

China's Conundrum: What to Do About the "Young Marxists"?

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The constitutionally communist People's Republic of China has found itself in a conundrum about what to do with the student activist groups popularly known as "Young Marxists", since their well-intentioned attempts to carry out grassroots reform of the country's current variant of communism inadvertently risks destabilizing the entire system.

A [seemingly unexpected story](#) is making the rounds on NPR about how the Communist Party of China has supposedly had to crack down on the student activist groups popularly known as "Young Marxists", with the report stating that their grassroots efforts to reform the country's current variant of communism have put them on a collision course with the authorities.

This might initially sound surprising to those who don't have any background knowledge about communism and wrongly assume that its adherents are ideologically homogenous, as well as those who fell for the foreign fearmongering about what China's system supposedly entails. In truth, while China is a constitutionally communist country run by the Communist Party of China (CPC), its domestic situation and the rapidly changing international environment that it's operating in have compelled it to move beyond the dogmatic teachings of Engels, Marx, Lenin, and Mao to "flexibly improvise" its socio-economic policies into what has since been described as socialism with Chinese characteristics and Xi Jinping Thought.

Who Are The "Young Marxists"?

Arguments abound about whether this is "real socialism" or just a euphemism for describing "state capitalism", but officially speaking, China still regards itself as a socialist country that's on the path towards communism, and the CPC derives its legitimacy from delivering tangible benefits to the population in the name of this ideology. Accordingly, all Chinese students are required to be well-versed in communist thought, with the most zealous among them choosing to join "Young Marxist" activist groups that voluntarily go out to the countryside or spend their vacations working in factories in order to enlighten their compatriots about communism. Oftentimes, these pioneers will teach workers how to organize in protection of their rights, horrified after finding out that many people are still living in what they consider to be more like "feudalism" than the "freedom" that they were taught had spread all throughout the country after the revolution. In their eyes, an increase in material benefits isn't equivalent to an improvement in real living standards.

The "Young Marxists" are believers in "communist orthodoxy" who think that everything should be done "by the book" and truly regard themselves as bringing "power to the

people”, conceiving of their efforts as being part of a bottom-up “course correction” to return the country back to “the right way” after it apparently “lost its ideological bearings” during the three decades of rapid growth that occurred as a result of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms. To the CPC, however, these well-intentioned activities could inadvertently destabilize the country if they popularize the implied notion that the ruling party’s ideological practices aren’t “real socialism”, to say nothing if they succeed in actually returning China back to its immediate post-revolution dogmatic model of Marxism that the government might not consider to be compatible with modern-day conditions in today’s ICT (information and communication technology)-driven world. If more Chinese become convinced that the CPC “isn’t really communist”, then they might question everything else that they were taught and become vulnerable to foreign political suggestions.

Old School vs. New School

Although neither side will ever openly admit it (or at least not yet), the core of the problem is that the CPC and the “Young Marxists” think that the other doesn’t practice “true communism”, with the former taking the implied position that Marxism-Leninism should evolve in the face of changing circumstances while the latter is dead-set on retaining this school of thought in its original form no matter what. As it stands, the “Young Marxists” are currently a statistically insignificant minority, though their ideas had previously been the guiding light that China followed during Mao’s leadership. The country then reconceptualized communism under Deng Xiaoping and is once again in the process of reformulating this ideology in the form of Xi Jinping Thought for carrying the People’s Republic through the [Silk Road Era](#). Accordingly, it can be said that the “Young Marxists” actually represent the “original” Chinese communists, thereby making them two “ideological generations” removed from the current “zeitgeist”.



Youth Workers’ Struggles China. Image: CLB

It would be ideal if the CPC and the “Young Marxists” learn from one another and cooperate for the betterment of all Chinese as a whole, the first being reminded of how important labor rights are to the communist ideology while the latter can become aware of the scenarios under which fundamentalist thought might have to become “flexible” in order to best adapt to changing conditions. Regrettably, however, neither of them might come to these

understandings. The CPC might be afraid of losing its labor force's global competitive edge while the "Young Marxists" might be averse to anything even remotely resembling what they'd probably regard as "revisionism". Furthermore, the state's relationship with the "Young Marxists" might be influenced by a security-centric approach that could see this youth movement grouped together with other Color Revolution forces in the country irrespective of whether or not there's any foreign influence or funding connected to their activities.

Security Considerations

What's worrying is that American information outlets have now begun to cover the "Young Marxists", which they probably aren't doing for what some might think are the "right reasons" even if the argument can be made that this movement veritably has some noble and well-intended goals in mind. Whether deliberately or not, this could feed into the CPC's threat assessment of the group, possibly prompting a more pronounced crackdown against them if some members of the security apparatus come to fear that these students might be misled into sacrificing themselves for the sake of a so-called "Tiananmen Square 2.0". It wouldn't matter in this sense that the "Young Marxists" are a statistically insignificant minority of Chinese society because any semi-publicized provocation that they participate in would be decontextualized, misportrayed, and over-amplified by the Western Mainstream Media for the purpose of manipulating perceptions and facilitating more pronounced destabilization, whether domestically or internationally.

It's therefore difficult to suggest a solution to this conundrum because the fact of the matter is that the "Young Marxists" are the proverbial "ghosts of the CPC's past", representing the dogmatic communism of two "ideological generations" ago that defined Mao's leadership but is no longer being practiced in the same sense. Because the CPC is the supreme political force in the country, all Chinese must learn about the party's history and how it became what it is today, hence how they become familiarized with this "orthodox" model of thought and might be so inspired by it that they join the "Young Marxists". This means that the CPC will continually run the risk of being challenged from "below and within" by younger "puritanical" adherents of this ideology regardless of whatever they choose to call themselves unless the state succeeds in convincing them that the party's evolution into its present form was necessary.

Opening Pandora's Box

That might be much easier said than done, however, because socialism with Chinese characteristics and Xi Jinping Thought bear little resemblance to the original Marxist-Leninist texts from which they supposedly originated, thus begging the question of whether the communist ideology itself in its original manifestation was "imperfect" in spite of its claims to the contrary or if its second and third "generation" successors are unnecessarily "revising" it for what might be "counter-revolutionary" purposes. Opening Pandora's Box can be very dangerous and that's probably why the CPC skirts around the issue, but the growing international attention being given to the "Young Marxists" is designed to eventually reach the Chinese audience behind the "Great Firewall" one way or another, getting them to ask themselves these "subversive" questions that could in turn "naturally" make them susceptible to foreign-promoted anti-government messages aimed at encouraging the creation of "[Umbrella Revolution](#)"-inspired [Color Revolution](#) movements.

Compounding the security sensitivities surrounding this sensitive issue, there's a significant

disconnect between traditional Marxist-Leninist teachings and the present state of affairs within the CPC when it comes to the topic of political improvements. The original texts that the “Young Marxists” follow preach the necessity of radical bottom-up change after which the “dictatorship of the proletariat” will theoretically manage the state to the population’s best interests, whereas the sitting “dictatorship of the proletariat” practices top-down reform and is suspicious of any changes suggested by anyone outside of the upper echelons of the CPC. To put it into an ideological context, the CPC emphasizes “responsible reform within the system carried out by qualified individuals” along the lines of what the Stalinist-era USSR at least superficially seemed to practice while the “Young Marxists” are prone to “revolutionary action” that might one day be taken to its “Trotskyist” extreme in believing (or being led to believe) that the CPC is a “counter-revolutionary” institution that “needs to be overthrown”.

Concluding Thoughts

At the present moment, the “Young Marxists” represent a statistically insignificant minority of Chinese society that’s peacefully challenging the CPC from below and within, though the state evidently perceives this movement to be a potentially “latent threat” because of the Western Mainstream Media attention that’s suddenly being paid to it and the possibility that “ideological inconsistencies” within the country could be weaponized from abroad for the purpose of turning this group into violent Color Revolutionary vanguards one day. Worse still, seeing as how the entire population is familiar with at least the fundamental basics of communist thought and the history of the revolution, countless minds could be manipulated into thinking that the “Young Marxists” are modern-day “revolutionaries” fighting to “liberate” themselves from “capitalist oppressors” just like their forefathers did, especially if this militant narrative somehow seeps through the country’s “Great Firewall”.

China is therefore in a very dangerous conundrum right now because it can’t crack down too harshly on the “Young Marxists” and risk inadvertently catalyzing the infowar blowback that this could inevitably create if the West caught wind of what Beijing was doing but the authorities also can’t sit on their hands and let the situation spiral out of control, ergo why “surgical action” has been undertaken against some of the most active members of the group but in as non-kinetic of a manner as possible to avoid this scenario. Going forward, China needs to prepare itself for the fact that more student-led “reform movements” will probably sprout up as the country’s economy continues transforming throughout the Silk Road Era, and that while some of these groups will probably be Color Revolution fronts or targets of foreign intelligence agencies, a few of them might offer some genuinely constructive ideas for reform that should be seriously pondered.

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Featured image: Demonstrators hold banners in support of workers at the Jasic Technology factory in Shenzhen, in China's Guangdong province, on Aug. 6. (Source: Maine Public)

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