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Summary of the research

The literature concerning the Chinese People's Republic leads us to believe that in China nothing exists outside the Party, its narrative and its worldview. The debate on certain issues, such as the government form, democracy, social justice and civil rights, is very limited, if not absent: it is visible in society, among party cadres, in the limited possibilities of protest. However, this situation does not fully reflect intellectual discussion. The Chinese Government is trying to promote the internationalisation of academic production, but social sciences, and in particular political philosophy, are very sensitive subjects, dealing precisely with the aforementioned issues, and therefore the government continues to monitor opinions that are not in line. Nevertheless, in recent decades the debates among Chinese intellectuals, and their theoretical elaborations, acquired global relevance.

The peculiarity of Chinese political thought is that it was introduced by the West, like other modern disciplines in China. Its autonomous development, however, from the first contacts with Western theories, was irregular, until a rigid ideological position based on the work of Mao Tse-tung conquered hegemony. Just in the last forty years, in academic circles, it has been observed a renewal of political philosophy: intellectuals have stopped passively accepting the results of Western researches, elaborating original insights themselves. This project, through the reconstruction of the genealogy of contemporary Chinese political thought, aims to investigate who are the Western thinkers that shaped its basic structure. Their categories, borrowed by Chinese intellectuals, have been reinterpreted in the light of the so-called *Asian values* and the Chinese historical and political situation, being placed in the end as a theoretical paradigm of reference. This is a necessary operation to fully grasp and contextualise China's political choices, both on the internal and international sides.

State of the art

Contemporary Chinese political thought develops on two levels of reading. The first is the official discourse: in order to fully understand it is necessary to analyse the leaders of People's Republic thoughts from Mao Tse-tung to Xi Jinping; the second one is the university debate. As for the latter, the evolution of modern Chinese philosophical and political thought can be understood starting from the book by Anne Cheng *Histoire de la pensée chinoise* (97 tr.it. 2000). However this reconstruction stops few years before the founding of the People's Republic. From this point, works such as *Whither China?* (2001) by Xudong Zhang and Wang Chaohua's book *One China many path* (2003), reporting essays and interviews by various Chinese intellectuals such as Wang Hui, Gan Yang and Cui Zhiyuan, provide the tools to reconstruct contemporary debate. These texts allow to understand the problems faced by intellectuals in every historical period, from the end of the 70s of the last century until the beginning of the new millennium, and shed light on the various schools of thought that have been developed. Looking at the various debates, Wang Hui's work stands out with *The rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (2008), *Depoliticized politics* (2008) e *China's New Order* (1997 tr.it. 2006). Due to these works and the articles published by other intellectuals in the magazines of Hong Kong and Beijing - above all "Twenty First century", "Tanya", "Xueren" and "Dushu"- it is possible to carry out a meticulous reconstruction of the cultural climate of the last 50 years. A particular mention goes to Gan Yang, Wang Shouchang (representatives of the New Left), Yang Ping (liberal) Mobo Gao (neo-maoist) and many others. This reconstruction process is also possible thanks to more recent works, such as *Constructing China*, a 2018 book by Mobo Gao, and *The rise of China and the demise of the capitalist world economy* (2008) by Li Minqi. None of these works, however, shows the real and decisive exchange between Chinese intellectuals and Western political thought: there is no in-depth analysis of the theoretical paradigm shared by intellectuals, which has stimulated certain debates rather than others.

From the studies already carried out it is evident that, since the mid-80s of the twentieth century, the paradigm of Marxist class struggle has been abandoned in academic circles, and it has been mostly replaced with the Weber's individualistic one, which was also abandoned later on. This research aims to deepen what are the reference models used by Chinese intellectuals in their theoretical elaborations in the last twenty years, to understand what the current theoretical paradigm is, through which intellectuals develop criticism, reflect on the future and contribute to shaping society.

Description of the project

In China, during the second half of the 19th century, with the intensification of intellectual exchanges with the West, new ideas began to circulate, such as the principle of the parliamentary state and that of popular

participation in politics. Many Chinese intellectuals began to support the need to reform the political and social apparatus, still based on a cultural heritage based on imperial orthodoxy. Confucianism was severely criticized, being held responsible for the backwardness of Chinese society. During this period Kang Youwei, promoter of the Hundred Days Reformation of 1898, in his reformist writings attempted to relocate the notions of individual freedoms, equality and Western democracy within the Confucian concept of *Tianxia* 天下, the unity of heaven and men.

The first contacts of Chinese thought with Western philosophy can be traced back to Yen Fu (1853–1921): through his translations of the work of Rousseau, Montesquieu, Huxley, Smith, Mill and Spencer, Chinese political thought began a conscious development towards a modern understanding of rational activity, laying the foundations for an original epistemology. This operation was not completed: Yen Fu had a partial knowledge of French and English thinkers, and was unaware of all the idealistic current of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel's philosophy.

In 1911, the year of the Chinese Revolution that led to the end of the Empire and to the birth of the Republic, the cultural debate was in turmoil: it was a matter of deciding the fate of the nation balancing tradition with the new theoretical ideas coming from outside the country. In those years the leading figures of revolutionary consciousness such as Zhang Binglin and Liu Shipei continued to use concepts dating back to eight centuries for instance the ancient concept of *Qun* 群 (community) of Xunzi (313a.C 238a.C), reorienting them according to the new themes derived from the West: traditional teachings were to serve as a "foundation" and Western ones as "functional practice" (*zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong*, 中学为体 西学为用). Facing of the new urgencies presented by modernity, the attempt to reformulate traditional schemes revealed profound contradictions. Hao Chang (1981) argues that Western ideas and values acted as a catalyst, accentuating some implicit radical tensions in Chinese thought. With the May 4th Movement, in 1919, the tradition was permanently shelved, in favour of a new culture, which was based on western ideas of democracy, science, individualism and nationalism. These are the years of Chen Duxiù, founder of *New Youth* and co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921.

After Mao took power and founded the People's Republic in 1949, adherence to Marxist ideology culminated. From '49 to '76 the Maoist government showed ambivalent attitudes towards intellectuals: usually those who supported the dominant thought of the CCP were appreciated, but there were also openings towards other philosophical-political traditions – for instance, the Hundred Flowers campaign - but their life was short. On the other hand, the Cultural Revolution was the most fitting expression of the impossibility of deviating from Maoist orthodoxy; in fact, in those years the researches of intellectuals stayed within the limits set by the government, and reading some Western philosophers and sociologists was strictly forbidden. The situation

changed in 1978, with Mao's death and the rise of Deng Xiaoping. The first significant and in-depth contact with Western theories arrived through the opening to the outside world and the establishment of the free market, stimulating the birth of critical thinking in China. During the 1980s, there was the reconstruction of intellectual traditions from earlier eras, and new studies developed in universities marginalizing both Marx and Confucius.

The process of reconstruction of a new political thought in Chinese universities over the past 40 years can be divided into four phases, each one approximately ten years long. In every phase a Western author - Martin Heidegger, Max Weber, Michel Foucault and Leo Strauss respectively - acted as a lens to observe the current problems, becoming the theoretical paradigm of reference. In academic circles the shift of interest from one thinker to another was not only due to the continuous renewal of the Western debate, but also, and perhaps above all, to the historical situation that Chinese intellectuals lived and their political conscience. The interesting aspect of the post-Maoist climate in China is the intellectual ferment that shook the country, which is designated with the term "cultural fever" or "cultural frenzy" (*Wenhua re* 文化熱). Of course, there was still control over research and publications (Zhang Xu, 2020).

From 1979 to 1989 the so-called "Kantian fever", born from the publications of Li Zehou -for instance *The Path of beauty* (1981)-, influenced by criticism, brought attention to concepts mostly devoid of political relevance. In the same years however the idea of "fifth modernization", the demand for democracy that led to student protests and the violent repression of Tiananmen Square, began to develop in society. Starting from the mid-1980s, Heidegger's thought undermined Kantian thought. Heideggerian existentialism, emphasizing the possible choices of the human individual, was more suited to the Chinese reality of that time. Moreover, the concept of *Dasein* was studied in its in-depth resemblance to the *Dao* (道)¹ and several studies focused on the compatibility among Heidegger, Lao Zi, and Zhuang Zi. The second phase developed from '89 to '99, the years of internet diffusion, and it gave a strong boost to the research prospects/development, contributing to the opening up of society as a whole. After Tiananmen Square, dealing with drastic changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and as a result of the transformation of China's economic system, Western liberalism became the primary ideology in academic circles and the main paradigm throughout the 1990s. In those years Hayek's social theory, Berlin's ethical-political analysis and Taylor's and Habermas' political philosophy became an object of great interest. In this climate Weber's social theory and Foucault's analysis of power turned into the preferred alternatives to Marxist class analysis. The replacement of the marxist concept of class with the weberian theory of social stratification caused the end of any element of internal conflict within society, to the point that, later under the presidency of Hu Jintao,

¹ The *Dao* or *Tao* translated as "The way" represent the becoming of the existing and how it manifests itself.

Chinese society was described as "harmonious" (Pun Ngai, 2012). When Weber's social theory proved incapable of responding to the various problems that had emerged in recent decades, intellectuals began to look at postmodernism, and particularly Foucault. Therefore a book such as *Discipline and Punish* replaced Weber's social theory, becoming the theoretical paradigm which in many aspects the Chinese left still refers to. In those years many of his works were translated, but the translations were not very reliable and that is why, after thirty years, foucaultian work will return as the main character of the scene.

In the third decade (1999-2009), especially after September 11th 2001, there was a drastic change of the debate in the intellectual circles. The September 11th events made the Chinese reconsider Fukuyama's theory of the *end of history* - internalized in '89 due to the similarities with the Confucian concept of *Datong* (大同) or "great union" or "permanent peace" -, which was replaced by the theory of the "Clash of Civilizations", theorized by Samuel Huntington. In those years, moreover, the interest in Leo Strauss' classical philosophy emerged, contributing to the repoliticization of the debate according to new lines of interpretation. Since September 11th, the Chinese have no longer unconditionally accepted the liberal democratic political system, especially neoliberalism and the praise of globalisation, promoted by American academic circles. Strauss' reading brought strong support to political conservatism, initiating a reflection on how a virtuous link between modernization and tradition could be reconstructed. The influence of Strauss' thought pushed Chinese academic circles towards the rejection of faith in historical progress enabling the return to the Confucian ideological tradition. This helps to contextualize the references to Confucian principles in Xi Jinping's speeches, which allow to fill the value gap that has been created in the population. These principles are in fact extremely congenial to the perpetuation of the political leadership legitimacy, to make the Chinese feel united in the realization of the "Chinese dream", and to ride the globalized context, according to Xi's vision of a China oriented towards global governance.

In the fourth decade (2009-2019), with the substantial increase of Chinese power on the international side, especially since 2008, political conservatism has been even more successful, contributing to the strong recovery of nationalistic currents. In 2018, Sino-American trade conflicts rekindled interest in Carl Schmitt's political realism, which provides excellent insights to ponder on the new international order. This overview shows that the construction of Chinese political thought is certainly based on domestic issues, but is also deeply influenced by the country's role on the international political scene and academic globalisation. The emergence of interest in populism and political realism in Europe and the US had a strong impact in Chinese intellectual circles.

Research objectives and expected results

The main philosophical theory in Chinese universities today is probably post-modernism, and several intellectuals, in their selective acceptance of Western proposals, feel the urgency to focus on Foucault. Foucault's thought is greatly appreciated by both the academic and the radical left, but it is also studied by liberals. Since the early 2000s, Foucault has therefore returned into the centre of discussion, especially with the concept of biopolitics. Other authors who have continued Foucault's project, such as Giorgio Agamben, are studied as well. According to Xu Yichao (2015), the analysis of the relationship between micropower and knowledge, advanced by Foucault, can replace the Marxist concept of class struggle, considered excessively deterministic. In this regard, the Snowden case of 2013 prompted many intellectuals to reflect on how society has now gone beyond Weber's "iron cage" concept, living in an even more suffocating reality, defined - also in relation to the Chinese situation - as "surveillance capitalism".

Academic circles are still studying Foucault because his thought has provided new concepts which make possible to explain the Chinese social reality. In 2013, during the 3rd plenary session of the 18th Congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the purpose was to improve and develop the socialist system with Chinese characteristics and to promote the *modernization of national governance*. This specific attention to the governance by the party - and by Xi as well, as seen in the section dedicated in the first volume of *Governing China* or from the *Resolution of the 19th Congress* – led the beginning to a series of studies concerning cultural and global governance, analysed through the resumption of Foucaultian concepts, such as the governmentality. According to Xu Yichao (2015) Foucault's governance investigation provides a tool for the reconstruction of China's contemporary historical and social path but is also crucial to question current governance practices and thinking on future reforms.

To date, Schmitt and Foucault's categories seem to represent the new interpretative line of contemporary Chinese political thought, leading to the overcoming of the models proposed by Marx and Weber. It would be interesting to understand how intellectuals develop the thinking of these authors, in relation to Chinese politics and to the interpretation given by the West as well. The study of Chinese political thought, as well as allowing us to fully understand and better contextualize China's political action on the global landscape, can in fact provide a different approach to understanding problems such as the crisis of democracy and liberalism, and the progress of populism, providing valid alternatives to the proposals drawn up by the West for the resolution of global problems.

The research especially aims to examine how intellectuals have developed a new understanding of contemporary Chinese society through Foucault's genealogical analysis of power and biopolitics. The main questions to guide the project will be as follows:

1. What new trajectories is the Chinese political thinking following in recent years?

2. How much do these lines of research relate to how power is exercised in China? In other words, is the work of Chinese intellectuals beginning to become a matter of debate outside universities as well? And if so, to what extent?

3. Will these transformations in intellectual debate push for changes in the Chinese logic of "strong government and weak society"?

4. Will these reflections be able to generate new demands from society, and at the same time to influence law or politics?

Methodology

The research will be developed through the analysis of scientific texts, Chinese journals, newspapers and speeches by politicians, in particular of Xi Jinping. If possible, qualitative interviews will be carried out, focused on Chinese political thinkers who will enrich the content of the evidence already collected. All of this will be done with regard to the congruence and concatenation of the proof. To analyze the rereading of Western thinkers by Chinese intellectuals, the method used will be the comparative one. Research is in fact characterized by the adoption of a global and international perspective in the analysis of historical-social and political processes and intellectual-conceptual history.

Timeline

The first year will be dedicated to the development of bibliographical research: in particular, in the first semester, the literature of the project will be reviewed, and the research concepts and project will be refined. In the second semester, the bibliography will be expanded and contacts will be established with one or more Chinese policy thinkers for field research.

The second year will focus on the analytical development of the study, and a period of stay in China will be necessary to deepen the direct reading of the texts and to interview the contact.

The third year will be entirely dedicated to the writing of the thesis and the update of the bibliography.

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