

# Redefining Chinese citizenship

Michael Keane

## Abstract

This paper addresses shifts in governance and the re-framing of citizenship discourse in the People's Republic of China during the 1990s. Drawing upon a Sinicized Marxist-Leninism, public intellectuals and propagandists have sought to represent citizens' rights primarily as socio-economic benefits of China's reform agenda delivered by the Communist Party. This materialist articulation of citizens' rights diminishes the prospect of citizenship functioning as a mechanism for political claims against the State. However, the proclamation of rights as social benefits is in keeping with a traditional Chinese relationship between State and society whereby the former is responsible for the general welfare of the population. The citizen is thus divested of its Western political connotations and becomes a blueprint for ethical refashioning based on state goals of economic development.

Keywords: China; citizenship; economic reform; civil society; consumer rights; spiritual civilization.

## Redefining Chinese citizenship

The idea of the citizen has been conspicuously dormant within the lexicon of Chinese Communist Party discourse since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. When one takes into account the citizen's 'bourgeois' heritage, its central role in state building in the modern capitalist West, and its connotations of political and civil rights, this is not an altogether surprising disclosure. When a government survey was instituted in 1995 in order to ascertain what people knew of Chinese citizenship, the results confirmed a widespread lack of

*Michael Keane, Centre for Media Policy and Practice, Queensland University of Technology, Box 2434, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, E-mail: m.keane@qut.edu.au*

understanding. Many of the people surveyed expressed confusion about what constituted citizenship, as well as demonstrating uncertainty about rights and obligations entailed in citizenship. According to one respondent, men were by nature citizens and women were 'female citizens'. Others responded that citizens were adults over the age of eighteen (Ni 1995).

Despite the intentions of elements within China's intellectual ranks to exploit the lacunae to make citizenship an integral part of the political language of the State, the results have been lukewarm. This demonstrable lack of enthusiasm and even suspicion about citizenship reflects to some extent its particular historical articulation in China. Citizenship embodies a distinctly Marxist utilitarian demarcation of needs within Chinese political discourse. In contrast with the Western democratic tradition that emphasizes sovereignty, participation in politics, and civil rights, citizenship in China is seen as a benefit granted by the State to persons born in the People's Republic. Rights emanating from citizenship are thus framed as economic, social, and cultural benefits (Ren 1997). And, rather than empowering the individual, citizenship rights are programmatic. That is, they obligate citizens to participate in social programmes linked to nation building. In this sense rights are a function of cultural development, in particular the guided process of raising the cultural level (*wenhua shuiping*) or 'quality' (*suzhi*) of the national population.

### **The ambivalence towards citizenship**

During the twentieth century, a time of momentous social change, the utility of the concept of the citizen in Chinese political culture was inevitably devalued by the expediency of revolution and a longstanding tradition of collective morality. The Western concept of the citizen as an individual actor with civil and political rights was seen as emblematic of modernity at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) (Zarrow 1994; Nathan 1989). The citizen concept emerged during the dying embers of the imperial period and was championed by the reformer Liang Qichao in the first decade of the century, only to be displaced by the rhetoric of class struggle and collectivism during the ensuing revolutionary period that culminated in the declaration of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

While much impressed by the vigour of Western capitalism, the revolutionaries and thinkers who envisaged a new type of Chinese subject at the turn of the twentieth century saw the ideal of participatory citizenship as encapsulating the central problem of capitalism, namely that the individual had too much freedom. And, as Sun Yat-sen famously remarked, the Chinese also had always enjoyed an excessive amount of it. The sense that Sun referred to, however, was not that of civil or political rights, but rather of the relative freedom that social groups and individuals enjoyed in running their own affairs. Sun Yat-sen felt that the State was not strong enough, and did not penetrate deeply into society. Only with a strong State and a disciplined population could China modernize.

In other words, the nation should have complete liberty, not the individual members (Sun 1956: 686, 688; see Tang 1986: 274). This was a view that was generally accepted by reformers and revolutionaries alike: it allowed the leadership to elevate the interests of the nation over the rights of the individual.

Another reason for the demise of the citizen in China was the Sinicization of Marxism during the early decades of the twentieth century and the resulting political emphasis attached to the enfranchisement of the dispossessed classes, although not in the sense of providing individual rights but rather in enabling a collective ethic of productivity which would some day turn scarcity into abundance (Meisner 1981: 183). In this way collectivism and altruism became cultural templates for a Chinese 'socialist' subjectivity. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the term 'citizen' (*gongmin*) was seldom used except in formal, legal, and propagandistic documents (Tang 1986: 276). Furthermore, during the period from 1949 to 1976, coinciding with the helmsmanship of Mao Zedong, the call to citizenship was never reckoned to have mobilizing potential for the revolutionary cause. The citizen, with its historical legacy of individual rights, was viewed as antithetical to the socialist goal of mass mobilization, class struggle, and collectivism.

Recent attempts during the 1990s by Chinese intellectuals to re-invigorate the concept of civil and political citizenship have foundered due to its shallow roots in Chinese history. However, I argue that where the citizen concept has been gainfully deployed in recent years – albeit in a different configuration – is within programmes aimed at educating people in the workings of the market and the rule of law. This renewed concern with redefining citizenship may give some analysts cause for optimism about the nature of democratic social change in China. However, we need to be mindful that the Chinese concept of the citizen and terms such as civic awareness address fundamentally different sets of social concerns than they did for their Western forebears. The purposeful deployment of these terms in the mainstream mass media and in education curricula has a more normative role than that which prevails in Western liberal democracies. If we adopt a Western-centred perspective on citizenship as entailing substantive civil and individual rights, we shall be disappointed – despite the Chinese constitution listing the political rights of assembly, speech, publication, etc. (see Nathan 1989). The distinctiveness of Chinese citizenship is embedded within an authoritarian mode of governance and a collectivist understanding of rights. Whereas the Western notion of 'natural' rights, best exemplified in the American Constitution, implies that rights spring from the dignity of the person, the Chinese idea of rights is founded on 'long-standing Chinese views on the relation between individual and collective interests' (Nathan 1989: 113).

This long-standing relationship still remains intact under a market economy albeit with some modification. I argue that recent articulations of the ideal of citizenship within public discourse illustrate a new kind of social compact between State and society by which economic governance (through the mobilization of the individual) has superseded nationalism (mass mobilization) as the primary mechanism of social organization. Economic prosperity enabled by

property rights reform has in turn given rise to changing social relations that engender new identity formations.

These identity formations (including regional, youth, gender, religious, and minority identities) are symptomatic of what John Hartley (1999: 154–9) calls ‘cultural’ and ‘do-it-yourself’ forms of citizenship. Identity politics thus forms the site for self-determination and empowerment. Whereas cultural citizenship is exemplified in the idea of *common* identity and the desire to reclaim civil, political, and social rights subsequently accruing, for instance, recognition of indigenous culture, DIY citizenship is revealed in *difference*, or in another sense by what Foucault (1988) has suggested by the term ‘technologies of the self’.<sup>1</sup> Both Hartley’s DIY citizenship and Foucault’s technologies of the self connote the idea of active self-fashioning, making one’s identity out of the available semiotic material, whether this material is the pedagogic output of government agencies or the free-market discourse of the marketplace (see Dean 1994; Rose 1999).

In fact, the high demand for knowledge of economic fundamentals in China is evidence of an invisible community, a new ‘mass’ desperately seeking alternative truths to fill the vacuum of state ideology. During the Maoist era (1949–78), the semiotic content for self-fashioning came from a limited public archive; in Chinese cities today one finds an array of popular psychology guides and ‘how-to’ manuals. Economic guides and treatises, ranging from translations of the wisdom of American management gurus to culturalist renditions of self-advancement such as *Sun Zu’s Art of War*, beckon to the curious, the ambitious, and the sceptical. The concept of the individual as ‘entrepreneur of the self’ is further revealed in the fact that China now has more than 50 million investors in the stock market while Internet users, as of 30 June 2000, numbered almost 17 million.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than looking specifically at the relationship between individual rights and citizenship, however, I want to examine how the State’s attempts to engineer citizenship formation have been eroded by its economic reform agenda. In short, government policy has enabled new forms of cultural citizenship and DIY citizenship. To understand this, I shall briefly discuss how the Chinese State has attempted to engineer a cultural template for maintaining social order and encouraging productivity – in particular, how the mass media are deployed to fashion ‘good citizens’ (*hao gongmin*). The point that I make extends the idea of cultural and DIY citizenship. As mentioned above, the idea of cultural citizenship embodies identity claims made by communities denied mainstream recognition. The idea of communities, however, is neither constrained by boundaries nor necessarily quantifiable. Communities are both large and small, and can overlap, for instance the intellectual community and the community of stock-market investors.

In China, two large communities that were formerly denied their social rights and are now very much mainstream are the mass audience of popular culture (*dazhong wenhua guanzhong*) and the community of consumers (*xiaofeizhe*). Prior to the reforms that began in 1978 the audience was a captive community

that was fed a prescribed diet of officially sanctioned culture. The term ‘consumers’, moreover, was seldom used because China’s planned market made consumption an act of necessity rather than choice. The ‘cultural’ rights of audiences and readers – and consumers in general – are part of what the Deng Xiaoping-led Chinese Communist Party identified as its social agenda. Jiang Zemin, the presiding leader of China’s Communist Party, has now endorsed the Internet and E-commerce as the road ahead for China’s next generation notwithstanding the dangers the medium poses to cultural sovereignty. E-commerce and digital content will be piped through integrated broadband cable linked to set-top boxes and the infrastructure costs will be enabled by a relaxation in foreign investment regulations post-WTO accession.<sup>3</sup> At least, that is the vision.

However, the much-stated commitment to plurality (*duoyanghua*) – a component of cultural policy in China – is necessarily circumscribed by political realities. In the government’s version of citizenship formation, the new *individual* citizen is to be moulded, as were the *masses* decades earlier. The appeal to the good citizen is articulated within ‘the two civilizations’ relationship – that of material and spiritual civilizations. The dialectical relationship between these conceptual ‘civilizations’ allows the ethical balance to be shifted depending on the political mood of the times. The make-up of a ‘good citizen’ is subsequently in a state of flux, having shifted from the ideological to the pragmatic, from the collective and altruistic ‘Lei Feng spirit’ to the productive and individualized energy of the entrepreneur.<sup>4</sup> In this analysis, the question of citizens’ rights emerges in a different guise – the right to make acquisition of private economic interests the basis for self-development. Citizenship can thus be understood against a background of public campaigns aimed at refashioning the ethical conduct of Chinese people to fit the expectations of a market economy.<sup>5</sup> So, while the Chinese State remains outwardly interventionist in comparison with liberal democracies, and while collectivism remains the dominant political rhetoric, we can nevertheless begin to discern modifications in social governance.

## Definitions of the citizen in China

Despite campaigns in the mass media during the 1990s to promote the idea of citizenship and the legal rights of citizens (Ni 1995; He 1997), the definition of citizenship remains problematic. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, there have been three notions of the political subject: people (*renmin*), nationals (*guomin*), and citizens (*gongmin* or *shimin*). Until recently, emphasis has been almost exclusively on the first two of these terms. For instance, the Common Programme of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference enacted in September 1949, which served as the temporary constitution, referred only to ‘people’ and ‘nationals’ (Li and Wu 1999: 158).

It is important therefore to explain the distinctions between different notions of the political subject. To take the most utilitarian concept first, ‘the people’ are

articulated as a political community. According to the Chinese constitution, the political status of ‘the people’ is defined as follows: ‘The people are the masters of the state and that all powers of the state belong to the people’ (Li and Wu 1999: 159). The term ‘the People’s Republic of China’ and the formulation of the mass media as the ‘mouthpiece’ of the Party, the government, and the people demonstrate the inclusiveness of the term. Despite this, the term ‘the people’ illustrates a certain sorting out between progressive and feudal, bourgeois elements. During the anti-Japan War (1937–45), those who were committed to resisting Japanese invasion were referred to as ‘the people’. Notable exclusions were evident during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when the five categories of landlords, rich peasants, anti-revolutionaries, evildoers (mainly intellectuals), and rightists were considered ‘antagonistics’, and therefore opposed to ‘the people’.

The second term – ‘the nationals’ – can be understood as a short form for *benguo gongmin*, meaning ‘citizens of this country’.<sup>6</sup> It is subsequently used interchangeably with the third term ‘citizen’ (*gongmin*). In contrast to the politically restrictive category of ‘the people’, *gongmin* is a legal concept and is defined as ‘all persons who hold the nationality of the People’s Republic of China’ (Li and Wu 1999: 160). The modern notion of the citizen (*gongmin*) was first articulated in the Law of Election of the People’s Republic of China, which was enacted on 1 March 1953. ‘Citizens’ and ‘citizenship’ subsequently appeared in the first constitution of the People’s Republic of China, enacted in 1954. However, the constitution did not spell out who the citizens (*gongmin*) were, nor were there legislative or juridical interpretations of citizenship until the promulgation of the fourth constitution in 1982 (*ibid.*; see also Nathan 1989).

In addition, the Chinese constitution does not actually stipulate that *gongmin* are the masters of the State – as are ‘the people’. And, unlike ‘the people’, what constitutes *gongmin* is fixed and not changeable according to political trends. *Gongmin*, however, sounds alien and technical to many Chinese, whereas the term *guomin*, that is, ‘persons of the country’ (*guo* {country, state, nation} *min* {the people}), is semantically transparent. ‘Nationals’ and ‘citizens’ thus refer to the same group of people, except that ‘citizens’ is a highly technical term with precise legal implications while ‘nationals’ is more widely understood. In policy documents ‘nationals’ is frequently used, especially when referring to ‘all people with the Chinese nationality’, while the term ‘citizens’ is more likely to be used when a citizen as an individual is referred to, and when citizens’ rights and obligations are talked about.

Another term for citizen that has also come into political usage is *shimin* (literally, townspeople). This term can be linked to both a radical political agenda and what might best be described as a refashioning of moral education. The accepted translation of ‘civil society’ in the PRC is in fact *shimin shehui* (see Ma 1994). The term *shimin shehui* has been used by critical intellectuals to describe a sphere of resistance to state hegemony (He 1995). However, *shimin* has a more common meaning in the Chinese lexicon, referring to citizens of a particular municipality or district, and is used regularly in civic campaigns, for instance: Citizens of Tianjin ‘guidelines of moral conduct’.

These kinds of ethical drives and moral concerns are not new to Chinese society and most Chinese people embrace the sentiments of countering lax morals, seen to be proliferating in the new society. What is new, however, is the emphasis on inculcating good business practices, avoiding unscrupulous activities, and giving good service. Concerns with ethical business practices are thus directly linked to citizenship, or at least the version that the government seeks to foster. The re-emergence of the citizen concept, in both the *gongmin* and *shimin* forms, can therefore be attributed to a desire on the part of Chinese leaders to deal with the question of appropriate conduct and social obligation under a new social compact, that of a market economy.<sup>7</sup>

Above all, citizenship has a moral component in China, associated with the term 'civic virtue' (*gongde*). The impetus for moulding a new type of moral citizen was adopted as the object of the Chinese Communist Party's initial 'socialist spiritual civilization' movement, which was implemented in September 1986 (see Keane 1998). According to Ma Shu-yun (1994), the rewriting of citizenship within a 560-page tome entitled *The Citizens Handbook (Gongmin shouce)* coincided with intellectual debates questioning the emergence of a Chinese civil society during the mid-1980s. Concerned at the time that civil society's fundamental premise of a separation of State and society might undermine its hegemony, the Chinese Communist Party mobilized its intellectual faithful to dilute the new ideas into a campaign for promoting 'spiritual civilization' (*jingshen wenming*). In the climate of progressive reform and Marxist-inspired dialectical reasoning, citizenship was gradually distilled into civic campaigns – which, as well as trumpeting the superiority of socialist morality (spiritual civilization), also encapsulated material civilization, the knowledge of commodity relations.

*The Citizens Handbook* was thus conceived as a guide to promote legal knowledge among the people, in order to 'strengthen socialist civic awareness' (Ma 1994: 185). The notion of 'citizen', according to the 1986 'Decision on the Guiding Principles for a Socialist Spiritual Civilization', was framed by the four positive virtues of 'ideals, morals, education and discipline'. However, due to the residual political utility of collective interpellations such as 'the people' and 'nationals', the individualizing notion of the citizen failed to gain widespread support among China's propagandists.

The ascension of Jiang Zemin to replace the ailing Deng Xiaoping, and the need to promote the knowledge of legality in social relations, was the catalyst for re-deploying the citizenship campaign less than a decade later. Following the 5th Plenary session of the 14th CCP Central Committee in 1995, a new 'appeal for awareness of citizenship' (*huhuan gongmin yishi*) was made through the pages of China's leading intellectual newspaper, the *Guangming ribao (The Enlightenment Daily)*. In the newspaper's survey, and through a concurrent campaign conducted on the People's Radio, it became apparent that people's understanding of the citizenship concept was at variance with the governmental vision of what Chinese citizenship might deliver (Ni 1995: 1). The responses to the survey were subsequently taken into account, with the outcome being an

updated and simplified 'question and answer' version of *The Citizens Handbook*, which was published in the spring of 1996.

### Consuming citizenship and rights mechanisms

The normative function of Chinese citizenship is central to understanding how it is used in China's mass media within the context of economic and social reform. The citizen concept (*gongmin* and *shimin*) seeks to modify social conduct to the Chinese socialist spiritual civilization template. However, citizenship and civic awareness drives in China during the past two decades need to be contextualized within the twin freedoms of property rights reform and consumerism.

The case that I wish to illustrate therefore is the installation of consumer rights as a template for economic and cultural citizenship, as well as ethical refashioning. Both the notions of the citizen and the consumer are discursively mapped onto reform strategies of development and public education. The difference lies in how these entities emerged and, furthermore, how they are used in the mass media and taken up by Chinese subjects in the shaping of identities. Both terms operate as new technologies of the self. The citizen is to be 'moulded' and educated in 'basic knowledge on citizenship from the legal, moral, social, economic, geographical and historical aspects, and common knowledge on moral and legal issues for a Chinese citizen' (Xu Guangchun 1996). The emergence of the consumer, on the other hand, is both a positive consequence of material civilization (economic reform) and an entity whose behaviour (consumption) needs to be protected while at the same time guided. The consumer as 'god' is a recurring motif in much critical analysis: from the television viewer, remote control in hand, to the discerning shopper in the new free markets. While the consumer is celebrated, however, she or he is the object of exploitation by black-market profiteers and misleading advertising claims. According to governmental edicts, the unreal expectations of Chinese people towards consumer society need to be carefully monitored, as well as the problem of the fetishization of brand names (*mingpai re*) and Western products (*yanghuo re*) (Jiao 1995: 43).<sup>8</sup>

In comparison with the citizen, 'the name of the consumer' is not so much invoked in terms of his or her moral obligation to the State as being addressed as the beneficiary of the rule of law – that is, consumer protection laws. It is possible to chart the emergence of the consumer from the time of the dismantling of the planned economy that effectively began in the 1980s. The capacity of ordinary people to own commodities, along with the promotion of the public good of accumulation, foreshadowed a shift in the approved ethical model from the collective national subject (*guoji ren*) to the economic person (*jingji ren*). This change was aided by a rising tide of economic discourse which found its way into mainstream popular culture: terms such as 'smashing the iron rice bowl', the law of value, supply-demand economics, material incentives, efficiency, maximization of profit, and so on. The increased wealth which was 'liberated' by the economic reforms found its way from state coffers into the purses of Chinese

citizens, further stimulating demand for electrical appliances such as large-screen colour television sets, hi-fi units, air conditioners, and washing machines. According to a report commissioned by the State Statistical Bureau in 1991, the 1980s witnessed a 5.9 per cent average annual increase in real levels of consumption compared with an average rate of 2.6 per cent over the previous twenty-eight years (Kent 1994).

The surge in Chinese consumerism during the 1990s has been recently chronicled in both sociological and market-research literature. In these accounts, consumerism is presented as a growing social problem (Zhao 1997), a means of liberation from the hegemony of the State (Davis 2000), a result of economic boom times (Li 1998), and the effect of rising entrepreneurialism (Malik 1997). There has, however, been far less scrutiny of the role of the State in enabling and regulating consumer society. For example, one aspect of the Chinese leadership's reform agenda that directly contributed to the growth of consumer consciousness was the dismantling of the state distributive economy by which goods were bureaucratically allocated (see Yang 1996; Mueggler 1991). The 'iron rice-bowl' system of social welfare had been a key platform of Maoist hegemony. By the mid-1980s a widespread perception had emerged that the egalitarianism of the 'iron rice-bowl' system of state welfare was both a brake on social progress and an unfair system under which some are rewarded by the labour of others (Kent 1994: 86). More importantly (and this was the view that China's leaders were keen to promote in the cause of national productivity), the new economically self-regulating person would be the beneficiary of his/her own resourcefulness.

The fact that the reforms have seen the formula of 'low consumption plus high state accumulation' turned on its head is significant enough. Even more significant has been the regime's encouragement of consumer culture and personal choice. Whereas in the Maoist era needs were defined by the State and distribution was regulated according to quotas, in today's 'socialist market economy' needs have come to be coupled with the stimulation of productive forces. In everyday life in urban China, the economic fundamentals of supply-demand have superseded the organic and utopian doctrines of dialectics. The blank cheque of 'everything according to need' (*anxu quchou*), which heralded a glorious future of communism, has been cashed in under the pragmatism of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', while the role of defining and measuring needs (demand) is now entrusted to market mechanisms.

While consumer consciousness has been an outcome of the official move to embrace a commodity economy in 1992, people's understandings of economic society developed steadily during the 1980s along with an increased demand for lifestyle products. The consumer, the focus of much debate in the Chinese press and on 'radio hotline' (*rexian dianhua*), emerged as a necessary and natural product of textbook economics, and as an entity whose consumption practices could be regulated by market levers. The popularity of mass media programmes such as China Central Television's *Talking Point* (*Jiaodian fangtan*) (following the national news broadcast every evening) and *Economics Half-hour* (*Jingji bange xiaoshi*) (broadcast twice daily) has acted as a vehicle for the Chinese

government to promote directives on vending practices under the rubric of social, economic, and cultural rights.

By 1987 the Chinese government had instituted an 'International Day for Protecting Consumers Rights'. This now occurs every 15 March, with nationwide media campaigns being conducted in association with the China National Consumers' Association, a body which by 1997 had over 2,700 offices above the county level, as well as being linked to numerous consumer protection groups, committees, and unions (*Beijing Commercial Guide* 1997: 76). In the nation's capital, the Beijing Self-Discipline (*ziliü*) Consultation and Service Centre for Social Issues has instituted a 24-hour hotline for consumer complaints. According to its brief, the objectives are 'to arouse the whole nation's sense of self-discipline . . . to help consumers defend their legal rights and interests, and to assist victims to seek compensation according to the law' (*Beijing Commercial Guide* 1997: 74). In a section entitled 'How can consumers seek justice for themselves', directives are given for mediation in the first instance followed by legal redress, including additional compensation for losses incurred as a result of cheating activities. In some cases of blatant deception, the consumer can receive reimbursement plus an additional compensation of 100 per cent.

The convergence of the consumer and the citizen becomes apparent in a governmental sense as the rule of law emerges as a means of regulating the market. In effect, the citizen concept has allowed a reformulation of the collective sense of 'the people' into the individualized sense of the law-abiding, rights-possessing, rational, consuming individual. The question of what constitutes a 'good citizen' (*hao gongmin*) thus becomes the subject of an increasing stream of cultural propaganda. Just as the 'the people' were used as a symbolic template upon which to inscribe concepts of collectivism and altruism, the citizen, in the era of economic development, is the blueprint for a Chinese subject formation that binds the anarchy of the market by prescribing appropriate codes of legal and moral conduct. Citizenship is thus primarily conceived of in economic and ethical terms. The Chinese citizen therefore has a utilitarian dimension that hangs on its use in government propaganda and the correspondence that the term proposes with the emerging consumer. The existence of the consumer and the citizen in the Chinese media in the 1980s and 1990s represents a gradual diminution of the political utility of 'the masses' and 'the people', both of which have served as foundations of collective morality and altruistic self-sacrifice in times past.

### **The individualization of altruism**

It is the residual memory of collectivism and altruism, however, that has proved a stumbling block to wholesale acceptance of citizenship and the notion of individual rights. These values of collectivism and altruism, central to socialist doctrine, are negatively weighted with political associations. In *The Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, Ci Jiwei argues that, under Maoism, belief in communism

as the new science of human progress was combined with the ideals of collectivism and altruism to shape the conduct of the population. How it did this is important in understanding the logic of moral governance in China by which freedom was distributed to the ruler and obligation to the ruled (1994: 127). The importance of belief (*tian*) in the overriding truth of communism was such that it made redundant the pre-existing Confucian moral code of propriety (*li*) and the code of virtue or benevolence (*ren*). These two codes of conduct had served as ethical templates during the Qing, allowing a balance between personal and public interest. These codes were overhauled under Maoism. In a way similar to how Christian faith works to transform people, belief in the science of Marxism cleansed and purified, enabling a form of governance in which people accepted authority because it embodied truth. Thus people's every action could be determined by political criteria. People were prepared to sublimate their desire and postpone utopia. The ideal of collectivism served to link people's desire with the fate of the nation-state.

Altruism, in turn expressed as a more immediate concern for fellow individuals, was necessarily subordinated to collectivism. The 'selfless or complete' altruism that was fundamental to revolutionary Maoism, according to Ci Jiwei, was different from the kind of altruism advocated in liberal democracies. The ethical dimension of cultural forms sought to redefine the conduct of social relationships according to an altruism that disallowed selfish interest. This complete disavowal of self meant 'giving every weight to other people's interest and none to one's own' (1994: 128). In this kind of moral setting there existed no intermediate zone in which equal weight could be given to one's own interests and to the nation's interest. By virtue of this fact, any notion of individual rights is both superfluous and bourgeois.

By contrast with Maoist complete altruism, Western or 'limited' altruism 'rests on the value judgement of private interests as morally legitimate objects of pursuit' (Ci 1994: 129). Limited altruism functions to regulate relations among individuals in the context of the simultaneous development of capitalism and individualism. While this has long been portrayed as selfishness by Chinese writers, it has recently been recognized as the key to moral self-regulation. As Deng Xiaoping realized in the 1980s, people's conduct could be modified and regulated by appealing to self-interest. In other words, people could be made to be more productive by encouraging economic incentives and substituting for revolutionary discourse with economic discourse and slogans. The nation would then prosper and standards of living would rise. Furthermore, by allowing people more freedom to decide their destiny, people would be compelled to take more responsibility for their actions, allowing the State to abdicate responsibility. People's need would be fulfilled but under a slightly different covenant than under Maoism. It is not inconceivable to suggest that such limited altruism has displaced selfless altruism, and that this ethical shift has been accepted by the Chinese Communist Party as a necessary component of social reform.

The question remains as to how this translates into cultural forms. Following the relaxations of the early 1990s and the emphasis on economic prosperity that

followed Deng Xiaoping's southern tour, producers were quick to embrace the commodity nature of culture and the 'non-dialectical' relationship of supply-demand. The relations of supply-demand, in any language a positivist science, eschew the fundamental dialectic between subject and object so central to Marxist thought and encapsulated in the labour theory of value. As the labour theory is dispensed with due to its unwieldiness, abstract exchange value emerges as the price mechanism of market economics.

At the same time the question of quality emerges, in the sense of both the quality of the commodity (*zhiliang*) and the quality of the Chinese citizenry (*suzhi*). The juxtaposition of these two terms is more than just serendipitous. There is a widespread belief that the quality of Chinese morality and the quality of Chinese products are somehow linked. For instance, in a speech at the sixteenth annual television drama awards for 1996, the vice-minister of radio, film and television, Liu Xiliang explained:

If the quality of a material product is good, it gives great satisfaction to the consumer whereas if the quality is inferior it will bring about an economic loss. As artistic work is a spiritual product, superior quality can stimulate national spirit, mould moral sentiment, increase aesthetic appeal, and enrich cultural life; if inferior, it will damage the spirit of the people, foster an unhealthy atmosphere, lead to all kinds of social problems, especially influencing the healthy development of youngsters.

(Liu 1997: 3)

The 'spiritual civilization' drive and the model citizen so interpellated are predicated on a relationship between 'ethical and cultural progress' and economic development. Accordingly, the relationship between the public cultural sphere and the commercial sphere can be captured in the interplay between the notions of the citizen and the consumer. Whether as a consumer, 'realizing value . . . by creating and owning social material wealth, (Han 1996: 112), or as a citizen, abiding by law and procedures in the processes of self-regulation and civic awareness, the dominant cultural representation of the 1990s in electronic and print media – the 'new socialist person' (*shehui zhuyi xin ren*) – is the individualized economic actor.

The process of ethical refashioning is implicated therefore within the kinds of social change delivered by economic reform. Tang Tsou, writing as early as 1986, commented that political life in post-Mao China was governed by a new 'paradigm' in which 'traditional and modern elements, the old and the new, foreign examples and Chinese reality, Western knowledge and Chinese mentality are sometimes merely juxtaposed, sometimes combined in unstable mixtures, and sometimes fully integrated' (Tang 1986: 330). Under this new paradigm, people's adaptation to the market, to rising expectations of wealth and consumption, and to ideas of rights and obligations are explained in government discourses and in the new language emerging from market theory. Arif Dirlik (1989) has drawn attention to what he called the 'hegemony' of economist language. More than a decade ago, Dirlik noted a transition from a

language of revolutionary hegemony to a more abstract language of management, efficiency, productivity, and labour discipline. Here one might append the language of 'civic awareness' with its particular appeal to ethical enterprise.

The discourse of 'economic development' (*jingji fazhan*) not only pervades government institutions but reaches out into mainstream discourse and popular culture. A genre of literature called 'overseas student literature' (*liuxuesheng wenxue*) emerged in the mid-1980s describing the experiences of Chinese students in the 'West'. Popular television serials dramas known as 'business dramas' (*shangye pian*) flourished in the early-1990s and dealt with the economic exploits and misadventures of ordinary people seeking to carve out new consumer-driven identities in the marketplace. Evident in serials such as *Beijingers in New York* (1993), *The Sun Rises in the East, It Rains in the West* (1996), *Chicken Feathers* (1997) is an ethical shift from dependency towards entrepreneurialism (see Keane 2001). The Chinese critic Dai Jinhua (1997: 8–9) has made the point that these television dramas create a format for the expression of individuality at the same time as expressing the centrality of family and ethical values, what she calls 'paperback' versions of humanitarianism and commercial ethical values. As John Hartley persuasively argues, television is the principal 'popular-knowledge-producing apparatus of internationalized consumer society' (1999: 4). Nikolas Rose, in his discussion of consumption technologies, has also noted how television soap operas 'offer new ways for individuals to narrativize their lives, new ethics and techniques for living which do not set self-gratification and civility in opposition . . . but align them in a virtuous liaison of happiness and profit' (Rose 1999: 86).

These popular cultural renditions of the new ethical template for progress illustrate that the negative associations once attached to the concept of 'self', such as self-criticism (*zimo piping*), self-examination (*zimo fanxing*), and self-remoulding (*zimo gaizao*), have been displaced by the positive associations of self-consciousness (*zimo yishi*), self-designing (*zimo sheji*), and self-realization (*zimo shixian*) (see Xu 1995). The mainstream press has likewise been eager to celebrate the new ethical spirit. On 7 September 1995 an article in Guangzhou's *Yangcheng wanbao* announced the emergence of 'a new commodity economy culture'. This new cultural spirit included:

values that have existed previously and re-appeared in recent years, such as openness, enterprise, competition, equality, pragmatism, adventurousness, initiative, freedom etc. Moreover, central to the rational cultural spirit of the age and indicative of the ethical change in ordinary people are the values of boldness, reasonableness, a sense of accomplishment, and cooperation, as well as taking pride in personal achievement.

(Zhou 1995)

The consumer and the citizen capture in various ways the contemporary *zeitgeist*, which, according to the Chinese psychologist Xu Jinsheng, is the progression from the passive, conforming personality type (*guishuxing rengo*) to the self-realizing personality type (*zimo shixian xing rengo*) (Li 1996: 5). Xu contends that this transformation is the genesis of a modern economic consciousness:

The evolution of the Chinese personality is itself related to China's changing position in the global economic grid. The higher China's position, the quicker the transformation. The popularization of the self-realized person is without any doubt the overriding trend. The extensive manifestation of this model, moreover, depends upon the establishment and perfection of market economy mechanisms through the whole of society.

(Xu 1995)

Reformers' attempts to marry Marxist dialectics with supply-demand economic theory have had to contend with the perceived selfish amorality of the market. In order to justify the market model, philosophical and theoretical debates within the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences have moved to argue that private interests can indeed contribute to the well-being of the nation. Under this revision it is suggested that Marx and Engels really meant that the development of each individual is a prerequisite for the development of all. In effect, this emendation has created an opening for liberal philosophies of the market. According to philosophical and economic think-tanks, Adam Smith's theory whereby the market functions as the regulator of diverse individual desires necessitates a certain loss of collective morality which is compensated for by a gain in individual morality or, in other words, the gradual formation of the individual as an independent moral subject.

The crisis of belief in politics in recent years is therefore directly related to a different modality of governance than that of Maoism. Now it is no longer necessary to believe in Marxism to be a good citizen. Notwithstanding this, the fundamental 'contradiction' facing the Chinese Communist Party is the tension between public morality and private interest. This tension has been manifest in debates about market morality and how culture might rescue moral decline. As one scholar from China's Academy of Social Science argues, a process of cultural construction is needed: 'People are required not only to consider their own short-term, partial or economic interests but also the long-term, overall and non-economic interests of other people' (Wu 1998: 97). In essence, this encapsulates the idea of limited altruism referred to earlier. The new moral order in China is one in which people are encouraged to be economically productive and self-reliant while at the same time respecting the so-called socialist spiritual values of collectivism and patriotism. The problem for China's leaders is getting the mix right. Too much self-reliance may be a dangerous thing in a country with a population of 1.2 billion people. Too quick a shift towards materialism is likewise fraught with danger as rising expectations of wealth creating social divisions.

## Conclusion

To many observers of China's reforms the lack of emphasis on citizenship in official discourse is evidence of a denial of the kinds of civil rights and freedoms

available in liberal-democratic societies. China, however, presents an interesting study of a society in transition in which freedom is subject to contending relationships. The new society that the Chinese government champions is a socialist market economy by name, but in reality Chinese society presents a synthesis of value structures and belief systems increasingly drawn from a global semiosphere. The 'hundred schools of thought' that now contend with state ideology include traditional social practices, creative responses to institutionalized power structures, imported management practices, new forms of spiritualism, and indigenous and imported forms of popular culture. It is within the interstices of these regimes of truth that DIY citizenship operates.

Governmental attempts to use traditional appeals to collectivism to construct 'good citizens' have met with limited success. Part of this may be due to the widespread belief that one has to be resourceful and have good connections to be prosperous in China today. In other words, just being a 'good citizen', as defined by the 'citizens' guides to conduct' that are circulated in the mass media, on billboards, in public transport, and in work units, seriously impedes the capacity to exploit the opportunities provided by the market (Keane 2001). Nevertheless, as much as there is the recognition of the need to be self-regulating and resourceful in the new society, there remains a certain residual dependency on embedded social norms and values. These ultimately form the cognitive maps in which new forms of DIY citizenship are embedded.

## Notes

1 The idea of technologies of the self is well developed in the work of Mitchell Dean (1994). Dean writes of the 'recent flowering of the culture of the self, of self-improvement, self-fulfillment, personal development and sexual liberation, and the rise of neoliberalism, with its notions of the 'entrepreneurial self' and the 'enterprise culture' (1994: 210).

2 The number of people playing the stock market in China reached 50,661,700 on 14 June this year according to *The People's Daily* online 16 June 2000 – <http://www.peopledaily.com.cn/GB/channel3/24/20000616/105781.html>. According to other research published on *Chinanews* online, among that number only 10 per cent are active players – <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/2000-5-19/26/30434.html>. According to the last survey by CNNIC (China National Network Information Centre), China has 16,900,000 Internet users as of 30 June 2000 – <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/>. Information accessed 27 August 2000.

3 China's entry into the World Trade Organization has led to increasing speculation as to the consequences for market liberalization and the flow-on effects to China's National Information Infrastructure (NII) vision. China is expected to join the WTO in 2001.

4 Lei Feng was the selfless PLA soldier who emerged as the model subject of cultural propaganda during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Noted in socialist folklore for his altruism and dedication to the Chinese Communist party, Lei Feng was killed when his truck backed into an electric pylon in 1963. His memory continues to be institutionalized in moral campaigns and mainstream popular works such as the 1999 film *The Days since Lei Feng Left Us* (see Keane 2001).

5 Ann Anagnost provides an interesting analysis of the way in which discourses of civilization have been used to engender productive bodies by institutionalizing a new

architectonics of disciplinary practices that regulate work and leisure (see Anagnost 1997: 74–97).

6 The term *guomin* (nationals) refers to people of Chinese nationality living in China and subject to Chinese law. Chinese people living outside China are conventionally referred to as *huaqiao*, for instance, American Chinese.

7 Governmental civic campaigns in China are similar in some respects to those instituted in Singapore by which good citizens are regaled as contributing to national prosperity and shunning deviant behaviour (see Birch *et al.* 2001). The Chinese government views the Singaporean mode of governmental regulation of culture as a model for China. However, the differences between the two nations are significant. Singapore has a population of approximately 3 million, allowing the state regulatory mechanisms to work effectively.

8 One of the perceived problems of the market economy concerns the expectations of wealth creation. When, in the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping made his famous remark that ‘to get rich is glorious’, it liberated people from the expectation that they should aspire to egalitarianism. However, Deng later modified his stance to the effect that it was better for some sections of the population to get rich, whereby there would be a gradual flow-on effect. Incidentally, China’s first hugely popular domestic television drama in 1990 was aptly named *Aspirations* (*Kewang*).

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