

The Debate about the People and the Individual in the Chinese Communist Party

Debating the “People” and the “Individual” in the CCP

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While reading Hu Jintao’s speech at the Chinese Communist Party’s 90th anniversary celebration this year, one could not help notice the high occurrence of the word *renmin*, “the People”. It appeared 135 times in the speech, second only to the word *dang*, the Party. The high occurrence of the word *renmin* was directly related to the Party’s policy of *yi ren wei ben* which stands for “insist on putting people first”. Does *ren* in *yi ren wei ben* stand for “people” or the “individual”?

In July 2003, President Hu Jintao outlined his contribution to the Party’s ideology. Hu’s theory, which came to be known as *kexue fazhan guan*, (the scientific outlook on development, or the scientific development concept), stressed that the Party should “insist on putting people first” (*yi ren wei ben*), set up a comprehensive, harmonious and sustainable development concept and promote full-scale economic, social and human development.” Since then, *yi ren wei ben* has been a common occurrence in Hu’s speeches.

Hu defined a harmonious society as focusing on economic development while paying attention to the overall social progress. This includes bridging the urban-rural gap in developmental planning and ensuring that economic progress filtered into social development and environmental protection. Specifically it refers to reducing income gap, increasing living standards, improving morals and eliminating “social ills”.

Like many other concepts proposed by the Chinese leaders, *yi ren wei ben* is broad enough to allow for multiple interpretations. The vagueness of the noun *ren*, which can be read either as “individual”, or as “the people”, led to debates in the Party about how the phrase should be understood. The meaning of *ren* is very important here because, if read as “individual”, it could signal the fact the party was now ready to embrace more liberal values by attaching more importance to the role of the individual in society. On the other hand, if *ren* was seen as standing for “people”, that meant that the party did not change the way it looked at the society. *Ren* as standing for “people” is collective body, in which the individual was undistinguishable from the larger group.

Party members seem to have different understandings of the phrase. Some totally exclude the reading of *ren* as “individual”, while others interpret *ren* as both “people” and “individual”. However, so far, we have never encountered anyone to interpret *ren* exclusively as “individual”.

Yi ren wei ben can be traced back to *Guanzi*, a classical book edited in the Western Han Dynasty and said to contain the sayings of the Spring and Autumn philosopher Guan Zhong. Researchers generally interpret the noun *ren* as “people”, and not as “man”, noting that, in classical texts, *ren* was commonly used instead of *min*, “people”. However, some of the articles analyzing the meaning of the phrase do mention that *yi ren wei ben* is not used very often in the classical texts, and that *yi min wei ben* (the phrase that actually uses the word “people”, instead of “human being”) appears more often.

So far, it seems that “putting people first”, and not “putting the individual first”, would be the most probable interpretation of *yi ren wei ben*. Still, a closer look at what harmonious society means, at the elements that make a society harmonious can prove that the individual cannot be ruled out.

Everything a harmonious society presupposes is based on the freedom of the individual. For a society to develop and prosper, it is important that the individuals forming that society are allowed to improve and develop freely. It is the individual freedom that stays at the base of sustainable economic development and social stability. But what does “individual” mean, in the Chinese context?

In China, the understanding of the term “individual” depends on how the individual is perceived, whether integrated in a collective, or isolated from the collective. The integrated individual carries a positive connotation of being loyal to the group, aware of its duties to the group, and only then enjoying his/her rights. The isolated individual carries a negative connotation, putting rights above duties, and attaching greater importance to his/her own interest and not to the common welfare.

The tension between the two aspects contained within the “individual”, (expressed in Chinese through the same *ren*), is very present in the political discourse of the Chinese leaders. President Hu Jintao’s speech delivered at the Party’s 90th anniversary had numerous references to the integrated individual, a moral person with integrity and skills contributing to social development. On the other hand, Hu strongly opposes the use of authority “as a tool to fulfill *individual* interests”; the party should fight against weak and arbitrary *individual* acts that violate the principle of the democratic centralism. Not to forget that the so-called “social ills” (a concept as vague as “putting people first”) are also committed by individuals, and not by the people as a whole.

When the mission (perpetuation?) of the party is the much bigger collective welfare, it is inevitable for the individual to give up some of its rights. However, the expectation is that individual should not be coerced into giving up its rights, but it should be willing to do so. The solution proposed by the Party in order to convince the individual to willingly become just one of the thousands wheels spinning inside the big social machine is the improvement of public morals. The party insists on using “the socialist concept of honor and disgrace to guide public conduct, intensify efforts to cultivate public morale, professional ethics, family values, and personal ethics, strengthen moral education among young people, and foster inspiring cultural pursuits and healthy, civilized lifestyles in the whole society.” A good example of how the party tries to improve morals is the “Eight Honors And Eight Shames” value system which everyone in China must internalize. In one of the lines, people are warned that “it is a shame to betray the people and your country, to make gains at other people’s expenses and to love profit more than righteousness”.

The language used by the Party's leaders in their speeches is rather vague and it is the vagueness of the concepts proposed that makes it very difficult to know what the Party really means. On the other hand, though, the fuzziness of the language works very much in Party's favor since it is a convenient tool which allows for the concepts to be reinterpreted as expedient.

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