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# Chinese liberalism

### Book section

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China's experience with liberalism (in Chinese, *zi you zhu yi*), understood broadly as a political doctrine valuing individual autonomy, personal freedom, and limited government, began over a century ago when Chinese intellectuals identified these values as central to securing the "wealth and power" that enabled Western nations to dominate China militarily and intellectually. Often in tension with ruling ideology—first with the Confucian-dominated political values of the imperial state, and then with Maoist Communism—liberalism on the Chinese mainland primarily remains an intellectual preoccupation rather than an organizational principle for mainstream politics. Liberal principles continue to inform political ideology in democratized Taiwan and in the former British colony of Hong Kong, however, and increasingly many contemporary Chinese intellectuals choose to draw attention to the similarities rather than tensions of liberalism with "traditional" worldviews like Confucianism.

As a foreign ideology self-consciously imported into China by elites in the late Qing dynasty, the term "liberalism" in China identifies not one but a cluster of related doctrines that each draw, in various ways, on classical and late imperial Chinese political thought (including Chinese Legalism and the Confucian "statecraft" (*jingshi*) school) as well as Anglo-American, French, and German traditions of liberalism. The term "liberalism" itself was a reverse loanword, created by Japanese translators from classical Chinese roots and re-imported into China by visiting students. The word for "liberty" in Chinese, *zi you*, literally translates as "do-as-you-will," evoking strong overtones of Daoist non-action beliefs as well as a degree of heterodox libertinism.

The political and intellectual movements in China that have been identified by participants or observers as "liberal" ones can be classified along four strands, whose historical and ideological overlaps are marked but not exhaustive. In rough chronological order of their emergence, these strands are: first, the importation and application of European classical liberal political ideologies by court intellectuals and treaty-port compradors in the late nineteenth century, and the subsequent development of this liberal trend in the early years of the Chinese republic (1911-1919) and into the 1930s; second, the rise of liberal individualism during the "May Fourth" student movement of the 1920s, largely informed by the pragmatic philosophy of the influential social critic Hu Shi; third, the revival of interest in both of these prior liberal schools, intersected with new interests in market liberalism and social democracy after the Cultural Revolution and during the "reform and opening up" under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s; and fourth, the retrospective recognition by Western sinologists of a proto-liberal tradition in Imperial (i.e., pre-1911) China, which draws attention to the indigenous discourses of individual autonomy and limited government championed by late Imperial scholar-officials like Huang Zongxi.

### Qing- and Republican-era Liberalism: Constitutionalism, Individual Rights, and Local Self-Government

The first self-conscious advocacy of a liberal political program in China did not appear until the late nineteenth century, when monarchical advisors including Tan Sitong, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao formulated a constitutional reform program to shore up the flagging monarchy. Inspired by Chinese thinkers of the late Imperial "realist" and "statecraft" schools, their policy prescriptions were given concrete shape by German and British liberal doctrines. Urging regime change along the lines of Britain's constitutional monarchy, these reformers endorsed the

dramatic revision or abolishment of the imperial civil exam system, a federalist political organization, and a variety of other measures designed to hold in check the centralized power of the Qing court and to secure some measure of civil liberties to the Chinese people. When their plans met with tragic defeat in 1898 at the hands of Empress Cixi, the survivors fled abroad and continued to develop their reformist agendas in exile. While in Japan, Liang Qichao and other sympathetic intellectuals exploited the emerging capacities of Chinese-language print media to argue that freedom of speech, a multi-party government system, and promotion of local self-government would strengthen the Chinese nation-building project, not weaken it in the face of foreign incursion as some contemporaries feared. Their theoretical work was aided by Yan Fu's influential translations of key works of British and French liberalism, including John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, and Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.

When the Revolution of 1911 ended the dynastic system, liberal constitutionalism rose to political ascendancy for the first and what was to be the last time on the Chinese mainland. Struggling to sustain the newly founded republican government, intellectual activists like Zhang Shizhao and Song Jiaoren developed the constitutional program of earlier pre-revolutionary intellectuals in both practical and theoretical ways. Recognizing the growing influence of radicalism on Chinese politics, Zhang and his followers urged broad toleration for opposing opinions and advocated for a multi-party parliamentary system. In an anticipation of the individualist thought that would dominate the 1920s, these thinkers argued more explicitly for individual rights against the state than did their earlier liberal counterparts, who had urged a more group-centered ethic attentive to social obligations and public commitments.

Liang, Yan, Zhang and their colleagues exercised seminal influence on what would become, in ensuing decades, a formative discussion in China over the extent to which Western values could inform or supplant indigenous Chinese political culture. Although soon eclipsed by more radical movements that urged total Westernization and destruction of China's Confucian heritage, the liberal program these thinkers promoted was taken up later by Zhang Dongsun and Zhang Junmai (Carsun Chang). These two thinkers throughout the middle of the twentieth century promoted constitutional democracy as a viable alternative to party tutelage under the Nationalists or authoritarian control under the Communists. Their focus on incremental, consensus-based, and politics-centered reform distinguished their liberalism from other, later developments, whose radically transformative goals implied dramatic interventions not only in politics but also in popular culture and social organization.

### Radical Liberalism: The "New Culture" and May Fourth Movements

On May 4, 1919, a student protest against the ceding of Chinese territory to Japan by the Versailles Treaty initiated a reassessment of China's attitude to its own past in the face of Western modernity and domination. The May Fourth Movement, as this ongoing reassessment came to be called, rejected the early liberal emphasis on piecemeal reform and constitutionally limited, elite-led government, but its own brand of liberalism remained indebted to the categories and concerns of late Imperial and early Republican liberal debates.

Convinced that the individual rights and political progress urged by early liberals could not advance on the basis of China's "traditional" political culture, May Fourth activists urged young

people to “destroy the Confucian shop” that in their view shored up social hierarchies, inhibited individual growth and personal expression, discouraged rational scientific inquiry, and crippled necessary social transformation in the name of adhering to ancient sagely models. Among the most radical yet enduringly influential May Fourth reform was the promotion of language vernacularization, which reflected the deeply populist ideals of this brand of liberalism. The vernacularization movement demanded that classical Chinese—the dense and highly allusive written language that dominated Chinese political and literary discourse for nearly two millennia—be replaced by the “plain speech” (bai hua) spoken by most ordinary Chinese. It was believed that this change would not only enable non-elites to access politically relevant written materials more easily, and thus facilitate their entry into politics, but also that it would change the system of values in Chinese thought and literature, bringing both into closer alignment with the lived experiences of China’s masses rather than simply educated elites.

This anti-Confucian, populist, and pro-science rhetoric was greatly influenced by a faith in Western Enlightenment principles, as well as by the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey, who during an extended trip to China in 1920-1 [check dates] urged the Chinese to adopt a more critical and socially engaged stance toward their history and culture. During this time, one of Dewey’s Chinese students named Hu Shi rose to prominence as an unusually informed theorist of both Western and Chinese thought. Hu was instrumental in translating Dewey’s thought for a Chinese audience, including how China’s history and culture could support a pragmatic, liberal project. Rather than engage in the directly political action that usually occupied Chinese intellectuals, however, Hu suggested that China’s elite classes should work on reforming Chinese culture and social organization from the ground up. Rather than be bound by categories of “new” and “old” or “Chinese” and “foreign,” Hu suggested, these reform efforts should focus on the truth yielded by rational inquiry and practical experimentation.

May Fourth liberalism remained influential throughout the 1930s and 40s, but its capacity as a practical reform program was truncated by the communist victory in 1949, when many of its adherents fled to Taiwan. In 1958 Hu was elected president of Academia Sinica, the Chinese Academy of Sciences re-established by the Nationalist government on the island. He and other liberal intellectuals in Taiwan—including Yin Haiguang, Lin Yusheng, and Fu Sinian—continued their revisionist research into traditional Chinese popular culture and thought as well as Western liberalism. The extent of their legacy, along with that of the earlier Republican-era liberals, was to become clear only decades later, when academic discussions became less subject to the strictures of the Communist state ideology.

### Liberalism After the Cultural Revolution: The Ascendency of Rule of Law Discourse and Free Market Principles

After the decade-long upheaval of the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976), in which intellectuals were labeled “bourgeois” elements and subject to torture and imprisonment as part of a power struggle among Communist leadership, liberalism once again emerged as a viable alternative to reigning ideology. Rule of law was given special emphasis in the new liberal program, as legal and political theorists urged an end to the arbitrary “rule of man” policies that in their view resulted in the lawless chaos of the previous decade. These liberals drew increasingly from

Qing- and Republican-era constitutional thought, sketching out policies for incremental, consensus-based change as well as legal protection for civil liberties.

Another major liberal trend that emerged in the 1980s was an unprecedented support for laissez-faire economic policy. Never before a central tenet in Chinese liberalism, due perhaps to a longstanding Chinese tendency to view commercialism as promoting greed, support for free markets and consumerism emblemized China's growing economic power in the Asian region and the world. The liberal principles of Frederick Hayek and Milton Friedman entered Chinese discourse through translations, but also through the work of Chinese scholars, such as Li Qiang, whose defenses of liberalism were informed by study at American and European universities. May Fourth liberalism also enjoyed something of a resurgence, as the social democracies of northern Europe provided inspiration and counterexamples to liberals less sanguine about untrammelled economic expansion in the wake of the Asian economic downturn.

Liberalism did not take inspiration only from Western sources, however. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s in Hong Kong and Taiwan, many Confucian revivalists such as Xu Fuguan and Mou Zongsan insisted on the compatibility between China's traditional value system—including Buddhism and Daoism as well as Confucianism—and liberal democracy. The work of these “New Confucians,” as they came to be called, broached old tensions that first emerged in May Fourth liberalism—between Western Enlightenment thought and science, on the one hand, and humanism and traditional Chinese culture, on the other.

In the 1990s and the turn of the twenty-first century, liberalism in China met new challenges in the form of postmodernism, globalization, and “crony capitalism”—all of which undermined the promised stability of a liberal economic transition. The return of the former British colony of Hong Kong to Chinese Communist control provoked further reflection as to the possibility of constitutionally limited government on the Chinese mainland. For all camps of liberals, however, fostering civil society and a critical, engaged populace continue to be major goals as China's Communist leadership relaxes controls on news and academic media. New translations of the work of John Rawls, Isaiah Berlin and other prominent liberal thinkers of the twentieth century fuel ongoing debates in China's increasingly cosmopolitan intellectual circles, even as scholars continue to argue for the relevance to modernity of traditional Chinese thought.

### Liberalism in China's Past

Many scholars of Chinese liberalism have come to pay increasing attention to indigenous liberal elements in China's long history of political thought and experience. Chinese liberalism, in its various forms, has exhibited similarity to its imperial forbears in orientation and practice as well as in its substantive ideas. Despite their attempts to ground political legitimacy in widespread popular consent and participation, both early Qing and May Fourth-era liberalisms replicate the top-down forms of political action that characterized literati reform efforts under the empire. Pointing to the traditional Confucian belief that the people were the “root” of government, not its masters, many scholars have suggested that the Chinese liberal program failed precisely on the basis of this paternalistic tendency. Other characteristics of indigenous Chinese “liberal” thought, however, provide more substantive bases for both self-reflexivity and institutional reform. Among the most prominent is the long-standing emphasis on a broad-based, socially responsible

“liberal arts” education, meant to outfit students with the tools to think critically about both themselves and their political environment.

In terms of institution-building, the early liberalism of Liang Qichao and Yan Fu was self-consciously informed by late Qing reformist thinkers such as Gu Yanwu and Wang Fuzhi. Their doctrines of “public” and “private” critiqued imperial privilege in the name of the common good, and in the process articulated a powerful argument for limited government and a proto-civil society. William Theodore deBary has been among the most prominent scholars to identify a tradition of rule of law, limited democracy, and individualism in pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese thought, especially in the work of realist scholars such as Huang Zongxi who wrote during the Ming-Qing transition, and in radical neo-Confucians of the Taizhou school, including Li Zhi. DeBary argues that these enduring liberal tendencies in Chinese thought encouraged both critical stances to absolutism as well as an individualistic voluntarism akin to what is found in most strands of Western classical liberalism. His work on these proto-liberals, although arguably promoting a Eurocentric analysis of China’s past, has nevertheless helped to break down research paradigms in both China and the West which tended to see limited government and individual autonomy as the unique heritage of European thought.

See also Chinese Legalism; Confucianism; Liberalism;

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