

Of reforms and funerals in Communist China¹

The recent Third Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party admitted that 'reforms' would decide the destiny of modern China. A statement of the Central Committee spoke of "the need to deepen reforms in order to build a moderately prosperous society, and a strong and democratic country, as well as realize the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation."

Xi Jinping and his colleagues seem to have seen the dark clouds gathering in the Middle Kingdom's sky: for the present Emperors, the only way to avoid the fate of former Soviet Union (where the internal security apparatus had become weak, corrupt and ineffective), was to act fast.

Reforms should go deep and wide, believes the leadership of the Party. No domain should remain 'unreformed'.

Take the Party leaders' funerals: the leadership in Beijing has decided that Party members and government officials should have 'simple funerals without any feudal or superstitious elements ...extravagance should be curbed'.

When he took over China, President Xi Jinping ordered: "The use of public funds to purchase cigarettes, liquor and gifts for government officials should be strictly prohibited. Public spending on extravagant banquets, travel, entertainment or sporting activities will also be prohibited".

It was later extended to everything 'from banquets to bribes'; after the November Plenum, the Party has further deepened the reform campaign, especially after it was noticed that 'feudal' activities were resurging.

¹ Published in ***Niti Central*** on December 23, 2013 (URL not available).

Regarding the funerals of the Party cadres, the government objected to 'a return to bad habits for some officials'. It noticed a drop in the number of cremations, while the construction 'of ornate mausoleums and holding of over-the-top funerals' had been increasing.

A statement on the Chinese Government website affirms that this "damages the image of the party and the government, and harms social morals". Apart from 'permitted State funerals', Beijing ordered that 'special mourning memorials should not be held for deceased party members and officials'.

Cremations is also a way to save agricultural land, rightly concluded the atheist (and pragmatic) Party.

Xinhua had earlier reported that funerals were increasingly "a platform to show off wealth and connections, with the degree of opulence and number of mourners symbolising the achievements of the dead, and setting a benchmark for competition among the living."

Though it is not clear how 'deceased cadres can show-off', the government wisely said such practices had to stop: "the gravestones should not exceed set standards. Party members and officials have to proactively promote funeral reform, and guide family members, friends and the masses, to prevent... feudal and superstitious activities." Well said!

However, as Cary Huang analyzed in *The South China Morning Post*: "The Communist Party's latest pledge to increase oversight over its 80 million members is being called a step in the right direction, ...the move would do little to root out corruption without better institutional checks on power."

During the Plenum, the Central Committee announced a five-year plan to fight graft and improve supervision over cadres: the party wants to gradually increase internal regulations and put officials under close watch by

the Party's disciplinary authorities. It was decided that an internal database would be produced to record the personal income and important financial information of all party officials.

The Hong Kong newspaper however commented: "But without institutional checks and balances to counter its power, such as a genuinely independent legislature and courts, this was usually ineffective in reining in abuses."

The Party is bound to confront a serious paradox, while Xi Jinping tries to strengthen the Party's grip over the 'masses', this runs opposite the instauration of the rule of law, which required an independent judiciary, "particularly when its regulations were in conflict with national legislation".

Take the *shuanggui* system through which cadres are detained and interrogated by the Party's disciplinary authorities, "at an appointed time and place" (it is the meaning of 'Shuanggui'); the case is not referred to the ordinary law enforcement apparatus and the courts. It is an internal Party process conducted confidentially and independently from the judiciary.

Will the Central Committee relinquish this and allow an independent legal system to function? Though it was rumoured that the Party is thinking of scaling down the *shuanggui* system, when the Party even controls funerals, one can doubt if it will do so.

To be truly fair, a political system also needs an independent press.

Here too, Beijing seems to have passed into reverse gear.

China-based reporters of foreign news agency had a few tense weeks while waiting for the renewal of their accreditations; particularly *The New York Times* and *Bloomberg* reporters and staff who had dared to enquire into the wealth of senior Party leaders' families.

Finally, Hua Chunying, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman told the media that the issue had been dealt with in accordance with the law and the rules: "Any person who speaks nonsense about this or who wants to seize on an incident and exaggerate it, [or if a report] does not accord with the facts, the [reporter] is completely wrong." The accreditation was renewed but the message is loud and clear: the foreign press has to behave.

For the Chinese media the situation is even more insecure.

Recently the State General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SGAPPRFT) recommended a '2013 News Reporters Training Materials' to all the Chinese media organizations.

In 2014, Chinese journalists will have to go through an examination, if they want to keep their press cards.

Some 10,000 copies of the Training Manual prepared by SGAPPRFT will be distributed to all the nation's news organizations. It will be used for the 2014 examination.

It consists of four parts: training courses, news gathering and editing regulations, regulations on news organizations' management of news gathering and editing, and exercises. The focus is on training using videos; amongst other subjects, it teaches 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', 'Marxist views of the news', 'journalistic ethics', 'norms of news gathering and editing' or 'prevention of false news'.

Such a program!

The examination will be based on this 700-page manual.

The manual contains advices/orders such as "it is absolutely not permitted for published reports to feature any comments that go against the party

line", or "the relationship between the party and the news media is one of leader and the led".

And of course, Chinese reporters can't speak to the foreign media without permission, otherwise...

Let us hope that one day, the Chinese media will report about the funeral of the Party as the reforms seem to me rather 'feudal'.