

Perception on Values in Chinese Society: Process of Change, Causes and Ongoing Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Since the mid-nineteenth century, there has been a process of transforming the perception of values in Chinese society. This essentially is the ideological struggle to choose the development model that is consistent with circumstances and meets the requirements and missions of China's Revolution through each stage of history. After China implemented its open market policies in 1978 to date, the system of values has gradually been built based on "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (中国特色社会主义), with a resurgence of capitalism and traditional values. From an ideological-cultural perspective, the article sheds light on the transformation of perceptions and views about the values in Chinese society. From that, the authors have highlighted and analyzed the problems dialectically, challenges stemmed from China domestically and externally. These obstacles to some extent, have hindered the process of building a system of values and ethical standards of Chinese society today.

Keywords: China, perception, values, society

Article Received: 10 August 2020, Revised: 25 October 2020, Accepted: 18 November 2020

INTRODUCTION

The Opium War (鸦片战争) erupted in 1840 in China, marks the entry of Western countries to the Citadel of feudalism that had existed for thousands of years in this country. Since then, China's cultural and socio-political life has changed drastically how Chinese people perceive their traditional values and social standards. Essentially this is the ideological struggle to choose the path of liberation and development models for the country, given the request and tasks set out for the Chinese Revolution. The issue of transforming perceptions of values in Chinese society has aroused considerable interest amongst scholars. These studies mainly focus on the changes in perception of some radical democrats in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and explain the objective and subjective causes leading to this phenomenon (Wu, 1990; Tian, 2002). Besides, there has been some research on changing the perception of values from 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established to 1978 when China implemented its open market policies. This process was manifested through two main aspects: cultural life and social situation (Lin, 2008; Vo, 2015). There exists a study analyzing the effect of changing the perception of the value on the development of the economy, politics, and culture of China (Nguyen, 2016; Phan, 2016) had presented the basis of ideological changes, awareness of social life since 1978 when China implemented its open market policies Phung (2015), Zhang (2016), etc., emphasizes the social differentiation and the difficulties in forming the world-views in Chinese society due to the effects of global integration. Meanwhile, Xi (2017), after carrying out a lot of analyses, reaffirms that any society

must undergo different development stages, and China is no exception. A scholar claims that this is an experimental

process for China to choose and apply a system of reasoning's, and new perspectives in order to adapt well to the specific context of the country (Wang, 2017; Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences – Institute of Chinese Studies (VASSICS, 2020). In addition, a study shows that China has always changed its ideologies to find ways to liberate and develop the country.

By considering a body of relevant research, using qualitative methodology, conducting an analysis systematically and logically, we focus on clarifying the process of changing the perception of values, as well as its causes and challenges for China today. There are four stages in this process:

- (1) The period from the Opium War (1840) to the Xinhai Revolution (1911): Due to the impact, and influence of external elements, the Chinese have gradually reconsidered the validity of traditional values which are based on Confucianism, and they step by step reformed the country by taking capitalist countries a model.
- (2) After the Xinhai Revolution (1911) to the birth of the People's Republic of China (1949): The failure of the revolutionary movements is one of the major causes of Chinese people choosing the path of the proletarian revolution. Marxist doctrine is the mainstream for the foundation of values and conceptions at this time.
- (3) After the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to 1978 when it implemented its open market policies: The overestimation of socialism when implementing public ownership and a rigid planned centralized market led the country into a crisis on values, culture, ethics.
- (4) After economic reform (1978) to date: along with the reform, a system of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (中国特色社会主义) has gradually formed, along with the resurgence of capitalism, and the

traditional values (VASSICS, 2020).

Currently, China is also faced with the challenge of shaping, building a system of values, and ethical standards for a “harmonious society” (和谐社会). These challenges stem from both external and internal factors such as rapid economic development, widening social inequality and increasing pressure from regional and international parties.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Perception of traditional values was fragmented, capitalism values were formed

The most significant change in this phase is that the reasoning of capitalism became the main trend which mostly replaced the system of values and the Confucian tradition (儒教传统). Through thousands of years in history, the concepts of traditional values in China were constituted based on agricultural civilization and centralized feudalism. Under feudal dynasties, Chinese people always considered themselves “Superior Court” (天朝上国), the land of rituals (礼仪国家) with the civilization of “Huaxia” (华夏文明). They considered that Chinese civilization was the most superior, the rest of the world were all barbarian (野蛮) (Sun, 1981). However, because of the rapid intrusion of Western capitalism, especially from the Opium War in 1840, some values, traditional ideologies in China were gradually faded. Many radical intellectuals in China at the time, started to worry and became increasingly sceptical about the traditional values that they had introduced.

Before the world’s intervention, China was a feudal society which was built on a ground of closed agricultural economy, China proclaimed itself as a king while closing its borderline. This model has a number of features. Economically, China largely respected agricultural production. Food production on an area of land cultivated was relatively high. It was a common practice that the government rent its lands to farmers and collected tax from them. The regulations on tax collections were made uniformly from the central to local levels. From social-political perspective, the power and efficiency of social management of the centralized feudalism were consolidated in the form of heredity (血缘关系). The emperor (皇帝) was considered the son of the God (天子), the ruling supreme of the country (Sun, 1986). Chinese political system undergoes a comprehensive development process under many different dynasties, including the Qing period. At that time, China had already had a unified administrative management system. In addition to maintaining agricultural production and defending the nation, the feudal regime strictly controlled industrial and handicraft businesses. The feudal regime organized examinations to recruit top talents to administrate the country (Wang, 2017).

On the basis of feudalism and the centralized economy, agricultural self-sufficiency, in China, a system of values and ethical standards was formed surrounding Confucian

core beliefs. The core value of this system consists of three elements, which is the relationship between the emperor and courtiers, the kinship relationship between fathers and sons and the spousal relationship between husbands and wives (三纲五常). It is common that a Chinese individual pursues these moral values first, to discipline himself, second, to raise his family, third, to rule the country and forth, to control the world (修身, 齐家, 治国, 平天下). These values fit well with the feudal system and the society in which families and clans are connected and bonded closely around blood relationships (Tian, 2002). However, these values were no longer consistent with Chinese society under the influence of capitalism. Feudalism and the longstanding dominance of Confucian ideology (儒教思想), therefore, gradually broke down.

The collapse of the concept that highly values Confucian ideology (儒教思想) happened slowly, and Chinese people struggled with the dilemma of whether they should welcome or repudiate capitalism. Before the Sino-Japanese War (1894), only a few patriotic intellectuals such as Zheng Guanying (郑观应), Ma Jianzhong (马建忠), etc. who, thanks to early exposure to politics, economic, cultural in Western countries, had realized many shortcomings of the old-fashioned dogmas in Chinese society (Chong, 1969).

The majority of intellectuals and the ruling class still pursued what is so-called “Chinese Learning as Substance, Western Learning for Application” (中学为体, 西学为用). Some typical characters still firmly believed that resistance against capitalism was the Chinese Revolution’s mission (Wu, 1990). Only when being defeated by Japan, plus some of the movement’s failures, noticeably the shortcomings of “Boxer Rebellion” (1899-1901) (义和团运动), China ‘awoke’ and started to copy the political-economic systems of other countries and applied them into their own country. The victory of Japan over Russia in the Russo-Japanese war (1905) once again had a huge influence on Chinese intellectuals. They began to recognize that Japan became a strong nation because Japanese people had learned Western technology and renovated it. From this perception, in China, there were some movements in which people tried to eliminate the outdated Confucian ideology; at the same time, they actively learned, built a new culture that values capitalism. The Chinese had to admit that if they wanted to save their country, there was no other way but to renovate, which led to following and learning Western capitalist countries. “The Japanese were so successful at learning Western countries, and China also wanted to follow the footsteps of the Japanese people” (Sun, 1981, p. 291).

In 1911, the Kuomintang (国民党), led by Sun Yat-sen, conducted the Xinhai Revolution. From the socio-political perspective, it seems that this Revolution ended the existence and longstanding dominance of feudalism in

China (Mao, 1991). This could be seen as a milestone marking the change in the way that radical Chinese intellectuals perceived traditional values at that time. However, since the establishment of the Government of the Republic of China in 1912 (中华民国政府), the domination and control of military forces could not change the socio-political situation of China. The negative policy of this Government has made China gradually fall into serious crises, including the conflicts in the concepts to build up the country (Nguyen, 2017).

2.2. Establishing values of neo-democracy system

After the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 to 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded, China tried to build a system of values in which the Western ideologies were the mainstream. However, all these attempts were not successful. At the same time, a process of receiving, disseminating, and establishing the status of a stem of democratic values was taking place. The Marxist doctrine became the foundation of the ideas and values that the Chinese followed at that time.

The failure of many democratic movements that fought for independence in China after 1911 made them realize that, Western values and ideologies were not suitable to the situation and specific circumstances in China. It could not solve the following pressing problems set out for China: *first*, to liberate the country, uphold national independence and security, *second*, to effectively reform the country to catch up with the Western ones. Based on such perception, many radical intellectuals gradually abandoned their intention to implement their initial capitalism-oriented plans and tried to find a new way. The system of ideologies about new democracy in China came into existence since the birth of the Communist Party of China (1921). For the Marxist Chinese, they believed that Marxism was more effective and practical when compared with capitalism (Bo, 2004). They argued that the root causes were the fact that:

First, China was basically a feudal society based on Confucian doctrine. With this system, most Chinese took for granted that the King was the son of God, the change of dynasties in history was due to God's will. Contrary to this idea, the scientific and objective theoretical system of Marxism, on the one hand, sheds light on the development of human society. On the other hand, Marxist ideologies provided explanations for thriving capitalism and indicated the future of socialism (Mao, 1991).

Second, the struggles and changes in the form of political institutions that took place during a relatively long period in China (1840-1921) ended in failures. Marxism has shown a new way of social transformation that would be suitable to China at that time. This method - when came into reality - meant mobilizing the majority of people to participate in revolutionary movements to overthrow imperialism and militarism in the country (Gan, 2003).

From that understanding, a group of progressive intellectuals in China began to shape and rebuild the system of social values by answering the question of

where China was standing and how it could develop, and which was the theoretical framework for the way that economic, ethical, and political institutions should be built. China argues that they could not follow the path of capitalism although the country was facing many problems such as low level of production, wide-spread poverty, and backward society. For China, survival and development must be given priority over European-American liberty and democracy. Therefore, it is necessary for them to study and follow the model of Soviet economic planning to build and develop the country.

One of the main reasons for China's renunciation of capitalism, including the model of economic and political development of Western countries in the 1930s and 1940s, is the Great Depression (1929-1933). In addition, the great socio-economic achievements of the Soviet Union after the October Revolution (1917) also had a strong impact on China's decision to choosing its development model (Nguyen, 2017).

From 1949, on the basis of Marxist theory, the system of social values and ethics in China gradually changed and moved into a new stage.

2.3. Values of communism in crisis

On October 1st, 1949, the People's Republic of China was established. To speed up the country's modernization process, the Communist Party of China drew a plan (and incorporated it into the 1954's Constitution) that later brought the country into a period called a transition to socialism. There was still an ongoing change in the perception of values in China. Specifically, China largely abandoned the notion of new democracies and transitioned into a socialist society with the implementation of the "public ownership" (公有制) and "people's commune" (人民公社) policies (Lin, 2008; Vo, 2015). In the process of establishing a system of socialist perceptions and values, China made it clear that "public ownership", "collectivism" were the core elements in transitioning to a socialist country. There are two main forms in the way that China conducted its development:

First, through a series of political and economic reforms, as well as public campaigns such as "land reform" (土地改革), "socialist transformation" (社会主义改造), China completely denied "capitalism" or private ownership and tried to reach the goal of "totalitarianism" (全面专政), which placed the importance of "class struggles" (Phan, 2016).

Second, through mass campaigns that encouraged its people to study national historical figures, learn from the People's Liberation Army, China aimed to strengthen public belief in socialist values which were presented through "collectivism" and the spirit of "generosity". China highlighted the cult of Chairman Mao, saying that any decisive policy set by Mao should be supported strongly, and strictly adhere to (Lin, 2008).

The wrong policies set to develop economy, politics and

culture initiated by the Chinese Communist Party such as “three red banners” (三面红旗), “great leap forward” (大跃进), especially the “great cultural revolution” (文化大革命), which took place in the period 1966-1976, harmed China’s political, cultural and social life (Peng, 1987). These policies caused Chinese traditional values to fall into chaos and crisis.

2.4 Perception of values in China after 1978 and ongoing issues

Since opening the economy in 1978, China has applied several measures such as building a multi-stakeholder economy, reforming the domestic commodities exchange market, strengthening internal relations, and promoting external links, etc. Thanks to that, a radical change has taken place in how Chinese society perceives their values. Some of the concepts used to develop socialism before 1978 were replaced or eliminated. This change also poses more difficulties and challenges to China.

Firstly, the conceptual system of value under the model of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” has gradually being formed in the socio-political life of China. In fact, the system of values is not entirely identical to capitalism or socialism. There exists a combination of both of these forms (capitalism and socialism) in China’s open-door practice. Here are some issues for China.

(1) The system of values, moral standards of socialism having been formed after the birth of the People’s Republic of China (1949) has been greatly influenced due to rapid socio-economic reforms. The fact that the Chinese Government recognizes and encourages economic development, diversification of economic components, and private ownership leads to the emergence of many companies, enterprises, and private economic units. There is a remarkable change in business management models after and before China conducted its open-door economic reforms. The relationship between workers and the boss becomes the relationship between employees and employers. The differences in socio-political status between classes in society will exert a great influence in their perception and even decision making (Zhang, 2016). A change in this economic foundation leads to a consequence that the old socialist values cannot fit well with the new uprising demands of today’s Chinese society.

(2) Open-door economic reforms generate a lot of changes in socio-economic and cultural institutions. The rapid development of the economy and the profound change in culture, society have made it hard to define and generalize the values and ethical standards in a new society. At the same time, it also provokes a number of controversial arguments and negative problems in social life.

(3) Poverty and an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and unequal income distribution bring about a more depressing society. In 2019, the Gini coefficient in income distribution was at 46.5 (0.465). This figure is much higher than the alarming world level declared by United Nations at 40 (0.4). China is on the list of the countries with the highest Gini coefficient (Statista, 2020). This will

accelerate the process of social differentiation as well as creates more profound polarities in social consciousness, ideologies in China. Therefore, the construction of the system of moral standards and social values in China will encounter many difficulties.

(4) The legislative and judicial system has not been finalized, coupled with the fact that there remain many problems in democratic practices (Phung, 2015). As a result, it would not be easy to establish a proper social values system and ethical standards as required by the Chinese Government.

(5) After the birth of the Communist Party of China (1921), advocates proactively set out new requirements the criteria on ethics and social value based on the ideology of the proletariat. Accordingly, the standard of morality and human personality is almost identical to the characteristics of those considered as “saints” (圣贤) of antiquity. China somewhat successfully implemented these requirements during the Revolution that unified the country (1921-1949). However, China basically failed in an effort to apply these requirements in building up a socialist country (1950 - 1978). The obvious evidence is the economic, political, socio-cultural crisis, in which the “Great cultural revolution” (1966-1976) is an outstanding example. After the open-door economic reform (1978), the development of the economy has made the perception and values in society to experience a fundamental change. While many Chinese still believed that they must pursue their personal interests, the Communist Party and the Chinese Government asked officials, party members and the people to sacrifice their own individual needs, abandon their self-interest, build up standards, values such as “five devotions” (五爱): devotion to the motherland, devotion to the people, devotion to work, devotion to science and devotion to socialism (爱祖国, 爱人民, 爱劳动, 爱科学, 爱社会主义), “three virtues” (三德): social morality, professional morality, family morality (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences – Institute of Chinese Studies, 2019). China determined to be adherent to the core values of socialism to build a “moderately prosperous society” (小康社会), and strengthen “Chinese spirit, Chinese values, Chinese power” (中国精神、中国价值、中国力量) (Xi, 2017).

In the current situation, the implantation of these values will encounter many challenges. China had been the work of endorsing what is called “socialist civilization” (社会主义精神文明) (Do, 2019). As a core of China’s philosophy since the 1980’s; however, it failed to achieve the planned targets. Currently, moral degradation in society, materialism, egocentric individualism, social ills, corruption, bribery, etc., have been happening quite common and complicatedly in China.

Secondly, there is a resurgence of capitalism. After the open-door economic reform, the market economy in China has thrived, and the private sector plays a more important role in China’s economy. Income has been distributed in more diverse ways, and salary is paid mainly according to the market’s rules. Along with this

development, a number of concepts concerning capitalism (which used to be strictly controlled in the period 1949-1978) gradually reappear (Nguyen, 2016). This shows that China has formed a society that appreciates the value of material values, personal interests and learns socio-economic management models from Western countries. There are a number of causes. *First*, economic reforms have made China become more integrated into global trade and international partners, at the same time, promote cultural exchanges between China and other countries. Those external elements, whether directly or indirectly, have been influencing the way that Chinese people of different classes perceive and think about existing values. *Second*, China is building a socialist-oriented market economy with two main factors: economic institutions and industrialized economies. In this economy, high or low level of social status, as well as the wealth of each person, is primarily determined by their capacity. In this system, there are people who gain massive wealth by taking advantage of others' labor. As a result, in addition to the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and between social classes, more problems arise in many fields such as jobs, housing, medical services, nursing, insurance, environmental pollution, social evils, etc. (VASSICS, 2020). All of this will govern and change some views, concepts in Chinese society.

Thirdly, there is the revival of traditional social values. Chinese traditional values are formed on the basis of agricultural production background and feudalism centralization. The core values and social relations are based on two main factors, namely "loyalty to the King" (忠君) and "blood relationship" (血缘关系) as mentioned in the sections above. After 1978, although the Socialist democracy in China has gradually been reformed, many shortcomings still exist (Gan, 2003), especially concerning the effectiveness and capacity of those in charge of inspecting the Party and the Government. Therefore, in this country's society, there is a resurgence of some notions of the value of the previous period. It is shown from two perspectives. First, there are more people following religious belief, and it appears that more relationships based on "kinship" are established. There exists what is so-called "unwritten law" (不成文法) in the political, socio-economic system, especially in the public sector from the central to the local levels, which are increasingly common (Phung, 2015). This has raised many negative phenomena which are taking place in China, such as corruption and bribery.

CONCLUSION

Overall, from the mid 19th century, China has gone through four stages in changing the perception of values. This change arose from the subjective and objective causes, in which the subjective ones play a decisive role. The volatility and historical practices taking place require China to constantly search and test the best models suitable for its diverse ideologies and value sets. Marxism ideologies and distinct socialism have brought China great success in economic and social development.

However, China is currently having difficulties reconciling the relationship between the materialism civilization and spiritual civilization, between the rapid economic development and the transformation of society's values. The unbalanced development, even conflicts between material values and spiritual values, between traditional values and novel values, require China to adjust its policies to reform and develop.

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