



Selling ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ ‘Thought and Politics’ and the legitimisation of China’s developmental strategy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines China’s senior high ‘Thought and Politics’ (*sixiang zhengzhi*) texts, analyzing how these seek to legitimize the regime’s developmental strategy. It is argued that their overriding emphasis on the strengthening of the state is premised upon the imperative of securing China’s position within global order conceived in Darwinian terms. While the school curriculum cannot be seen simply as an instrument with which the party-state shapes and moulds popular consciousness at will, it is assumed here that it does play a significant role in the political socialisation of young people. ‘Thought and Politics’ serves as a benchmark of ideological correctness within what remains a highly centralised system of curriculum development. The article begins by briefly analyzing the shifts and continuities in China’s developmental strategy, and of the roles assigned to education within that strategy. The importance traditionally attached to schooling’s moralizing function is noted, as is the relatively elitist character of the audience for the ‘Thought and Politics’ course – senior high school students. After considering how and why a discourse of state-centred patriotism has become central to the Communist Party’s efforts to legitimise its authority, the implications of the ‘Patriotic Education Campaign’ for the broader school curriculum are reviewed. The main discussion then focuses on the way in which the current texts for ‘Thought and Politics’ justify the national developmental strategy in terms derived from this patriotic discourse. Some potential implications of this combination of patriotic political socialisation with a highly labour-repressive developmental model, setting the case of China in comparative and historical context.

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2008 looks set to be remembered for the global discrediting of an overly doctrinaire faith in market-driven economic development and, by the same token, of predominantly market-based rather than state-directed models for the provision of basic services. Meanwhile, in China, a year in which the Beijing Olympics were intended to be an unalloyed triumph for the successes of national development was punctuated by a series of unfortunate events underlining the tensions inherent in what Harvey has

termed ‘Neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics’ (Harvey, 2005). Both the glittering spectacle of the Beijing Games, and the subsequent spacewalk by a flag-waving Chinese astronaut, were meant to illustrate in spectacular fashion the nation’s acquisition of key attributes of ‘developed’ modernity. However, the freak snowstorms of February, the April earthquake in Sichuan and the autumn milk-powder scandal¹ was demonstrated the effects of political and fiscal structures that have left many

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¹ The Chinese authorities at national, provincial and sub-provincial levels faced considerable domestic criticism over the handling of these three major crises or scandals during 2008. February witnessed freak snowstorms in central and southern China (an area where heavy snowfalls are extremely rare), cutting off power and transport links to many rural communities and disrupting the travel arrangements of millions of migrant workers attempting to return home for the Spring Festival holiday. What many saw as an initially slow and incompetent response to the crisis on the part of local government prompted the central authorities to launch an energetic exercise in damage limitation. Prime Minister Wen Jiabao made highly publicised visits to affected areas, and in a speech to stranded rail passengers acknowledged the initial inadequacy of the official reaction to the disaster. Senior Party leaders were far quicker on the scene two months later when a catastrophic earthquake hit Sichuan Province in Southwest China. Official responses to both these crises, and particularly to the earthquake, demonstrated both the increasingly polished nature of the Party’s media management operation, and a constant recapitulation of patriotic themes as a means of invoking and celebrating a collective national effort to ‘overcome’ adversity, and deflecting criticism of any prior government failings that may have exacerbated the crisis. In the case of the earthquake, such criticism centred around the apparently lax application of construction standards for public buildings in the affected areas, demonstrated by the way in which numerous school buildings crumbled, while the residences of local cadres and businessmen nearby remained standing. Initial toleration of protests on the part of parents whose children had been killed by the collapse of school buildings had given way, by the end of the year, to a clampdown on continued expressions of discontent on this issue. Meanwhile, in the period just before and during the Beijing Olympics, news was suppressed of a breaking scandal over the contamination of powdered milk with a chemical designed to boost its apparent protein content. Central government stipulations that only ‘positive’ news be reported during the Olympics appeared to have prevented or deterred both local officials from taking action, and the Chinese media from publicising this issue earlier. It was only after the Olympics that news of the scandal surfaced and action was taken to withdraw tainted products from circulation, but a number of children died and several hundred were taken ill. Official responses to all three of these crises – the snowstorm, the earthquake, and the tainted milk scandal – thus

communities severely disadvantaged, and have “‘significantly impaired” the capacity of local governments in poorer areas to respond to local needs and demands for decent public goods’ (Shue and Wong, 2007, p. 10, citing Liu and Tao, 2007). In addition, the furious public outrage expressed by mostly young, urban and educated Chinese at the anti-government protests in Tibet during March, 2008 and at Western reaction to the subsequent government clampdown, highlighted the powerful resonance of discourses that on the one hand portray minorities as ‘backward’ beneficiaries of enlightened Han trusteeship, and on the other depict Western states as determined to demonise and misrepresent Chinese policies in order to frustrate the drive for national strength and international status.

This article examines the ‘Thought and Politics’ (*sixiang zhengzhi*) texts for senior high school, to examine how these legitimise the regime’s post-2008 developmental strategy. In particular it considers the way in which the texts emphasise the strengthening of the state as the overriding developmental goal. It is argued that this emphasis is premised upon the imperative of securing China’s position within an international order seen as governed by Darwinian laws of competition—a strategic imperative represented as demanding collective and individual sacrifices. Many aspects of the worldview presented in these texts will be familiar to those who read the Chinese press or who have witnessed or participated in Chinese discussions of development or world affairs. However, the decision to focus here on ‘Thought and Politics’ is largely based on how this subject – along with its junior counterpart ‘Thought and Values’ (*sixiang pinde*) – serves as a benchmark of ideological correctness across the school curriculum, within what remains a highly centralised system of curriculum development. At the same time, it is important to stress that the argument is not being made that the school curriculum in general, or ‘Thought and Politics’ in particular, can be seen simply as an instrument with which the party-state shapes and moulds popular consciousness at will. ‘Thought and Politics’ is a compulsory subject for students in senior high school, but it would be highly misleading to attribute the attitudes of any senior high school graduate simply to the effects of schooling because obviously an individual’s attitudes are affected by a range of factors including the media, popular culture, friends and family. All that can safely be said is that schooling plays a very important role in political socialisation—but its precise importance will vary, and the messages that the curriculum seeks to impart will not necessarily be absorbed uncritically by students.

The article begins with a brief analysis of the shifts and continuities in China’s developmental strategy, and of the roles assigned to education within that strategy. The importance traditionally attached in China to the moralising function of schooling is noted, as is the relatively elitist character of the recipients of the ‘Thought and Politics’ course examined here—senior high school students. After considering how and why a discourse of state-centred patriotism has become so central to the Communist Party’s efforts to legitimise its authority, the implications of the ‘Patriotic Education Campaign’ for the broader school curriculum are reviewed. The main discussion then focuses on the way in which the current texts for ‘Thought and Politics’ set about justifying China’s developmental strategy in terms derived from this patriotic discourse. Finally, the conclusion considers some potential implications of this combination of patriotic political socialisation with a highly labour-repressive developmental model, setting the case of China in comparative and historical context.

1. The context—education, ideology and China’s development

Notwithstanding the preceding caveats, certain broad generalisations can be ventured concerning the likely readership of the senior high school texts discussed below, and these students’ receptiveness to key aspects of the worldview presented therein. Whereas the majority of pupils nationwide complete the compulsory nine years of education (up to the end of junior high school), participation at higher levels of education narrows dramatically. As of 2000, official figures showed that nationally 98% of children were completing primary school, and just under 88% completing junior high school (i.e. the nine years of compulsory education), but that only 23% attended senior high school (Connelly and Zheng, 2007). These figures also showed that, while the rate of participation in junior high school had jumped by almost a quarter over the preceding decade, the rate of transition to senior high school had witnessed a far more modest rise of about 4.5%. Although participation rates in senior high school and tertiary education have continued to rise since 2000, the principal barriers to enrolment on the part of poorer students have remained in place. The costs of post-compulsory education, and the location of high schools (almost invariably in urban centres), mean that the vast majority of senior high school students are urban-resident, Han and middle class. As the urban–rural gap has widened over recent years into a chasm, claims concerning the state’s farsighted contributions to rural or regional development may be expected to go largely unchallenged by the gilded youth of the cities, who have little experience or knowledge either of rural China, or of local conditions in Tibet, Xinjiang or other ‘minority’ regions. And when city-dwellers are confronted with the realities of rural poverty – either through encounters with migrants from the countryside, or through tourism – the pervasive discourse of ‘*suzhi*’ (or ‘quality’) may prime them to blame poverty largely on the indigence and ignorance of the poor themselves (Murphy, 2007).

Indeed, young Beijingers or Shanghainese in the early 21st century inhabit a ‘networked’ society closer in almost every way to that of their counterparts in Taipei, Hong Kong or Seoul than to the rural universe of villagers living three-hours’ drive from the city centre. Perceptions of the world outside China nevertheless remain powerfully mediated by official discourse (and by official controls over the internet), and influenced by a populist nationalism that the regime has alternately sought to stoke and rein in (Hughes, 2006). While opportunities for contact with foreigners, and for direct experience of the world outside China’s borders, are far greater for young urban Chinese today than even five or ten years ago, such opportunities remain limited to a relatively privileged few, and often do not involve the kind of prolonged or sustained interaction with actual foreign ‘natives’ that might fundamentally challenge preconceptions and stereotypes.

The relatively affluent young urbanites who populate senior high classrooms are thus prospective citizens of a China in many respects radically different from that inhabited either by high school students of previous generations, or by their poorer rural compatriots today. The policy shifts that have underpinned this societal revolution – most notably the progressive abandonment of socialist central planning, and the marketisation not just of agriculture, industry and trade, but also, to a large extent, of the provision of public services such as health and education – have been widely noted and analysed (Shue and Wong, 2007). However, when contemporary developmental strategy and the official discourses deployed to legitimise it are viewed in the context

illustrated the argument of Shue and Wong concerning the way in which bottom-up patterns of official accountability render local authorities hamstrung when it comes to exercising initiative in dealing with local crises, or representing the interests of local communities in dealings with higher levels of government (rather than *vice versa*). The shoddy construction standards of public buildings in poorer areas, as revealed by the earthquake, also graphically illustrated the consequences for poorer regions of this skewed pattern of accountability combined with corruption and under-investment in public goods.

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