

# Confucian and Marxist Ideologies at the Xi Jinping Era

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The Chinese cultural and political imaginary are strongly influenced by their political-philosophical heritage. As a political move, the Communist Party of China has been using Chinese connections with the past to reinforce one party ruler. Since 1949, Party's legitimacy has been based practically only in terms of economic competence, but in the era of Xi Jinping, it is possible to recognize the attempt by the CPC to legitimise itself through the use of older and traditional strands of Chinese belief systems. Therefore, using a study case methodology, we analyse if the association between Marxist principles and Confucian concepts in Xi Jinping Era is used to sustain the one party rule. Starting from the premise that the fusion of Marxism and Confucianism gives rise to a political ideology, we believe that this ideology in Xi's China serves to uphold one-party rule by reinforcing the 'Chinese identity,' unity.

**Keywords.** China, Xi Jinping, Ideology, Confucio, Marxism.

## 1. Introduction

The classic compilations from the imperial Chinese period serve as the primary sources for China's historical and cultural memory. In works such as Confucius' 'Analects' one can discover the initial elaborations of civilizational models, political institutions, and the ethical-moral foundations of China ([1]). Confucianism, therefore, stands as one of the primary pillars in the ideological and cultural upbringing of the Chinese populace ([2], 74-83). Confucian ideas have adapted over time; thinkers throughout history have reinterpreted Confucian ideas to address new challenges which shows that Confucian teachings go beyond theory, they provide a practical guide for everyday life and they are able to coexist with other philosophies, such as Buddhism, Daoism and, more recently, with Marxism ([3], 16-34).

In the era of Xi Jinping, it is possible to recognize the attempt by the Communist Party of China (CPC) to legitimise itself through the use of older and traditional strands of Chinese belief systems. This strategy developed a new political context with ideology in its centre. Ideology holds strategic significance as it plays a vital role in maintaining sustainable one-party rule and ensuring the Party's survival amidst challenges such as stagnant GDP growth and escalating social, economic, and political issues. It enables the Party to maintain its pivotal coordinating role in society and prevent the emergence of organised opposition against it ([4]).

Therefore, in this article we analyse if the association

between Marxist principles and Confucian concepts in Xi Jinping Era is used to sustain the one party rule. Starting from the premise that the fusion of Marxism and Confucianism gives rise to a political ideology, we believe that this ideology in Xi's China serves to uphold one-party rule by reinforcing the 'Chinese identity,' unity. The article is organised as follows: (2) Ideology with chinese characteristics, where we analyse how the Party has been adopting ideology to legitimize its power, (3) The Combination, where Confucian and Marxist ideology are combined at the Chinese context and (4) the conclusion.

## 2. Ideology with chinese characteristics

### 2.1 The concept

According to Terry Eagleton ideology can be defined as 'the process of production of meanings, signs, and values in social life; a body of ideas characteristic of a popular social group or class; ideas which help to legitimise a dominant political power'. In those terms, it is possible to assume that, since 1949, China has been a highly ideological society ([4])

### 2.2 The evolution of the concept in China

After the Chinese Communist Revolution ideology took a very important part in Chinese society with the personification of Mao's ideas that could be broadly described as a belief in the achievement of Utopian social goals. In 1978, the scenario was different with Deng Xiaoping's reforms, the 'living ideological and social force has largely died away'

[[4], 324). At that time, the Party's state legitimacy was connected to the market socialism with Chinese characteristics with the delivery of tangible material outcomes for families and individuals. Dentist pragmatism has kept the CPC in power ([4]). Jiang Zemin's 'Three Representations' and Hu Jintao's concept of 'Scientific Development' followed the same path as Deng's ideology ([5]).

### 2.3 Xi Jinping and the New Normal

Xi Jinping faces a different social, political and economic context compared to the leaders before him. In the second decade of the 2000s, the Chinese economy experienced a shift in its growth pattern due to the transition from an agrarian economy to an urbanised one, characterised by significant migration of skilled labour to urban centres and high productivity rates in industries. Moreover, during this post-2008 crisis period, China grappled with overcapacity of state investment in strategic sectors like construction, saturated markets following four decades of intense investment, and stagnation in population growth. With declines in Foreign Direct Investment and exports, the Chinese economy no longer had the capacity to sustain the growth rates seen in the early 2000s. In summary, China faced the necessity of adapting to a moderately slower overall pace of economic growth ([6]).

In this scenario, the Chinese New Normal is formulated and implemented in the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2011-2015). The plan aimed to address the escalating inequality and foster conditions for sustainable growth, emphasising fairer wealth distribution, boosting domestic consumption, and enhancing social infrastructure and safety nets. However, the lower growth path pursued sparked domestic and international concerns about China's decline, attributed to the perceived reckless policies of the CPC ([6]).

In this case of rising distrustful sentiment towards the CPC power, the role of ideology in maintaining regime sustainability via people legitimacy played an important role in the CPC's quest for legitimacy. An example of the CPC's effort is Xi Jinping's address to the 19th CPC Congress, in 2017, where he stated China's transition to the New Normal amidst unprecedented domestic stability, progress, aspirations, determination, and achievements ([7]).

As a progressive action from the central government, a Chinese state television aired a series called 'When Marx Met Confucius' in October 2023. As a clear example of state propaganda, the series offers insights into Xi Jinping's philosophical outlook. Introduced in October, Xi Jinping's Thought on Culture aims to merge pride in Chinese culture with allegiance to the CPC. Consequently, the tv series shows that there is an endeavour to contextualise Marxism within China's unique reality and to localise Marxism by integrating it with the country's traditional culture ([8]).

## 3. The combination

Karl Marx and Confucius did not coexist in history; in fact, their lifetimes were separated by over 2,000 years. Nonetheless, in contemporary China, there is a noticeable effort to bridge the philosophical traditions of Marx and Confucius through Xi Jinping's Thought on Culture.

### 3.1 The Greatest Ancient Chinese Philosopher

Confucius (c. 551-479 BC) lived during the Zhou Dynasty, a period marked by disorder and political instability. Despite the tumultuous times, the philosopher became an influential figure, renowned for his teachings on order, virtue, and justice, as compiled in the Analects. His wisdom extended to concerns about harmony within both the universe and society, underscoring the intersection of politics and ethics. Confucius emphasised the pivotal role of just and virtuous rulers in fostering peace and prosperity, advocating for a unified government to achieve political stability ([2], 74-83).

One of Confucius's enduring contributions is the concept of 'tianxia,' meaning 'all under heaven,' which highlights the emperor's authority as the recipient of the 'Mandate of Heaven'. This hierarchical structure, intrinsic to 'tianxia', aims to maintain societal harmony and the ideal political order in China. The pursuit of this ideal involves a commitment to moral principles, with the emperor expected to exemplify virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. The legitimacy of power is thus derived from the demonstration of these virtues and adherence to established rites, illustrating the fusion of politics and morality in Confucian thought ([3], 16-34, and [5]).

### 3.2 'When Marx Meet Confucius'

The television series titled "When Marx Met Confucius", set in China at a painting school, shows a conversation between Marx and Confucius while they serve as models for Chinese arts students for their paintings. Throughout the artistic process, the philosophers engage in dialogue with each other and with the students, highlighting similarities and points of connection between their philosophies ([8]).

The series was inspired by Guo Moruo's book entitled "If Marx Talks With Confucius" from 1926. Like the TV series, the book unfolds within the confines of a Confucian temple, where Confucius welcomes Karl Marx for a conversation. While the book's storyline is inherently fictitious, there is an endeavour to rationalise the parallels between the philosophies outlined by Guo ([9]).

This effort rests on the premise that Marxism itself is an open theoretical framework, as Marx and Engels consistently opposed the treatment of their theories as dogmas, doctrines, or rigid formulas. Instead, they advocated for theory to be adaptable to the historical context of its time. Chinese Marxists, in turn,

pragmatically apply Marxism in China, suggesting modifications to Marx and Engels' theories to accommodate the reality and idiosyncrasies of China ([9]).

## 4. Conclusion

Confucius's teachings have left an indelible mark on Chinese culture and society, resonating with contemporary values and governance practices ([2], 74-83). Today, the CPC leverages Confucian principles, particularly the emphasis on filial piety and reverence, to bolster its legitimacy. Xi Jinping's government actively aligns itself with familial values, fostering a sense of connection and hierarchy reminiscent of ancient China ([5]).

This shift marks a departure from the CPC's previous efforts to eradicate Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and subsequent reforms. However, elements of Confucian ideology, such as prioritising material well-being and familial bonds, have endured and resonate with Chinese society ([3]). Under Xi Jinping's leadership, there has been a concerted effort to integrate Confucianism and Marxism into the CPC's ideology, reflecting an attempt to reconcile ancient traditions with modern socialist ideals. This synthesis serves as a robust ideological foundation, resonating with the Chinese populace and reinforcing the CPC's position as a leading force in society ([8]).

Xi Jinping's speech is rich in historical allusions, employing key terms from state propaganda. Some of these terms merit closer examination ([4]):

"Fuqiang," meaning "strong," originated in the late Qing dynasty, symbolising the desire for a modernised, resilient China and recalling past colonial humiliations to underscore the nation's aspiration for independence.

"Wenming," or "cultured/civilised," is linked to concepts like "improving population quality," emphasising China's long-standing civilization as the foundation for societal refinement.

"Hexie," or "harmonious," draws from classical philosophies of Confucius and Mencius, signalling the CPC's call for moral unity in response to societal fragmentation caused by materialism.

"Pingdeng," or "equality," acknowledges the Party's socialist mission to ensure balanced growth for all, aligning with its commitment to Marxist-Leninist principles.

"Aiguo," or "patriotism," reinforces the CPC's legitimacy by appealing to nationalistic fervour and promoting patriotic education as crucial for a stable and resilient nation.

These terms reflect a deliberate effort to blend China's classical philosophical heritage with external discourses. Notably, the "China Dream," introduced by Xi Jinping in 2012 as "a dream of the people," symbolises a shift towards individual empowerment.

The emphasis on "socialist spiritual civilization" underscores the Party's commitment to socialist modernization, aiming to cultivate citizens with moral integrity and intellectual vitality, thereby strengthening the nation as a whole.

Xi Jinping emphasises his new motto: "With the people's trust, the nation finds hope, and the country gains strength." This slogan highlights the importance of public confidence and optimism for a nation's greatness. Achieving this entails fostering a spiritual civilization and promoting both traditional Chinese culture and core Socialist values. By recognizing the contributions of both Confucianism and Marxism, the CPC seeks to forge a cohesive national identity and advance a distinctly Chinese vision of progress. This narrative, rooted in traditional values and socialist principles, resonates deeply with the aspirations of the Chinese people while upholding the CPC's legitimacy and authority.

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