Social and Cultural Continuity and Change in China

“China is a nation that has undergone significant change and resistance to change over the last 60 years.”

As a result of rapid modernisation, the People’s Republic of China has experienced an acute social upheaval, due in no small part to the autocratic direction of its government. Modernisation has contributed to a material alteration of China’s social strata. Government acts of imposing of birth control policies and censorship of personal expression signify the degree that Chinese culture has shifted. Following the tenets of sociologist Karl Marx’s conflict theory, the pervading power of the government has resulted in the development of a social schism, in this case, due to the influence of authority, as seen by the Communist Party of China, the Chinese government has acted as a catalyst for the major transformative changes that has threatened the most fundamental and valued unit of Chinese society: family. Hence, China’s unique cultural and industrial shift has ignited a publicized social dispute between the government and the rights of its populace.

The arrival of the Communist Party of China and its leader Chairman Mao Zedong would portend a “flag of revisionism” and modernisation for China. After World War II, China’s industry had been dismantled and appropriated by the Soviet Union. The size of China’s population necessitated economic growth and production. The beginning of the social and economic campaign, the first ‘Five Year Plan’, signified an ideological shift within society and the birth of the rapid modernisation that continues in China today. Due to Chairman Mao’s impatient desire for immediate industrial and economic growth, which he envisioned with the phrase, “More: faster, better, cheaper.” With financial aid at the macro-level from the Soviet Union, Mao reestablished a stable economic platform at the macro-level. However, despite strong, reassuring economic reforms, the power of the Communist Party of China merely increased, with centralised state control of more of the country, including the majority of industrial enterprises. Therefore, the presence and future of modernisation in China was assured.
China’s traditional society and culture have maintained a deep-rooted existence for decades prior to the communist revolution and predominant influence of the Communist Party of China, with the nature of tradition in China based on the institution of family. For example, the commitment to family life and kinship has been described by the popular proverb, “Falling leaves will return to the root that sired them.” The familial hierarchy of China has changed very little, despite the pervading influence of modernisation, as the universal family value of filial piety exists, with the will of the family superior prevailing over any other member. Familial gender roles and status continue to be influential, with filial piety centred on a single-family patriarch. The decision of the closeness of kinsmen in a family similarly falls to the judgment of a patriarch. With the abdication of Emperor Puyi and the subsequent dissolution of the final Qing dynasty in 1912, however, the opportunity for a new social institution in Chinese society could come to fruition. Furthermore, in contemporary society, the institution family has come upon a resistance to change in the form of its elders. The ageing population of China, which is estimated to be close to two hundred million people, represents fifteen percent of its total population. With China’s meteoric influx of technology, comprised of electronic devices such as mobile phones, household appliances and transport, elderly citizens are unused to the rate of innovation and change of environment. With the ageing population growing in China, their ability to assimilate or acculturate is a steadily growing social concern. Regardless of social change, however, family life in China is an aspect of society that has remained largely similar.

This rapid modernisation, however, has created significant complications and social controversy, in the form of organised opposition to authoritarian policies. Furthermore, the civil unrest within China grows in tandem with Karl Marx’s theory of social conflict, which proposes the existence of two groups, a powerful minority class, the bourgeoisie over the powerless but larger class of the proletariat, with social conflict erupting as a result of the development of class-consciousness from worsening socio-economic conditions. The most infamous instance of such oppression is seen in China’s one-child policy. As a result of Chairman Mao’s encouragement for families to grow in size, as part of his personal belief that
population growth empowered society, and consequently provided manpower to fuel industrial energy, population growth has existed as a major issue in China since the initial boom between 1949 and 1976. During this period, population estimates in China rose exorbitantly, from approximately 540 million to 900 million. Imposed in 1979 by the leader of the Communist Party of China at the time, Deng Xiaoping, as a means of curbing this unnatural rate of growth, if Chinese citizens break this law by having more than one child, government authorities will forcibly sterilize that woman, as evidenced by Wei Laojin, a sterilised Chinese citizen who became the focus of media attention in 2010 for her punishment at the hands of authority. Recently, the controversy surrounding this policy has consequently lead the Communist Party of China to abolish the policy and instate a two-child policy, a notable example of empowerment of the Chinese population through protest.

Since the cessation of its long-standing social structure, existence under the rule of a dynasty, China has adapted to the standards of a modern superpower and benefits of globalization through modernisation. With the advent of the Communist Party of China, the country’s energy of industrialisation and the meteoric modernisation of society have inevitably affected the most central aspects of its society, its most sacred social unit affected by such accelerated modernisation. The resulting social unrest from its oppressed citizenry has established China as an example of Marx’s conflict theory and a spectacle of the effect of industry upon society.

Bibliography and Reference List


