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Youth Attitude in the Era of Economic reform and Opening Up (1979-89) in China

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Abstract

With the demise of the supreme leader Mao Zedong and end of the Great proletarian Cultural Revolution (文化大革命), There was sudden change in the approach of the Chinese leadership for building China. The leadership does not want to deviate from the core foundation of the Communist Party of China, therefore, they started talking on the line of economic development. Deng Xiaoping in order to open China said, "being poor is not socialism, if everyone become rich, is it not socialism?" . With these attitude and approach for uplifting Chinese economy, he came out with the policy of 对外开放 (open door policy). With the commencement of this liberal policies, China witnessed a high speed growth with the increase in double digit economic growth. Interaction with the outside increased in leap and bounds, China was changing every day so was the Chinese society and the attitude of the more volatile youth. They started embracing foreign especially western culture.

With the above background, this paper will try to analyze the Change in the Youth attitude in the beginning of the comic reform(1979-1989). This paper will try to answer following:

1. How was changing society reacting with the change in basic economic structure of China?
2. How youth were negotiating between the tradition and modernisation in this period?

Keywords: Youth, Economic Reform and open door policy, Traditional values

Background :

At the end of Cultural Revolution in 1976, the Chinese population, especially the youth, was psychologically scarred. Great many of them had witnessed a complete collapse of social relationships, including family ties, and utter confusion of ideological/political issues. Shortly after Mao Zedong's death, the 'gang of four' were arrested, ushering in an era of reorganisation in the structures of power. As a result, a more liberal and pragmatic leadership assumed control in the intra-Party power struggle with Deng Xiaoping emerging as the new architect and policy-maker. At the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress held in December, 1978, this new leadership announced the new policies of economic reform and opening to the outside world, thus categorically shifting emphasis from politics to economic development.

This clearly marked a turning point in the modern history of China. Because it indicated that the leadership recognised the need to put the country back into the course of stable economic development which was badly disrupted as a result of series of political campaign during the Mao era.

“The six critical objective of the economic reform were the following:

1. Decentralising decision-making and administrative authority.
2. Giving the market role in planning and substituting general guidelines for mandatory plans in most areas of economic activity.
3. Reforming prices to reflect true costs and value.
4. Revamping the economic structure.
5. Opening to the outside world to stimulate foreign investment and technology exchange and to improve foreign trade.
6. Ending egalitarianism and substituting an improved system of individual motivation and reward”.¹

With the consolidation of Deng Xiaoping’s position, the reformist leadership ventured upon a development path differing radically in form and substance from that of the preceding decades. This strategy heralded a shift in economic power from the state to the market. Although, contrary to popular belief, China had always maintained some trade links with the capitalist world, this was the first time since liberation that it was to open up to the international capitalist economy on such a massive scale. Since the Third Plenum in 1978, various strategies of economic growth were established, by which agricultural and non-agricultural (Industrial,

commercial, transport) enterprises were given greater freedom to determine the composition and pricing of outputs, to retain profits, and to decide on the disposition of retained earnings. Administrative decentralisation transferred more of the authority to plan and manage economic activity from the central government to provincial and local bodies. Central control over the economy was scaled down by reducing the number of commodities, the volume of production subject to mandatory plan targets, and the share of key products distributed through state controlled channels. Resources previously monopolised by the state were transferred to enterprises and rural producers.

The Deng Xiaoping regime proposed an anti-egalitarian line at the beginning of the 1980s. The most obvious consequence of this new approach was the formation of a multifaceted economy. Although China remained an economy where public ownership remained at the core, the government permitted other forms of ownership, including private, cooperative, foreign joint ventures, and so on. China had accelerated its interaction with international economy because of the post-Mao regime’s ‘open door policy’. Western influences started penetrating China’s old protective isolationism. China’s external trade, which was equivalent to over a quarter of the GDP, strengthened the economy significantly. The creation of several special Economic zones with adequate infrastructure, legislation governing foreign investment, and the steady elaboration of laws defining the rights of overseas business operating in China helped attract large volume of foreign capital and technology. From 1981 to 1986 alone, China introduced more than 2,100 foreign technological items, not including items at the local levels.

With economic development, political changes were also introduced into Chinese political life. Some scholars have categorised China's political reform in the Post-Mao period into five aspects: encouragement of a reconciliation between the Party and society by reducing the scope and arbitrariness of political interference in daily life; expansion of opportunities for popular expressions in political affairs, albeit with limits on the form and content of political expression; efforts to revitalise all institutions of governance by re-staffing them with younger and better educated officials and by granting them greater autonomy from Party control. Measures to restore normalcy and unity to elite politics which could bring an end to the chronic instability of the late Maoist period and create a more orderly process of leadership succession; step to redefine the content and role of

China's official ideology so as to create a new basis for authority in contemporary Chinese politics.²

It was felt that the old government officials were old and were having the thinking of Mao's era. They were not equipped with the knowledge of modern technological advancement. They were only carrying the old traditional Confucius ideologies which were not suited in the era of modernisation and economic reform. During Mao's era they had to obey the party order and they were not allowed to think apart only from the party ideology of the dictated of the party leaders. In order to modernise Chinese society, Youths were given chances to hold some key government post and were given some autonomy to think freely and contribute something for the Chinese society.

Economic growth and political progress had a great impact on individual behaviour and thus had significance for China's fifth modernisation- democracy. During this period, China was transforming from a planned economy to a mixed one. The market was playing an increasingly important role. In contrast to the planned economy, the base of a market economy is that every human beings, as an owner of property, is economically independent and chooses how to co-operate with others in production (division of labor).

the market economy is characterised by free choice and individual. With economic development, economic rationality is changing human relationship and other human behaviour: Although a market economy also leads to income differences and creates new kinds of difference, it does not create an unequal society, but rather changes the base of inequality. Under market economy, inequality based on official rank and other political factors is replaced by inequality based on income and other common factors, less by political factors. What is important for the individuals is that they can change their social status by creating economic opportunities using their ability. They can try to get what those who controlled political resources and thus controlled economic resources could get in the Maoist old days.

Survey data shows that individual economic and political values started changing in China as a result of economic reform. Since 1978, Chinese living standards have been rising fast because of economic reform. Economic reform on the one hand increased uncertainty and risk, but on the other, it brought an individual's hope to the fore and a possibility to develop oneself and realize one's expectations which was not seen earlier. The following surveys demonstrate this trends:

Table 1.1 : Individual Values in China

Q. 1. "There are two kinds of jobs from the first, you can get high income and more opportunities to raise your social status. But you have to work very hard and also risk losing your job. From the second, you can only a lower income but you do not need to work hard and you will not lose your job. If you have to choose between them for yourself or your children, which will you choose?"

Age	The First (%)	The Second (%)
Age 18-30	62	31
31-45	47	46
46-60	48	45

60 and above	54	39
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Q.2. “Mr. Zhang bought a watch several years ago. It works well now but is old-fashioned. He wants to buy a new one what you do?”

	Get a New One (%)	Use the Old One (%)
Age 18-30	53	47
31-45	41	59
46-60	38	62
60 and above	22	78
Whole survey	47	55

*N=4,124

Most individuals preferred to take some risk to increase their income and raise their social status. In terms of age groups, 62% of young people chose the risky job. This rate was much higher than that of middle-aged and older people. This demonstrates a generation gap in individual values. Also, traditionally, China emphasized frugality. Individuals were asked to control their desires and reduce their consumption. The increased affinity toward consumption among younger person reflected by the data was the result of the fast economic progress. If we see the Chinese people’s values then it is apparent that the values of younger people as compared to older people are becoming more individualistic. People in present day China wanted more individualistic life style, they do not feel comfortable if some one interfere in their personal matter. They think one should mind his/or her own business. In early days, people used to care about others and were ready to approach the family for support or help if they feel that family need their help. The family bonds as well as social bonds were much stronger than the individual aspirations and desires. When asked, “what do you think is improper behaviour in daily life?” 46 percent of the people in the age group 45 years and less chose “Interfering in other people’s privacy”. Only 22 percent of those in the age group of 46 years old and other selected this answer. When asked, “what do you think is the most important in your life?” 40 percent in the age group of 45 years old and less chose “friends’ confidence and respect of other people” and 20 percent of those in the 46-60 years age Group selected the same answer.³ The Following survey also reveals that individual interest is more important to the younger generation, and the element of self-sacrifice is becoming weaker in young people.

TABLE 1.2: INDIVIDUAL VALUES IN CHINA (2)

Q. “There is an opportunity for a promotion in a unit. Both Mr. Zhang and his friend Mr. Wang are qualified for the promotion, but only one can be selected. If you are one of them, what will you do?”

Age	Try to Get Myself Selected (%)	Give up (%)
30 and below	67	22
31-45	66	26
46-60	53	40

60 and above	51	44
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*N=4,124

source: Adopted from Shang, Zbongguoren de ziwo yizbixing renge, 228.

After the death of Mao, Deng's regime faced a serious political crisis—a crisis of political identity. The proportion of party members among college students steadily declined in 1980s. Though the percentage increased in 1990s, but was never more than 5% neither did it regain the Pre-Cultural Revolution high. This was because college students felt generally disillusioned with the Party after Cultural Revolution. Growing social plurality and western influence further shifted their values away from the officially sanctioned ideological system. In a 1988 survey of 3,751 students at 18 universities in Shanghai it was revealed that 87% of the students were not interested in course on Marxist theories. Less than 5% expressed interest. In the survey, 59% of the respondents felt that “Party ticket are capital for future benefit”. They did not think that membership of the Party is indicative of belief in Communism.

With progress in economic reforms, individuals increased their income and raised their living standards. In practice, they had relatively higher degree of freedom to pursue their own businesses and express their own ideas without Party or state interference. Most of them then held positive expectations for a socialist state and believed that China could resolve her problems within the existing framework. Yet compared to Mao's time, individual's loyalty to the socialist state was weakening, especially among youths. Young people were least concerned about ideological principle of the state, they were worried only about money and economic growth which can bring social changes conducive to personal material advancement.

Another nationwide survey among urban citizens also confirms the above tendency. When interviewees were asked, “Do you think that ‘Love the socialist motherland’ is the most important basic morality?” the distribution of those who answered “yes” was only 28 per cent in the age group of 18-30 years old; 38 per cent in the age group of 31 to 45 years old; 46 per cent in the age group of 46-60 years old; and 52 per cent in the age group of 60 years and above. For most individuals, what was important was not what kind of state they lived in and what ideological principles they should obey, but rather what kind of state and ideological principles would actually promote economic growth.

The data presented in the Table 1.3 demonstrates that political values are also changing, particularly attitudes toward the socialist state:-

TABLE 1.3 INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE CHINESE SOCIALIST STATE

Q. “Are you proud of Chinese socialist state?”

R. Yes: 54%; No: 45% (N=1,721)

Q. “Do you agree with the following statement: “In China, what is important is not to follow strictly some basic principles but develop the economy and raise people's living level?”

R. Yes:56%; No:44% (1,510)

Q. “Does the CCP's performance satisfy your expectations?”

R. Yes:30%; No:62% (1,419)

Q. “Do you want to be a CCP member?”

R. Yes:43%; No:57% (N=1,230)

Q. “Are you proud of yourself as a party member”

R. Yes:56%; No:43% (N=472)

Q. “Do you think the CCP member have played a vanguard role?”

R. Yes: 18%; No:78% (N=1,404)

Q. “Are you satisfied with the CCP’s ultimate goal?”

R. Yes:65%; No: 29% (N=1,405)

Q. “Are you satisfied with the CCP’s current line and policy?”

R. Yes: 57%; No: 38% (N=1,405)

Q. “Are you satisfied with the CCP’s social development goal?”

R. Yes: 52%; No: 47% (N=1,405)

Q. “How do you evaluate the role of the People’s Congress?”

R. Functions well: 16%; functions poorly:23% (N=1,709)

Q. “Do you have expectations that the People’s Congress can play an important role in the building of Chinese democracy?”

R. High expectation:39%; no expectation: 14% (N=1,600)

Q. “Do you agree with the statement that one main reason that China had developed so slowly is its political institutions?”

R. Yes: 72%; No: 28% (N=1,369)

Q. “Do you think now it is necessary to reform the Chinese political system?”

R. Yes: 67%; No: 19% (N=1,337)

Q. “Do you agree with the statement that China needs democracy?”

R. Yes: 75%; No: 19% (N=1,391)

Source: The data are based on the 1987 political culture and political attitude survey. Adopted from Min Q1, Zbongguo zhengzhi wenbua (Chinese Political Culture), Kunming, Yunnan: Yunnan People’s Publishing House, 1989, 33,35,98,99,101,64,66,83,179.

A most dramatic change occurred in individual faith in the Communist party (CPC). The party has faced serious criticism from individuals since the reform began. Only 30 per cent thought that the party’s performance had been satisfactory, and 62 per cent thought not. This striking change in individuals’ faith in the party had made the party much less appealing not only to non party individuals, but even to some party members. Full 57 per cent did not expect to be a party member. Another 43 per cent of party members were no longer proud to be party members. Only 18 per cent believed that party members had played a vanguard role; 78 per cent thought they had not. In addition, many individuals began to cast doubt on the party’s ultimate goal, i.e., leading the country towards a communist society. Nearly 29 per cent were not satisfied with the party’s ultimate goal; 47 per cent were not content with the party’s social development goal, and 38 per cent were not comfortable with the party’s line and policy.

A change in individual attitudes towards the existing political institutions had also occurred. Data reveal that most people had recognised that to reform the Party was the most crucial of all political reforms. Only 15 per cent believed that the NPC had played an important role, 46 per cent believed that it had not played an unimportant role, and 23 per cent believed that it had not played any essential role in Chinese politics. Only 39 per cent had high expectations for the NPC and believed that only by improving the NPC could Chinese democracy be achieved. Another 39 per cent did not have high expectations for the NPC, because to improve the NPC was only one aspect of democracy. Fully 14 per cent felt that under the existing regime, there was no possibility for people’s delegates to represent people’s real interests. Thus, to rebuild the NPC was not the starting point of political democratisation in China. Instead, China needed to make more efforts to construct the instruments of democracy.

Discontented with the Party-state's behaviour during the Cultural Revolution, individuals started to attach greater importance to institutional reforms. Almost three-quarters argued that the political system itself had led to China's slow pace of progress. Two-third contented that it was necessary to reform the political system and keeping pace with the other policies such as open door policy, "democracy" was the desirable element for incorporation. The economic reform had brought about the decentralisation of power which in turn, promoted uncertainty and fostered political and economic instability. Ideally, power that was once in the hands of the central government should have accrued to economic enterprises and citizens. In practice, however, argues Wu Jiayang, "Individual citizens did not get power. Rather, the authorities and institution in the middle levels of the bureaucracy that formed the foundation of authoritarian rule in the past have now amassed power"⁴. Consequently, what emerged in China is an anomaly: neither centralisation nor freedom.

The rapid economic growth generated unrealistically high expectations among both the leaders and the people.⁵ The early success made the leaders relatively immune from criticism, both from adversaries and friends. The first results of reform were indeed reasons to feel euphoric and helped in reinforcing the confidence of the new regime's policymakers. Many important decisions were carried out without careful consideration of their possible consequences, especially political consequences. Under the old regimes, Cadres, and especially those at lower levels, did not have real control over nationalised property because they could not legally use, enjoy, or dispose of that properly. With the price reform, a bridge was created between political power and money which was not there in pre-reform days, it led to 'nepotism and widespread corruption and official profiteering. This, in turn, further fuelled people's grievances.

The new policy of the State Education Commission, for instance, stipulated that the state would no longer be responsible for assigning jobs to students⁶, who now would have to look for work themselves. This specific "reform" made students very unhappy, for there was no labor market in China and it

was difficult for students to find satisfactory jobs unless they had good connections. Many college students felt the new policy worked only to the benefit of the progeny of high officials or those who had connections, and that even if a student worked hard and avoided any unauthorised political activities, he or she still did not get a good job.

Though, economic reforms brought in significant dividends, the distribution of benefits were rather arbitrary. The official policies discussed above became instrumental in advancement of the elites, who had political connections. The ordinary people were compelled to manage as best as they could with existing disparities. The section of the population which was worst hit were the young students, who at the threshold of life seeking just and fair share in opportunities. This is the section of population that eventually took to the streets and gathered in Tian'anmen square, hoping to make their demands heard and dissatisfaction conveyed to the authorities. As a result, in the spring of 1989, the students of Beijing and other big cities, began to protest against corruption and nepotism and as time progressed, they called for more political freedom. The demonstrations extended to other walks of life and work activities in the capital were seriously affected. The Chinese authorities first declared a martial law, then requested the students to leave the square and finally cracked down upon the students of June 4, 1989, leaving the Chinese people and the world at a state of shock.

Conclusion:

Due to economic reform China underwent many change which influenced Chinese society. The most influenced were the youths. Their values underwent a drastic change with the economic reform following path of individuality shifting from the path of collectivism in the pre-reform period. In the traditional Chinese society, the family provided support to livelihood and long-term security of the individual. In the period since the establishment of PRC, the state had guaranteed such securities. In other words, to a great extent, work units started to share long term responsibility for the Individual. Thus, the role of the families changed a bit, becoming limited in the face of increasing responsibilities shouldered by the Party-State. Values inculcated by the youth showed a corresponding change. While earlier individual wishes had bowed in front of family decision, in Mao's China individuals were taught to defer to the interest of the collective. In this conditioning, the families functioned virtually as an instrument of the Party-State.

In the initial phase after the onset of reform economic reform the state encouraged individuals to take his or her own decision. As the reform progressed state denied to take full responsibility of giving jobs to Chinese youth which was given in pre-reform era. Chinese were left alone to search for their bread and butter. The modern and lucrative opportunities which economic reform brought to Chinese in general and youth in particular alienated the youth from the Party and its ideology. Phrases used by the authorities, such as “no matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice” gave youth a justification for ignoring conventional socialist ideological and moral values. Individual aspirations and expectations started to emerge and play a prominent role in Chinese society.

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