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Cultural Implications of the Sino-Soviet Conflict

Paul V. Hyer*

When the Chinese Communists set up shop in Peking, it was predicted that they would soon dispense with Soviet leadership both in theory and practice. Those acquainted with the Chinese are aware of their great population, a venerable tradition and a keen sense of national pride—cultural elements incompatible with subservience to Moscow. Those who predicted a pending divorce between the two Communist giants, because of their knowledge of Chinese historical development and culture, at the same time assumed that the Chinese brand of Communism would also be more moderate, reasonable and humane. Although this is true in certain particulars, the Chinese, on the contrary, have shown themselves to be more fanatical, intolerant, and ruthless. Now that the Moscow-Peking axis has broken for most practical purposes, there are many ideas advanced to explain the break, which is very real in spite of the fact that some people with an overly simplistic view still feel that the whole thing is a hoax to deceive the free world. Among the explanations the most common point stressed is the matter of national interest including more particularly geography, Russian occupation of former Chinese territory, and the Chinese desire to revive ancient glory and the former empire. Others stress economic development in explaining the break and the fact that Russians are “fat Communists,” a “have nation,” whereas the Chinese are “lean Communists,” a “have-not nation.” It is also pointed out that the revolutions in Russia and China are at different stages thus causing a conflict. The Russian revolutionaries now in the second generation have “arrived,” are bureaucrats with vested interests, creeping capitalism and a tendency to moderate. On the other hand, the Chinese still feel the ardor and agonies of a genuine revolutionary epoch. They want to maintain international tensions leading to

*Dr. Hyer is associate professor of history and chairman of the Committee on Asian Studies at Brigham Young University.
world revolution, and they feel that now is no time to encourage their overworked and underfed people to bask in the sunlight of co-existence. The problem of personalities is also mentioned with such conflicts as those between Mao Tse-tung and Khrushchev. The Communists themselves talk most loudly about ideological conflict, and everyone is aware of the problem of race, subtly injected into the fray.

Certainly these are important factors but a very basic element underlying and indeed conditioning all factors is that of culture, which involves attitudes and values, "national character," and the Chinese "world image" or "self image." Little more can be given here than a few elliptical comments regarding very complex matters which still require a great deal of study. Indeed it might be said that much of the Sino-Soviet conflict is in the mind of the Chinese. At another time with a different mental set or frame of reference it may not exist.

An idiosyncrasy gradually becoming known to Westerners is the fact that the Chinese civilization grew up largely in isolation surrounded by the ocean, the Gobi desert, Himalayan mountains or wastes of Central Asia. The only real contact with aliens was confined to nomadic tribes or others with a much lower level of culture or social organization. The eagerness of such peoples as the Koreans, Japanese, or Vietnamese to adopt Chinese institutions and pay tribute to the dragon throne only confirmed the Chinese in the notion that they were the fountain head of culture. Indeed this old view was valid until comparatively recent times.

Perhaps it should be pointed out that this sinocentric concept is not entirely unique if we observe that the old world wide empires set up by small European countries buttressed by far-flung territories have given way to the empire of the continental, self-contained mass society. The history of all three, the United States, Russia and China is one of isolation and powerful ethnocentricity. The Chinese are only unique in having a much longer history of conditioning in these attitudes and in being much slower in emerging to a mature internationalism.

Until recently the Chinese thought not in terms of Kuo-chia (nation state), but in terms of Tien-hsia (all under the heaven, the universe). The former term was invented only in modern times when the Chinese became more aware of international political realities. Intellectually this tradition made it easier for
the Chinese to go from a Confucian universalism to a Communist internationalism. The idea of a world order of nations is common to both Communists and non-Communists alike. However, a basic assumption of the Chinese world order is that it should be sinocentric. While our term, China, is derived from the ancient Ch’in dynasty (221-206 B.C.), which first unified China and created an empire, the Chinese still speak of their nation as Chung-kuo (the middle nation or central country), the point around which all other peoples revolve. While the concept of the Chinese world has changed, the form still persists in the Chinese self-image. It is emotionally untenable for the Chinese to subordinate themselves to anyone even within the Communist world and certainly not the Russians whom the Chinese consider to be crude and overbearing. It goes without saying that the Peking-Moscow split has been followed by splits and often chaos in virtually every Communist party around the world. There seem to have emerged pro-Peking parties following roughly the old Chinese pale of the former imperial tributary system.

In spite of their ethnocentrism and xenophobia, the Chinese are aware of one advantage over the Soviet Union in Asia in that they know a great deal about the culture and society of their neighbors while the Soviet Union is basically ignorant about the non-Western world and often ignores Asian Communist needs and sensitivities. Not only the Chinese, but other Asian Communist leaders see Russians such as Khrushchev as second-generation bureaucrats of peasant stock and thus very impetuous and vulgar. These they contrast with the suavity of Chou En-lai or the classical intellectualism of Mao Tse-tung. These personal, cultural, or “esthetic” considerations are very important to the contemporary Communist elite of all Asian nations. While the Chinese have gross distortions about the nature of the Western world, they have keen insight into the world of Asia. In the competition between themselves and the Russians in this area, involving the forces of nationalism, regionalism, and internationalism, one important deciding factor in the conflict is the degree of cultural rapport which China and Russia are able to establish in the countries concerned. In most areas the Chinese are significantly ahead. They are hampered only by their inability to subsidize development and to some extent by their recklessness.
No people, even though they experience a revolution, divorce themselves from the past or break entirely from their historical and cultural roots. It is not surprising, therefore, that what we really have is not Chinese Communists but Communist Chinese who still see themselves and the world largely through Chinese eyes. Thus some of the experts stress that the new regime and its foreign relations are still “in spirit” or real content traditional, regardless of what the surface forms of revolution may seem to be. While this point can be pressed too far, it is not coincidence that old Confucian China and present Communist China are both institutionally bureaucratic and despotic, intellectually dogmatic and canonical, psychologically restrictive and demanding, and internationally culturalcentric and condescending. These attitudes with strong cultural roots all find expression in the bitter exchanges directed by Peking against the Soviet Union. “Sinological determinism” is therefore still an important principle in analyzing the behavior of the Chinese.

The change in the role of the Soviet Union vis-à-vis China from ally to antagonist is prompted as much by ancient memories as it is by personal resentment. The Ch'in dynasty created the first Chinese empire (c.215) and built the great wall for defense. Eighty years later the Han dynasty sent China's first representatives abroad to subvert an offensive alliance of barbarians beyond the wall. Since that time every Chinese regime which could not prevent outer barbarians from uniting against it has been destroyed. To the Chinese mind, keenly aware of past indignities, there is little difference between the Mongols who conquered the Sung dynasty, the Manchu who conquered the Ming dynasty and the ambitious Soviet Union which still holds large areas of old China and draws close to the wall. Conversely, the Russians associate the Mongols and the Chinese together historically and have not forgotten that the Mongols were the only aliens to conquer Russia and occupy it for two hundred and fifty years. Now in our day China provokes nightmares of a new “yellow peril.” This, incidentally, is reflected in divergent Chinese and Russian interpretations of the historical role of Chinggis Khan, great world conqueror of the Mongols. The Russians continue to condemn the Mongol conqueror while the Chinese only recently have reinterpreted him as a great leader who promoted cultural contact between the East
and the West through the famous Pax Mongolica. The Russians complain bitterly that the Chinese have "wiped the blood from the hands of imperialistic Chinggis Khan and have rehabilitated him as a Chinese hero."

Moscow frustrated the Chinese ambitions to the north and deliberately interferes with Peking's advance into Southeast Asia, which has been culturally tributary to China for centuries, by contesting Peking's monopoly of the Communist parties in the region. To China insult is added to injury by Russia's publicly taking India's side against China in the recent conflict. The Communists were able to prostitute Chinese nationalism and exploit it in their rise to power. Currently in place of nationalism, but using much the same strategy, the Chinese are making a thinly veiled exploitation of racism and striving to develop a bond between themselves and the non-Caucasian peoples of Asia, Africa and even Latin America. They thus grasp the banner and leadership of world revolution to the exclusion of the Russians. Peking has been adept at turning nationalism against the West in general and the United States in particular. However, the cultural expression or phenomenon of nationalism can also be turned against them. To the degree that the Chinese moves beyond the pale of traditional Chinese cultural hegemony, the more they will be frustrated by difficulties of cultural, linguistic and racial differences.

In a sense the phenomenon we are witnessing with regard to China is one case of many in history. In the nineteenth century Western merchants and missionaries supported by their governments and using militant measures, projected their way of life into China and disrupted the stability of Confucian culture. The abrupt end of old Chinese society doomed Western hopes of seeing the emergence of a Christian, democratic China. Instead a hostile, totalitarian regime emerged from the political, economic and social chaos. Now in a similar way Chinese Communist strategy is a systematic and self-conscious expression of the general tendency of most people to project their values, attitudes and way of life abroad, to judge foreign peoples by their own standards and to interpret alien affairs in terms of their own self image. The irrevocable result is friction with those who only partly share Chinese standards or values.

One of the dominant themes of modern Chinese intellectual history is the conflict between "historical tradition" and the
"value of existence." While modern-minded Chinese have been intellectually alienated from their tradition, they are at the same time emotionally attached to it. A corollary of this theme has been the attempt to seek an equivalence between the Chinese world and the world of the barbarians. In accepting Western science and technology the Chinese were constrained to reject Western Christianity. In accepting Marxism, Leninism and the Russian model of development the Chinese feel compelled to reject Russian leadership and strategy. The frustrating factor is that in seeking independence from the West in order to remain Chinese, the Chinese have been forced to be dependent on the West, various nations at different times, in order to protect themselves from a real or a felt threat. Old style imperialism was a real threat. Now the Americans are felt to be a threat. Understandably the Chinese judge themselves by their ideals and the United States or Russia by their actions.

Paradoxically but truly the Chinese reaction against Western physical domination has gone far to complete the conquest of China by Western culture, more recently of the Soviet brand. As the Chinese came to worship science, and to seek a panacea for her social, economic and political problems, their iconoclastic tendencies drew them to Communism. The only alternative would have been to cling to tradition or to come hat in hand to sit at the feet of the West. This being emotionally untenable, many anomic Chinese intellectuals accepted Communism and its claim to a scientific solution to social problems. And in so doing the Chinese feel they have bypassed the West and arrived at the head of the line of history to look down from the vantage point of Communism, to which all societies, in their view are evolving, and disparage the West with its social and economic inequities. Chinese attachment to their own culture and the emergence of a hyper-nationalism has brought China to a new stage, to a dispensing with the leadership of their Russian comrades and a swinging of the pendulum once more to independence, isolation and the establishment of the Chinese model as a rallying point for other Asians and now Africans also. Certain factors nourish Chinese parochialism or provincialism, and thus encourage a grossly distorted view of American conditions, Russian policy and the world situation. This brings China into conflict with Russia over strategy and how to exploit revolutionary conditions. The particular factor is the ignorance
of the Chinese in general and of Mao Tse-tung and most of the other leaders in particular regarding the outside world. Most of these men with their roots in the countryside spent most of their adult lives in guerrilla warfare among the peasants. Now Chairman Mao, once constantly among the people, has reverted in a way to the practice of the imperial court, rarely appearing in public and refusing to travel outside China. The myopia of Mao is in a sense an archetype of the Chinese population in general.

One important pattern of traditional Chinese international relations as seen in the old tributary system was the strategy of "using barbarians to fight barbarians." Since the United States is the object of opposition focus, the leader of the free world, and the single most important factor frustrating the Chinese in gaining what they consider to be their rightful place in the world, and since the Chinese lack the industrial base and the strength to attack the United States directly, Peking's approach is to pressure the Russians into using their resources to confront the Americans. The Russians, however, who have met the Americans face to face in Berlin and Cuba, are inclined to be more responsible than the Chinese and to take fewer risks, particularly in areas in which they feel the Chinese would be inclined to gain more than themselves. Vietnam is a case in point.

China in its extreme iconoclastic purge of traditional culture on the basis of class criteria must still feel the emotional security of self-worth. This the Chinese gain in part by presenting themselves as the only true defenders of the faith. In condemning Soviet revisionism and launching their famous commune movement they claim to be the first nation to move into an advanced stage of evolution closer to true Communist institutions, something the Soviets have never claimed.

In the religious field the Chinese have relegated Confucianism to the philosophy department of the university, have rooted out the decadent cult of Taoism unmercifully and have severely restricted Christian churches, setting up autonomous units cut off from the West and accountable only to Peking. Buddhism has been used, however, as one more international arm of the government, to influence other Buddhist states of Asia such as Cambodia or Laos. Refurbished temples are used as places to impress Buddhist dignitaries from abroad and a