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Research Paper

State and Public Intellectuals in Modern and Contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

The article examines relationship between state, society and intellectuals in China and discusses the role of elite Activism in deciding state-society relationship in modern and contemporary China. It analyzes how intellectuals have played a significant role in modern Chinese state and society and have worked as a bridge between the two, the state and the society. It further examines how intellectuals have always been challenged and questioned state policies directly, wherever they felt and how state has reacted to it in various eras.

Introduction

In context of Modern China, three intellectual movements, occurred in Qing Dynasty and in Republican China influenced China to a great extent. These movements paved path for the scope of movements and demonstration in China. The history of intellectual activism in Modern China began with Kang Youwei's 'Hundred Days Reform Movement' while still garbed under the Confucian intellectual framework, the movement began radical cultural, political and educational reform movement from 11 June to 21 September 1898 in late Qing dynasty China. It was resisted by old guards under the guardian Empress Zi Xi and was suppressed within 100 days. It thus failed to achieve the desired goal.

The second one, Xinhai Revolution overthrew China's last imperial dynasty and established the Republic of China in 1911. It marked the end of more than two thousand years of dynastic history and monarchical state. The revolution succeeded after odious revolts and uprisings under the leadership of Sun Yatsen. Chosen as the first President of Republic of China, Sun Yatsen is regarded as the 'Father of China' and the "Forerunner of Democratic Revolution" in the People's Republic of China.

It was an anti-imperialist, cultural and political movement. It was initiated by students and intellectuals to protest the Chinese government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles which allowed Japan to receive territories in Shandong, surrendered by Germany after the Siege of Tsingtao. The protest was started on May 4, 1919. Believing that traditional Confucian values were

responsible for the political weakness of the country, students and intellectuals rejected it. They clamored for constructing new cultural ideas based on principles of science and democracy of the modern west. Under the leadership of Li Dazhao, Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi respectively professors of history, literature and philosophy at the Peking University, the movement soon spread like a wildfire. It gave rise to many of the political and social leaders e.g. Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi and many others.

The movement effected China's politics and culture in later decades. On the afternoon of May 4 over 3,000 students gathered in front of Tiananmen. They shouted slogans such as "Struggle for the sovereignty externally, get rid of the national traitors at home", "Do away with the 'Twenty-one Demands' and 'Don't sign the Versailles Treaty'". The movement went violent. Now the authorities acted and when the students were not at all listening, they are reported to be arrested, jailed, and beaten. Next day, students went on strike. Very soon students across the country and merchants and workers came to Beijing and joined the protest. The news spread through newspapers and through word of mouth. Now from June it spread widely to Shanghai, and it became another Centre of protest. Chancellors from thirteen universities arranged for the release of student prisoners. Cai Yuan Pei, the president of Peking University resigned. Different sectors across the country extended support for the students. Merchants threatened to withhold tax payments if China's government didn't listen to the protestors. Under public pressure, the Beijing government released the arrested students. Chinese

representatives in Paris refused to sign on the peace treaty. It was a sign of victory for the protestors. Japan for the moment retained control of the Shandong Peninsula and the islands in the Pacific. Though not completely successful, the partial success of the movement showed the strength of such mass movement in bringing about changes in socio-political order. It was finally the May Fourth Movement of 1919 which in true sense build the ideological base for the contemporary intellectual activism. It became the ideal reference point for the movements that followed later. It is therefore not surprising that the May Fourth Movement is considered the dividing line between old and new China.

However, after the triumph of communism in 1949, Chinese intellectuals/activists were seen in dilemma whether to stay back in China under the rule of Chinese Communist Party or to go to Taiwan under KMT (GMD, Guomindang) rule. They found themselves at crossroads, not knowing where to go from there. In Communist China, the state had become all powerful. If they decided to remain back, they knew that they would have to acknowledge the supremacy of the state. As Merle Goldman and Timothy Cheek illustrate,

“With the communist revolution in 1949, the state finally had the means as well as the will to impose its authority over virtually all areas of intellectual and professional life. Whatever individual, professional, moral or intellectual autonomy members of China’s educated elite had achieved in the past century was circumscribed by the party’s organizational control and periodic thought reform campaigns. Within the Marxist- Leninist Maoist Framework, there was much less room for alternative views and values than there had been in the Confucian ideological framework and certainly less than in the early decades of the 20th century. Nevertheless, in the early years of regime, the full implications of the party’s policies were not yet clear. Equally important, the majority of intellectuals welcomed or at least complied with the parties’ policies. Because of their sense of patriotism, most of the intellectuals were along with party even in 1955 when it persecuted the writer Hu Peng and a small number of leftist writers who had criticized the party’s oppressive literary controls. Many intellectuals also acquiesced and even participated in the persecution in 1957-1958 of some of 300,000 to 400,000” rightist” inside and outside the party who had criticized bureaucratic abuses at Mao’s behest in the Hundred Flowers campaign in the spring of 1957. In addition to their feeling of patriotism, which justified closing ranks against officially designated scapegoats, there was the omnipresent fear that, if they did not acquiesce, they too would be labeled ideological heretics, political dissidents and traitors to the people, which could result in public disgrace, isolation, labor reform, imprisonment, even death.”¹

The establishment of People’s Republic of China created a dilemma among intellectuals about the likely nature of Communist regime. Some therefore opted for going to Taiwan with the KMT. Those who were with Mao in the initial days of revolution, slowly chose to remain and reverted themselves to the traditional role of Chinese intellectuals. The traditional role was of course to influence, and control Chinese minds about what was wrong and what was right. However, after only a few years, they felt disillusioned watching the functioning of the state under Mao; First the experiment of industrial Revolution or the Great leap Forward (GLF), then Hundred Flowers campaign (HFC) and then finally the Cultural Revolution (CR). All the three, GLF, HFC and CR were brainchild of Mao. Mao as the head of the state was always successful in doing what he wanted to do. The

Great Leap Forward despite all the efforts of the state, failed. It was unfortunately followed by natural calamities. Intellectual and activists now started to question Mao. The socio-political environment of the new China did not allow questioning. Intellectuals nonetheless discussed relevant issues concerning the role of state and society. They also tried to come up with solutions but there was no scope of being heard. Mao found this fussy and unleashed Hundred Flowers Campaign under the slogan of ‘Let Hundred Flowers Bloom, Let Hundred School of Thoughts Contend’. Intellectual minds were requested to provide ideas on how to overcome the socio-political and economic problems in the state. They were also requested to show their disagreement with those state policies which they think should be improved. It indicated a ray of hope for liberalization in the Chinese state. Intellectuals came up with many new ideas, criticized some of the strategies and policies of the state, and suggested new remedies. Unfortunately, Chinese state has always seen a difference in what state writes or says and what it does. State could not accept the criticism as taking criticism is not ideologically and historically typical of the Chinese state. Those who protested were called ‘Anti-Mao’. Thus, they were now put in the category of ‘Rightists’. As the campaign for Hundred Flowers went out of control, the state ordered to suppress it. Intellectuals were attacked and even imprisoned.

But Mao was always clear as far as his dream of bringing social and political equality was concerned. Agrarian society was the Centre of his vision where peasants and workers were given hope of equality. This is what he always tried to implement. And thus, though his policies did not seem practical to few of the intellectuals, Mao did not bother. With the failure of GLF and HFC, the question of equality was gaining momentum. Now Mao unleashed the Cultural Revolution. Here with CR Mao’s dream was to purge the nation from four olds, i.e., “Old Culture”, “Old Custom”, “Old Habits” and “Old Ideas”. CR was a strong reaction to the Soviet Union’s shifting approach to world capitalism. The bureaucratic approach of party members and intellectuals made him worried. The Chairman Mao had a different vision for China, and he felt that party members and other intellectuals are deviating from that. His vision through this movement was a unique work-study programme where schooling was scheduled to accommodate the work schedule of communes and factories. It had the dual purpose of providing mass education less expensively than previously and of re-educating intellectuals and scholars to accept the need for their own participation in manual labor. Recruiting intellectual for manual labor was part of the party’s rectification campaign, publicized through the mass media as an effort to remove “bourgeois” influences from professional.

The CR started with an agenda to remove the socio-economic inequality in Chinese society. But the 10-year long revolution is today regarded as having been a double catastrophe for the Chinese State and Society. With voices of opposition after the GLF and HFC, it was clear that opposition was strong. Mao wanted the young generation to be involved with his new agenda, in the Cultural Revolution. His call was answered by the college and school students. They were trained under his guidance and were called ‘Red Guards’. Later it was followed by workers and soldiers. On party’s instruction, schools were closed. Teachers not willing to follow the forced recruitment to the fields and factories were tortured by the Red Guards. As Street and Mateleski write, *“From 1966 to 1976, Red Guards ran the Chinese work units, families were pulled apart, teachers,*

intellectuals and others were killed, books and paintings were burnt. The people turned on one another with direction to criticize the ideology of the bourgeois and all other exploitation classes and, to reform education, reform literature and reform the entire superstructure which was not fit for the socialist economic base.”ⁱⁱⁱ Yiu Chungwang writes more directly, “Intellectuals were denounced as the “stinking ninth category” in Mao’s reign. Famous writers and prestigious academics were often objects of repeated attacks during numerous political campaigns in the pre-reform period (Ye long 1992). Many committed suicides and some were tortured to death in the CRⁱⁱⁱ.”

A *The Hindu* dispatch article about the CR talks about aftermath of the revolution, “Forty-five years on, victims of China’s Cultural Revolution are fighting to preserve the fading memories of those that they lost during that turbulent decade” says Ananth Krishnan in his 06-08-2011 published article in the *Sunday magazine, The Hindu*. “People want justice,” she tells me. “They want to talk. But they cannot because they are still in fear.” This article by Krishnan, is a good observation of how the victims still live in fear as expressing the grief is also an offence in communist China. He provides accounts of the brutality of those young Red Guards who humiliated, tortured and put to death for no reason, for just being from a feudal family.^{iv} Mao with his noble intention of equality in Chinese society started many noticeable reforms and campaigns. But unfortunately, intellectuals were not consulted and when these intellectuals tried to intervene, there were called activists, and it affected their self-esteem.

During early phase of Deng’s regime, activists felt emboldened after liberalization and opening of China. They began airing their views publicly believing that the new era was about to usher in the framework of democracy in new China. They went even to the extent of suggesting some changes and readjustment for overall good of the Chinese people as seen in the Democracy Wall Movement and 1986 Students’ Movement. Intellectuals switched to the old rule of Chinese intellectuals. The result was the 1989 Demonstration. Inspired by Chinese intellectuals, the young students gathered courage to assemble at Tiananmen Square to express their views demanding real democracy in the country.

The year 1989 has historical significance in China. It was the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, a movement Chinese looked to as ushering in a new era of “freedom, equality and fraternity”. It was 70th anniversary of the May 4th Movement, 40th anniversary of founding of PRC, 10th year since Wei Jingshen was prisoner for giving his life for democracy in the country. But the Tiananmen movement was not really a planned movement. It can be viewed more as an offshoot of a critical situation; it was spontaneous and just happened. The students felt deprived of suitable prospects due to prevailing unemployment and economic crisis. They got agitated following the death of their favorite leader Hu Yaobang on April 15, 1989. They demanded a place of honor for him, putting his photo on the square. On the spur of the moment, they began denouncing Mao. Caught in a dilemma, the state tried to negotiate to pacify the agitators, but angry students resorted to hunger strike. On the other hand, the state, faced by urgency, created in view of forthcoming visit of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev pleaded for postponement of the demonstration. In absence of a positive response from the side of agitating students, the situation reached a point of no return from both sides. The situation had reached such a stage that neither of

the two was able to judge the real situation. Mainly because of a communication gap, it culminated into violent demonstration and ruthless suppression.

Even after almost 25 years of the 1989 massacre, things have not normalized. Silencing the movement has made the Chinese society somewhat indifferent when it comes to political affairs and most people don’t bother much so long as their personal life is bliss. But those who are fighting for the people are still not giving up; same is the case of the State. In recent years China is seen giving official warning to all its state-run newspapers, magazines and news channels urging limits on the use of those intellectuals, dissidents or activists who have been heard under the “public intellectuals” moniker and who often voice thoughts differing from China’s party line. But this is now possible to stop such writings and ideas to reach to the masses as with advancement in technologies in last two decades, reaches of the dissent writings outside and within China from writers who write from foreign countries as well from mainland China is widening. In such condition, reactions from Chinese activist in various forms and interference from international communities pose a serious threat to Chinese state. The scope of interaction between the two state and intellectuals, also between intellectuals and state has changed a lot but the relation stills remain unbreakable in case of China. Also, the nature and scope of elite activism has not changed much. Even in today’s government led society, intellectuals play a vital role in Chinese and Chinese society. Only big and noticeable change it that today, when the state overhears, intellectuals/activists appeal to world community

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