

A Look Back at the 6th Plenary Session of the CCP's 17th Central Committee: Will the Unexpected Cultural Reforms be Misappropriated for a New Ruling Strategy?

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Last week, the Chinese Communist Party's 17th Central Committee concluded its 6th Plenary Session. Late next year China plans to inaugurate the 18th CC, which will be composed of the next generation of leaders. As concerns about a hard landing for the Chinese economy dominate discussion, this last session garnered the world's attention as the final act of the 17th CC. Speculation abounded as to whether there might be signs of change in China's political elites or a new economic policy direction in response to the global financial crisis.

Quite unexpectedly, the subject of "cultural reform" emerged as a dominant issue. Details involved deepening reform of cultural systems and promoting the flourishing development of socialist culture. This was followed by a series of abstract concepts, but the core idea seemed to be an emphasis on promoting a degree of cultural soft power to match China's overall national power, and building up a spirit of socialist civilization. The discussion revolved around ways to promote cultural industries and regulate or manage media outlets such as newspapers and other publications. Considering the opaque nature of the CCP's policy-making process, it is always difficult to obtain official information on changes in the political elites. Even so, considering the current situation in which the "China

threat” idea is gaining traction abroad and domestic concerns are rising over the possibilities of explosive inflation and a faltering growth dynamic, such abstract talk of culture was hardly expected to become the core agenda topic.

Actually, discussion of cultural reform as a major topic at CCP meetings is nothing new. From the 12th Central Committee to the present the Chinese leadership has continuously stressed the importance of constructing a socialist cultural civilization, and the report of the 16th CC brought up cultural construction and reform of cultural systems as key tasks. However previous discussion of cultural issues has had more of a symbolic propaganda character and has not been treated as a vital task. Breaking from this tradition, the 6th Session of the 17th CC raised the issue of cultural reform on all fronts.

Why bring this up now? We should note that this topic is likely to be treated as a major issue of the 18th CCP Central Committee. After all, there is precedent: the “harmonious society” concept, which became the guiding concept of the 17th CC, was originally formalized at the 6th session of the 16th CC. One thing we often overlook is the fact that China’s system is not ruled by a single member of the political elite. Even if a new political leader emerges from the 18th CC next year – possibly Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, or someone else – the CCP’s collective leadership system will clearly continue to function. This means that regardless of who rises to power, the new leader will not be able to immediately enforce his own governing ideology. Thus in the initial period, the governing ideology and political slogan of the 18th CC will probably be “constructing a spirit of socialist civilization” and “becoming a cultural world power.”

In that case, why is the CCP pushing the topic of cultural reform? First of all, based on its achievement of becoming an economic power, it apparently intends to take the next leap to become a cultural power. As discussed at the plenary session, China’s cultural power and awareness level are relatively low compared to its overall national power, and therefore the goal is to raise China’s soft power through cultural reform while fostering a more mature cultural awareness among the Chinese people. However we must look beyond this rather simplistic officially stated goal and question the true political motivations behind China’s decision to expand its cultural power on all fronts.

In the Hu Jintao period China has externally promoted the ideal of the “Beijing Consensus.” They may have benefited from the failure of the neo-liberalist world order led by the US, but for whatever reason it is clear that China has made use of its advancement to G2 status in international society. Nevertheless China’s

precipitous advancement to global superpower status has re-awakened residual fears about the “China threat” and has caused concern in international society and the region. Also, internally the national integration crisis has deepened. The communist government is threatened by the spread of various elements of social instability, such as minority ethnic groups calling for independence, terrorism, the paradoxes of rapid economic growth, the extreme gap between rich and poor, urban-rural inequality, protests and rioting, corruption, increasing worship of money, lax morals, the anti-dictatorship movement and calls for democratization.

From the CCP’s perspective they must have desperately felt the need to find some means of overcoming these internal and external conflicts and threats. Cultural reform has thus emerged as a new total solution. In other words, it is a manifestation of their intention to combat the crisis of social integration by expanding China’s soft power externally and reconstructing a spirit of socialist civilization. A new emphasis on securing the foundation of the CCP government and its directivity could be even more meaningful than the economic development agenda of the 5th session of the 17th CC, which formulated the current 5-year economic plan.

The question is, how is China going to proceed down this road to becoming a cultural powerhouse? First, there are doubts about what they will use to implement these cultural reforms. What can China’s peculiar socialist values offer to the world? Presently three ideological factions are battling over China’s ruling ideology. The New Left espouses strict adherence to the Mao Zedong-style socialist tradition; the New Right emphasizes stronger markets and more freedom; and traditionalists argue for a return to China’s traditional Confucian values. Each of these factions is pushing their own agenda. But it appears that this ideological conflict has not yet played itself out within the CCP. Recently there have been two symbolic incidents related to this debate over values. Early this year a large statue of Confucius in the vicinity of Tiananmen Square was removed just 3 months after being erected. Then, when a portrait of Sun Yatsen, the father of the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, was erected in Tiananmen Square on PRC National Day (10.1), some cadres objected that Sun Yatsen contributed to the spread of liberal ideology and thus various memorial events were cancelled. Incidents like these indicate the chaotic state of the current struggle over the CCP’s ruling ideology.

Considering the negative effects that can result from experimentation in using cultural values as a governing tool, China will have a difficult time emerging as a cultural power. Despite ideological conflicts and confusion, Hu Jintao’s government used the cultural ideology of nationalism for the sake of social integration and

stability. It looks like China intends to proceed along the path to a future as a cultural power through a revival of the “great Chinese people” ideal, and has given the people the impression that the economic growing pains accompanying the development process will vanish in time. The success of the Beijing Olympics, China’s rise to G2 status, their construction of an aircraft carrier, and the launch of a manned spacecraft are all symbolic manifestations of the “great Chinese people” ideology.

However, excessive use of Chinese nationalism has contributed to oppression of minorities, an aggressive foreign policy, and the growth of extreme nationalist groups that even the CCP has difficulty controlling. In fact, the influence of extreme nationalist groups empowered by the media and the internet has had the effect of limiting the regulatory efforts and actions of the CCP, and some officials have made use of these groups for their own personal interests. In an effort to solve its problems the CCP is playing with a dangerous tool that may boomerang back to hurt it later.

Fundamentally, culture is a spontaneous creation. Autonomous revision and power differentiation are better matched as fellow travelers along the road to developing a culture. Of course, some artificial investment and foundation setting may be helpful in nurturing a culture’s growth. But considering the current situation in China, the CCP’s involvement in the cultural reform effort is more likely to trample the young sprouts than to breathe new life into them. Already some concerns are beginning to be expressed. In the name of constructing a spirit of socialist culture, it seems likely that tighter regulations will be enforced over all aspects of culture, from broadcasts and performances to publications, and stronger restrictions will be placed on media outlets such as newspapers and the internet. Already there has been considerable discussion of proposals for restricting the use of Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter. This is why the CCP is unable to erase suspicions that it may seek to manipulate social and cultural phenomena to suit its own tastes.

Cultural capacity is not something that can be deliberately increased. The tremendous influence of the Hollywood movie industry, which inspires such envy from China, is not simply the result of massive capital investment. Cultural capacity expands when the buds of creativity have been nurtured in the fertile soil of a culture that values free markets and liberty. Simply investing billions of dollars to lecture people about Confucius and expound on the excellence of Chinese culture will not be enough to boost China’s soft power. The solution is to choose freedom and democracy over control and repression, and the road of cultural reform can only lead to political reform. Only when it moves in that direction will China truly take its first steps toward becoming a cultural power.