



Made in China: The Revenge of the Nerds

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The nerds are running the show in today's China. In the twenty years since Deng Xiaoping's reforms

kicked in, the composition of the Chinese leadership has shifted markedly in favor of technocrats -- that is, individuals holding actual or putative political office who majored in natural sciences or engineering in college. The Maoist Reds who dominated politics during the Cultural Revolution have long since been eclipsed by resurgent Experts. These techno-intellectuals' were once themselves targeted by the Gang of Four and zealous Red Guards because of their suspect class backgrounds, allegedly elitist attitudes, and affiliations with the "capitalist roaders," Liu Shaoqi and Deng himself. But now they hold sway in the Politburo, the Central Committee, the National People's Congress, and even provincial, municipal, and county governments. It's no exaggeration to describe the current regime as a technocracy. Yes, China is the land of Nerd Empowerment.

Take a look at the seven members of the current Standing Committee of the 15th Central Committee. The Big Three in the Chinese oligarchy were all trained as electrical engineers: President Jiang Zemin at Shanghai's Jiatong University, Li Peng in the Soviet Union, and Premier Zhu Rongji at Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University. Hu Jintao graduated from Tsinghua in hydroelectric engineering. Wei Jianxing studied mechanical engineering at the Dalian Engineering Institute. Vice Premier Li Lanqing earned his degree in automotive engineering from Fudan University. Of the seven, only Li Ruihuan did not graduate from a four-year institute with an engineering degree. But he did earn a college certificate by taking night classes at the Beijing Spare-time Architecture Engineering Institute.

How did this happen? At a basic level, you might say that technocratic politics is a natural fit with the Chinese political culture, steeped as it is in the Confucian tradition. From time immemorial, statecraft and scholarship have been intertwined in the Chinese mind. Beginning as early as the Han Dynasty (206 BC--AD 220) officials were selected in ostensibly meritocratic civil service examinations, in which they were tested on their knowledge of and familiarity with the Confucian canon. "Let those who labor with their heads rule over those who labor with their hands," Mencius said, codifying an attitude that remains ingrained in the Chinese approach to leadership.

New wine filled this old bottle during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as a bureaucracy predicated on Confucian learning proved inadequate to the challenges of modernity. Supplanting Confucianism, at least among the cognoscenti, was the belief system that they thought lay at the heart of Western wealth and power: Science. By the time of the May Fourth Movement (which centered on the student demonstrations of May 4, 1919), science -- or, more accurately, scientism -- had become a secular religion among China's forward-thinking New Youth. It was in large part the supposedly scientific basis of Marxism-Leninism that led many of the May Fourth

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After the Maoist madness abated and Deng Xiaoping inaugurated the opening and reforms that began in late 1978, scientific and technical intellectuals were among the first to be rehabilitated. Realizing that they were the key to the Four Modernizations embraced by the reformers, concerted efforts were made to bring the "experts" back into the fold.

During the 1980s, technocracy as a concept was much talked about, especially in the context of so-called "Neo-Authoritarianism" -- the principle at the heart of the "Asian Developmental Model" that South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan had pursued with apparent success. The basic beliefs and assumptions of the technocrats were laid out quite plainly: Social and economic problems were akin to engineering problems and could be understood, addressed, and eventually solved as such. Qian Xuesen, a protégé of Theodore von Karman and the father of the Chinese space program, taught at MIT in 1940s and returned to China in 1955. He became a Central Committee member and Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. In the early 1980s Qian proposed that by the year 2000, all cadres should be college graduates, that all leaders at county and bureau level should hold masters degrees, and all full or deputy ministers and provincial governors should hold PhDs. Qian also likened the government to the design department in an aerospace engineering outfit: He said it should be mainly composed of scientists and engineers.

The open hostility to religion that Beijing exhibits at times -- most notably in its obsessive drive to stamp out the "evil cult" of Falun Gong -- has pre-Marxist roots. Scientism underlies the post-Mao technocracy, and it is the orthodoxy against which heresies are measured.