

MARKET AND STATE POWER IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA. IS THERE A NEOLIBERAL SHIFT IN THE POST-MAO ERA?

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to question the so-called neoliberal shift of the post-Mao era, apparently dominated by its the core principles: the liberalization of the market, decentralization and reduction of state power. Since the reform period of Deng Xiaoping, a new form of governance has occurred, generating at least two new phenomena: (1) the transfer of power of former local and central Party officials into the new economical sector (resulting in a new and powerful social class), (2) the increase of income inequality and the pauperization of some formally stable working classes. Although the Chinese political elites still show commitment to socialist values and the firm way of control, they achieved the aim of developing a richer state through market-driven principles, but paying the high cost of social conflicts. In addition, the new hybrid governance still uses traditional trustful personalistic ties (guanxi) in business and public sector, as well as authoritarian methods to achieve its normative goals: a wealthier and more equal society. Thus, the claim of a neoliberal makeup of China will be contested.

Keywords: China after Deng, economic liberalization, guanxi, ideology, Legalism, market socialism, neoliberalism

“Let China sleep, for when she awakes, she will shake the world.”
(Napoleon)

Critics and admirers of China’s economic reform agree that we are witnessing a unique episode of social and economic transformation of People’s Republic of China. Since 1978, the market-oriented reform has

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greatly improved, through constant economic growth, the livelihood of more than 1.3 billion Chinese citizens. But in the same time, this path generated a highly unequal and divided society in which power and wealth are polarized by a small elite of party members and businessmen, while a large number of workers are deprived of employment and social rights. This development is interpreted by some academics as a sign of a “neoliberal restructuring”¹.

In the following, I am going to argue that, despite some economic policies that bear similarity to neoliberal practices, China’s economic reform is hardly able to be characterized as being neoliberal, either from an ideological or governmental point of view, but more a new hybrid form of government. Such a theoretical position contests the mainstream Western view of the Chinese economy, according to which there are evidences of western style market economy – as there is a noticeable increase in power of local authorities, and a firm privatization project for more than thirty years. In such extent, the argument of expansion of neoliberalism in China among many economical domains and urban spaces, or certain social groups were considered to be justified².

Considering the impact of numerous ideologies present in the contemporary People’s Republic of China (nationalism, developmentalism, soft forms of Maoism, Legalism, and social Confucianism, etc.) as well as the market reorientation and “open door” policy, these facts highlight a more hybrid form of governance which creates diversification of policies (partly centralized, partly liberal), a great transformation of social classes (new divisions of labor, new urban vs. traditional rural population, increasing regional gaps, etc); and a more flexible political discourse.

After the economies of Western nations imploded in late 2008...[t]alk spread, not just in China but also across the West, of the advantages of the so-called China model – a vaguely defined combination of authoritarian

¹ See Hairong Yan, “Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks” in *Cultural Anthropology*, no. 18, 2003, pp. 493-523.

² Cf. Ann Anagnost, “The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*)” in *Public Culture*, no. 16, 2004, pp. 189-208; Hairong Yan, *op. cit.*, pp. 511-518.

*politics and state-guided capitalism – that was to be the guiding light for this century.*³

Chinese Neoliberalism. A Western Perspective

Neoliberalism may generally be considered “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”⁴ This doctrine refers to the reduction of public spending on social welfare such as education and health care, liberalization of trade and investment, privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and a transformation of government functions. As such, neoliberalism has been referred to as an “ideology” or a “hegemony” (as used by Stuart Hall)⁵, or a “doctrine” (as in the Chicago School of Milton Friedman), or a “rhetoric”, or a “logic of governance”. However it is defined, it is about processes of governance which seek to create a particular relationship between, on the one side, a minimal state, and on the other, markets, capitalist enterprises and populations.

Harvey has shown in his analysis the rise of a new “post-Fordist” form of capitalism, in association with shifts in the processes of production, exchange and consumption. Although, the spread of global neoliberalism has been associated with this new form of capitalism, it made possible for transnational corporations in nation-states to reorganize all dimensions of everyday life. According to him, most part of the world has become neoliberal, including China:

the spectacular emergence of China as a global economic power after 1980 was in part an unintended consequence of the neoliberal turn in the advanced capitalist world.[..] By taking its own peculiar path towards ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ or, as some now prefer to call it,

³ Edward Wong, “China’s Growth Slows, and Its Political Model Shows Limits” in *New York Times*, 11. 05. 2012
[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/11/world/asia/chinas-unique-economic-model-gets-new-scrutiny.html?_r=0], 10 September 2014.

⁴ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 2.

⁵ Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London: Verso, 1988.

'privatization with Chinese characteristics', it managed to construct a form of state-manipulated market economy that delivered spectacular economic growth (averaging close to 10 per cent a year) and rising standards of living for a significant proportion of the population.⁶

According to this thesis, China indeed embraced neoliberalism through a two decades transformation from a closed system to an open dynamic center of capitalism. The argument that China is becoming neoliberal appears to be based on the conclusion that since the rise of Western neoliberalism and the liberalization of China occurred during the same period as time and were interdependent (through the outsourcing way of production in the West and the need of commerce opportunity in the East), they are similar in structure and in goals. The justification why China is neoliberal is that neoliberalism requires a large, easily exploited, and relatively powerless labor force, then China certainly qualifies as a neoliberal economy "with Chinese characteristics"⁷. The unique growth generated an unparallel social inequality, as much of the capital accumulated by private and foreign firms came from poorly paid labor. The result has been the eruption, after 2008, of different protests in many areas.

Apparently, Chinese workers don't seem prepared to accept the long working hours and the appalling working conditions as part of the price of modernization and economic growth, as well the non-payment of wages and pensions. Harvey and other authors argue that petitions and complaints to the central government on this score have risen in recent years, and the failure of the government to respond adequately has led to direct and more radical actions.⁸

Many other scholars in contemporary China have recently made claims that neoliberalism prevails in China. There are claims about the "neoliberal restructuring" of China⁹; about "a dominant rhetoric of neoliberal developmentalism"¹⁰; about neoliberalism in China as "a

⁶ See e.g. David Harvey, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

⁸ See *Ibidem*, pp. 146-149.

⁹ Yan, *op. cit.*, p. 511.

¹⁰ Anagnost, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

national project about global reordering [...] a national imaginary about a post-Cold War world" and about a prevailing "neoliberal biopolitics" in China¹¹.

On contrary, other important analysts characterize Chinese economy and social structure as having no included neoliberal elements, but a new economical vision which goes beyond Western neoliberalism principle. For instance, Nonini sees the dominant ideology of neoliberalism as being described through four main elements:

(A) markets are excellent: *unregulated markets maximize social happiness and individual satisfactions*; (B) state control over markets is horrible: *state regulation of or interference in markets distorts the otherwise optimal functioning of markets and should be minimized [...]*; (C) globalization is best: *free trade in capital and goods across national borders, and exports defined by comparative advantage without state impediments to mobility, allow markets to function best*; (D) rational, self-interested individuals are best: *the behavior of rational, self-interested, entrepreneurial individuals in markets as consumers, investors, bondholders, taxpayers, etc. is socially valuable as such because it is efficient in optimizing the use of capital and goods*.¹²

He argues a strong form of neoliberalism promotes all four claims – markets are excellent, state controls over them are horrible, globalization and free trade are best, and rational selfish market actors are best – within the rhetorics and practices that is hegemonic in a society. In contrast, a weak form of neoliberalism promotes some but not all of the four claims. The differences between the two forms are ones of degree, but the range is one along which a significant and important distinction can be made. "If neither the strong nor weak forms of neoliberalism nor the process of neoliberalization are present in China, [...] but its limits and what lies beyond it"¹³ This new

¹¹ Susan Greenhalgh, and Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China's Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics*, Stanford, Stanford University Press. 2005, p. 9.

¹² Donald Nonini, "Is China Becoming Neoliberal?" in *Critique of Anthropology*, no. 28, 2008, pp. 153-154.

¹³ Donald Nonini, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

economical perspective might be seen a fusion between different principles of governance.

The hybrid principle of governance

Since 1978, the Communist Party has promoted “liberalization” and systematically installed a “socialist market economy” in China. When liberalization was being conceived, the Party adopted a paternalist development strategy which has been summarized by Liew¹⁴ as to “make no Chinese worse off because of economic reform”. He notes that there was “a genuine desire of the Party, at least until 1992, to prevent the emergence of significant income differentials and to avoid social conflict”¹⁵, but the idea to *make no Chinese worse off* has been the subject of internal contention within the Party since then – as many party leaders and analysts agree that social inequality within China has increased greatly since the early 1990s¹⁶.

The state have created a hybrid form of hierarchic institutions that have combined older elements of Maoist governance (central planning and an socialist paternalism toward employees) with elements of market liberalization in order to develop forces of production, preserving the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, and consolidating the base of economic accumulation of China’s “cadre-capitalist” class¹⁷. Over the last two decades, many state officials, particularly in urban areas, have come to assume new entrepreneurial roles while enlarging the vertical control of the state over local social and economic organizations, and incorporating them into governance.¹⁸

¹⁴ L.H. Liew, “China’s Engagement with Neo-liberalism: Path Dependency, Geography and Party Self-reinvention” in *Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2005, p. 336.

¹⁵ L.H. Liew, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

¹⁶ Including Harvey and others.

¹⁷ Cf. Alvin Y. So, “Beyond the Logic of Capital and the Polarization Model: The State, Market Reforms, and the Plurality of Class Conflict in China” in *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2005, pp. 481-494; Ana Pantea, “Noile forme de legitimare ale unei superputeri. Forța și riscurile interne ale Chinei” in *China in ascensiune*, Cluj-Napoca: PUC, 2011.

¹⁸ Frank N. Pieke, “Contours of an Anthropology of the Chinese State: Political Structure, Agency and Economic Development in Rural China” in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2004, pp. 517-538.

Such a hybrid construction is in fact central to the new governing logic of the state, and is mediated by the culturally specific arts of personalistic relationship: *guanxi*.

[T]he reforms created myriad opportunities for the reorientation of entrepreneurial energies from the political to the economic sphere, which party cadres and officials eagerly seized upon to enrich and empower themselves in alliance with government officials and managers of SOEs, often influential party members themselves. In the process, various forms of accumulation by dispossession, including appropriations of public property, embezzlement of state funds, and sales of land-use rights, became the basis of huge fortunes. It nonetheless remains unclear whether this enrichment and empowerment has led to the formation of a capitalist class and, more important, whether such a class, if it has come into existence, has succeeded in seizing control of the commanding heights of Chinese economy and society.¹⁹

Arrighi presents the argument that the Chinese economical path follows Adam Smith's original *credo*. In fact, Smith advocated that the markets are a mode of organizing the society and are sources of domination within it, and not necessary sources of democracy. Smith anticipated the rise of China, but Arrighi goes further, concluding to see contemporary China as the next center of global capitalism. The new authoritarian capitalism challenges the Western model, and the Beijing consensus looks more appealing in several parts of the world.

New social classes and old values

The new classes which have emerged over the last two decades with different private rights include *geti* (small business people), *minying* (private entrepreneurs), *guoying* and *dajiti* (two related kinds of managers in the public sector), and *guanshang/guanying* (former officials, turned private owners of sold State Owned Enterprises).²⁰

¹⁹ Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith In Beijing. Lineages of the Twenty-First Century*, Chapter: "Origins And Dynamic Of The Chinese Ascent", London: Verso, 2007, pp. 368-369.

²⁰ Chun Lin, *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 255.

Government and party high officials have been in the first line of those benefiting by privatization and liberalization, while private entrepreneurs have also emerged in the same context. Cadres transformed the collective local township into businesses for their own profit. After the early 1990s, under the “grasp the big, release the small” policy, *guanshang* cadres systematically diverted the profits of large urban SOEs into their own hands by using arrangement such as the “one manager, two businesses”.

In this context, *guanshang* formed prosperous partnerships with business people, including foreign corporate investors. They provided to the entrepreneurs vital information and access to credit and to markets; and they accorded their partners the political protection they have needed to evade labor, health, pension and other welfare regulations. In return, capitalists provided *guanshang* fees and gifts, integrated them into valuable social networks, mobilized overseas connections, and provided them with shares in the enterprises they formed. These trends point to the centrality of personalistic relationships between the members of this new rising cadre capitalist class within the class formation process.

As many researchers have pointed out, *guanxi*²¹ or relationship is an important principle of the Chinese society. It has its origin in the Confucian thought, which includes a strong foundation on virtues as loyalty, reciprocity, good faith, diligence, kindness, benevolence, charity, politeness, trust, altruism and filial piety. Some scholars classify *guanxi* in different ways, showing its ubiquity in public life since the Qin Dynasty. It may be seen as well as a particular type of personal relationship, which has different types depending on the based *guanxi* is built, as, family ties, familiar persons and strangers. Others classify it according to its nature and purpose of interactions. There are three main types of *guanxi*: socio-affective *guanxi*, like family relationships, which involve primarily exchange of feelings in order to satisfy the need of love; instrumental

²¹ The term is literally made up by two distinct words: *guan* and *xi*. *Guan*, according to the Chinese dictionary, as noun, it can serve as a barrier or a juncture point that connects two different entities. As a verb, it means “to shut”, close or “turn off”. *Xi* is a conjunctive word that means in relation to or linked with something or somebody. *Guanxi*, as a final compound word, means “connections” or “relationships”. It can be related to individuals, families, organizations or networks and it operates in different life spheres as political, social and business sphere.

guanxi, the market type of resources-exchange relations as between buyers and sellers; and the mixed *guanxi*, which refers to the combination between the socio-affective *guanxi* and the instrumental *guanxi*, including both feelings and material benefits.²²

Since reputation has a great impact on future business opportunities, Chinese highly officials and business people are very protective of it. *Guanxi* refers to building a relationship based on trust and credibility²³. This may be achieved not only through socialization, but also through providing to counterparts with information about oneself and a company and convincing the other about a reliable source, an ideal business partner.

The strongest relationship-quality is characterized by the following: trust, which refers to benevolence, propriety, wisdom, righteousness and fidelity. Fidelity is loyalty and the repayment of a debt of gratitude and favors. Favor it is seen in Chinese culture as a humanized obligation, combining quality and relationships. Dependence, which is the Chinese desire for internal harmony, can be achieved through compromises, social conformity, non-offensive strategies and submission to social expectation. The last characteristic is adaptation, which refers to simplify the customization of products and services by suppliers to the request of others.²⁴

Guanxi is a critical factor in business environment, as the stronger the relationship of trust is, the higher is the performance of a company. There is a strong correlation between *guanxi* and the sales growth, suggesting that *guanxi* helps it in positioning it in its market, establishing external relations, acquiring resources and establishing legitimacy. It provides an opportunity to improve market share through advanced

²² M. H. Bond and K. K. Hwang, "The Social Psychology of Chinese people" in *The Psychology of the Chinese People*, 1986, pp. 213-266.

²³ Cf. Brian Combrie, "Is Guaxi Social Capital?" in *The ISM Journal of International Business*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2011, pp. 6-19.

²⁴ Henry Y. H. Wong, "The Dynamics of Guanxi in China" in *Singapore Management Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1998, pp. 25-42.

competitive position and other applications of collaboration with competitors.²⁵

Guanxi was crucial as well during the privatization process. The administrators of public resources and the managers of SOEs were able to transfer state-assets to the people they were connected to. This phenomenon creates an alliance between the economic and the political elite, both originally parts of the Communist party. Such a mutual relationship implies that the managers rely on the state to provide economic stability, access to market and protection of their interest; but in the same time, the political local elite takes some financial benefits as well.

*This has resulted in startling inequality in China. According to a government research, from 1988 to 2007, the income ratio of the top 10% earners against the bottom 10% has widened from 7.3 to 23 times. A recent Financial Times article reveals just how the "princelings" have come to dominate the lucrative private equity business in China. This is only the tip of the iceberg. Family members of high-ranking officials now occupy a sizable portion of the senior positions in the manufacturing, resources, construction and financial industries.*²⁶

Following these data, there are evidences of a more hybrid than a neoliberal market in which state intervention and political power are vital for a small number of entrepreneurs. Undoubtedly, Chinese economy has incorporated certain elements linked to the policies of the accelerated liberalizers. These include marketization and exchange at the local level of production, geographic decentralization and the emergence of new national and local state-capitalist power holders.

²⁵ Seung Ho Park, Yadong Luo, "Guanxi and Organizational Dynamics: Organizational Networking in Chinese Firms" in *Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 22, no. 5, 2001, pp. 455-477.

²⁶ Xibai Xu, "Neoliberalism and Governance in China", research paper of *European Studies Seminars*, St Antony's College, Oxford University, March 2011, p. 8.
[<http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/esc/docs/XibaiXuNeoliberalismandGovernanceinChina.pdf>], November 2014.

Socialist values and the importance of stability?

Elites – factory managers, local government cadres and others with access to market resources – used their *guanxi* during the transition period with significant benefits. But what can be said about the employees? In fact, in the 1990s, Deng Xiaoping's policy of "grasping the large and releasing the small" (*zhuada fangxiao*) has changed the whole spectrum of working environment. The Party denationalized large numbers of "small" SOEs and the consequence has been that factories closed down, millions of urban workers lost their positions and cast into conditions of pauperization and the hopelessness of finding casual work in the new economical sectors. A few "large" SOEs were allowed to remain in operation and received large amounts of capital from state banks. For those still employed, work tasks intensified, but pay remained stagnant.²⁷ The third category of employees, those belonging to the commuter population, were allowed to go back to their rural villages, being protected by the use-rights of households to land provided them in the course of decollectivization. In addition, the residence permit system creates a virtual *apartheid* of rural and urban residents, making it illegal for migrant workers to reside permanently in cities. In the cities, ghettos are torn down as "illegal constructions"; street vendors are frequently harassed by urban administrative officer: and beggars are "removed" from the streets and sent to repatriation centers.

These collective traumas were often be coded by the Party elite as a challenge to the legitimacy of the Party and to their rule. For instance, the 1998 emergency resolution states: "Contradictions in society are becoming sharper daily; demonstrations, rallies, petitions, incidents involving attacks on Party and government show that social and political instabilities are increasing daily."²⁸

Among the Party's claims to legitimacy, nationalism has risen to prominence in the post-Mao era. According to this doctrine, the Party has

²⁷ Cf. Liew, *op. cit.*; Harvey, *op. cit.*

²⁸ L.H Liew, "What Is to Be Done? WTO, Globalisation and State-Labour Relations in China" in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2001, pp. 49-50.

as main goal not only to lead the vast population of China to prosperity, but also to guard against foreign hostile forces.²⁹

One more argument is crucial to be mentioned on the minimal state:

From a practical point of view, China's reform fails to achieve one the core objectives of neoliberalism – the limitation of state power. When Deng initiated the reform, the 'transformation of government functions' was one of his priorities. Several waves of administrative reform in the 1980s and 90s did make progress in the direction of 'small state, big society' by reducing the size and responsibility of the government.³⁰

But state power was not reduced, just transformed, as the state does still maintain its ubiquity and a formal commitment to socialist values. Like in past eras, social welfare is more of a manifestation of power – a charity through the will of the leader, than a real struggle.

Since the Warring State period, which means since the original moment of the development of the Chinese national identity – and the subsequent unification of China during Qin Dynansy –, the Legalist philosophical tradition proclaimed the importance of firm control in the process of formation of a legal system for the regulation of political, economic and social spheres.³¹ The Legalists emphasized, since then, that the head of state was endowed with *shi*, the "mystery of authority", and as such his decisions must always command the respect and obedience of the people. The emperor brought legitimacy through *shi* and as such the public, rather than the private interest, came first ever since.

In order to conclude the discussion whether there is a neoliberal shift in the post-Mao Chinese economy, I would say that except the import of some neoliberal elements (especially connected to privatization), the Chinese economical and political model bear more Legalist and socialist features (strong state apparatus, *gunxi* practices and nationalism). In the

²⁹ The idea of access of foreign capital to China invokes the memories of the "century of humiliation" and the Opium War which is used even today for a xenophobic discourse according to which Westerners only want to enslave and exploit the Chinese people.

³⁰ Xibai Xu, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³¹ See Han Fei Tzu *apud* Burton Watson, *Han Fei Tzu: Basic Writings*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1964, pp. 104 sqq.

new ideologically hybrid state, the protection of the former political and new economical elite remains the priority. In such extend, China's post-Deng reforms are in a way similar to the one implemented in Eastern European transition period when former political elite transferred its political power and economical privileges over the last turbulent decades. The unprivileged classes were the ones who paid the real cost of "neoliberalisation" with Chinese characteristics. As it has happened in Eastern Europe, this power-transfer blocked the real reforms through a more democratic political system. It remains the duty of present Chinese political leadership to fulfil the goal of a more inclusive and equal society.

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