

Beijing cancels debate on 1911 revolution

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The Beijing branch of the Communist Youth League last month abruptly cancelled a debate originally planned to open on April 9 to mark the 100th anniversary of the 1911 revolution—an upheaval that set in motion the downfall of the Manchu dynasty and three decades of political turmoil, revolutions and counter-revolutions.

The debate on the 1911 revolution was to have involved 16 universities in Beijing and Tianjin that were historically hotbeds for democratic and revolutionary ideas. Amid rising social tensions, the Chinese regime is fearful that any serious discussion of the country's tumultuous past could help trigger a popular revolt today.

The ban came amid the rounding up of dozens of dissidents in recent months, particularly those who have responded to or facilitated the Internet calls to emulate the “Jasmine Revolution” in Egypt and Tunisia. Beijing University professor Zhang Ming complained in his microblog that the authorities had ordered the cancellation at the very last minute: “No reason was given, just cancelled it.”

Broad layers of the population have long regarded the current regime as resembling the rotten Manchu court that desperately sought to cling to power in 1911. The cancellation of the debate will only strengthen those sentiments. One blogger said: “The longer the ailing CP [Communist Party] lives on, the more it is going backward, the fact is they are living in real fear...” Another noted: “Even frightened by the 1911 revolution? Surely they are going home soon.”

Beijing's greatest concern was that the debate would raise questions about the political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself. A hundred years after 1911, basic democratic rights remain a distant dream in China. More than six decades after taking power in 1949, the CCP is presiding over the return of the old evils—from official corruption and poverty to prostitution

and child labour—on a vast scale.

For millions of young people unable to find a decent job and compelled to work in sweatshops, history has assumed an explosive character. The strikes last year in auto and electronics plants owned by transnational corporations were initially sparked by a young Honda worker who had drawn his inspiration from earlier revolutionary struggles of the working class, including the Hong Kong-Canton general strike in 1925.

Chinese authorities have been holding university debates on the 1911 revolution since 2002, primarily to celebrate its bourgeois democratic leaders, particularly Sun Yat-sen, who formed the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT). These debates have been part of the CCP's broader campaign to revamp the history of the three Chinese revolutions in 1911, 1925-27 and 1949 so as to bury any lingering revolutionary traditions and transform these events into steps in the rise of the modern Chinese capitalist nation-state.

The promotion of Chinese nationalism in various activities and ceremonies to mark the 100th anniversary of the 1911 revolution has served an additional political purpose. It has been designed to pave the way for closer relations with Taiwan and the KMT—China's former Cold War enemy. After losing power to the CCP's armies in 1949, the KMT fled to Taiwan and imposed a military dictatorship that lasted until the 1980s. Having transformed China into the world's largest cheap labour platform, the CCP's appeal to a common patriotic history is aimed at helping to bring Taiwan back into the fold.

The CCP's nationalist campaign has literally rewritten history. All the enemies of the Chinese revolutions—from the reactionary imperial rulers to various warlords and the KMT dictator Chiang Kai-shek—have been given a facelift that transforms them into humane, patriotic historical figures. Even Confucius, who encouraged absolute

obedience to authority and acceptance of social inequality, has been promoted as a symbol of Chinese national identity.

By contrast, more thoughtful youth and intellectuals still regard the 1911 revolution as a source of inspiration, despite its limitations and ultimate failure. Among university students, the debates were followed with a degree of interest.

Last year's debate in Wuhan focussed on the issue of whether the social conditions were ripe for the 1911 revolution. Students from Taiwan argued the prerequisites were present and the revolution was successful. Their mainland opponents declared that the 1911 revolution lacked mass support and was incomplete as compared to the classical bourgeois revolutions in Britain and France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Despite its narrow focus, the debate touched on an important theoretical issue—the inability of the bourgeoisie in countries with a belated capitalist development to carry out the tasks of the earlier bourgeois revolutions. It was Leon Trotsky in his Theory of Permanent Revolution who pointed out that the democratic tasks in countries like China and Russia could be resolved only as part of the struggle of the working class for socialism internationally. The validity of the Theory of Permanent Revolution was demonstrated in the Russian Revolution of 1917, which inspired workers and intellectuals around the world, including in China where the CCP was formed in 1921.

This year's debate was to have been about Sun Yat-sen's "Three people's principles"—nationalism, democracy and livelihood. The organiser, the Beijing Institute of Technology, declared in its statement that the debate "should not only look at those exciting victories of the revolution, but what is hidden beneath—the awakening of people's awareness in this country and the spread of democracy." However, the last thing that the CCP wants amid the current social tensions is a debate about political awakening and basic democratic rights.

While the 1911 revolution has been the subject of carefully managed university debates, the Second Chinese Revolution of 1925-1927 remains a virtual taboo topic. Apart from a small layer of academics, few in China know that the fate of that revolution was sealed by the policies of the Stalinist clique in Moscow, which tied the

CCP to the bourgeois nationalist KMT that drowned the revolution in blood, killing thousands of CCP members.

Stalin bitterly opposed the demand of Trotsky and the Left Opposition for the CCP to break from the KMT and advance a genuinely revolutionary program. The official *History of Chinese Communist Party* only tentatively acknowledged in 2004 that Trotsky had been correct in 1925-1927. But the political implications of the Stalinist betrayal cannot be honestly discussed in China.

The suppression of Trotsky's ideas in China is not accidental. In the wake of the defeat of the Second Chinese Revolution, the CCP under Mao Zedong abandoned Marxism and the urban working class, and turned to peasant guerrilla warfare. Although the Third Chinese Revolution in 1949 toppled the corrupt KMT, the non-proletarian social forces on which the CCP was based and its adherence to what was, in essence, a bourgeois democratic, not a socialist program, determined its subsequent evolution.

Just 23 years after 1949, Mao reached a rapprochement with the US imperialism, laying the foundation of Deng Xiaoping's drive to open up the economy to foreign capital from 1978. In 1989, when millions of workers rose up to oppose the regime's "market reform," the CCP sent in the army to crush the movement, paving the way for a flood of foreign investment and the startling growth of Chinese capitalism.

Throughout the past 60 years, the CCP has been terrified of any mass movement of the working class. It is little wonder, given this year's upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa, that the regime has shut down a debate about revolutionary events—even though they occurred 100 years ago, and for the most part did not involve the working class and ultimately failed.



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