The Problems of Isms: Pragmatic Orthodoxy and Liberalization in Mainland China*

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The contradiction inherent in a pragmatic orthodoxy is that on the one hand it tries to minimize the interference of ideological questions in practical policy, and on the other hand it must prevent open questioning of its political principles. Ideology therefore becomes unimportant in practice but remains uncriticized in theory.

The paper begins with a discussion of the differences between Teng Hsiao-p'ing's (Deng Xiaoping's) pragmatic orthodoxy and Mao's revolutionary orthodoxy. It then describes the development of four arenas of discourse in the 1980s relating to Chinese politics. Political discourse has improved under Teng, but it is still constricted by ideology. Policy discourse, the expert discussion of concrete problems and alternatives, has blossomed under Teng. Private opinion has also become more diverse, and, lastly, the 1989 events have created an important arena of political discourse outside of mainland China. These developments may pose serious problems for the regime because the maintenance of ideological domination creates a systemic alienation that is not easy to reduce by piecemeal improvement.

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"Teng Hsiao-p'ing (Deng Xiaoping) Thought" is not a contradiction in terms, but as an officially enforced ideology of pragmatism it is a contradiction in functions. Throughout his career Teng's characteristic style has been pragmatism. Not just pragmatism in the service of ideological ends—something that could also be attributed to Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong)—but pragmatism as opposed to doctrinal

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politics. In his early days in France he was known as the "doctor of the mimeograph machine." He became famous and then infamous (during the Cultural Revolution) for his remark, "Black cat, white cat, what difference does it make as long as it catches mice." And he came back to power in 1978 with the slogan that "practice is the only criterion for determining truth."

Teng Hsiao-p'ing's pragmatic attitude has prevailed since 1978, and his political direction and leadership have been praised fulsomely. But ever since 1978 Teng's political thought has played an authoritative role similar in function to that of Mao's political thought. Moreover, the authoritative role of Teng's thought has not been a transitional phenomenon, strongest in the 1970s and fading in the 1980s. From the time of the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992 the attempt has been made to reassert Teng Hsiao-p'ing's thought as a new orthodoxy for mainland China. A particularly apt example is the devotion of the entire first page of the People's Daily on November 6, 1993 to remarks by Teng Hsiao-p'ing made in January and February 1992 in Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shanghai. The text was not printed as news (too old for that), nor as documentation (clearly it is an edited collation), and it certainly is not merely one opinion among many. Rather, it is political thought that is meant to be directive for the Party. Its publication implicitly asserts that the viewpoints presented are beyond public question. In fact, of course, Teng's speeches from his southern trip signaled an important setback for Li P'eng (Li Peng) and Ch' en Yün (Chen Yun), and they were warmly welcomed by progressives inside and outside mainland China. However, the pragmatic content of the orthodoxy stands in ironic contrast to its dogmatic form.

The contradiction between the pragmatic content and the doctrinaire form of "Teng Hsiao-p'ing Thought" sets first level of questions to be addressed by this essay. We will not address the fascinating question of the content and internal consistency of Teng's politics perse, because that topic would be a considerable research project in its own right. Instead, we will focus on the relationship of content and form. Clearly the form of orthodoxy has continuities with the orthodoxy of "Mao Tse-tung Thought" and earlier with Leninism and

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1Also available in Teng Hsiao-p'ing wen-hsüan (Selected works of Teng Hsiao-p'ing), vol. 3 (Nanning: Kwang-si jen-min ch'u-pan-she, 1994), 370-83.

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traditional Chinese politics. Indeed, I will argue that it is best considered a neo-traditional orthodoxy in contrast to Mao’s revolutionary orthodoxy. Therefore the question of the continuity and differences between Maoist orthodoxy and Teng’s pragmatic orthodoxy must be examined.

There is clearly a profound difference between Mao’s “struggle between two lines” after 1957 and Teng’s enforcement of boundaries of orthodoxy against the unpermitted left (“uphold modernization and openness”) and against the unpermitted right (“uphold the four fundamental principles”).2 Teng’s position creates a limited space for public discourse, while Mao’s approach led to an absolute repression of intellectual differences. Since the content of Teng’s politics has discouraged the interference of politics in other societal questions, especially economics, there have been very real developments in what can be said in mainland China.

One might describe three, or three and one-half, ranges of discourse: politics, policy, and private opinion. The additional one-half would be external political discourse, opinions about Chinese politics that originate from persons outside mainland China and insulated from its political sanctions. Given the changes in public, political discourse and the emergence of expert, private, and external discourse, the second major set of questions to be addressed here centers on mapping the new intellectual territory of the Teng era.

Politics, the public discussion of overtly political questions, is still restricted, and in this public realm of discourse open challenge and debate are not permitted. The zigzag of liberalization and repression of political discourse in the 1980s demonstrates both the limited, indirect, and vulnerable nature of political discourse and the gradual progress made in this area.

Policy, the consideration of concrete problems and solutions with a bearing on public interests, has increasingly allowed the expression of expert opinion. Expert opinion can be radically challenging of specific policies in the expert (largely nei-pu—internal, limited circulation) press, and variably bold or cautious in the public media. Thus the realm of expert discourse has expanded enormously in the 1980s.

Private concerns, and private opinions that do not attempt to become public and political, are largely left alone in the post-Mao era. Private discourse includes opinions and rumors about politics, and few visitors have not been impressed with the increasing variety and boldness of such opinions.

The external realm of discourse includes overseas Chinese, diplomatic problems with domestic implications such as Hong Kong, and external attention to Chinese political affairs such as American interest in human rights and the activities of Amnesty International.

The third and last set of questions to be considered here concentrates on the challenge posed by liberalization to any orthodoxy, that of Teng Hsiao-p'ing included. Far from relieving pressure on politics, mainland China's new fields of discourse press on the current boundaries of what is permitted, regardless of where those boundaries are set and whether or not the content of the orthodoxy is reasonable. The imposition of an orthodoxy creates a sense of alienation among those who submit to it, and the alienation results from the fact of imposition rather than from the details of the content of orthodoxy or the level of sanctions. Thus liberalization is more likely to increase the risk of political challenge rather than simply satisfy and coopt increasing numbers of intellectuals. But liberalization is also an inexorable pressure sanctioned by the content of Teng's pragmatic orthodoxy, and it will seem even less avoidable to his successors. The possibility of crisis cannot be excluded, even though there are many reasons for all sides to avoid crisis.

Since the primary audience of this essay is already well familiar with contemporary Chinese politics, this essay will concentrate on trying to present the theoretical questions outlined above as clearly as possible rather than presenting a detailed narration of China's ideological history.

**From Revolutionary Orthodoxy to Pragmatic Orthodoxy**

The primary difference between Maoist orthodoxy in the 1957-76 period and that of Teng Hsiao-p'ing is that Mao's politics was structured by a future-oriented revolutionary mission while Teng is oriented toward maximizing the opportunities at hand. This is more basic than differences in pragmatism or in attention to economics, because differences in these areas can be derived from the fundamental difference in orientation. The difference in orientation also determines the vast differences in political function of the two orthodoxies.
Maoist Orthodoxy

With the accomplishment of socialist transition in 1956, Mao was faced with reorienting his politics toward the next historic task of achieving Communism. But the achievement of Communism was a much more ideologically-defined goal than his previous targets of revolutionary success (achieved in 1949) and socialist transition. Moreover, unlike the previous two phases, the Soviet Union could not be used as a model of success. On the contrary, the emergence of revisionism in the Soviet Union demonstrated how desperately difficult the new historic task would be. Domestically, the strategy of a united front to reach a shared goal was no longer applicable, because the former class allies, the national bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, and so forth, could only distract and derail the proletariat as it tried to transform the given political economy and culture. Indeed, the bad influence of classes rooted in a society of exploitation reached beyond its members and into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself, in the form of "Party persons in power going the capitalist road."

During the revolutionary struggle before 1949, correct leadership centered on the practical task of understanding the concrete political situation and mobilizing maximum popular support. At this time Mao defined correct leadership in terms of becoming well-informed about the local situation and of avoiding the mistakes of being too cautious ("empiricism," "opportunism," "tailism") on the one hand, and too adventurous ("subjectivism," "voluntarism," "putchism," "blind adventurism") on the other. However, after 1956 mainland China was at the edge of history, and all error was seen as constraining its forward progress toward Communism. Obstruction and derailment of the socialist mission was objectively in the interests of capitalism. Therefore Mao Tse-tung Thought after 1956 was engaged in a "two-line struggle" with capitalist tendencies rather than occupying a pragmatic middle ground between excessive caution and excessive risk-taking. The division between correctness and error became one with the division between left and right.

Of course, the economic and political crises induced by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution required pragmatic action.

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oriented toward present crises rather than future goals. But the fact of failure was not acknowledged publicly, and the rationale of the pragmatic policies was not incorporated into the orthodoxy. As a result, the pragmatic policies (and the pragmatists themselves) were doubly vulnerable: their failure could be blamed on lack of vision and revolutionary nerve, while their success did not prove the validity of pragmatism but rather created the opportunity for new leftist interventions.

The ultimate absurdities of leftist orthodoxy were the arcane campaigns of the early 1970s, most notably the critique of Confucius and Lin Piao (Lin Biao) and the critique of Water Margin. In these the posture of mortal struggle with capitalism was maintained, but the justifying orientation toward the Communist future disappeared. Leftist orthodoxy in the 1970s was fighting a defensive action in the political present against Chou En-lai's (Zhou Enlai's) sponsorship of returning pragmatists, most notably Teng Hsiao-p'ing. The logic of Gang of Four leftism was simple: if to be left was to be correct, then the task of political orthodoxy could be reduced to exposing the non-left. The problems of production, modernization, and so forth, were only camouflage for rightists. In other words, exerting the "all-round dictatorship" of the proletariat would necessarily be correct, because the only possible mistake would be that of not being left enough.

Pragmatic Orthodoxy

The reversal of leftist orthodoxy in 1978 was so complete that it appeared that orthodoxy was simply replaced by pragmatism. The new orthodoxy of Teng Hsiao-p'ing differed fundamentally from leftism not only in its content but also in its retreat from the pervasive penetration of ideological concerns into all aspects of life. However, Teng did not repudiate Marxism-Leninism, or even Mao Tse-tung Thought. More importantly, an orthodoxy was necessary for the direction and legitimacy of the CCP's role of political leadership. Thus, not only did pragmatism become a new orthodoxy, but it was pragmatic to do so. Instead of the leadership following the orthodoxy, the orthodoxy followed the leadership.

Teng could not repudiate the idea of a Communist future and remain a Marxist, but he could establish an intermediate goal of economic modernization that would provide practical direction for all policy. In effect, the ultimate goal that drove Mao's leftism was postponed indefinitely. Chao Tzu-yang (Zhao Ziyang) announced at the Thirteenth Party Congress in 1987 that mainland China was still
in the primary stage of socialism, and it would remain at this stage for a hundred years. The message here was not one of humility. The primary stage of socialism permitted other forms of economic organization, including capitalism, and a hundred years duration implied that there was no need at present to be concerned about historical progress and transition to higher levels of socialism. While Mao’s leftism might be described as “no here and all hereafter,” post-Mao orthodoxy was “all here and no hereafter.”

Without the pressure of progress toward Communism, policy could be set by the tangible benefits that it promised. Moreover, the harsh egalitarian and anticommercial strictures derived from Marx’s description of Communism could be replaced by the promotion of a socialist market economy. Theorists returned to the Marxist classics to reassert the priority of economics over politics, and “socialist economics” was redefined as whatever policies were most productive under mainland China’s present conditions.

The new political orthodoxy was described as a struggle on two fronts rather than as a two-line struggle, but the ideological struggle became sporadic and defensive. An oscillation began between demands that thought be freed and “forbidden zones” be opened up and attacks on various signs of bourgeois liberalization and spiritual pollution. Since the harshness of earlier ideological campaigns had been condemned, the mode of conduct and penalties applied in post-Mao ideological conflicts were quite mild by comparison. Nevertheless, the principle was carefully maintained that the regime’s political trajectory could not be criticized by the left, while its political structure could not be questioned by the right.

While Teng Hsiao-p’ing’s pragmatism has certainly been a progressive influence on Chinese politics, his pragmatic orthodoxy might be considered conservative or even “neo-traditional” for a number of reasons. This is hardly surprising, since as Michel Oksenberg has pointed out most of the world’s “great reformers” have been conservative in significant respects. First, in contrast to the future orientation of revolutionary orthodoxy, it is primarily concerned with

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4See Lowell Dittmer, China’s Continuous Revolution (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 267-68, for a similar analysis.

maintaining the existing political leadership, policy, and structure. The regime has patronized reform, but it has not countenanced the challenging of its power. It is a "neo"-traditional orthodoxy rather than merely a traditional one because it aims to preserve societal structures while encouraging growth in its material level and capacities. The tragedy of June 4, 1989 demonstrated both the real effects of reform and the unreformed essence of power at the center. Secondly, it is clearly a passive orthodoxy of an elderly leadership, even if its policy content is progressive and the societal effects of its policies undermine the old order. It is more daring in its permissiveness than in its active leadership. Moreover, politics of the post-Mao era has been increasingly dominated by that most traditional of concerns, the problem of anointed succession.

It is ironic that a future-oriented revolutionary orthodoxy could produce a relative stagnation of society, while a present-oriented neo-traditional orthodoxy has presided over the most rapid and sustained economic growth in China's modern history. Teng's new orthodoxy deserves credit for permitting China's material transformation, but the material transformation poses challenges to the structure of his pragmatic orthodoxy.

**Fields of Discourse in Post-Mao China**

Teng Hsiao-p'ing's pragmatic orthodoxy has had transformative effects on the intellectual world of mainland China even if the role of orthodoxy itself has remained unchallenged. Political discourse has been transformed in its content and to a lesser extent in its breadth and rules of engagement. More impressive has been the emergence of expert discourse related to specific policy issues, and of private opinion. Lastly, there is a much greater role for external political discourse, especially with the international condemnation of the June 4 massacre and the impending reversion of the sovereignty of Hong Kong.

*Political Discourse*

In one respect political discourse has been totally transformed under Teng Hsiao-p'ing. What could be said with impunity during the Cultural Revolution cannot be said now, and what is orthodoxy now was condemned in the Cultural Revolution. A clear marker of the reversal was the disappearance of the term "revisionism" in early 1980. The fact that this once common term of abuse cannot be used
in political discourse in the post-Mao era is, paradoxically, also a sign of continuities. Just as in the Maoist period, political discourse is reserved for the support of the official orthodoxy. No challenge is permitted, though it must be said that the current regime is far less trigger-happy in detecting deviations.

Political discourse is difficult to define, and the distinction that I will draw between political discourse and policy discourse is intended to sketch a frontier between two general arenas and styles of discussion rather than a thin line between two completely disjunctive categories. The difference is that political discourse brings into the discussion the purposes and direction of public action and merits of public officials, while policy discourse assumes agreement on purposes and assumes the competence of officials, and it concentrates on the practical evaluation of policy effects, problems, and alternatives. In a democracy, the ultimate audience for political discourse is the citizenry itself, while the audience for policy discourse is the policymakers.

In mainland China, there is no citizenry, even though individual citizen rights have improved. The difference between a citizenry and "the masses" is that the interests of the masses are presumed to be in harmony with the leadership, and political discourse consists of persuading the masses to be enthusiastic about current policies and leaders. Even though the general discussion of policy alternatives has been proposed by such diverse leaders as P'eng Chen (Peng Zhen) in 1984 and Wan Li in 1986, the structure of the Party's media monopoly would make it very difficult to permit even a limited public political forum. As a result, even though the content of political discussion varies over time, and has changed completely since the mid-seventies, at any particular time it appears that everyone is in agreement. The road winds, and it may go in the right direction, but it remains narrow. Of course, oblique but clear political differences do emerge in the press, but the fact that the disputes remain oblique shows that the primary audience is within the leadership, and that the structure of the media prevents open questioning.

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6Besides the ambiguity of the relationship between political discourse and policy discourse, Professor Lynn White has quite rightly raised the question of the relationship between intellectual, articulated politics and practical, unarticulated politics. This problem cannot be addressed without a much broader discussion of ideology and politics than the scope of the present essay permits.

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Policy Discourse

In contrast to the continuing narrowness of political discussion, the realm of policy discussion has mushroomed in the post-Mao era. Perhaps the best illustration of the extent and range of different opinions in policy discourse are the discussions of economic policy analyzed by Joseph Fewsmith in his *Dilemmas of Reform in China.* The policy arena is one of fact and expertise. It questions the relative efficiency of black and white cats and the extent of the mouse problem in Szechwan (Sichuan); it does not look at the cat from the point of view of the mouse. It advises the leadership from the side; it does not stand between the leadership and the people. There has been an explosion in the public specialist media, but the most interesting advice is provided internally in the nei-pu media. There can be a broad range of implicit and explicit disagreement among experts, even in public forums, and new factual perspectives can be raised that call into question existing policies.

The importance of the pragmatic character of Teng Hsiao-p’ing’s orthodoxy is clear in the expansion of policy discourse. While the range of political discourse remains narrow, the domain of public concerns completely dominated by political concerns has been reduced by nine-tenths. Even such major questions as the adoption of new economic reforms or the continuation of the current population policy can be dissolved into practical concerns of efficiency and be argued by experts. Public conflict among experts is avoided, and even policy discussion becomes more sensitive as it approaches the implicit critique of current policy, but both conflict and critique do occur.

Private Opinion

Ultimately, private opinion has probably seen the greatest expansion of discourse. Due to the confluence of several factors, Mao Tse-tung achieved what was probably the highest level of control over private opinion in modern history, and it was especially strong in urban areas and among intellectuals. Teng Hsiao-p’ing is not interested in maintaining control in such matters; as long as it does not become political, private opinion fits into the realm that Tang Tsou has called the “zone of indifference.” Since the state’s tolerance of

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7Joseph Fewsmith, *Dilemmas of Reform in China* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1994).
private opinion is based on indifference rather than citizen rights, it can be arbitrary if its attention is roused. The best recent example is the self-confessions required of broad reaches of the urban population in the aftermath of the Tienanmen (Tiananmen) massacre. However, in general the state’s interest in private opinion has subsided, and its invasive capacity has weakened.

The claims just made are difficult to prove, since private opinions remain private. But beyond anecdotal evidence, there is the evidence of opinion polls that show a broad divergence of opinion from official media, and significant differences among different groups of people. I would argue that if people were afraid to talk to one another, and did not do so, they would tend to articulate the media viewpoint both because they would not have the chance to formulate their own point of view (except to themselves) and because they would not be likely to trust a pollster if they did not trust their friends.

The most amazing political opinion survey that I have seen was a national survey of a stratified sample of almost two thousand people carried out in July 1987 and published as a two hundred and fifty page book under the editorship of Wen Ch’i (Wen Qi). The respondents are differentiated by occupation, age, education, party affiliation, and urban/rural residence, and they show very interesting confluences and differences. I reproduce only a tiny portion of the opinions in table 1 in order to show the variety of opinion in 1987, that is, before the major inflation of 1988-89 and the events of 1989.

The table demonstrates clearly that in 1987 there was a considerable alienation of people from the government despite a fairly high level of support for policies over the previous ten years. Criticism of the attitude of officials was even more prominent, and there was a fair amount of understanding for the student demonstration. The general unwillingness in 1987 to participate in demonstrations under any circumstances shows the powerful effect of the Tienanmen events on Chinese political culture. The opinions of the local people’s congresses imply that they are of some use, but they are not looked on as the bastions of popular government. Another question indicates that there is considerably greater hope for the people’s congress system as a whole.8

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Ibid., 66.