Constructing New Socialism and New Socialist Individuals in China

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This paper outlines an academic journey started with the preparation of a master course dissertation in late Eighties when a number of young academics in Hong Kong were in anticipation of the colonial Hong Kong being returned to China. Studying in the London Institute of Education gave me the opportunity to go to the SOAS library to read so much about the Cultural Revolution in China. In the late Eighties, when China was still debating the ideological orientation of the open door policy, I was enjoying reading the relevant literature on the Cultural Revolution in the SOAS library. At the same time, when I was working on Bernstein’s curriculum code theory, I was able to connect the classical example of weak classification and weak framing to the nature of educational reform during the Cultural Revolution. I was also able to understand the intrinsic contradiction underlying the Cultural Revolution. Such understanding provided me with the conceptual starting point of my doctoral research to ask about the nature of the modernity underlying the Open door policy in China.

In this article, the “new socialist” in China can be understood through the concept of ‘regulated individualism’. In this paper, regulated individualism refers to the new role of individuals tolerated by the Chinese Communist Party in the fields of economics and education. In the economic field, it refers to the emergence of individual traders, manufacturers and even workers as agents of new forms of production activities. The modernisation programmes launched in China were expected to lead to a form of entrepreneurialism that creates an economic space for individuals, firms and regions. These entrepreneurial forms were to be recognized by the Party as an important strategy for raising the material level of the society. These new forms entailed a new tolerance of the Party for the space an individual can construct in the economic arena. From the
point of view of this paper, this new balance between individual and collective creates a greater but still limited autonomy for individuals. We refer to this change in the balance as regulated individualism. This does not mean the recognition of individualism as understood in the Western sense. Indeed, Western individualism is still very much rejected by the Party. Hence individualism is not recognized as a moral principle but as a conditional strategy. Regulated individualism may well be, from the point of view of the Party, an outcome of the modernization project. For some, this space represents a potential for legitimating more intensive involvement for the emergence of a civil society at various levels. Thus new conflicts are created in the move from an ideology of traditional collectivism to an ideology of regulated individualism. For some, this space represents a potential for legitimating more intensive involvement for the emergence of a civil society at various levels.

In the field of education, regulated individualism refers to the recognition of individual space in the pedagogic process, although it highlights individuals to the danger of abusing this newly recognized conditional autonomy. It creates conflicts with the old socialist ideology of traditional collectivism because regulated individualism stresses to certain extent autonomy for individuals. However, it also raises moral problems because there is a new tension between the newly acquired personal autonomy and the base line of the socialist collectivism. In other words, the changing nature of socialist morality would lead to a new mode of moral education.

The abandoning of radical collectivism means that the homogeneity of ideological positioning ceases to exist. However, this new form of individualism has also created problems for the State, which led to certain ambivalent positions of the State with regard to the control of this emerging individualism.

In this paper, we argue that the emergence of regulated individualism is a response to the new socialist era in China. With special reference to the PRC’s moral education policies enacted in the past two decades between the 1980s and 2005, this article suggests that regulated individualism can be indicated on four dimensions: the persistence of national education policy in socialist direction, the creation of legitimacy for the reform of moral education, the broadening scope of moral education, and the diversification of methods for moral education, and the conditional adjustment of the state-defined individual-collective relationship.

With specific reference to moral education policies enacted by the state of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) between the 1980s and 2005, this article develops the concept of “regulated individualism” to understand how the PRC state copes with the tension between the newly acquired personal autonomy and the bottom line of the socialist collectivism. It demonstrates that regulated
individualism can be indicated along four dimensions: the persistence of national education policy in a socialist direction, the creation of legitimacy for the reform of moral education, the broadening scope of moral education, the diversification of methods for moral education and the conditional adjustment of the state-defined individual-collective relationship. This article concludes by discussing the new pattern of individual-collective relationship that differs from traditional collectivism in Mao’s China, conditional autonomy for educational institution, teachers, and students, and the gradual but conditional liberalization in moral education in the context of China’s ongoing economic and educational reforms.