The Chinese Liberal Camp in Post-June 4th China

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This paper is an assessment of Chinese liberal intellectuals in the two decades following June 4th. It provides an analysis of the intellectual development of Chinese liberal intellectuals; their attitudes toward the party-state, economic reform, and globalization; their political endeavors; and their contributions to the project of constitutional democracy in China.

The Chinese liberal camp was divided into two different phases by the June 4th massacre in 1989, which brought a permanent end to the brief period of political liberalization inspired by democratic aspiration. Following the massacre, and in the wake of the collapse of Communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Deng Xiaoping took two essential measures for survival: a ruthless purge of democratic forces in society and within the CCP on the one hand, and the introduction of "market economy" on the other. With the tremendous aid of capital, technology, and consumer goods facilitated by globalization, the post-June 4th regime in China rapidly evolved into a new order of "Market-Leninism," a useful term coined by New York Times correspondent Nicholas Kristof that refers to a Leninist party-state sustained by a combination of relatively free-market economics and automatic one-party rule. The most prominent new political force engendered by Market-Leninism in China has been the formation of a liberal camp in the late 1990s, consisting of at least six vaguely distinct but at times overlapping categories: liberal intellectuals, liberals within the CCP, Chinese liberals, human rights lawyers, and grassroots rights activists. These six groups have advocated liberalism in their own perspectives through publications and speeches, having taken part in various social and political activities for the cause of democracy. They have expressed mutual support for each other when persecuted by the party-state, and have occasionally united to issue joint petitions or open letters on the Internet to express their shared concerns or demands for democratic change.

Liberal Intellectuals and liberals within the CCP

The majority of intellectuals in China today are at least semi-liberal in the sense that they share beliefs in market economy, individual rights, and to a lesser extent, liberal democracy, although only a tiny minority of them hold these liberal ideals passionately enough to express them in a systematic way or be brave enough to put their beliefs into practice by actively confronting the party-state. A claim of "liberal" or "bourgeois intellectual" is often made with the term constitutionalism (somewhat on a stand-alone, a converse practice that is employed in modern China) and was espoused prominently during the Constitutional Movement (sometimes poetizing in the 1940s).

1. In the context of post-Communism, the terms "constitutional democracy" (RENMIN) and "liberal democracy" (RENMIN) are used interchangeably. The latter term is more often used by the more ideologically liberal (in the Chinese liberal intellectual's conceptual framework) among Chinese liberal intellectuals, referring to liberal democracy with additional emphasis on the protection of the individual rights of citizens. The former term is generally used by the CCP and its supporters to refer to the party-state as a whole.


In recent years, the Chinese liberal camp has debated how to achieve constitutional democracy in China. This debate has been characterized by a transition from liberal democracy to constitutional democracy, which is an evolution of the earlier form of liberal democracy that is more focused on the protection of individual rights. For these liberal democrats, the transition is seen as a "responsible" and "constructive" change. They believe that constitutional democracy is the most effective way to achieve democratic change in China.

However, the Chinese liberal camp has also faced challenges. One of the main challenges is the lack of political opportunities for liberal intellectuals. Although they have made significant contributions to the development of liberal democracy in China, they have been excluded from political power and have had limited influence on political decision-making. As a result, they are often portrayed as "bourgeois intellectuals" by the Communist Party, which has led to a decrease in their political influence.

Another challenge faced by the Chinese liberal camp is the lack of public support. While some Chinese intellectuals and human rights activists support the liberal camp, the majority of the Chinese population remains skeptical of liberal democracy. This lack of public support has made it difficult for liberal intellectuals to achieve their goals.

Despite these challenges, the Chinese liberal camp remains an important force in the political landscape of China. Their ideas and actions continue to influence the direction of political development in China. The Chinese liberal camp's role in the transition to constitutional democracy will continue to be a significant topic of debate in the coming years.
regime has prevented them from forming an organisation for their political endeavour, but they have managed to get together regularly at informal occasions and at conferences organised by Western colleagues. 

Zhu Xunqiu, born in 1952, is a leading historian and public intellectual based at Tsinghua University. He is known as a political ideologist and institutions, Beijing, Chinese University of Political Science and Law, 2006; and He Weihong, Theology of Chinese Culture: The Christianization of Chinese Culture, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.)


Beyond doubt guarantee the emergence of a liberal China in the world of globalization.\(^{24}\)

In official publications, this was the first time that the history of the People's Republic of China that an ideological system of liberalism was ascertained as the guiding ideology for China, notably by a high-ranking CCP official, although many con-

cepts of liberalism, freedom of speech in particular, had been advocated by pionners of the Chinese democracy movement such as Chen Ziming, Hu Ping, and Chen Kizhe since the turn of the 1980s.\(^{20}\)

After the publication of this declaration, Li Shenshi quickly emerged as an opponent leader and mentor of Chinese liberals, who rapidly surfaced in a visible force in the intellectual and political arena.\(^{22}\) Zhu Xingui summarised the propositions of Chinese liberalism as follows:

Empiricism is a philosophy, as opposed to a priorism; the evolutionary theory based on the process of trial and error is in concept of history, as opposed to any

kind of historicism; pragmatism is its strategy for change and development, as opposed to revolution; it supports the market mechanism in economics, as opposed to a planned economy; it demands representative democracy, as opposed to a dictatorship by one man or oligarchy; in ethics it demands protection of individuals, holding that an individual cannot be further reduced to any thing else and cannot be sacrificed for any abstract goals.\(^{23}\)

Rejecting Chinese despotism as embodied by CCP rule

These conversion to liberalism also means that Chinese lib-

erals are so no longer confined to so-called "socialist democrac-

y" guaranteeing the leading rule of the CCP. The experi-

ence of the June 4th crackdown and the collapse of

Communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern

Europe provided an opportunity for Chinese liberals to

reflect deeply on the illusion of "socialist democracy," and

they awakened to the fact that the party-state has been

revealing itself and others as claiming Communist one-party

rule as a higher form of "despotism." They sharply pointed

out that the CCP under Mao's leadership overthrew the

Nationalist dictatorship only to supplant it with the CCP's

dictatorship, and Mao's successor, the post-Tiananmen

leadership, had maintained the despotic system and become

even more corrupt. Since the 1990s, based on their new-

found conviction that one-party dictatorship and democracy

are incompatible, Chinese liberals have increasingly

abandoned the ideological and democratic focus, and shifted to

standard features, including multiparty elections, legal safe-

guards for human rights by limiting the power of the govern-

ment, and a system of checks and balances between the legis-

lative, executive, and judicial branches.\(^{24}\)

The achievement and continuous resistance from the theoreti-

cal and pragmatic liberalism during the last two
decades has been summarised in Charter 08 (38 Xiangzhou) which has been signed by more than 8,000 Chinese citizens of all

walks since its publication on the Internet on 10 December 2008. It calls on China to "embrace universal human values, join the mainstream of civilized nations, and build a democratic system" as an alternative to one-party dictatorship: it provides succinct exposition of six basic liberal values and concepts: freedom, human rights, equality, republicanism, democracy, and constitutional rule; and it sets forth liberal positions on 19 major issues for political reform: a new constitution, separation of powers, liberal democracy, etc.

\(^{24}\) Li Shenshi, "Zhougou ren de yanxue chuangzuo" (promoting and developing the liberal tradition of Peking University), in Li Jiaxiang (ed.), Zhongguo de biaoyu: Shishi shehui zhuyi moshi yu zhongguo shehui zhuyi de xian dai huiyi (Chinese liberalism: modern characteristics of liberalism in China and China's modern society), Shanghai: Shanghai Shehui Wenyi Chubanshe, 1999, pp. 85-90.}

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The comprehensive purge of journals such as Yingzao, which discuss religion-related political issues as well as China's liberalism.
Replacing rule by law with rule of law

Debate arose between “rule of law” and “rule of man” (renzh) in China in the late 1970s, when intellectuals in general and the ruling elite in particular wanted to put an end to the sufferings caused by Mao’s personal dictatorship and the lawless practices of the Cultural Revolution. The result was “socialist legality,” under which dozens of laws were enacted and a court system was rebuilt. The 1990s witnessed a new debate between “rule of law” and “rule by law.” According to Chinese liberals, socialized “socialist legality” is best at “rule by law,” in which the law is used by the party-state as an instrument to control society, while the Party itself exercises its power above the law and is not subject to the law. Since then, tremendous efforts have been made by Chinese liberals to promote the concept of “rule of law,” in which everyone, the government in particular, is subject to the law, and government power is limited by law, with the result that individual rights are effectively protected by the law against the abuse of the government in particular. Due to the efforts of Chinese liberals and other legal scholars, the CCP leadership has also abandoned the concept of “rule by law” for the concept of “rule of law” since 1995. It is in the process of this debate that the concept of constitutional government (xianzhang) has been revived and incorporated into the common vocabulary of formal publications in China. In 2003, when the Chinese constitution was undergoing a major revision, participants in both official and unofficial conferences on constitutional revision called for replacing the concept of renmin minshu zhuquan (people’s democratic dictatorship) in the constitution with the concept of renmin minshu xiangzhang (people’s democratic constitutional rule).

Addressing issues of social justice

The Chinese new left have labelled Chinese liberals as “neo-liberals,” causing grave confusion and misunderstanding. Even some Chinese scholars in the West assume as a matter of course that the cause of social justice is championed by China’s new left and neglected by Chinese liberals. The Chinese new left actually includes three groups of people: populists, populists, and neo-Marxists. The nationalist group can be further broken down into two subgroups: sinophiles, who borrow theoretical weapons from postcolonial criticism and blame the invasion of Western goods, Western capital, and Western values for the sufferings caused by Mao’s personal dictatorship and the liberalism to promote the concept of “socialist legality,” debate between the sufferings caused by Mao’s personal dictatorship and the populists, who argue for social justice, class exploitation, and the hegemony of global (Western) capital, they have effectively problematic the Chinese quest for Enlightenment values (such as liberty and rationality), modernity, and globalization. They hereby attack liberalism as if it were the main cause of social injustice and other evils. These groups are labelled “the new left” mainly because they borrow theories and vocabulary almost exclusively from the new left in the West. While their patois in the West perform a healthy function of social and cultural criticism to balance the excesses of neo-liberalism and the populism, the new left in China obscures China’s real problems by transplanting intractable dogmas developed in a fundamentally different context.

Chinese liberals aim, in fact, tackling China’s burning issues, including the problem of growing social inequality. Not only do Chinese liberals do their utmost to advocate market efficiency, liberty, democracy, and rule of law, they also began taking great pains to promote social justice, well before the new left took up the issue; not only do they advocate equality of opportunity and procedural justice, they also stand for distributive justice to a great extent. The social democrat elements within the liberal camp in particular closely follow the tradition of utopian liberal political economy with great enthusiasm in the egalitarian mode of the welfare state. However, in tackling the issues of equity and inequality, Chinese liberals differ from both the Chinese old and new left in two fundamental ways. First, the liberals see the despotic political system, as well as the resulting misdistribution of political power in the process of transitioning to the market economy (rather than the market economy per se), as the primary source of inequality, including unequal distribution of wealth. Based on the observation that power-holders have abused their power for “personal ends” (prevarication accuses), He Qunying came to the conclusion that unbridled distribution in China today does not manifest itself in the distribution of national income (through wages or taxes), but mainly in the allocation and possession of resources through political power.

Another liberal, Zhu Xianjun, argues:

Current social evils in China cannot be simplified and equated with a “western disease” or “market disease.” They are a “Chinese disease” and a “power disease” resulting from the peculiar circumstances where the market mechanism is parasitized, distorted, and even suppressed by an outdated power mechanism. The liberals cordoned off the market for a long time before the new left did, and they dug deeper to the root of the problem, pointing out that the problem already existed in the Mao era, such as in the plundering of private property, possession of public property, and suppression of dissenting political views by the political establishment. These thinking shaped the concept of social injustice in a way that had been covered up by Mao’s ideology of egalitarianism. The power mechanism has not changed with the introduction of the market mechanism, but rather has increased its privileges and augmented the scope of rent-seeking. The result is structural corruption and social injustice at an unprecedented level.

Second, based on empirical evidence linking economic and political freedoms, and the experience of suffering inflicted by the Communist “command economy,” the liberals have not waged an all-out war against the market, capitalism, and the “middle class” as the left has, but rather firmly defend the market and the “middle class” while focusing their...
attacks on the unjust power structure of the Leninist party-state and the "upturns" (daofanhui) who profit from the abuse of political power. It is the belief of Chinese liberals that universal protection of rights, including property rights, is the foundation of social justice. Xu Xueqin points out that "the new left pick up other people's phrases to attack marketisation, ignoring the positive effect of marketisation in breaking down the oppressive old system." According to him, what should be done is to protect the interests of working people against "sATIO privatization" (gongzao zhuyi) through the creation of a just legal framework to regulate the market and human behavior. 43

Qin Hui argues that since social injustice in China today is rooted in an unfair process of competition where some abuse protections of the old system, thereby avoiding a situation in which some people continue to enjoy protection after removing constraints while others continue to suffer from the constraints after losing the protections, and in which opportunities are monopolised by the former while risks are taken by the latter, and the latter take the "fruit" while the latter pay the price. 44

Xueqin summarises the liberal solution to combating the social evil of inequality as follows:

Liberals aim to deepen market-oriented reform while opposing any attempt to plunder, in the name of economic reform, the social wealth accumulated from the contributions of the lower strata of society, and opposing any attempt to repeat the experience of Land Reform and BaoYi-type big-business nationalism. The economic reform of the past 20 years has not been accompanied by corresponding political reforms to balance power, hence the accumulation of social injustice. The only way out is to establish constitutional democracy and rule of law through political reform, rather than falling back into the trap of campaigns and mass movements as in the past. 45

Formulating concrete programs for the transition to constitutional democracy

Chinese liberals within the CCP such as Shang Dewen, Fang Jun, Du Guang, and Li Rui have made heart-felt proposals to the Party leadership for a smooth political transition from within. The death of political strongman Deng Xiaoping in early 1997 presented an opportunity for liberals to call for democratisation of the party-state. Shang Dewen is a senior professor in economics at Peking University and a member of the People's Liberation Army in the 1940s. In August 1997, when the 15th National Congress of the CCP was at the last stage of preparation, Shang Dewen sent the Central Committee of the CCP a proposal entitled Some Issues of the Political Reform in China and Main Strategies. His proposal included recommendations according to the demands of market economy, general elections and the establishment of parliamentary system, and checks and balances of power - virtually the political system of liberal democracy as established in the West, which he regarded as "political civilisation" belonging to all humankind. In order to minimise resistance within the CCP, Shang Dewen proposed that the backbench of the new political system would be the working class and the CCP. He also proposed allowing three years for preparation through consultation and discussion and another 12 years to complete the process of political transition to full democracy. Shang's proposal was not accepted by the CCP leadership, but led to many interviews and reports by international media.

When these calls for further political reform in the direction of democratisation fell on deaf ears among the "third generation of leadership" led by Jiang Zemin, democrats within the CCP turned their attention to the "fourth generation leadership" represented by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, who became the General Secretary of the CCP and the Prime Minister of the PRC, respectively, in early 2003. Before Hu and Wen assumed power in late 2002, Du Guang widely circulated a pamphlet of over 100,000 words analysing the reality and causes of communist distortions in China and calling for reforms to return enterprises to workers, land to peasants, government to citizens, and culture to society. Concretely, he asked the CCP leadership to eliminate all Party institutions and functions that overlapped with those of the government, to deprive Party propaganda departments at all levels of censorship power, to abolish the power of the CCP to intervene in the internal affairs of "democratic parties," to grant full independence to the army by separating the Party from the army, to grant independence to "social organisations" (particularly the AIBChina Federation of Trade Unions, Communist Youth League, and Federation of Women) by severing the Party's administrative and financial ties, to allow genuine multi-candidate elections, to endow the National People's Congress with genuine legislative power, to establish judicial independence, to guarantee freedom of speech and association, and to establish a new government structure. 46

Following the same line of thinking, Li Rui introduced a proposal for comprehensive democratisation at the 16th National Congress of the CCP in November 2002. In his document, Li Rui divided his suggestions into "democratisation of the Party" and "democratisation of the state." In the area of "democratisation of the Party," Li K asked for institutionalisation in strictly adhering to the rule of a maximum of two terms service for standing politburo members; multiple candidates for election to the central Committee; competitive elections for politburo members, standing politburo members, and the general secretary; freedom of speech within the Party; major decision through votes; and submission of the Party to the state constitution. In the area of "democratisation of the state," his requests included effective measures to guarantee the operation of the National People's Congress as the most authoritative organ of state and legislation, establishment of a "constitutional court" to safeguard all the rights stipulated in the constitution, judicial independence, promulgation of a law of political parties to clearly demarcate the power and responsibilities of the ruling Communist Party and other parties, free elections for government at the township level, and restoration of peasant associations for rural residents to exercise equal citizenship rights. 47

Transcending nationalism

Liberals in China today have achieved a much better understanding of the tension between liberalism and nationalism than their predecessors in modern China, prioritising human rights and individual freedom over national wealth and power (guzao fuping). 48 A complicated and delicate relationship had existed between nationalism and liberalism in China since modern times, largely due to the different logic of these two ideologies as well as the extraordinary intellectual and political history of modern China in confronting the dual challenges of democratisation and national salvation. Most liberals in modern China were nationalists at the same time. In promoting China's independence and modernisation, nationalism and liberalism were both utilised as part and parcel. When modern liberalism was first introduced to China, Yan Fu, father of Chinese liberalism, deliberately and masterfully transmuted it into statism programs, which were upheld by several generations of Chinese liberals. 49 In a politically charged environment, where nationalism had become the most important tool for legitimising the Leninist party-state, and where nationalist sentiment runs high among a population fed with highly selective information by the state propaganda apparatus, Chinese liberals warn against the potential dangers of nationalism in causing social disorder, in arousing xenophobia and chauvinism, in suppressing individual freedom and personal rights, and in sabotaging the project of democratisation and modernisation. 50 They stress that China's modern nationalism has been informed by a backward Sinocentric that has held China back from learning from other civilisations and making progress, and they call for an end to fanatical populist nationalism (jebian xingzuo), which rejects liberal values in the name of patriotism and breeds hatred and violence against other nations.

For liberals in contemporary China, the regime of the Leninist party-state has always been a combination of Communism and nationalism, in which national interests have been greatly distorted by vested interests, privilege, and the ruling ideology. Having established a firm belief in democracy and liberal values as the prerequisite for "rational patriotism and breeds hatred and violence against other nations.

For liberals in contemporary China, the regime of the Leninist party-state has always been a combination of Communism and nationalism, in which national interests have been greatly distorted by vested interests, privilege, and the ruling ideology. Having established a firm belief in democracy and liberal values as the prerequisite for "rational nationalism," they insist that this abstract "national interest" exists apart from the sum of individual interests of the members of a nation, and that this kind of "national interest" can only be legitimised through the democratic process. They argue for the supremacy of universal values over national interest.

42. Qin Hui, "Shi shi gongzao para xia fangbu taishang" (Social justice and academic condition), in Li Shengwei ed., Dazhong dazhong para xia fangbu taishang (Discourse on liberalism and the split in the Chinese world of thought), Shehai Wangli Publishing House, 2000, pp. 389-396.
45. Li Rui, "Xueqin gongzao para xia shi ji shi" (Subjective and objective trends in modern times), Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House, 1999, pp. 395-396.
47. Zheng Jun, "Jianyi para xia shi ji shi" (Discourse on political reforms in China since modern times), Beijing, People's Publishing House, 1999, pp. 396-400.
Liberalism in China protest against the cynical manipulation of nationalism by the party-state, especially for the purpose of reinforcing the legitimacy of the outmoded party-state regime. In Sun Liping’s words, “Nationalism has been pragmatically employed as an important resource for the formulation of state ideology during the era of transition.” This observation is echoed by Fan Baihua, who points to the party-state’s cynical and opportunistic use of nationalism to win the hearts of the people while the party-state assets foreigners in exploiting the Chinese people for enormous profits. Xu Youyu has also acutely pointed out the distinct difference between Chinese nationalism in the 1990s and nationalism in modern Chinese history: the latter was a response to a national crisis caused by foreign invasion, whereas the former resulted from efforts by the party-state to fill the ideological vacuum created by the collapse of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Obviously, neither Chinese citizens nor Chinese “national interests” need to stand in opposition to the West. On the contrary, normal communication with the advanced Western benefits the people and “national interests” of China in protecting human rights, are not something peculiar to capitalism. They are the joint achievements of civilization of the entire world during mankind.  The open discourse on liberalism is effectively damping the Leninist party-state intellectually, ideologically, and morally, and may in the end subdue it without a physical fight, as preached in Daoist strategies.

**Glossary**

- peace, non-violence, democracy, rationality, freedom, and human rights in particular — and urge their compatriots to observe them.
- observation is echoed by Fan Baihua, who points to the party-state’s cynical and opportunistic use of nationalism to win the hearts of the people while the party-state assets foreigners in exploiting the Chinese people for enormous profits.
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**Building Harmonious Society**

-The idea of “building socialist harmonious society” was first put forward by Hu Jintao at a meeting with key officials at the provincial level in February 2005, and reasserted in the resolution about some major issues of building socialist harmonious society at the third plenary session of the CPC National Congress on October 10. The other five criteria are fairness and justice, honesty and fraternal love, full of vitality, stability and order, and harmony between humanity and nature.

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53. Xu Youyu, “Minzuzhuyi de shoufa liuyong de shoufa” (Utilizing nationalism as an important resource), Akb, pp. 373-80; and Li Sheng and Xu Jiaozhong, Zhongguo de de dao (The road for China), Guangzhou: Guangdong Daily Publishing House, 2005.

54. For details see Joseph Feastman, “Preventing the Development Concept,” China Leadership Monitor, vol. 11.