

The Development Trend of Student Politics in China

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Abstract

From the perspective of group politics, student politics is possessed with great political power in a country. Based on the distinguishment between “student politics” and “student political activism (or movement)”, this paper generalizes the main three forms of student politics over different times in China, i.e., “successive” politics in the traditional feudal society, “oppositional” politics in the turbulent society and “abstaining” politics in the material society, and further puts forward an appropriate form suitable for the current transitional society of China, i.e., “inter-communicative” politics, emphasizing equal and honest dialogue between two subjects, the older generation and the younger generation, who are linked by inter-subjectivity with love instinct and values of goals. The “inter-communicative” student politics may safeguard the development of China’s democratic politics in a sustainable way, and is a politically correct expression of today’s and future’s society in China.

Key words: Student politics; Development trend; China

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INTRODUCTION

Students are a major part of any academic system. In a sense, universities exist to serve students by providing them with education, knowledge, and increasingly various

kinds of ancillary services. Within the scope universities’ responsibility, students’ academic and non-academic lives among which student politics is a crucial element should be fully discussed. However, in China, student politics has always been a sensitive subject. Greatly influenced by Western academia, Chinese intellectuals tend to regard “student politics” as “student political movement”. Besides, it is the student political movement¹ that culminated in the 1949 revolution that brought the Communists to power. Naturally, Chinese authorities seem to go pale at the theme of student politics in the key period of social, political and economic reform.

In the era of globalization, the study of Chinese student politics must be attached great importance for it can be productive to understand the politics and sociology of higher education, and strategically significant to China’s social and political development.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature concerning student politics mainly has two features.

One is basically a Western literature. Social and political scientists from a variety of disciplines have employed the methodologies of their fields to study student politics of Western industrialized countries. Edward Sampson and Harold Korn (Sampson & Korn, 1970) have mainly presented psychological aspects of analysis on American student activism. James Wood (Wood, 1974) has provided a sociological study on the background of American student activism. Gianni Statera (Statera, 1975) has written a post-mortem of the European student movements in a volume which discusses a number of Western European nations. Philip Altbach (Altbach,

¹ The most significant student political movement is May 4, 1919 movement that was spurred by students and marked the emergence of students as a significant political force.

1997) has made a historical analysis on student politics in America from the perspective of student organizations themselves. However, the Western “bias” of the literature, to some extent, has distorted analyses of student politics in the Third World. Although Lewis Feuer (Feuer, 1969) and Michael Miles (Miles, 1971) have made great efforts to put forward a generational conflict hypothesis and overarching generalizations of student politics throughout the world, their studies have received severely criticized for not taking account of a sufficient number of national experiences.

The other is the ambiguity between “student politics” and “student political movement (or activism)”. Due to the fact that much of the research and analysis on student politics was stimulated by the wave of student movement (especially, crises of the 1960s) in various countries rather than by an intrinsic academic concern for the topic, when the crisis is over, the steady flow of studies stops. Thus, it has created illusions in the academic circle, i.e., “student politics” is equivalent to “student political movement (or activism)”. Altbach, a comparative education specialist on students and politics, founder of the research field of comparative higher education, has also mixed up “student politics” and “student political movement (or activism)”. Many of his works titled as “student politics”, such as *Japanese Students and Japanese Politics* (1963), *Student Politics in Bombay* (1968), *Student Politics in the Third World* (1987) and *Student Politics in America: A Historical Analysis* (1997), have turned out to be the analyses on “student political activism”. However, the two terms hold fundamentally different connotations.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: GROUP POLITICS

“Group” is a multidisciplinary word. From a general sociological perspective, “group” is a collection of individuals, on a scale, within certain social relations. “Group” may be divided into “small group” and “large group” based on population size, or into “geographical group”, “kinship group”, “interest group” on forming factors. From a psychological perspective, “group” refers to two or more individuals, in a certain way, engaged in activities to achieve a common goal. As Le Bon said,

It is evident that it is not by the mere fact of a number of individuals finding themselves accidentally side by side that they acquire the character of an organized crowd. A thousand individuals accidentally gathered in a public place without any determined object in no way constitute a crowd from the psychological point of view. (Bon, 2002, p.2)

“Group” has a common goal, and its members having a sense of identity and belonging and common values. From a political perspective, the concern over “group” can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Politics*:

Out of these two relationships between man and woman, master and slave, the first thing to arise is the family... But when several families are united, and the association aims at something more than supply of daily needs, the first society to be formed is the

village...When several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence. (Aristotle, 2000, pp. 4-5)

Subsequently, Hobbes, Montesquieu and Rousseau, well-known political scientists in the Enlightenment era, have employed the logic of Aristotle’s “natural evolution”, and stated that society is composed of men in “natural state” by signing some form of “social contract”. Starting from “the real individual”, Marx, based on the relations between productivity and production, has also explained the evolutionary logic.

Normally, “politics” holds two senses. In narrow terms, it is seen as a particular social and historical category linked with class, power or government; in broad terms, it is treated as human’s basic lifestyle, coexisting with human’s economic life, cultural life, as Aristotle (2000, p.5) once declared “man is by nature a political animal”. According to *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Science*, “politics” broadly refers to communities’ participating acts for common interests, and such participating acts are possessed with initiative, indicating that politics may present different forms in its developing process (Miller et al., 1992, p.583).

It can be seen clearly that this paper treats politics broadly. Politics is humans’ act or even basic lifestyle. Moreover, man born to live a social life is possessed with social characteristics. Among them, group characteristic is the crucial element of social characteristics. Group politics in this paper is a special form of citizens’ participation in political affairs resulting from division of labor and group, such as student politics, peasant politics, military politics etc.. Group politics increasingly shows its function and significance in the process of social development (Gu, 2012a). Therefore, Owing to the fact that students are the important human resources of present and future social and political development, student politics, being of great importance to a country’s development, is worthy of research from the perspective of group politics.

3. DEFINITION OF STUDENT POLITICS

Students are confined in post-secondary education. Based on their identity, students may further be classified as “younger generation”; whereas other adults may generally be classified as “older generation”.

In accordance with the logic of “politics” definition, student politics discussed in this paper refers to “college students’ participation in political activities” (Gu, 2012b). It mainly has four features: firstly, students refer to college students; secondly, student group is divided on identity, not on socio-economic background; thirdly, student politics is students’ participating act and holds initiative, i.e., it presents a variety of forms over times in the process of development; fourthly, because students are a relatively “closed” group, student politics contains enormous potential political power in a country for its special inherent collective.

4. THREE FORMS OF STUDENT POLITICS IN CHINA

Student politics can mainly be generalized into 3 forms over times in China: “successive”, “oppositional” and “abstaining” student politics.

4.1 “Successive” Student Politics

Although “succession”, in general terms, is the normalcy of political development for inheritance or heritage is a natural law in human society, “successive” student politics, here, is narrowly defined as the younger generation’s “obedient”, “following” or “copying” political act by imitating the older generation’s. In the long course of Chinese political history, especially in the feudal period, student politics mainly exhibits “successive” form that is the longest and most traditional one, such as “First-born Son System of Inheritance”².

4.2 “Oppositional” Student Politics

In the unrest and turbulent times, student politics tends to present a more radical “oppositional” form, stressing the “opposition” between “younger generation” and “older generation”. Due to its most radical and noticeable manifestation, the “oppositional” student politics is mostly discussed and widely studied, and gradually treated as the only form of student politics.

Most nations’ authorities are a typical representative of “older generation” and tend to be conservative throughout the world. College students, idealistic young intellectuals, are generally assumed to tend to be “anti-establishment” regardless of the orientation of the ruling authorities. As Altbach (1968, pp.3-15) mentions, on the one hand, college students’ values and worldviews are tremendously influenced and formed by their teachers, especially social studies teachers, who possess the responsibilities of propagating the doctrine, imparting professional knowledge, and resolving doubts, through guiding and encouraging students to examine and resolve complicated social problems from a theoretical and intellectual perspective. Based on their high-degree intellectual honesty, college students approach society without the biases of vested interests or social constraints. They have greater ideological “purity” than other segments in the society. Furthermore, students with little practical experience in politics are often more naive and more likely to seek all-encompassing solutions to societal problems than are their elders, and seek an “absolute”, “complete” ideological system which will provide them with a Weltanschauung, a guide to thought and action. College students hold a special conviction to achieve that the older generation has failed to achieve, or to correct imperfections in their environment.

² Established at the turn of the Shang Dynasty and the Zhou Dynasty, the system based on polygamy is a basic principle of traditional patriarchal clan system in ancient China, i.e., the first-born son has a special privilege to inherit the throne and property from his father.

On the other hand, compared with “older generation”, students have relative freedom from parental and familial control and from outside work. Many realize that adult responsibilities will necessarily follow graduation from the university. Thus, they treat drastic social reforms as a means of fighting the authoritarian influence. When a time comes, the original opposition between “younger generation” and “older generation” may transform to be conflicts or even movements.

4.3 “Abstaining” Student Politics

On the occasion of rapid economic development, Chinese people, at present, around the country rush to go after material benefits, overlooking faith or morality. Many students, in such a material society, neither want to maintain nor want to overthrow the current political power. Instead, they are more likely to choose a negative and passive way to avoid or stay away from existing politics, not being involved in Chinese political affairs, such as working or living abroad. That act may be called as “abstaining” student politics. Although students are allowed to be unique existence in the modern society, such recluse and escaping behavior would neither be carried out by every student, nor be realistic for every student, for man cannot exist without social or political being.

In fact, student politics holds an ever-evolving process. The above-mentioned 3 forms are only a tendency to present student politics on different occasions. Comparatively, “successive” student politics is more inclined to copy and imitate the older generation’s act, “oppositional” student politics more tends to break up or overthrow the older generation’s power, and “abstaining” student politics is more prone to apathy on the older generation’s act. There is no distinct division among them.

Due to its initiative, changing over times, student politics cannot be thoughtlessly or simply-copying “successive” form, radically “oppositional” form, or negatively “abstaining” form. In Chinese modern transitional society, it should present a brand-new form - “inter-communicative” student politics, i.e., a form, built critically on “successive” politics, of emphasizing equal dialogue between two subjects (the younger generation and the older generation) in terms of “inter-subjectivity”, trying to avoid “oppositional” or “abstaining” politics. It is the “inter-communicative” student politics that can guarantee the realization of Chinese modern civilized society.

5. THE DEVELOPMENT TREND: “INTER-COMMUNICATIVE” STUDENT POLITICS

5.1 Logic Origin of “Inter-communicative” Student Politics: Love Instinct

The fundamental driving force to trigger and sustain all humans’ activities is the instinct that is composed with three psychological components: cognitions, affections and thoughts. Among them, the instinct of love is man’s

most original, simplest and strongest emotion. Lampert (Lampert, 1997, p.12) holds, “the talent to love and to be loved, as well as the need to seek love, is part of human genetic equipment and is passed on from parents to children via heredity. This talent appeared somewhere along the lines of life on earth and has been undergoing changes since then by natural selection. These changes are what brought love in humans to such intensity.” Man has felt the tender love from his parents since he was born, sucking his mother’s milk. The instinct and consciousness of love has deeply imprinted in humans’ brain from each generation to the next. McDougall (McDougall, 2010, p.132) also believes it is the love instinct that urges men to form families and even societies. In Western societies, some ascribe humans’ fraternity and kindness to religions, but if man were lack of love instinct, the basic instinct, any enlightenment or learning would be futile.

With an extraordinary social power, the instinct of love between older generation and younger generation, parents and children, is the basis of developing “inter-communicative” student politics. Owing to a long-term lack of mutual trust and communication between two generations, narrow-minded “successive”, “oppositional” and “abstaining” student politics come into being. All of them, however, are not rational or correct ways of expressing love in the modern civilized society. The appropriate interpretation of love instinct should be the older generation trying to head and help the younger generation; the younger generation diligently taking advice from the older generation with an open mind, not just be simply copy, brutal overthrow or negative apathy.

5.2 Substance of “Inter-Communicative” Student Politics

5.2.1 Primary Values: Values of Goals

Western modern philosophy discusses the relationship between man and nature, man and man from a “subject - object” dual perspective. Though such dual thinking mode helps to understand humans and nature, it, to some extent, unconsciously and unavoidably devalues men to tools or objects, who are losing their subjectivity.

In Chinese traditional feudal period, the relationship between older generation (government authorities in office) and younger generation (students) was actually controlling and being controlled, which fully embodies the “subject-object” thinking mode, i.e., students were unfortunately reduced to tools or means to safeguard authorities’ political power. But in today’s China, such values and behaviors are inhumane, not suitable.

With the development of Chinese modern politics, the ruling government’s role has changed from traditionally commanding position to human-oriented or serving-human position. Man can only exist with being a goal, not being a tool or means. Thus, the core and primary values of “inter-communicative” student politics should be values of goals, rather than values of tools.

5.2.2 Key Way: Equal Dialogue of Inter-Subjectivity

From Husserl, Sartre to Habermas, they all have put forward the concept of inter-subjectivity. Holding “subject -subject” structure, inter-subjectivity emphasizes that humans do not only live in an objective world, but a life-world composed by the objective world, a social world and a subjective world. Influenced by “subject-subject” thinking mode, the key way of “inter-communicative” student politics should change from an instrumentally unidirectional monologue to the equal dialogue of inter-subjectivity which can create mutual understanding and reach a consensus between the two subjects, not purely controlling or being controlled between the subject and the object.

Politics is like a text, ruling government and college students are like two readers: The older generation tends to understand the text in a macro way; the younger generation tends to interpret the text in a micro way for the lack of experience in social practice.

In the current age of Internet and globalization, faced with political or social problems, avid students are vulnerable to the influence of foreign cultures and tend to make a simple analogy. To some extent, students’ political outlook seems to be “premature”. No matter what actions (even beneficial to students) are, as long as the ruling government carries out them in an authoritarian monologue way, a “commanding - executing” pattern, radical students will label them as a kind of dictatorial behavior or force command of “private ownership”. Such potentially psychological resistance and resentment among college students, the future backbone of a country, is extremely unfavorable to the nation’s political and social development.

Therefore, the key way for the two readers to reach a consensus on the text is to interpret each other based on political events. The process of readers’ interpretation and integration upon political events is the process of their equal dialogue. Indeed, the equal dialogue is not only between ruling government and students, but also between students. Students are allowed to hold free to think, but if they are lack of dialogue or discussion, how much substances or correctness of their thought will be?

Finally, both parties must use effective verbal behavior which is an intermediary or leverage of the dialogue (Habermas, 1984, p.295). Both sides must choose a proper dialogue to let each other understand. On the one hand, due to the fact that inexperienced students may not fully appreciate the complexity of politics, the older generation should put aside authority and explain its political position or phenomena in a brief but in-depth way; on the other hand, the younger generation should pack up short-tempered personalities, learn diligently and communicate sincerely on politics. For modern social system is based on democracy, all political actions should be based on equal and effective dialogue so that it can achieve mutual understanding and promote social sodality and development.

5.3 Achieving Conditions of “Inter-Communicative” Student Politics

Equal dialogue between two subjects provides us with a wonderful utopian society. However, there is a huge gap between “what it should” and “what it is”, theory and reality. How to achieve “inter-communicative” student politics? Two conditions on social and thought levels are necessary.

Firstly, on the social level, all levels of governments and school organizational units should make great efforts to expand “public sphere” for students to express themselves freely. As citizens, students may express themselves by means of real-name reporting and Internet forums, and by virtue of the school branches of CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and CCYL (Chinese Communist Youth League), student unions and student communities. Governments at all levels should establish and improve information feedback mechanism to provide opportunities for college students’ political expression to learn students’ advice in an active way. Campus is the main place of students’ activities, school organizational units should also sum up students’ view with an open mind, investigate students’ ideological trend, and provide solutions timely. Only such combination of governments and schools can better guide students to participate in political activities in a reasonable and orderly way, and make the decision-making democratic and scientific.

Secondly, on the thought level, schools should increase investments in legal and political education, and students should strive to improve their political literacy and enhance political awareness and responsibility. In the era of economic globalization, a great variety of ideologies are impacting people’s values, outlook on life and world view. To schools, they must guide students to correctly cognize and critically analyze social phenomena, and help students cultivate correct national consciousness, democratic consciousness, consciousness of human rights, and consciousness of rule of law by means of increasing investments in legal and political education, linking theory with practice. To students, they must stand on individual growth, social development and the fate of the nation and the people, and strive to improve their political literacy and enhance political awareness and responsibility by means of theoretical learning and practical discussion on current social events abroad and domestically, avoiding Chinese traditional feudal ideology of worshipping authority blindly or political thought of drifting with the current. Only in this way may be student’ political participation is rational and directional.

CONCLUSION

Owing to radical student movements tends to draw public attention and discussion, “student politics”, influenced by Western academia, has been relegated to “student political activism (or movement)”. People seem scared of it even in today’s modern society of China.

However, man is by nature a political animal. Student politics, namely students’ political participation act, is an integral part of students’ life. Student political movement is one of students’ political expressions. With the initiative, student politics may develop over times in various ways and present different forms. Till now, student politics mainly presents 3 forms in China, i.e., simply-copying “successive” form in the traditional feudal period, radically “oppositional” form in the turbulent period, and negatively “abstaining” form in the material society. All-above mentioned forms, but, fail to meet the needs of China’s modern democratic society. In accordance with today’s social and political development, student politics is expected to be a brand-new form, “inter-communicative” politics. In brief, “inter-communicative” student politics is the form of the equal and honest dialogue between two subjects, namely the older generation and the younger generation, who are linked by inter-subjectivity with love instinct and values of goals. It is the “inter-communicative” student politics that can safeguard the development of China’s democratic politics in a sustainable way, and is a politically correct expression of today’s and future’s society in China.

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