

The Communist Party of China and Ideology

Kerry BROWN

The People's Republic of China since 1978 has been called a post-Communist and post-ideological society. And yet, at least in terms of maintaining an institutional network of party schools and think tanks, and a common conceptual language for the political elite within the Communist Party, China continues to put resources and effort into what could be construed as ideological work. What is the function of this, in a society which is undergoing dynamic economic and social reform? Does ideology continue to perform a role in building up cohesiveness amongst the political elite in contemporary China, and if so, how? This article looks at the ways in which ideology is formulated in the key speeches of Hu Jintao and in the institutional and linguistic context of these.

IDEOLOGY FOR THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

China has been called a “post-Communist society”. Marxism and the other dominant thought forms on which the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) came to power, and exercised that power from 1949, have been buried. It has been described as a system now guided by pragmatism and by simply finding what works to deliver the all-important economic growth. And yet, the language that elite Chinese leaders of the “fourth generation” use often seems to contradict this. In their use of terms, in the ways in which they frame the world, and in the moral and intellectual justifications that they invoke for policy, there does seem to be ideology. In comments made in early 2012, Party Secretary and President Hu Jintao wrote of the hostile intent of western powers and “their efforts ... to divide us”, and referred to the fact that “the international culture of the west is strong while we are weak ... Ideological and cultural fields are our main targets”.¹ The CPC puts a lot of effort into crafting its ideological message, in fact, and this is testified by the network of Party Schools across the country, at the central and provincial level, the time devoted to training even the

Kerry Brown (kerry.brown01@googlemail.com) is Director of the China Studies Center at the University of Sydney. He received his PhD from the University of Leeds in Modern Chinese Language and Politics. His research interests include Chinese politics and the Communist Party of China, China's foreign policy, China-Europe relations, Chinese intellectuals and thought and technology policy in China.

¹ Quoted in Peter Simpson, “Chinese President Hu Jintao Warns of Cultural Warfare from West”, *Daily Telegraph*, 2 Jan. 2012, at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8988195/Chinese-President-Hu-Jintao-warns-of-cultural-warfare-from-West.html>> [14 Jan. 2012].

most senior cadres in ideological work and the imperatives of both the fourth- and fifth-generation leaders to get their ideological messages right. This article explores what is meant by ideology, how it manifests itself in contemporary Chinese elite leaders' language and political behaviour, and in the end, why it matters to them and those outside China.

WHAT IS IDEOLOGY?

Ideology may well matter, but in order to be clear about this, we need to answer the question: what, in fact is it? The very term itself is highly contested in Western discourses, let alone within China. According to one definition, ideologies “map the political and social worlds for us. We simply cannot do without them because we cannot act without making sense of the worlds we inhabit”.² Terry Eagleton, the British cultural theorist, offers the following menu of different meanings as a starting point: the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life; a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class; ideas which help to legitimise a dominant political power; forms of thought motivated by social interests; the conjuncture of discourse and power; the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world; action-orientated sets of beliefs; and the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure.³

In this article, ideology is necessarily linked to the key, discreet areas of power, language and social practices and institutions. These have been its most explored areas in recent literature. In current theories, ideology operates in two directions: as a means of control and direction over key vocabularies, linking them with power systems in order to achieve political ends; and as something linked to practices, institutions and organisation, legitimising and operationalising their key objectives. From this perspective, it is the bones within the system, giving structure, cohesiveness and functionality to social practices, justifying them to key constituencies and audiences. In this reckoning, ideology can best be seen as a neutral term, something which exists everywhere where there is social behaviour, hierarchy and discourse. It exists in the cultural, social and political realm, as well as with economics and economic management and strategy. In this article, it is purged of its sometimes derogatory meaning. Even to proclaim the death of ideology is, in this sense, to make an ideological statement.

In post-modernist thinking about ideology, the fundamental issue is its link to power — power understood in the terms set out by French philosopher Michel Foucault as a field of forces, existing in a zone for negotiation between different actors and subject to continuous contestation and redefinitions. Political ideology is driven by the need for all political forces to legitimise their strategies and programmes, by

² Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 2.

³ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 2–3.

creating an appropriate intellectual narrative — a logic to justify their dominance in certain key areas of a society's political life, and in the economy of power distribution. In western liberal democracies, theocracies, or authoritarian states, ideology is linked to different means of delivering power to specific groups — through mechanisms that range from elections to consultations, and other means of social capture and the distribution of social capital.

Ideology makes no sense unless it is linked to language. Dominant vocabularies in particular — what Raymond Williams called “keywords” — has been a specific area of research, with the bid for dominance over the rights to use certain kinds of language and the links to legitimacy and the rights to activate the content of that language in the larger social world. Institutions, belief communities and schools have all been the agents by which this has been achieved, with philosophers since Foucault, in particular, concentrating on this link between what is said, who says it, and the kinds of power they are laying claim to, with special interest in the negotiations between different power systems and actors.

IDEOLOGY IN CHINA UNDER MAO AND DENG

In the specific context of 20th-century China, ideology has served two functions. The first is that it has been linked to the promotion and achievement of modernity. The second is that it has delivered consensus and cohesiveness in areas where there was fragmentation and disagreement.

The link with modernity is perhaps the most powerful. The introduction of Marxism to China in the 1910s onwards allowed the articulation of an alternative vision of social structure and power relations. But it needed to be recalibrated to the specific conditions within post-imperial China. China's first encounter with modernity had been traumatic. The aspiration of the May Fourth generation intellectuals in 1919 had been to define a uniquely Chinese version of modernity. Mao's vision of a Chinese modernity involved adapting the class nomenclature of Marxism to the predominantly rural economy of China. It gave traction to a social vision which as it transpired, was highly Utopian. According to Jie Li, the post-1949 project under Mao was a moment of “gaining broad mass consent by means of a nationalist popular language of insurgency and liberation and coercing the diverse social groups by wartime disciplines and injunctions of national salvation.” It was intimately linked to a search for an “alternative modernity that transcended capitalist modernity and its Eurocentric assumptions of historical teleology and economist determinism.”⁴

The political impact of this ideological project was in two areas, where they are intimately linked to the language and power structures of Maoist China. The first was an enormous effort to apply highly determined class labels, in order to unify Chinese across ethnic, cultural and other divisions and give each individual

⁴ Quoted in Su Xiaobo, “Revolution and Reform: The Role of Ideology and Hegemony in Chinese Politics”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 20 (2011): 316.

a meaningful political space within the post-revolutionary moral settlement. The labels of proletariat, bourgeoisie, petit bourgeoisie, capitalist, etc., were carefully adapted and calibrated, lifted from their original context in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and applied to the unique conditions prevalent in a China emerging from agrarian to semi-industrial production models. The social consequences of these labels, once determined and fixed, were played out from the Great Leap Forward (1957–1958) into the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Ideology infected and politicised public space, embroiled in increasingly widespread and ambitious social movements. Its apogee was the later era of the Cultural Revolution when having the right class labels became in some cases a matter of life and death for people. Mao's earlier celebration of contradiction meant that highly unstable intellectual resting points were reached and then subverted through the course of this movement with the Party structures themselves challenged by revolutionary committees and the creation of alternative power structures, as Mao viewed it, within society and the CPC.

The second element of Maoist ideology was the creation of a Party-state. In this sense, there has been some longevity. The Party, with its attendant ideological justification, occupied a specific social space supplying unity, legitimacy and an all-embracing social belief system. This was supported by a historic narrative of revolutionary liberation, which was directed towards highly Utopian ends.

Maoist modernity was always contested, and never enjoyed entire hegemony even at its point of deepest integration into post-revolutionary society. Talk of the Four Modernisations occurred in 1965 and then again in 1975, promoted by Premier Zhou Enlai. That there was an alternative view of Chinese modernity became clear in 1978, soon after Mao's death, when the Four Modernisations became the spur of a redirection in Chinese party ideology. Deng Xiaoping's removal of class struggle as a key objective of political life in the PRC, and replacing it with more pragmatically measured economic ones became clear with the creation of a different institutional set up from 1980 — the removal of communes and the building of town and village enterprises, special economic zones and most boldly the initial tolerance, followed by the enfranchisement, of a non-state sector through processes of marketisation. This was given the unique formulation of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" within canonical CPC documents, and accompanied deeper institutionalisation and definition of the role of the Party and the State. Professionalisation of cadres and their career structures, and an embracing of alternative views of modernity from the outside world were all parts of this redirection. This demanded an ideological change, one undertaken with immense effort in order to maintain cohesiveness and was occasionally challenged by strongly entrenched voices which argued for a different strategy — one that struck more closely to the legacy of Mao.

The continuing needs to manage the contradictions that arose in society as a result of these reforms and have ideological unity is best exemplified in the tension between economically and intellectually embracing a market while maintaining a privileged adjudicating role for the Party. From outside, this seems a highly paradoxical outcome — a society which seems overtly capitalist, and yet politically maintaining

fidelity to socialism. There is less understanding of how this looks from within — the very real debates and arguments about how to balance the need to expedite reform and modernity — while maintaining cohesiveness through a consensus-driven political model, and through the best language by which first to negotiate it and then implement it. The bottom line is that the reform process would not have happened, and would not have economically succeeded, without an ideological justification.

IDEOLOGY DURING THE JIANG ZEMIN PERIOD: EMBRACING THE PRODUCTIVE FORCES OF SOCIETY

The greatest contradiction in modern Chinese society in the 1990s was the increasing importance of the non-state sector and civil society, and the handling of what some called a post-socialist settlement in which the Party needed to redefine its role and maintain its privileged position despite fundamental structural changes in the role of the state. There was recent evidence of how problematic this could be. In the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the contradictions between political and economic reform came to a breaking point in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party. Deep engagement with marketisation for China was still a central objective, as Deng's Southern Tour in 1992 showed. But the anomaly of having economic growth produced in increasing amounts by non-state actors, and the wholesale restructuring of state owned enterprises (SOEs) offered the opportunity to rethink the role of the state in economic productivity. From 1997, therefore, Party Secretary and President Jiang Zemin talked of the need to enfranchise non-state actors, especially entrepreneurs, within the institutions and discourse of the CPC.

The “Three Represents” (*san ge daibiao*) theory that was articulated to deal with this contradiction is simple and had its origins in the talks that Jiang gave in 1995 on the “three stresses” (*sanjiang*) — to stress study, politics and healthy trends. With Deng Xiaoping thought officially written into the Chinese Constitution at the Party Congress held a year after his death in 1997, Jiang was able to formulate his “theoretical contribution” more completely. In one pithy formulation, it focussed on what the CPC currently represents:

- the development trends of advanced productive forces
- the orientations of an advanced culture
- the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people of China⁵

The practical impact of this was that from the 16th Party Congress in 2002, the private sector was recognised in the Party Constitution and entrepreneurs were finally allowed to join the CPC. The move was a timely one:

⁵ “What is the Three Represents”, *china.org.cn*, at <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/zhuanti/3represents/68735.htm>> [12 Jan. 2012].

The emergence and growth of the private sector in China has been one of the most profound socioeconomic changes in China since the onset of Post-Mao reforms. From the early 1990s, the number of private enterprises increased by 35 per cent annually and now [2007] totals over 5 million. The private sector is the main source of growth in China; by 2007, it contributed 66 per cent of gross domestic product, and 71 per cent of tax revenues.⁶

It was, therefore, a constituency that could not be ignored.

HU JINTAO'S CONTRIBUTION: FIGHTING AGAINST INEQUALITY

Enfranchising entrepreneurs was a double-edged sword, not just in the way it forced a redefinition of some of the key vocabularies and ideological positions that had been dominant from 1949 to 1999. It also created economic space for actors who, in their success, simply started running away from other members in society. Inequality has been one of the great challenges of the Hu Jintao era, and one of the core targets of ideological campaigns.

This was aptly symbolised by the visit Hu Jintao made on 5 December 2002, days after his elevation to General Secretary of the CPC, to Xibaipo in Hebei, an isolated town which had served as the last revolutionary capital before Mao Zedong had come to Beijing in 1949. The symbolism of the revolutionary geography being used to link the leader with those who had founded the regime and were the core of its first generation was clear. In a speech given there, Hu reminded the Party members present and also the wider community to which he was speaking beyond, of the “two musts”, upholding the spirit of plain living and hard struggle, and to “remain modest, prudent and without arrogance and rashness.”⁷

The challenge of inequality persisted. Premier Wen Jiabao stated in 2003 that “the level of relative affluence that China has now attained is not comprehensive or balanced and the main discrepancy is in the rural areas”.⁸ Hu’s own belief in reaching out to as broad a social constituency as possible became clear in his speech on 1 July 2003 when he talked of “the need to build a party that serves the interests of the public and governs for the people”.⁹ The phrase “taking people as the centre/core” (*wei ren you ben*) became a critical one, with the Third Plenum of the Sixteenth Congress in October 2003 being a key moment to shift from talking not just of “economic developments” but also social ones. The aim was to build a “Party that serves the interests of the public and governs for the people”, to be “people centred”, and to use “scientific development”; in order to create “comprehensive, co-ordinated, sustainable development”.¹⁰

⁶ Jie Chen and Bruce J. Dickson, *Allies of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 1.

⁷ Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 243.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

If these were the objectives, what were the means of delivering this within the historic ideological parameters which had been bequeathed to Hu and fellow elite leaders? One of the keywords of the Hu era has been “scientific development” and “harmonious society”. These in fact were written into the Chinese State Constitution in 2007, and recognised as contributions to the development of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

Hu Jintao made three important statements about the core ideological beliefs of the CPC. These are contained in a speech given at the 85th Anniversary of the Foundation of the CPC on 30 June 2006, the speech at the Party Congress in October 2007 and a talk to celebrate the 30th anniversary of reform and opening up. Important additional material was included in a talk at the Sixth Plenum of the Seventeenth Congress Discipline and Inspection Committee on 10 January 2011.

IDEOLOGY IN HU’S SPEECHES: HARMONY AND MODERNITY

Hu’s speech on 30 June 2006 contained the central elements that dominated elite discourse in the PRC during the first decade of the 21st century. First, for legitimacy, there is a strong attempt to appeal to the narrative of revolutionary history. Second, there is the continuous effort to present the CPC and its ideology as the key embodiment of modernity and its most important driver in the PRC. Third, there is the tension created in trying to handle post-socialist belief systems while embracing issues which might seem contradictory or antithetical. Fourth, there is a focus on the political objective of making a message, or a declaration, for “all the people” and for the whole of society, showing that the Party delivers and represents the best entity to deliver a settlement across society. This aspiration for consensus has been one of the key characteristics of Hu’s period in power.

The speech commemorating the 85th anniversary of the Party’s founding in June 2006 was one of the most developed expressions of “harmonious society” and “scientific development”. Nodding to the narrative of Party history which was now accepted as the “historic truth”, Hu stated,

During the construction period of reform and opening up and socialist modernisation, we have opened up the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, persisting in taking economic development as the central task, persisting in the four basic founding principles, persisting in reform and opening up, making advances in the setting up of a socialist market economy, improving the comprehensive power of our country and the living standards of the people, in order to fully create a middle income society (*xiaokang shehui*), basically realising social modernising to open up a vast future.¹¹

¹¹ Hu Jintao, “Zai qingzhu zhongguo gongchandang chengli 85 zhounian ji zongjie baoche dangyuan xianjinxing jiaoyu huodang da huishang de jianghua” (Speech Made at an Advanced Educational Meeting of Cadres Celebrating and Summarising the 85th Anniversary of the Founding of the CPC), *Xinhua*, 1 July 2006 (author’s translation).

The sense of the Party being the vanguard leading to the future and the main engine of modernity is returned to again soon after: “Only our Party can become the nucleus of power to lead the Chinese revolution, construction, and reform, only it is able to bear the great trust of the Chinese people and the Chinese nationality ... In the last 85 years, our party has preserved and developed the progressive creative line”.

People “are the force for creating history”. From the 1970s as “the international environment was dominated by peace and development”, the Party “faced the contradiction between the daily increase in the material and cultural needs in society and the backwardness in the productive capacity of China”. Reform and opening up were implemented in order to address this contradiction. The CPC is the guarantor of historic scientific-based progress — where the function of science is posited in terms of empirical truth aiding social development. But in order to have stable development and to take China towards “a harmonious (*hexie*) society with scientific development”, and to construct “the new socialist countryside” (*shehui zhu yi xin nongcun*), it is necessary to regard the CPC as representing the best interests of the people, the repository of their collective modernist hopes and aspirations. “History proves, only with the deep recognition of the mighty force of people ... can our Party get complete trust ... and gain victory”.

To do this, to be a modernising force, linked to the productive vanguard of the people, the Party relies on the fundamental tools of theory and strategic policies. These are the “life” (*shengming*) of the Party. Having a correct theoretical understanding, based on the development in China of Marxism, is crucial. “Our Party persists in liberating thought, seeking truth from facts ... combing the fundamental tenets of Marxism with the actual situation in China.” Only with the “non-stop progress of the realisation of theory and policy can our Party ... find the right path, the scientific manner, in which to push forward the Party and the people’s enterprise from victory to victory.”

The impact of modernity through the reform and opening up process since 1978 has created problems, contradictions, threats and imbalances. Hu admits this. “From first to last the Party knows that its central task during different historic periods is to deal with these contradictions. But the Party is at the heart of all attempts towards progressiveness in society, pushing forward the advancement of Chinese productivity, advancing its culture, being “the embodiment of the basic benefits of the great mass of the Chinese people.”

Progressiveness (*xianjinxing*) after all “is the essence of Marxist party building”, the “basic service and the eternal theme” of Marxism. Despite daily changes in the international system, therefore, the Party’s consistent commitment to this on behalf of the people acts as a foundation for stability. In essence, the Party embodies progress, giving a framework in which the forces of productivity can be unleashed, continuing the historic project started in 1949 of building a “new, strong country”. There is space in this to discuss developing democracy, but one within the framework supplied by the Party, which represents the interests of all people, and which remains the sole guardian of modernity in the PRC.

“THE HISTORIC MISSION”

In a speech made a little over a year later, at the Seventeenth Congress of the CPC on 15 October 2007, Hu declared that this was “an extraordinary period”. “At its Sixteenth Congress,” he went on, “the Party established the important thought of the Three Represents as its guide and made the strategic decision to build a moderately prosperous society in all respects.” Hu listed a long menu of these successes: economic strength grew, reform and opening up continued and “living standards improved significantly”. Fresh progress was “registered in improving democracy and the legal system”, and “social development proceeding in an all round way”. However, “while recognising our achievements we must be well aware that they still fall far short of the expectations of the people.”

One issue that faced Hu during this Congress was continued leftist anxiety about the rightness of importing so many ideas from the West and adopting too much marketisation. To head this off, he devoted a whole section to the correctness of the decision made at “the historic Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee which ushered in the new historic period of reform and opening up”. Reform and opening up “represent a great new resolution carried on by the people under the Party’s leadership in a new era to release and develop the productive forces, modernise the country, bring prosperity to the Chinese people and achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. It also had historic legitimacy: “the great cause of reform and opening up was conducted on a foundation laid by the Party’s first generation of collective leadership”, and continued by its second- and third-generation leaders. On this reading of the Party’s history, there had been only consistency since 1949 in terms of overall direction and strategy, and that was to pursue modernity, progress and development. “Rapid development represents the most remarkable achievement of this new period [since 2002].” Hu’s final statement on reform was emphatic: “Facts have incontrovertibly proved that the decision to begin reform and opening up is vital to the destiny of contemporary China.”

Within this ideological formulation, the key task of the leadership was therefore to offer refinements and improvements, to build, as it were, on the work of Mao, Deng and Jiang. The “scientific outlook on development” is a key tool in this, acknowledging the economic achievements but also recognising that “overall productivity remains low, the capacity for independent innovation is weak and longstanding structural problems and the extensive mode of growth are yet to be fundamentally addressed”. Behind this is the intense debate about sustainability, both of the growth model, the economy and the infrastructure of society, which had been ongoing since the very start of the reform era in 1978. Imbalances abounded, between the cities and the countryside, between the rich and the poor and between the different, newly created and defined social groups. People in the late reform period were becoming more demanding, “our society is becoming more dynamic, but profound changes have taken place in the structure of society, in the way society is organised, and in the pattern of social interests, and many new issues have emerged”. The scientific outlook on

development “takes development as its essence, putting people first as its core, comprehensive, balanced and sustainable development at its basic requirement, and overall consideration as its fundamental approach”. Governance, putting the people first, pursuing sustainability, and striving to find balance while remaining a dynamic, ever changing society were critical in order to build a harmonious society. “Scientific development and social harmony are integral to each other”. In order to do that, Hu states that “we must continue to deepen reform and opening up.” The Party needs to be strengthened. The whole of society needs to be recruited into this common goal.

The policy goals set out by Hu in this speech for achieving a “harmonious society” and pursuing “scientific development” were to “promote balanced development to ensure sound and rapid economic growth”, to increase citizens’ participation in political affairs and to promote socialist core values so that “fine ideological and ethical trends will be encouraged”. By 2020, therefore, after the implementation of these measures, “China, a large developing socialist country with an ancient civilisation will have basically accomplished industrialisation, with its overall strength significantly increased and its domestic market ranking as one of the largest in the world”. It will be a country “whose people are better off and enjoy markedly improved quality of life and a good environment”. Its citizens “will have better institutions in all areas and Chinese society will have greater vitality coupled with stability and unity”.

Discrete separate areas of policy focus consisted in enhancing Chinese innovation, upgrading the industrial infrastructure, building a new socialist countryside (one where the stark imbalances in terms of wealth, provision of education and medical care, and infrastructure would be ameliorated) and addressing some of the country’s immense energy efficiency and environmental problems. Beyond these practical policy objectives, there were also the equally critical ones connected to “promoting ... socialist culture”. Whatever happened, it was important to “build up a system of socialist core values and make socialist ideology more attractive and cohesive”.

In his final words, Hu struck a note of caution: “We are bound to meet difficulties and risks in our endeavour. We must therefore stay prepared for adversities in times of peril, be mindful of potential dangers, and always maintain our firm faith in Marxism, socialism with Chinese characteristics and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”

Mao’s embrace of contradiction has been noted above. For Hu, the opposite seemed to be the case. The challenge was to find balance, stability and ways to address contradictions. While he avoided the word “Confucius”, many others started to appeal to a sense of ancient Chinese values which reached back two and a half millennium to the time of the great philosophers. “Taking people as the base” was ascribed to Mencius, a near contemporary of Confucius.¹²

¹² This is best illustrated by Beijing academic Yan Xuetong’s *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

REFORM OR DIE: 30 YEARS OF OPENING UP

In a speech Hu made a year later, on 18 December 2008, to mark the 30th anniversary of the Reform and Opening Up process, his main objective was to demonstrate legitimacy by being seen as proceeding with a project linked seamlessly with the reform process instigated in December 1978. He specifically mentioned, right at the head of the speech, the “leftist” challenges on the consensus centrist position on Party modernity in the last decades:

Under the leadership of Comrade Deng and other lifelong revolutionaries, the Third Plenum of the Central Committee of the Tenth Party Congress [in December 1978] conscientiously corrected the leftist aberration of the Cultural Revolution, criticising the ‘whateverists’ [those that claimed that whatever Mao said or did was correct],’ ending the conflict caused by class struggle, and taking economic development as the key task.

The emphasis now, after “following the correct line of Marxism Thought, the political line and the organisation line” was to “liberate and develop social productive capacity”, modernising the country, allowing the people to get prosperous”.¹³ The great transition in the last three decades had been to go from being a planned economy (99 per cent of economic activity in the late Mao period was under central state control) to the market economy, “a great historic shift”.¹⁴

In becoming what was to be then the world’s fourth largest economy, according to Hu, the PRC had an average annual growth rate of 9.8 per cent between 1978 and 2008. This prosperity had proved that “in striving to develop socialist democratic politics, the people, in becoming the masters of their own houses, have received an even better safeguard”.¹⁵ Over this, relations between all nationalities (*minzu*) in China, all religious groups, all classes of society and between China and the Chinese compatriots (*tongbao*) in the outside world should become “more harmonious”. As in the speech at the Seventeenth Party Congress, Hu stated that the “meaning and deep impression of the Eleventh Party Congress Third Plenum” was absolutely correct: “The great achievements of reform and opening up are the result of the unity between the Party and the people of all ethnic groups in the PRC”.¹⁶

As in Hu’s 2007 speech, this all had an ideological basis, creating consistency in the social beliefs across the new groups emerging in Hu’s PRC (see below). “The theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics,” he declared, “is the latest success of the Sinification (*zhongguohua*) of Marxism, the most precious riches of the Party’s politics and spirit, and the foundation of the common thought of the whole people’s

¹³ Hu Jintao, “Zai jinian dang de shiyi xu san zhong quanhui zhaokai 30 zhounian dahuishang de Jianghua” (Speech Remembering the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress), reprinted in *Liu ge weishenma (The Six Why’s)* (Beijing: People’s Daily Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 1–2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

struggle for unity.”¹⁷ In order to continue the critical reform process, China had to deepen its own development, making productivity the key, under the joint leadership of the Party and the people, with Marxism seen as the expression of the people’s will: “The mass of the people are the fundamental source of the Party’s strength and victory”.¹⁸ Uniting socialism with market economy principles had been one of the great ideological and political successes of “Marxism with Chinese characteristics”. The new stage was to push forward with political reform, still led by unity between the working class and the farmers: “People’s democracy is the lifeblood of socialism ... without democracy there is no socialism, and there can be no socialist modernisation”.¹⁹ This did not mean “using the western models”. It did mean creating a more balanced, equal and stable society, with socialism bringing about justice, China’s sovereignty being preserved, and the country’s interests being tightly defined and defended. “Without stability, then nothing is possible”.²⁰ Therefore the Party needed to have “unified thought”.²¹ The objective of the Party now after six decades in power and three decades of reform was “building a rich, democratic, civilised, harmonious, modern socialist country”.²²

In a modernising state where “the Party and the people are one”, as Hu declared when speaking to the Discipline Committee in January 2011, the Party had to act for the whole good of the people. The aim of his speeches was clearly to speak only in a way that could be agreed across almost all the complex interests groups and factions and other shades of opinion that constituted the CPC in the 21st century. In his address in early 2011, he referred to “complicated internal issues”, and the need to maintain stability, along with the need to create laws to safeguard this and resolve possible contention between people in society. The social contest for this was the explosive impact of rapid economic development. And the challenge this created had been to make new links in society, reassemble certain key lines of connection, break up others and create new social classes with distinct differences between each other. Class issues had reconfigured themselves from the Maoist era, but they had not disappeared. The issue was to find a new way of talking about class, i.e., a new framework, which dealt with some of the immense fractiousness that could grow from new imbalances and inequalities while avoiding the shattering divisiveness and the consequent breakdown of order in the late Mao era.

Fundamentally, in the early reform era, ideology had given elite Communist leaders in China a way to identify a political programme to deal with the fragmentation of Chinese society and its immense power imbalances. Communism had, in the early decades, cut largely across tribal alliances, and created a national common purpose.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

²¹ Ibid., p. 19.

²² Ibid., p. 21.

It had also addressed the age-old divisions between the haves and have-nots, the rural and the urban, and had something to say about the political impact of the very modest industrialisation that had occurred in China up to 1950. For Mao, a precise taxonomy of class structure had supplied him with the basis on which to wage a form of permanent war against those classes who were antipathetic to the new revolutionary, utopian programme. His 1957 speech, “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Amongst the People” had been the classic statement of this. “In the conditions prevailing in China today,” he had stated:

the contradictions among the people comprise the contradictions within the working class, the contradictions within the peasantry, the contradictions within the intelligentsia, the contradictions between the working class and the peasantry, the contradictions between the workers and peasants on the one hand and the intellectuals on the other, the contradictions between the working class and other sections of the working people on the one hand and the national bourgeoisie on the other, the contradictions within the national bourgeoisie, and so on.²³

On how to handle these social conflicts, Mao had initially sounded reasonable: “The only way to settle questions of an ideological nature or controversial issues among the people is by the democratic method, the method of discussion, of criticism, of persuasion and education and not by the method of coercion or repression.” But a more prescriptive tone then appeared:

To be able to carry on their production and studies effectively and to arrange their lives properly, the people want their government and those in charge of production and of cultural and educational organisations to issue appropriate orders of an obligatory nature. It is common sense that the maintenance of public order would be impossible without such administrative regulations. Administrative orders and the method of persuasion and education complement each other in resolving contradictions among the people. Even administrative regulations for the maintenance of public order must be accompanied by persuasion and education, for in many cases regulations alone will not work.²⁴

The persuasive method reached its apogee in the Cultural Revolution, an era when all-out war prevailed for a period between different groups that defined themselves separately and linked themselves to what were presented as legitimate strands of revolutionary activity.

Since 1978, the relationship between the individual and the state has been redrawn. But the need to create a new taxonomy of social classification has not gone away. Of course, the impact of rapid growth on social development had been disruptive, and allowed a reconfiguration of social groups, creating a swath of winners and losers and redrawing the boundaries of different kinds of elites with their access to sources of power.

Social conflict in late reform China has appeared in new forms, and created sharper challenges for state leaders and for the Party in its efforts to craft a cohesive

²³ Mao Zedong, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People* (Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Press, 1957), pp. 3–4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–2.

message across all these groups. Many parts of the Chinese political, economic and social state functioned better than ever before. The main issue was the creation of new identities for social groups and their need to find a voice and social space. Political scientist Teresa Wright looks at some of these new categories in her book, *Accepting Authoritarianism*. In the “Late Reform Era” (from the early 1990s onwards), with “a dramatic acceleration and expansion of state led economic privatisation and marketisation”, where the CPC has “moved from tolerating the private sector to embracing it”, entrepreneurs have become increasingly wealthy, but there has been “an even more highly polarised socio economic structure” resembling an onion dome, where “the wealthiest 20 per cent of Chinese citizens earned more than 59 per cent of China’s income” with the bottom 20 per cent getting only 3 per cent of the country’s wealth, a difference of 18 to 1 compared to the US, where the difference is 15 to 1.²⁵

In this complex and increasingly stratified society, the CPC has devoted considerable effort and time to brokering deals and accommodations with new social classes, from private entrepreneurs, to professional urban dwellers, rank and file private sector workers, migrant labourers and farmers. It has achieved its greatest success with entrepreneurs, of whom a staggering third are now Party members. But the different kinds of deals that the Party has been able to do have also been supplemented by the ways in which these separate social classes see their best interests. “For private entrepreneurs”, for instance, “who have garnered their wealth through their connections with the ruling party-state, political change would similarly threaten their economic advantage”.²⁶ Almost all the social groups see elements of the CPC’s message as protecting their best interests, with the possible exception of farmers, who “sit at the bottom of the lower tier of China’s onion dome-shaped economic structure”,²⁷ and whose experience of the sometimes highly unequal benefits of the central government’s development strategies have led them to “be restless and only tenuously tolerant of the political status quo.”

The Maoist legacy of collectivisation had left a deep memory stain, but even policies like the introduction of the Household Responsibility System in the early 1980s had created new power blocks and elites, with farmers able to sell back surpluses to the state and invest this money in other economic activities. Land ownership problems, the inherent problems in the maintenance of a dual citizenship system, and a range of other issues meant that “many peasants felt that their ability to rise economically was limited by socialist legacies and state controls”. The impact of the late reform policies had had mixed effects, “in some respects improving their quality of life and diminishing their political dissatisfaction, yet in other ways

²⁵ Teresa Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State-Society Relations in China’s Reform Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 6–7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

creating new types of hardship and political complaints”.²⁸ The impact of market forces, exposing the agricultural sector to fierce competition and the increase in the requisition of farming land for non-agricultural development had all taken a toll on the popular rural attitudes towards party elites, and the CPC’s message of “taking people as the base”. Peasants who have continued to depend on agriculture “have experienced absolute, not just relative, declines in their standards of living”.²⁹ Peasant-based challenges to the ruling elite, Wright concludes, are “likely to increase”.³⁰

The CPC’s constituency includes all of these groups, from the highly internationalised returned-students, of which there were about one million, to the private businesspeople with their deepening links into the global investment system, and the urban professionals with their interest in protecting their property, lifestyles and rights, to the farmers and migrant labourers, who clearly wanted more of the pie created by the policies of the previous three decades. How could an elite leader frame, from a Marxist discourse first used in China in a period of huge unrest and poverty and state breakdown, a message for a country careening towards modernity? This problem was compounded by the fact that at least for the elite, the ideology did matter — it was a basis for legitimacy, and for a cohesive worldview which had brought the CPC to power. Whatever the Hu CPC’s ideological position was, in the end the key issue was the organisational powers of the CPC itself, and its ability to demonstrate efficiency, relevance and legitimacy to the whole of society. That remained the fundamental challenge of the CPC in late Chinese post-reform modernity.

CONCLUSION: IDEOLOGICAL CHALLENGES FOR THE FIFTH GENERATION LEADERS

The complexity of defining an ideological message that has traction is increasingly difficult for the CPC. Elite language frequently suggests that the key task of the Party is to focus on economic productivity. But there is a sense that when this language is not used, things become much tougher. This article has discussed the Party’s recognition of this, addressing since 2002, not just economic but social development issues. But finding the ideological framework within which to do this is immensely difficult. As Beijing-based academic Wang Hui has argued, a feature of modern Chinese history has been that “every great political battle was inextricably linked to serious theoretical considerations and policy debate”.³¹ This is true of the transition from one group of leaders to another. In the coming five to ten years from 2012, the

²⁸ Ibid., p. 148.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 153.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 160.

³¹ Wang Hui, *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 6.

major ideological challenges are likely to come from a series of accommodations that the CPC must make in order to maintain its political, intellectual, historic and administrative function.

The first accommodation will be how the Party is able to redefine its role in relation to the state and government. This has been an ongoing project since 1980, with a number of attempts to reconcile the constitutional basis for the role of either, avoiding inconsistency and conflict. But from the village level upwards, the relationship between Party branches, congresses and administrative bureaus of various levels of government remain problematic in terms of pinning down overall responsibility for key policy. The issue of the Party being in overall command of the political direction of society is the current holding position.

The second accommodation is with different social groups mentioned in the section above. In what ways are they able to see their interests reflected in the CPC, and its core values as ones they can assent to? What kind of negotiation over this is possible? What are the terms of any likely breakdown where social groups either dissent, or simply defy, the CPC's ideological hegemony and its task of creating consensus? Where is the Party located in terms of being a broker, or forging neutral solutions in cases where there might be stark political differences in society?

The third accommodation is about how to manage the increasing pressures of contention, dissent and rupture within an ideology that is flexible, and where the space for contrary vocabularies is controlled, but not repressed and where there are clear mechanisms for adaptation and innovation. Members of the CPC governing elite are restricted by the need to use a language which is inherited from previous elite leaders in CPC history, and by their need to honour the ideological history of the CPC and PRC since 1949 without creating ruptures and a collapse of consent amongst different groups. In January 2012, Xi Jinping stated at a meeting with different departments of the CPC that “[teachers] are the engineers of the human spirit, and guides for growing-up students. [Teachers’] ideological and political qualities and noble morality had a strong influence on young students, and played a most important role in ideological dissemination”.³² The CPC somehow has to give this ideological content for dissemination to teachers, and to a country which has never been more complicated and had more extremes within it in terms of wealth levels. Framing a common message across the board and which will have traction and be seen to be relevant will prove immensely complicated. The populist campaigns of former Party Secretary of Chongqing, Bo Xilai, or Wang Yang in Guangdong might be seen as attempts to craft messages that have at least some emotional traction with society. But for the new leaders, coming up with an ideology and accompanying language that satisfies their power needs, but also has credibility in a society increasingly networked by social media and influenced by external ideas is likely to

³² *Xinhua*, 4 Jan. 2012.

prove gargantuan. The CPC in this area has to demonstrate the relevancy of its message and its historic legacy and language, in ways which appeal to an audience that is often indifferent, cynical and in some cases, outright hostile. At the heart of this will be the ways in which, continuing Hu's articulations, the CPC can still link itself as the main agent in delivering modernity and progress in China. Failure to do that will mean that its ideology will change from being an instrument in its exercise of power to being a tool to attack it. And that is a situation the fifth generation of CPC elites can neither tolerate nor afford to be put in.