Comments on “China’s Coming Ideological Wars”

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Recently, ideology has become a popular conversation piece in China. A recent illustration is the Cyberspace Administration of China ordering Sina to shut down Ren Zhiqiang’s microblog accounts on their platforms. Ren Zhiqiang is a property mogul in China who has more than 30,000,000 followers on his social media account. Last summer, Ren shared and commented on a post of the “Youth League Central Committee” about “Faith in Communism.” Ren stated that “Communism has been a lie for decades.” His comment was strongly protested by the “Youth League Central Committee” and some party media. In February, he made another post criticizing President Xi Jinping’s recent speech that Party media should always uphold Party’s will. Ren is not only a party member who used to be rewarded as “the outstanding CCP member” but also a typical businessman who has benefited from and is strongly vocal on economic reform. This event has caused a serious fermentation in terms of ideology. People have started discussing the relationship between ideology and the recent policies of the anti-corruption campaign, legal reform, and cultural supervision.

I am very glad to see that there is such an excellent article introducing China’s current ideological tension to the Western audience. I find this article logical and convincing. I would like to share the following thoughts on it.

The author Zhang Taisu makes a few important points. In China today, there are many signs of two distinct ideological groups: Left and Right. The Left is a combination of the "New Left" intellectual movement and the Neo-Confucian social conservative movement. The Right is the intellectual group that is more friendly to Western notions of free markets, constitutionalism, and civil rights. President Xi Jinping has been openly friendly to ideas coming from the Left. His speeches have embraced Mao and discussed the importance of Confucian values and ancient Chinese philosophy in general. It is not clear whether Xi actually agrees with the Left or if he is being pragmatic to gain their support. His actions are consistent with both possibilities. However, regardless of whether Xi is a sincere Maoist/social conservative, Western scholars will soon realize that ideology is a crucial part of Chinese politics. Scholars must abandon the idea that Chinese politics are purely pragmatic.

Western scholars seem to consider Mao Zedong’s administration as very ideological, Deng Xiaoping’s leadership as very pragmatic, and Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao’s administrations as pragmatic to the point of being post-ideological. Professor Zhang is certainly right that China cannot be considered post-ideological under Xi’s administration. However, in my opinion, the Western notion of a “post-ideological” China was never accurate. Simply, I do not believe China has ever been post-ideological.
The concept of post-ideology turns on the idea that the leadership does not care about ideological force but only economic growth. It is true that the social values in China have become more materially pragmatic in the economic growth since the reform and open up policy. But the political ideology has never lost its position as the foundation of the state theory and governance.

Political ideology is a very broad notion. It refers to many standard terms and labels such as Liberal & Conservative, Socialist & Communist, and Left & Right. Regardless of these terms, the core of political ideology is that it provides a set of ideals, theories, policies and orders as part of a belief system about how a society or institution should function. Within China's context, ideology has been merged with the Party's theories. Professor Backer argues in his manuscript “On a Constitutional Theory for China—From the General Program of the Chinese Communist Party to Political Theory,” that CCP ‘ideology’ is "an expression of the theoretical foundations of the political order." In his view, "[t]he cage of ideology restricts the political line of the CCP, and the state apparatus that administers that line."

The certainty and consistency of political ideology is guaranteed by the Party’s role in the State’s order. The specific expression of the ideology is stated by the second paragraph of the General Program of the CCP Constitution, which reads, “The Communist Party of China takes Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of Three Represents and the Scientific Outlook on Development as its guide to action.” If Westerners think that China has been post-ideological, it is because they do not understand the interconnection between the five theories. The basic task of China is to develop the productive forces and economy by carrying out reform in order to achieve socialist modernization. Political ideology is always the guidance to this task and direction.

Let’s take the development of the state-owned enterprises as an example. The CCP has long considered state-owned enterprises to be the foundation of the socialist economy. The reform of the state-owned enterprises has been conducted for more than thirty years, and the capital operation, corporate governance, and personnel management are now totally different than before the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Party. However, the emphasis of ideology has never ceased. The ideological work within the state-owned enterprises has been ongoing throughout all the stages and processes of the reform. For example, “the campaign to maintain the advanced nature of the Party members,” “the activity of studying the scientific concept of development,” “the education and practice of the Party’s mass line,” and “the education of three stricts and three steadies” is typical ideological education based on the five theories. State-owned enterprises are one of the main fields for these events.

To observe and analyze the coming ideological war in China, one has to consider China’s current situation and the global political and economic climate based on facts. But more importantly, one has to jump out of the Western ideological framework and figure out what ideology represents and what its fundamental role
is in China. Only in that way, can one understand that ideological tension has always been part of China’s society, only in different battles, images, or to different extents.