revolution as it was central to Deng Xiaoping’s reforms. That the reforms taken by the CCP under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping produced socialist modernization with its emphasis on Socialist markets and economic activity does not make it any less ideological—unless one embraces the conceit that ideology must be as flamboyant as a drag queen on stage to merit serious attention. This sort of critique necessarily adopts the conceit that there is no legitimacy in Chinese Marxist Leninism and that its evolution and dynamism must mean anything but that Marxist-Leninism in China is dynamic and evolving to suit the times and context. Yet that dynamism is precisely what was built into the bones of Chinese Marxism Leninism at the time its course was reset after the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Party Congress (中国共产党第十一届中央委员会第三次全体会议). That transition was itself a highly ideological event and one that centered reform in and through the CCP. The opposite conclusion—that Deng Xiaoping stripped the CCP of its Communist ideological edge by shifting “the focus of the work of the whole Party onto economic development and carried out reform and opening to the outside world, ushering in a new era of development in the cause of socialism” (CCP Constitution Preamble), is itself something of a revival of the sort of the backwards critique (made earlier by the ideological remnants of the followers of the Gang of Four), critique that is now echoed in some extreme quarters beyond what Zhang speaks to as of the “New Left”.

Equally ideological have been the reforms that followed since the 1990s, from those of Jiang Zemin (Sange Daibiao) to those of Hu jingtao (harmonious society)—and all within a carefully cultivated ideologically vigorous Marxist Leninist framework. The move from an emphasis on the development of socialist modernization emphasizing the development of socialist markets to one focusing on building socialist democracy, rule of law etc. does not mean that ideology, long dormant, has reappeared. It does suggest a refocus of an ideological discussion that has never disappeared. And that discussion is framed within Marxist Leninist parameters—however much one might seek to invest it with Confucian, Doaist or Western liberal characteristics. Thus that Chinese would be presumed to be “Communist ideologues”—again the pejorative—would be as unremarkable as expecting Western elites to be “liberal-Democratic ideologues.” And indeed, what made the 1990s and beyond remarkable was not the demise of Communist ideologues, but the emergence of a richness in working through the challenges for Chinese Marxist Leninism that socialist modernization posed for both State and Party. For Westerners with an ideological hidden agenda—the weakening of the foundations
of legitimacy of a Party-State system—this might be horrifying, and the need to characterize these intellectual currents as something else necessary—to advance its own ideological agendas. But that is politics.

2. The material pragmatism of the 1990s for most Chinese did not signal an “end of ideology” or more remarkably, an “end of Marxist Leninist” framing of China’s economic, political or social ordering. Nor did the reduction of the severity of ideological struggles signal the end of ideology or of the abandonment of Marxist Leninist framing. It is true that the population was left “more than eager to focus single-mindedly on an unprecedented bevy of economic opportunities.” But that was deliberately so and in furtherance of Marxist Leninist ideology. It is a shame that people no longer read Deng Xiaoping, even in China. The difficulty here is distinguishing between Chinese society, writ large, and the Chinese political elite—focused on the cadres of the Chinese Communist Party. Thus the idea of a post ideological society is itself ripe for interrogation. Neither Deng Xiaoping nor Jiang Zemin advocated anything close to political and social discourse that would stray far from its centering on Marxist Leninist premises, goals and objectives. The Four Cardinal Principles, the Sange Daibiao, the very clear demarcation of a line between socialist markets within socialist modernization and liberal political reform was made in 1989—and that line remains well protected—even within the rarified corridors of elite power in China. As a consequence, it is as plausible to suggest that there was never any period of post-ideology in China—an idea that is as odd in the Chinese as in the U.S. context. Rather, China’s governing ideology has been going through fundamentally distinct, and quite visible changes in the focus and manifestation of its ideology. These are well documented in the opening paragraphs of the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party—a document remarkably transparent (once one reads past for formal language) about ideological changes through ther present. Those manifestations in China—as in the U.S.—public policy producing law and regulatory frameworks and approaches, have indeed been changing, and since 2013, quite dramatically. But they remain well within the Marxist Leninist framework that has served to guide the CCP since 1927 and the state since 1949.

If that is the case, then one might wonder what, exactly is what Westerners understood as Chinese pragmatism? One way of understanding Chinese pragmatism was the way it presented itself to Western observers, usually blind to the way in which they tended to see and analyze foreign systems through their own normative ideologies. And, of course, what markets U.S. ideological manifestation more than (at least until this century) as the pragmatic. To see what manifested as pragmatism in China, then, for American and European serious China hands, at least those China hands eager to remain within the disciplinary and prestige structures of their group, was to see in Chinese pragmatism American ideological possibilities. And it was the narcotic effect of that unfortunate translation—one that never were there in the first place, at least not as they would have wanted them to be—that marked a very palpable tendency to see in China post 1990 the beginnings of patterns of transition—not just from central planning macro-economic policies, but also from a
Party-State system of political organization to something like Western liberal democracy (even if it also exhibited Chinese characteristics).

3. As such, Zhang is quite correct to reference the stereotype of Chinese pragmatism. Not that Chinese were not being pragmatic—just that they were being pragmatic within a quite well understood ideological universe whose policy and legal manifestations were remarkably stable between the early 1990s and the start of the second decade of the 21st century. That pragmatism was centered on a key element of CCP policy—one well described and quite transparent for those willing to look: the policy of developing the productive forces of the country (economic modernization) as the central policy element for the project of socialist modernization. This was not pragmatism devoid of ideology, but rather a quite deliberate policy choice deeply embedded within and at the time embraced as the best expression of the ideology of Marxist Leninism with Chinese characteristics at this stage in China’s development. More specifically the object has (and continues to be) to “carry out fundamental reform of the economic structure that hampers the development of the productive forces, and keep to and improve the socialist market economy” (CCP Constitution Preamble).

4. If that is the case, then what is being revived? Zhang suggests, and quite rightly, the ideological character of this revival. Zhang, not implausibly, looks at the evidence—the public expression by influential Chinese elites—and worries about revival. That is there is a fear that what is expressed suggests an effort—like that among rightists in the U.S.—to revive and return to some made up version of a past ideologically pure or distinct stage of national history-ideology. The usual suspects in fearful revival scenarios never strays far from two germinal figures—Mao Zedong and Confucius. Mao’s ideas have played a larger role now than in the past. But it is important to note that the use of Mao ideas may not be utilized to replicate his governing style. And indeed, any such move would itself breach the basic line of the CCP and could lead to disciplinary action—the CCP itself emphasizes in its ideology and has been testing the extent of the implementation of its line that “all members are equal before Party discipline” (CCP Constitution, Preamble). And, indeed, there has been a revival of Confucius in China, a revival now now decades old. That revival has opened the possibility, still lightly explored, for the re-examination of Confucian thought within the complex ideological structures of Chinese Marxist Leninism. It does not necessarily suggest a mere imitative revivalism or a political screen that covers an ideologically transformative agenda. The possibilities of theorizing Confucian elements within Chinese Marxist Leninism is quite possible, though it awaits a community of scholars worthy of the task.

5. Zhang is right not to be lured by the easy cynicism of that would reduce all this effort to propaganda. But I might suggest a different slant on Xi Jinping’s well known August 19, 2013 speech. That might as easily suggested what many had already hinted in the years before 2013—that China was entering a new stage of development; that this stage of development required the CP to shift some focus from its economic work—the development of productive forces for socialist
modernization—to the socialist modernization of its political, societal and administrative systems. That task, in turn, required a return to the task of Party work, which had evolved but had not been vigorous attended to since the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Party Congress. That task was made all the more necessary precisely because of what Zhang nicely points to—the rise of what seems like factions within the CCP itself that appeared beyond the disciplinary structures of democratic centralism and that had laid bare the need for a bit of socialist modernization of the CCP basic line itself. That was the sort of ideological work that has appeared to have slipped out of the CCP itself and into the blogosphere, on the one hand, and the elite academies, on the other. The consequence—by 2013 it appeared that the leadership role of the CCP was as much influenced by the “Big V’s” as it was by traditional CCP ideological organs. Perhaps innovation within these traditional institutional sources of ideological movement were involved in other matters, or perhaps others took earlier to the task of opening the mind, seeking truth from facts and moving CCP ideology forward in line with the changing Chinese context. That is left to the judgment of history. Critical to that understanding of that consequence were two realities on the ground. The first suggested the growing distance between CCP “classical” ideology and its manifestation in the daily lives of Chinese from the most humble to the most exalted levels of the social order. The second, and perhaps most important among these were its manifestation in the severity of corruption and in the weakness of the legal system the state had been at some pains to develop over the course of the first decade of the 21st century.

6. Zhang’s discussion of the rise of political “New Leftism” and Confucian movements is instructive. And it is important. The demands of some elements of these movements certainly express principles of governance quite incompatible with those of Western democratic states. And it is important to remember that as one considers the normative development of these movements. Yet for me the importance lies beyond the politicking of netizens and the groupings of academics. It’s core importance lies with the relationship between these movements and the CCP basic line—that is, to the extent that these positions may be developed and maintained outside of the disciplinary structures of the ideological framework on which the state is founded. Just as the tendencies toward an empty imitation of Western principles—and ideology—by elements of the Chinese “right” appear at odds with the current organizational-ideological framework of China so does the movement toward a backwards looking agenda by “left” elements. In either case, extreme positions begin to resemble those of extremist political candidates in the United States—perhaps alluring and naughty but clearly marginal and close to beyond what might be legitimate. But it also suggests a reason for the substantial attention now being paid by the CCP to its political work—and to the disciplining of its cadres with reference to its ideological line. It is in that respect that what may pass for “war” to outsiders may be the reflection of a dynamic process of change as China matches its ideology to its realities to keep both current and relevant.

7. Zhang, thus, is absolutely right to see in this dynamism serious consequences for
Chinese policymaking—the way one understands the serious consequences to U.S. policymaking in our own current ideological wars playing out against the national election. I would suggest, though, that the sources of legitimacy (always a favorite point of analysis from the American perspective) have not changed in China whether it is characterized as a “pragmatically materialist society” or as an “ideologically charged and polarized one.” China’s CCP has always remained ideologically charged—even as its people have been shielded from much of the slow development of ideology. That, in retrospect, might not have been the best approach, even as a consequence of privileging the development of productive forces over other aspects of socialist modernization. But it is also clear that the ideological conversations that have continued to play out at the highest levels of the CCP have now seeped into general society. And that is itself a sensitive policy issue for the CCP and the structuring of its leadership role in the state and society. As Zhang suggests, until a new relative consensus emerges from the different lines of thought currently at play, there will appear to be some instability in the leadership order. That, more than anything, is a consequence of the Leninist organization of the state. The Americans can afford ideological fracture for a little while with no effect on the sense of its stability; a vanguard party has no such luxury (and thus one understands better the legitimacy enhancing value of concepts like democratic centralism, and the mass line, in CCP operation). Indeed, the mass line can be understood as a means of “grounding” ideology in society, and could be used instrumentally to heal ideological fractures. But gaps between ideology, policy and practice also produces, as Zhang suggests, the unfortunate history of the Hong Kong Occupy Movement in 2014.

8. But in the end, as Zhang suggests, Chinese policy makers remain deeply ideological. From my perspective to think otherwise or to long for a non ideological situation would be incomprehensible in the Chinese system. Like Zhang I agree that the “new ideology” at least in its official versions are still cautious, though now more overtly focused on politics—and thus on the Party. I might have been less harsh in my assessment of Xi Jinping—avoiding Zhang’s description of Xi as the pragmatic autocrat for a description in Xi might be seen as a deeply embedded first among equals within a vanguard party structure now wary of the destructive power of cults of personality (even as they use some of the instruments of such an era). One is here reminded of the old Chinese insight: to bring down your enemy make him a god. And indeed, to some extent, the harvesting of information that seeks to make the case for a growing cult of personality around Xi might be evidence of politics—but not of ideology.

9. Lastly, unlike Zhang I am not sure I hope that “the Western notion that Chinese politics are simply rooted in pragmatism will soon die out.” I might instead hope that the necessary ideological basis of the policies that may flow from a pragmatism with Chinese characteristics, however incompatible with Western ideologies or measures of legitimacy, might be better understood, and thus understood applied rigorously to whatever problem may present itself in our mutual relations. That pragmatism, grounded in the deeply Marxist Leninist Chinese political lines of
“emancipating the mind, seeking truth from facts and keeping up with the times” produces the sort of flexibility within normative constraints that are the hallmark of a dynamic but fundamentally stable political system, one that, like the United States in its own way, is still evolving. In this sense, China, like the United States, remains deeply embedded in the same sorts of ideological wars. That ought to move our analysis from systemic to policy issues, and from legitimacy to conformity of Chinese policies to its own ideology.