Issue Date: 19-08-2017 Zone: UKPB Desk: China Output on: 17-08-2017----11:12 Page: CN1 Revision: 0

Also in this section

51 Workers' rights

For daily analysis and debate on China, visit
Economist.com/china

Reviving traditional culture

Making history

JINAN

The Communist Party is trying to redefine what it means to be Chinese

CHILDREN sit with straight backs chanting in loud voices from the *Dizi Gui*, a classic Chinese text about obedience. At the end of class they bow low to an image of Confucius, hands clasped as if in prayer. A statue of the ancient sage watches over the playground, too: "Study the *Dizi Gui*, be a good Chinese," reads a red banner. At the Zhengde summer camp in Jinan, in the eastern province of Shandong, children as young as five spend their day reciting verses, learning tai chi and watching cartoons with moral messages. Phones are banned "to prevent contamination of the mind", says Yi Shugui, the headmaster, a former management consultant. At similar summer schools across China children learn calligraphy, traditional Chinese crafts and how to play ancient instruments. China is undergoing a cultural renaissance, much of it government-sponsored.

For most of its history the Communist Party wanted to smash China's past, not celebrate it. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s it sought to overturn the "four olds": old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas. Temples, mansions and tombstones were ravaged, along with any artefacts or people associated with the bourgeois way of life. Small wonder that Communist ideology lost its appeal. The blistering pace of change in recent decades has kindled an anxiety that China is suffering from moral decay and a concomitant yearning for a revival of ancient values. The government is harnessing those feelings, using ancient rites and customs to spread favoured values.

Since coming to power in 2012 Xi Jinping, the president, has intensified efforts to build what he refers to as "cultural confidence". In an extraordinary denial of its legacy, the Communist Party has taken to presenting itself as "the faithful heir" of traditional Chinese culture. "Our civilisation has developed in an unbroken line from ancient to modern times," Mr Xi declared in 2012. In January the government sought to codify its attempts to "preserve" traditional culture by outlining a vast array of policies that local and national officials should advance.

Individual elements of the policy to promote "the integration of leisure life and traditional cultural development" sound rather benign. Taken together, however, they constitute an attempt to infuse daily life with a sanitised and government-sanctioned version of Chinese culture. The intention, as in so much that Mr Xi does, is to secure the enduring power of the Communist Party.

The agenda touches every aspect of life. The white paper calls for an emphasis on "our festivals", so local and national holidays are being celebrated with new vigour. Some people are proposing that China should pick its own Mother's Day, rather than copy the American date (China already has a native version of Valentine's Day). State media are boosting the use of Chinese medicine when people fall ill, wearing Han robes when they get married, and keeping fit by practising tai chi and other ancient sports (a recent viral video lauds "Kung Fu Granny", a 94-year-old who reckons she owes her longevity partly to such activities). The party is trying to bend popular culture to its agenda, too. On August 5th it announced plans to replace prime-time entertainment and reality TV shows that "hype" pop stars with programmes of higher "moral" content. Examples include a much-plugged quiz show about classical poetry and another in which children compete to write complicated Chinese characters.

The great call

Every part of society is being pressed into the effort. Zhengde is emblematic of a wider plan to influence Chinese youth, what the *People's Daily* refers to as a "soul-casting project", by introducing new school textbooks and degree programmes relating to ancient culture. Employers are encouraged to take their staff on study trips and provide classes on culture. Even the People's Liberation Army has been told to seek courage from a lion-hearted hero of ancient China. So, either by directive or a desire to please officialdom, every art form is being given a Chinese twist: "King of Glory", a popular game for mobile phones, features a famous eighth-century poet, Li Bai, albeit as an assassin, not a calling there is any evidence he pursued. A well-known Peking opera has been reinvented in jazz form to appeal to new audiences.

There is an economic logic to such policies, since they protect some Chinese firms from foreign competition and promote ▸▸

Issue Date: 19-08-2017 Zone: UKPB Desk: China Output on: 17-08-2017----11:25 Page: CN2 Revision: 0

new sources of consumption. Last year Mr Xi urged a group of writers and artists to "draw energy from the treasure vault of Chinese culture". Publishers have been asked to limit imports of foreign children's books, thereby making way for home-grown comics and picture books that promote "Chinese values".

In an effort to cut poverty and create new rural jobs, all manner of crafts have been revived or invented, including creating sculptures from peach stones and yams, weaving bamboo and, in one place, making miniature souvenir coffins. In April the government expressed the intention to develop cultural industries into a "pillar" of the economy. China's ancient heritage stands at the centre of its sales pitch to the world, too: becoming "a socialist cultural superpower" is now an official national goal.

By presenting himself as the defender of traditional values, Mr Xi hopes to harness the conservative forces in society. He also seeks to divert attention from the party's own culpability in creating the supposed spiritual vacuum. Traditional values bolster the Communist Party in other ways, too. Promoting the country's cultural heritage is a safer source of patriotism than anti-Japanese feeling, which the party had been stoking for many years and which backfired in 2012 when demonstrations against Japan turned violent.

The Communist Party has cherry-picked the version of the past that suits it—what it refers to as a "correct" reflection of the ancient values prizing hierarchy, obedience and order. Preaching to a class of 12-18-year-olds at Zhengde, Mr Yi sums up Confucius's teachings: "Listen to your parents at home, to your teachers at school, to your boss at work and to the state and government in the country—then you will have happiness." That epitomises Mr Xi's vision of a "harmonious society" nicely as well.

Inconvenient elements of China's ancient culture have been left safely behind. Endorsing traditional values does not include a tolerance for religion, for example, which Mr Xi sees as a potential rival for citizens' loyalty. While he preaches that ancient values are the "soul of the nation", he has also overseen harsh moves against Tibetan Buddhists and Chinese Muslims. Monasteries throughout China have, in effect, been turned into tourist attractions. Many Buddhist temples charge entry fees and few host regular religious services or provide prayer books. Within weeks of the release of the white paper on preserving traditional culture came another edict forbidding even retired officials in Beijing from engaging in any religious activities. The Communist Party has clearly heeded one lesson from its own history: social movements, be they revolutionary, religious or democratic, may prove hard to contain. Better to control them itself. ■

Labour law

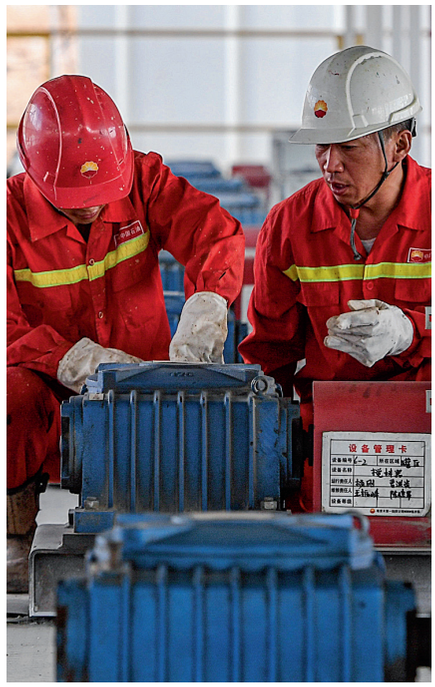
Workers, disunited

BEIJING

Measures to protect employees are no use to those who need them most

WHETHER in the breathless years of double-digit economic growth or today's more languid era, one constant in China has been the poor state of workers' rights and the frequent outbreaks of labour unrest. From coalminers in the snowy north-east to factory staff in the steamy Pearl River Delta, workers have agitated against low pay, wage arrears, unsafe conditions and job losses. A law on labour contracts that took effect in 2008 aimed to keep Chinese hard-hats happier, and on paper it should have succeeded. Indeed, the worldwide ranking of employment-protection laws by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, a rich-country think-tank, puts China near the very top of the tables on several indicators.

In practice, however, the law has only helped a bit. The lack of independent unions or genuine collective bargaining leaves China's blue-collar workers vulnerable and grumpy. Incidents of labour unrest remain widespread. Around 600 strikes or protests have been reported this year, according to researchers at China Labour Bulletin, a Hong Kong-based watchdog, who reckon this tally of known incidents may represent only 10-15% of the actual number. The government is trying to keep unrest in check by lowering the threshold at which the police intervene. In Beijing protests used to be broken up if 50 workers showed up; now ten will suffice.



Hard hats, hard luck

But even though the law has left blue-collar workers in the lurch, it has brought considerable, unintended benefits for white-collar ones. Managers in all sorts of companies—Chinese, foreign, state-owned and private—complain that the law makes it difficult to fire office staff, even in cases of egregious malfeasance. "When the law was written, we didn't anticipate this," says Wang Kan of the China Institute of Industrial Relations.

He describes a case involving a senior executive at a big technology company who was caught subcontracting work at grossly inflated prices to a firm that he had established using a relative's name. His employer was unable to meet the extensive documentary and procedural requirements laid out in the law, so could not dismiss him. The executive's departure instead came on terms he dictated: he got a huge payout and the firm he was leaving even waived non-compete restrictions it would normally have imposed.

Blue-collar workers may have even less job security than before, partly because of slowing growth and the closure of some state-owned firms. Yet they are often unable to use the labour law to protect themselves. Many of them, especially the tens of millions of migrant workers who roam from job to job in construction and other lowly roles, are taken on without formal contracts, says Aaron Halegua of New York University, even though that contravenes the law in itself. If an employer denies any relationship with a worker and there are no documents to prove one, he says, the worker's case will seldom reach a court or arbitration panel.

Professionals have also been better able to use the labour law because they are paid enough to hire legal help. Lawyers are not allowed to take on cases in exchange for a share of any settlement. Theoretically the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, an umbrella for all Chinese unions, offers legal aid to blue-collar workers as part of its mandate. Since it is completely controlled by the Communist Party, however, it typically prizes the government's desire for stability over workers' calls for fairness.

China does have a handful of campaigning lawyers and NGOs that seek to offer legal help to abused blue-collar workers, but they are routinely met with professional censure or worse forms of intimidation. Communist Party officials instinctively respond more fiercely to aggrieved blue-collar workers than to white-collar ones. When they lie awake at night worrying about labour unrest, they picture mobs of manual labourers with pickaxes, not swarms of pen-wielding office drones. ■