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[China is looking to its dynastic past to shape its future](#)

The [Chinese Communist party](#) celebrated its 90th birthday on July 1. In the days before this event, the airwaves were full of historical dramas depicting heroic People's Liberation Army soldiers and party cadres struggling against a variety of enemies. There is a new, neo-Maoist faction within the party led by Bo Xilai, the party chief of the western city of Chongqing, who began promoting the singing of classic Communist songs such as "The East is Red" in workplaces and schools throughout the country. Henry Kissinger, in China for a book tour, managed to attend a sing-along there with some 70,000 other people.

This "red culture" revival has nothing to do with the Communist party's original ideals of equality and social justice. Rather, it is being promoted by national party leaders as a means of strengthening stability in a country that has seen a massive rise in inequality in recent years. One of the songs not being promoted is the Marxist "Internationale", with its call for revolution, lest this suggest the need for an Arab spring in China.

The older Chinese who lived through the Cultural Revolution understand its horrors, and how much the new China is dependent on their generation's determination never to let something like that happen again. The term limits imposed on party leaders and their need for collective decision-making are practices designed to prevent another Mao Zedong from arising. But because the party has never permitted an [honest accounting of Mao's real legacy](#), it is possible for younger Chinese to look back on that era today with nostalgia, and to imagine it as a time of stability and community.

Chinese history did not, of course, begin with the Communist victory in 1949. In a fascinating turn, an older alternative historical narrative is being

formulated alongside the Communist one through a revival of the serious study of classical Chinese philosophy, literature and history. Mao attacked Confucius as a reactionary, but today academics such as Zhao Tingyang and Yan Xuetong have tried to revive a Confucian approach to international relations. The American scholar Tu Weiming left his position as director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute in 2009 to take up a post at Beijing University promoting the study of Confucianism as a serious ethical system on a par with western philosophy. Chinese dynastic history is once again being regularly taught in the school system and there is renewed interest in traditional Chinese medicine, music and art.

The government has permitted, and even encouraged, this revival of Confucianism in order to provide a justification for a modern, authoritarian [China that does not depend on western theories of history](#). The latter necessarily see China as an uncompleted project: while the Chinese may have developed a strong, bureaucratic state already by the time of the Qin unification in 221BC, the country never evolved a rule of law or democratic accountability. After the fall of the last Chinese dynasty in 1911, many Chinese lost faith in their own institutions and believed they would have to be replaced by western ones. Only now, with the emergence in the early 21st century of a powerful China, is there an effort to recover this disrupted historical tradition. Best-selling authors such as Zhang Wei Wei are able to argue that China is not a democracy manqué, but rather a separate civilisation founded on different but equally valid principles from the west.

Many of the new Confucianists argue that in the Chinese tradition, political power is not limited by formal rules such as constitutions and multiparty elections as in the west. Rather, power was limited by Confucian morality, which required benevolence of emperors who had to act through a highly institutionalised Mandarinate. Ancient China did have a pure power doctrine in the form of the school known as Legalism, elaborated by the philosopher Han Feizi and ruthlessly implemented in the state of Qin that would ultimately unify China. It is perhaps not surprising that favoured Legalism and oversaw its revival. But just as Confucianism replaced Legalism as the dominant state ideology in early China, so too contemporary Confucianists see the present-day party as better grounded in moral terms than it was under Mao.

The Communist party is itself of two minds about this Confucian revival. It is eager to find alternative sources of legitimacy for itself in a world where liberal democracy is the default ideology, and it has established almost 300 Confucius Institutes in 78 countries. On the other hand, a modernised

Confucianism is potentially threatening because it is, after all, a more genuinely indigenous Chinese product than Marxism-Leninism, the invention of some dead white European males. It is perhaps for this reason that a large statue of Confucius, erected earlier this year in Tiananmen Square, was suddenly dismantled a few months later.

Contemporary China thus has two alternative sources of tradition to look back on, a neo-Maoist one and a neo-Confucian one. Both are being promoted as alternatives to democracy. Neo-Maoism is purely retrograde and could easily erode what freedoms the Chinese have gained over the past generation. Neo-Confucianism is more complex: as Tu Weiming has argued, Confucianism can be interpreted in ways that support liberal democracy; on the other hand, it could become the basis for a narrow Chinese nationalism. That the Chinese need to find their own way to modernity seems incontrovertible. Whether either of these ideas will bear the weight of regime legitimation, or indeed whether they can ultimately co-exist with one another, is something yet to be seen.

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