

Preliminary Thoughts

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Let me express my gratitude for being invited to this conference today, here in lovely State College, a city seemingly at the outer edge of civilisation, and yet in the heart of America's vibrant intellectual community. I am absolutely confident that cold weather will not impede heated discussions about one of the central developments in our time, namely the emerging contours of socialist democracy, often also referenced as „socialist consultative democracy“ in China at the dawn of the 21st century. To that end, exploring the role of the United Front and of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) will be essential.

However, before I start to ponder on that subject I wish to share with you an observation that I found to be highly interesting and yet naive, yes, even dangerous. In the last couple of months of my professional journey, I got into touch with many different stakeholders, of course in the realm of economics, but not limited to, also working together with foreign policy makers and academia. The common message is clear: Whereas before the financial crisis, China first and foremost was pictured as an ideological rival, foe or friend, today it seems that concrete matters on the ground such as railways, ports and smart factories are the stuff that dreams, or nightmares, are made of. Internet Plus, Made in China 2025 or the „Next Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan“ is the talk of the town. Why even bother with such burdensome and surely distressing issues like democracy? How could one be so foolish?

Well, maybe first, as scholars of conviction we should admit that we are, at least to the healthy degree necessary for the rigorous scrutiny of common held assumptions. Second, and on a more practical basis, we should remind ourselves of the powerful impact and link of China's political system and economic development since the PRC's foundation, with Deng Xiaoping himself stating „that if we fail to do (political reform), we shall be unable to preserve the gains we have made in economic reform.“ Indeed, as a process of political changes, including economics, social and cultural dimensions, reform and opening-up first and foremost necessitated „emancipating the minds“. But what does this mean? It refers to breaking loose from the bondage of old-fashioned dogma and outdated ideas, to develop new ideas and new theories. So, if our policy-makers and politicians don't do it, I hope that at least we as brave scholarly outlaws can emancipate our minds regarding the role of the United Front and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Marxism-Leninism 2.0 in its concrete national form, hereby eschewing distortions coming along with universalist arguments. To quote Mao,

“The history of this great nation of ours goes back several thousand years. It has its own laws of development, its own national characteristics, and many precious treasures ... From Confucius to Sun Yatsen, we must sum it up critically, and we must constitute ourselves the heirs to this precious legacy. Conversely, the assimilation of this legacy itself becomes a method that aids considerably in guiding the present great movement. A Communist is a Marxist internationalist, but Marxism must take on a national form before it can be put into practice. There is no such thing as abstract Marxism, but only concrete Marxism. What we call concrete Marxism is Marxism that has taken on a national form, that is, Marxism applied to the concrete struggle in the concrete conditions prevailing in China, and not Marxism abstractly used. If a Chinese Communist, who is a part of the great Chinese people, bound to his people by his very flesh and blood, talks of Marxism apart from Chinese peculiarities, this Marxism is merely an empty abstraction. Consequently, the sinification of Marxism – that is to say, making certain that in all its manifestations it is imbued with

Chinese characteristics, using it according to Chinese peculiarities – becomes a problem that must be understood and solved by the whole Party without delay...” (Knight 1983: 27)

What was true back then in the 1930s, is also true today. As such, we need to be particularly sensitive to China’s first failed attempts to build a united front by means of a dual policy in the 1960s, both from below, meaning transnationally, and from above, meaning internationally. Ironically, this failure was largely due to the fact that contrary to Mao’s theoretical writings, Marxism back then had neither taken on a national form, nor had it been applied to the concrete struggle in the concrete conditions prevailing in China. This was even the case, when the more „radical“ fundamentalist position for a united front from below slowly gave way to a more „moderate“ adaptive one in light of many disasters that befell China’s foreign policy in the 1960s. By that time the CPPCC as the concrete institutional form of the United front in the national arena had already fallen in oblivion.

However, this has started to change fundamentally in the last two decades in so far as that China’s carefully engineered globalisation is slowly bringing about the nationalisation of global revolutionary struggle, within and subsequently outside of China. Simply put, the tensions between nationalism and world revolution often to be found in classical Marxist tenet are in the process of getting dissolved, enabling the pursuit of the very dual domestic foreign policy embraced by Mao. Codified in the CCP constitution as the the principle contradiction between the ever-growing needs of the people for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development as well as enacted through „One Belt, One Road“, it thus should be stressed that China’s dream of „national rejuvenation“ is also a dream about the national revolutionization of developing countries specifically and the world at large for the purpose of world revolution. Here the circle closes with the adapted revival of China’s classical notions of a global nationalism of culture instead of ethnicity, rooted in Qing dynasty political rule and first comprehensively expounded upon by Sun Yat-Sen. Undoubtedly a culture of Marxism-Leninism with Chinese characteristics for all under heaven, there are other, more precise questions that come along with such an interpretation: What is the modus operandi of this culture? How does it relate to democracy and the CPPCC as the national institutionalised form of the United Front? What does it hold for the idea of power?

At this point I have to confess that I can only share preliminary thoughts that I hope to discuss with you in the course of this conference. First, in my opinion, the operating principle of this culture is democratic centralism. Democratic centralism is a method of organisation that embodies two elements, democracy and centralism, in an ever-changing dialectical relationship of struggle and unity. In that way, it is often understood as integral to the concept of endogenous democracy. But I argue that amidst the rise of socialist consultative democracy we currently witness the gradual and careful application of democratic centralism as an exogenous concept of democracy for long having been monopolised through its submission to Western constitutionalism. Namely, insofar as that the idea of a United Front institutionalised as a revolutionary party-led consultative body on the national level is sought to be further developed, reinforced and exported abroad by the CCP. Unsurprisingly then, the CPPCC has taken on an active, albeit carefully managed role, in China’s foreign policy. Moreover, such an understanding and promotion of exogenous democracy as democratic centralism carries not only immense relevance in the context of current challenges to the Western democratic republican system such as populism, legalism and the deep state, but also has important implications for our perception of power.

Let me just say a free words about this. The mainstream IR literature has paid great attention to either the agential or the structural power, but largely overlooked a third type strongly influenced by Confucian philosophy and by some Chinese scholars called „relational power“, whose resources reside with relations among agents and are accessible or usable through this very relations. Contrary to classical Western notions of power, relational power is not simply unilateral, but

shareable, not solely private, but exchangeable and not domineering, but co-empowering. (Here, I want to explicitly stress that relations as a power resource is not to be confused with soft power, expounded upon for example by Joseph Nye, differing in important ways. First and foremost in regards to the ownership of power.) Overall then, relational power is intersubjective power. As intersubjectivity is crucial in establishing the truth of propositions and constituting the objective world around us, intersubjectivity may be rightfully called the mother of all forms of power. In my view, it is this concept of power that lies at the heart of democratic centralism and subsequently of the United Front in general. If this is so, we therefore would need to inquire about the consequences for the working of the international system and a rules-based model of global governance in the context of Sino-American geopolitical rivalry. However, this shall be a question for another time.