

Chinese Way of Nation Building: Re Interpreting the Early Maoist Era

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Like all social political phenomenon, nationalism is a concrete historical category. The integration of communities into nations was a direct outcome of a prolonged historical process and at a distinct stage of social, political and economic development, nations came into being.

This excitement took place in the context of a world which had just seen the brief success of many ideological movements as Nazism, and Fascism and which was not confronting the spread of communism. The problems of political development clearly called for interdisciplinary research. Anthropological studies of African & Asian cultures appeared to offer rich material for understanding the processes associated with nation building.

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Like all social political phenomenon, nationalism is a concrete historical category. The integration of communities into nations was a direct outcome of a prolonged historical process and at a distinct stage of social, political and economic development, nations came into being. In short, the history of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is replete with the history of formation of nations all the world over, beginning from the European world. In the twentieth century, the nation remained an enduring unit in all programmes of re-construction and modernization. Therefore, it is imperative for social scientists and historians to seriously comprehend this important historical process of nation building in Asia in general and China in particular.

In the continent of Asia nationalism emerged out of the struggle against imperialism. Gradually, the nationalism won the souls of the masses. Similar to Europe in the nineteenth century, it became a mass movement.

At a general level, historians give three reasons for the rise of nationalism in Asia. First, the ideology of nationalism was an effective means of organizing the anti-imperialist struggle to either direct foreign rule or indirect imperialist domination. Secondly, it stood for basic changes and challenged previously held political rituals and beliefs. Modernizers also used nationalism as a tool to spread other modern values they articulated, like industrialization, or the secular world view with its faith in science, critical thinking and progress. Finally, nationalism overtime spread because it simultaneously gave both leaders and followers a vision of a bright future for an awakened people with 'potentially awesome power'.

In the history of modern China, nationalism emerged out of struggle against semi-colonialism and semi-feudalism. The central issue in modern China revolved around the question of how to recover sovereignty, end the ‘humiliation of foreign occupation’ and bring about ‘equality and development’. It is interesting to note the fact that in the recent writings, “nationalism is not characterized by a passive response to the west, but by an active struggle of the Chinese to meet the foreign and domestic challenges in an effort to regenerate and transform their country from an out dated Confucian Universal Empire to a modern nation state, with a rightful place in the family of nations.” Infact, Chinese debates on the key issue of modernization were marked by the views of three groups. The early reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Cichao tried to use ‘traditional ideas in new and different ways’. The second group was represented by republicans like Sun Yat Sen, who were inspired by ideas from Japan and the West. The third group, the Communist Party of China wanted to end all sort of inequalities and drive out the foreigners.

In post first world war period, it was on 4th May, 1919 that students in Beijing held a huge demonstration against the verdict of the Versailles Peace Conference on Shantung. The May Fourth Movement was an outburst of nationalism and manifestation of Chinese disappointment with the western powers. The May Fourth Movement was primarily intellectual and political in nature, which aimed at achieving ‘national independence’, ‘individual emancipation’ and creation of a ‘new culture’.

The decade of 1920’s was marked by the beginning as well as growth of the Chinese Communist Party. The party leadership was committed to communism but simultaneously were staunch nationalists. In the decade of 1930’s and 1940’s the important leaders like Mao Zedong, Liao Shaochi, Deng Xiaoping and Zhou En Lai were fired with the desire to revive the self confidence and self respect of China.

It is appropriate at this stage to define the scope and objectives of the proposed study. First of all, the word nationalism has been deliberately discussed as it pre-supposes the important process of nation building being an ongoing historical process which logically culminates in 1949 when China becomes People’s Republic of China.

It thus, heralded a new chapter of nation building under the collective leadership of communist party of China with Mao Ze Dong the paramount leader. Second, the research work assumes that during the Pre-cultural Revolution period apart from Mao, other important political leaders did influence the course of nation building. It was only after the initiation of the Cultural Revolution that the personality cult of Mao assumed added importance. Third, it is pertinent to note here that in course of discussion of twin dimensions of class analysis as well as the issue of culture would be highlighted. Furthermore, the centrality of nation building will be taken at length, simultaneously; the question of state building will also constitute another important facet of discussion. The work, therefore, would analyse the importance of state sovereignty, territorial integrity and perceptions of international system.

Thus, the research work will involve discussion of both domestic policies. However, due to constraints of time and space in terms of chronology, it is important to note that the period between 1949 and 1969 would be discussed. This caveat is necessary because in terms of historical research

it is inevitable that historical background is important but some where it must end. Hence, deliberately the year 1969 has been selected although Mao reigned till 1976 but in this work first thirty years of establishment of People's Republic of China would be on focus. This paper is an attempt to understand Chinese way of nation building from 1949 to 1969, one of the most crucial and tumultuous period of its history.

At the time of founding of People's Republic of China, on 1st October, 1949, Mao stated that "the Chinese people, comprising one quarter of humanity, have now stood up. The Chinese have always been a great, courageous and industrious nation; it is only in modern times that they have fallen behind."¹ Therefore, it heralded a major transformation in the landscape of Asia in particular and world in general.

Writing about this epoch, a renowned social scientist of India observed:-

"As in many earlier epochs of change, there has existed a large hiatus between objective reality and political theory in the period since, 1945. This period was marked by the collapse of colonial order and the successful culmination of national revolutions in many parts of the world, in effect transforming the world political structure and ushering in an epoch as momentous as the age of the industrial revolution and the age of imperialism. Yet the dominant paradigms in political theory were pre-occupied with the notions of development and modernization (conceived in terms of transforming human diversity into the monolithic image provided by western social science)."²

From the very beginning Mao was quite clear about the goal of nation as well as state building in unique Chinese way and let it be known that, "we should organize the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people in political, military, economic, cultural and other organizations and build a new China, independent, democratic, peaceful, unified, prosperous and strong." Thus, a unique way of nation building began to evolve in China.

The term nation building is a normative concept that means different things to different people. But it is generally opined that the people of a nation share a common national identity and part of nation buildings is the construction of that common identity. As such, these days the word nation is used synonymously with state, but it should be clear that it is more properly the governmental apparatus by which a nation rules itself. In the words of Lucian Pye there is acceptance in the political realm 'that the prime unit of the polity should be the nation-state'.

It is also used synonymously with political development, modernization which is pre-requisite to economic development. Be that as it may be nation building is important concept. It matters among the comity of nation states because strong state is necessary in order to provide security, as such building of an integrated national community is important in the building of a state. In short, nation building refers to the process of constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state. This process aims at the unification of the people or peoples within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run.

This crucial process equips nations with the institutional foundation absolutely critical to enhance their capacity to effectively assert self governing powers.

The fundamental elements are following:

- Genuine self rule making decisions about resource allocations and development strategy.
- Creating effective governing institutions.
- Vesting institutions legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens.
- Above all, the need for a strategic orientation in terms of long term planning.

Having discussed the conceptual aspect of nation building, a point of caution should be noted.

In the words of a leading political scientist:

“Such a recognition of state and nation building as important social processes should not, of course, degenerate into a glorification or mystification of ‘nation’ as some transcendent reality with exclusive claims over other social entities or chauvinist designs vis-à-vis other nations what we are concerned with is, rather, a global process of moving from a world structure based on domination and dependence to one based on respect for the autonomy and dignity of diverse peoples, a global process that can lay the foundation of a truly civilized world order. Nation building is not an exercise in fragmentation but rather a necessary step in the evolution of a world society based on principles of freedom, justice and participation. Nor is it a passing phase; the future world society, if it is not to become a monolith will need to be conceived as a community of diverse cultural entities.”³

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the leaders who initiated the task of nation building were no book worms but were ‘steeled and nourish held in the vortex of struggle’. There was unique ways of the Chinese background. The leaders had successful experience of handling power in rural bases for some two decades prior to gaining state power, with accumulated concrete experience in social change and economic organization. In the words of a social scientist:

“Some strategies used today were first tested in Yen-an and even as far back as 1927-35, in the mountain bases of Ching Kang Shan and in Kiang Si. . . participatory mass action in revolution (land reform in the late 1920’s, early 1930’s and late 1940’s) and production, relying on the people to emancipate themselves; ‘Serve the people’ ethic, politics, and discipline for the armed forces and all cadres; A ‘Bear up, strive on’ spirit plus a ‘More production, Less Waste’ ethic for building a self reliant economy; use of a dual technology (indigenous and advanced) according to need and availability of skills and resources (later to be known as the strategy of ‘walking on two legs’); A ‘Serve the workers and peasants’ orientation to education, combining, classroom study with productive labour and with participation in social struggle (Yen-an in the early 1940’s); the exercise of rigorous criticism and self criticism and ‘Rectification Movements’ (1941-1942) to maintain the ascendancy of people oriented values among the cadres and intellectuals ‘the final dividing line between a revolutionary intellectual and (other) intellectuals is whether he is willing to merge and in practice does merge with the workers and peasants’ (Mao in 1939)”⁴

So there was considerable degree of continuity in the Chinese leadership between the pre

1949 and post 1949 era, both in respect of 'value-orientation' and 'personnel'. The leaders in course of anti-imperialist movement had grasped the reality and realized lesion of methodology – 'to marry theory, including imported theory, to one's own specific historical socio-economic and cultural reality'.

Uncritical, non evaluative learning must be eschewed and the correctness and applicability of foreign and domestic experience must be tested by practice, relying first and foremost on the practice of one's own people. T'ui Ch'en Ch'uhsin, "weed through the old, bring forth the new"; Yang Wei Chung Yung, "adapt foreign things for domestic needs" these were two of the operational slogans in China. In the words of Stuart Schram:-

"Another point, closely linked to this one, is Mao Tse Tung's very strong sense of identification with China and her fate. This gave rise, not only to a fierce and uncompromising nationalism, but to an insistence on the need to adapt theories of foreign origin, including Marxism, to Chinese conditions and to Chinese culture. Indeed, two of Mao's best known theoretical contributions, contained respectively in the essays 'on practice' and 'on contradiction', can be traced back, before they were developed in Marxist terms, to very ancient Chinese ideas : that of 'seeking' the truth from facts. (Shih-shih ch'iu - shih), and the old Yin-yang dialectics."⁵

Mao spelled out, on 30 June 1949, in an article written to commemorate the 28th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, the nature of the 'people's democratic dictatorship' which he envisaged in near future.

Commenting on the class nature of the new state, Mao "defined the locus of authority in terms of what has often been called a concentric-circle metaphor. The 'people' who were to exercise the dictatorship would be composed of the working class, the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the 'national bourgeoisie' of these four classes, the workers would enjoy hegemony and the peasants constituted their most reliable allies. The petty bourgeoisie were to be largely followers, while the national bourgeoisie had a dual nature: they were part of the people, but at the same time exploiters".

Consequently, those elements among them who behaved badly could be reclassified as not of 'the people', and find themselves on the receiving end of the dictatorship, the objects rather than the subjects of revolutionary change.⁶

In the task of guiding the development of China 'from an agricultural into an industrial country', Mao stated that 'the education of the peasantry' was 'the serious problem'. For, Mao added: 'The peasant economy is scattered, and the socialization of agriculture, judging by the Soviet Union's experience, will require a long time and painstaking work.'⁷ Mao declared in March 1949, 'From 1927 to the present the centre of gravity of our work has been in the villages – gathering strength in the village in order to surrounded the cities, and then taking the cities. The period for this method of work has now ended'.

The period of "from the city to the villages" and of the city leading the village has now begun. The centre of gravity of the party's work has shifted from the village to the city. From henceforth, the task was the bringing of modern knowledge, and the resources of the modern industrial sector,

from the cities to the countryside. Therefore, in year 1949, the emphasis was on working class leadership of the 'people's dictatorship'. As Mao had declared:-

“Given this condition, China can develop steadily, under the leadership of the working class and the communist party, from an agricultural into an industrial country, and from a new democratic into a socialist and communist society, abolish classes and realize the Great Harmony [ta-t'ung].”⁸

Therefore, the attempt was to be made in very near future in the decade of early 1950's, to enlist large numbers of 'real flesh and blood worker's into the party in order to 'improve' its class composition'.

Thus, Mao sought to promote a 'new democratic' revolution in China which would be equivalent of the capitalist stage in the development of European society. This undoubtedly, by meant 'modernization and industrialization, in order to create the economic foundation on which socialism could ultimately be established.' Therefore, there was strong Chinese way which Stuart Schram shared:

“And yet, despite all this, and despite Mao's explicit statement, in 1962, that during these early years there had been no alternative to 'copying from the soviets', his article of 30 June 1949 itself contained elements that point in a significantly different direction. Thus, the traditional term 'autocracy' (tu-ts'ai) was used as a synonym for dictatorship (Chuan-cheng), ta-t'ung or 'Great Harmony' was used as an equivalent for communism, and the unique character of China's revolutionary experience was repeatedly underscored.”⁹

The problems facing PRC on achieving state power were indeed formidable. First, national administrative control had to be established and strengthened. Second, economic sector had to be revived holistically, economic direction brought under government control, and reconstruction development projects begun. Finally, the transition to socialist relation of production was to begin, in keeping with the party's ideological beliefs and the expectations of its political base. Clearly, the strategy of the 'new democracy' period was to gain the support of or to neutralize the intermediate groups that were seen as part of the alliance of 'people', in order to isolate the landlords and the representatives of 'bureaucratic capital'. Mao wrote in December, 1947,

“confiscate the land of the feudal class and turn it over to the peasants. Confiscate monopoly capital... and turn it over to the new-democratic state. Protect the industry and commerce of the national bourgeoisie. These are the three major economic policies of the new democratic revolution”¹⁰.

The essence of economic strategy under the 'new democratic state', then, was to 'permit private capitalism some leeway and motivation to encourage its production potential, but to harness it to the goals and priorities of the new state'.

These principles were embodied in the 'common programme', adopted by the Chinese people's political consultative conference in September, 1949. The CPPCC was composed of delegates from the various classes and groups that made up the United front of the 'new democracy', and the 'common programme' served as a national constitution until 1954.

The common programme is an important document which laid down outlines of nation building. It began with the preamble, Chapter-I enunciated general principles, while Chapter-II which consisted of Articles 12-19 speed out organs of state power, and Chapter-III described about the Military System.

Chapter-IV dealt with Economic Policy from Articles 26-40. Articles 26-31 of this programme spelled out the economic strategy of the new democracy, earlier mapped out by Mao and divided the economy into four sectors according to degree of public ownership:

1. The state owned sector : 'All enterprises vital to the economic life of the country and to the people's livelihood shall come under unified operation by the state' (Article-28);
2. The cooperative economy, regarded as semi-socialist in nature and to be accorded preferential treatment (Article-29);
3. The private sector, to be 'encouraged and fostered' where beneficial to the national welfare (Article-30);
4. The state-capitalist sector, an amorphous concept embodying various means by which private production was subordinated to state priorities :
'For example, producing for state owned enterprises and exploiting the state owned resources through the form of concession' (Article-31)¹¹.

Chapter-V discussed about the cultural and educational policy and Chapter-VI comprising of four articles deals with policy towards nationalities the highlights are following:

- All nationalities within the boundaries of the Peoples Republic of China are equal (Article-50);
- Regional autonomy shall be exercised in areas where national minorities are concentrated and various kinds of autonomy organization of the different nationalities shall be set up according to the size of the respective populations and regions (Article-51);
- All national minorities within the boundaries of the People's Republic of China shall have the right to join the People's Liberation Army and to organize local people's public security forces in accordance with the unified military system of the state (Article-52);
- All national minorities shall have freedom to develop their dialects and languages, to preserve or reform their traditions, customs and religious beliefs (Article-53).

Finally, Chapter-VII describes about the foreign policy.¹²

As for the crucial question of land reform, it proceeded from the summer of 1950 to the spring of 1953. Its redistributive principles are conveyed by the pronouncements of the Agrarian Reform Law (1959):

Article-1: The land ownership system of feudal exploitation by the landlord class shall be abolished and the system of peasant land ownership shall be introduced in order to set free the rural productive forces, develop agricultural production, and thus have the way for new China's industrialization.

Article-2: The land, draught animals, farm implements and surplus grain of the landlords, and their surplus houses in the countryside shall be confiscated but their other properties shall not be confiscated.

Article-4: Industry and commerce shall be protected from infringement.

Industrial and commercial enterprises operated by landlords and the land and other properties used by landlords directly for the operation of industrial and commercial enterprises shall not be confiscated.

Article-6: Land owned by rich peasants and cultivated by themselves or by hired labour and their other properties shall be protected from infringement.

The earliest work on Political Culture which was premised on national character did not distinguish between the orientations of political leaders and the common people; everyone was taken to be representative of a common national culture. Ideological position taking and moralizing replaced positionistic theory building.¹³

A Western political thinker acknowledged that culture is often treated as the explanation of last resort; if there is no other way of accounting for differences, then just say these are due to culture. Another social scientist noted, "Men and nations behave relationally and wisely only after they have exhausted all the alternatives".

The opening of China by the great Helmsmen Deng Xiaoping and the end of communism in Eastern Europe revealed that the decades of communist rule had not obliterated the different national cultures nor did produced societies of "new socialist men" at that time work on "End of History" also suggested new ways of looking into these important historical processes."¹⁴

In the "post-cold war" world we are already seeing a revival of ethnic and nationality differences which testify to the importance of cultural factors. Marxist and Leninist leaders realized, they have had to allow ethnic and other cultural realities to reemerge as significant political realities. The "end of (dogmatic) ideology" has opened the way for cultural predispositions to become the bases for group identities.

It may be necessary for them to go back and actually read the pioneering works which much that may be very stimulating. The pendulum appears to be swinging away from description and back towards a search for the elegance of bold theory culture will not be as exorbitantly praised or as viciously damed as it has been; and therefore it will have won a secure and enduring place in social science research had to combine the task of waging war with that of building socialism and carrying out modernization.

In short, culture for these social scientists and historians was the generalized personality of a people, in the sense that the model personality of a people was their culture, and thus culture and personality were essentially identical factors shaping behavior of nation states.

The national character approach which was much famous in the early work of political culture was caught up in 1920's in the wake of end of the First World War era excitement over the ability of political science to figure out the prospects for political development of new states in developing areas in the decade of 1940's in the continent of Asia and Africa.¹⁵

This excitement took place in the context of a world which had just seen the brief success of many ideological movements as Nazism, and Facsism and which was not confronting the spread of communism. The problems of political development clearly called for interdisciplinary research. Anthropogogical studies of African and Asian cultures appeared to offer rich material for understanding the processes associated with nation building.

Thus, it offers to open up fresh approaches of studying Chinese way of nation building in the 21st century after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and disintegration of USSR. At a time when people of Asia are talking of 21st century as Asian century and simultaneous rise of China and India and importance of ASEAN Nations emphasis on comprehensive methodology of social sciences may be of considerable use in our understanding of Modern and Contemporary China in particular and Asia in general. Then only a giant leap forward will be possible in important discipline of social sciences.

Endnotes:

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3. Ibid., pp. vii-viii.
4. As cited in, Paul T.K. Lin: 'Development Guided by Values: Comments on China's Road and its Implications' in Rajni, *op. cit*, pp. 151-152.
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7. Cited in Ibid, p. 91.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid, p. 92.
10. Selected Works of Mao: Vol. IV, p. 167.
11. Cited in Carl Riskin: *China's Political Economy The Quest for Development since 1949*, New York, 1987, p. 40.
12. See the entire text in Appendix-II Liu Suinian and Wu Qungan (eds.) : *China's Socialist Economy*, Beijing, 1986, pp. 487-500.
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