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大同，小康

Datong and Xiaokang

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In his epic three-hour-long speech to open the Nineteenth Party Congress on 18 October 2017, Xi Jinping emphasised the establishment of a comprehensive *xiaokang shehui*—which official translators rendered as ‘moderately prosperous society’—as the first of four strategies for the ‘new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics.’¹ He repeated the term *xiaokang shehui* 18 times during this exceptionally long speech, making it a goal for his tenure and almost synonymous with the rise of China. Still, the concept has been in use throughout China’s reform period and much earlier, as intellectuals have repeatedly raised it as a future step on the country’s path to utopia.

Xiaokang and its close relative *datong* are distinctly Chinese terms that successive generations of intellectuals have adapted from classical Confucian discourse to fit Marxist and, subsequently, Maoist and post-Maoist teleologies. This adoption plays a role in Party-state legitimacy by forging a continuity between past Chinese traditions and a future Chinese utopia. Emphasis on the establishment of a *xiaokang* society highlights the success of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in leading China along a path that is distinctively Chinese. Although the terms have a long history in Confucian texts, intellectuals returned to and developed the concepts in the twentieth century, opening them up for adaption to define today’s China. Ubiquitous in current Party rhetoric, due to their long-standing role in Chinese intellectual thought, *xiaokang* and *datong* convey messages about the role and authority of the CCP that go far beyond their classical meanings.

Classical Usages

Xiaokang and *datong* most famously appear in the ‘Li Yun’ chapter of the *Book of Rites*, one of the Confucian classics compiled in the Han Dynasty. As one of the most admired sections of one of the most popular books in history, the ‘Li Yun’ has received

regular attention for close to 2,000 years. The concepts have managed to maintain much of their original meaning as stages on the path to utopia, yet their adoption into the contexts of modern ideologies has created new implications.

The second and third paragraphs of the 'Li Yun' describe the periods of *datong* and *xiaokang*, and are the key to their modern influence. The opening line of the section on *datong* indicates its importance: 'When the great way was followed, all under heaven was for the common good' (*dadao zhi xing ye, tianxia weigong*). The spirit of the clause is unmistakably egalitarian, as is the entire passage, but the ambiguous nature of the text allows for considerable variation in interpretation. The 'Li Yun' described the utopia of *datong* as a past world which had no borders, no crime, no waste, no need to adhere to the classical relationships, and no unnecessary suffering. It was a world in which all felt safe, secure, and provided for. Modern Chinese intellectuals interpreted *tianxia weigong*, or 'the world is for all,' as an indication that the age of *datong* was a world without private possessions.² This was an effort to draw upon the authority of a classical text to legitimise a political programme, but it was not removed from the context of the terminology.

Xiaokang was more complicated to appropriate into modern usage. It was a world in which 'all under heaven is for [private] families' (*tianxia weijia*). The text also explained that, unlike in the age of *datong*—a meritocracy in which those most worthy were appointed as officials—in a *xiaokang* society families maintained monopolies over government posts and, thereby, over wealth. The age of *xiaokang* was, however, only inferior when compared to the age of *datong*. Ritual and principle, walls and moats, as well as the five relationships, were necessary to maintain order and harmony in such a time, but nevertheless it was a period of relative peace. It is the comparison between *datong* and *xiaokang* that is important for our reading of the 'Li Yun' and for understanding the usage of the two concepts in modern China.

In translation, the terms have a number of iterations, indicating their complexity, but also revealing the assumptions and politics of the translators in their understandings of Confucian thought. James Legge's 1885 translation of the Confucian classics as part of *The Sacred Books of China* has had the greatest influence as a reference for later generations of translators. However, his rendering of *datong* and *xiaokang* respectively as 'the grand union' and the 'small tranquillity' has not been passed down.³ 'Grand unity' has come closer to being a standardised translation for *datong*, and remains in use.

In French, Séraphin Couvreur (1835–1919) offered a more comprehensive translation of *datong* as 'the grand union of universal brotherhood' (*la grande union ou la fraternité universelle*), but chose a judgement-laden translation of *xiaokang* as 'the imperfect tranquillity' (*tranquillité imparfaite*).⁴ This is not very different from the translation as 'lesser prosperity' favoured by Theodore de Bary in his recent renditions.⁵ Translating these passages in the twentieth century, it was difficult to avoid connecting the classical concepts to modern political theories of capitalism and communism. The passages lent themselves well to the politics of the time, and were crucial conceptual resources for Chinese intellectuals during that time.

The Return to Datong in Modern China

The term *datong* gained new significance in the twentieth century, largely through the efforts of the extremely influential reformer and intellectual Kang Youwei. Kang reconceptualised Confucianism from a religious perspective, emphasising *ren*—‘benevolence’ or ‘love’—as the basis upon which to build civilisation. He saw *datong* as the ultimate realisation of *ren*.⁶

In *The Great Unity* (*datong shu*), Kang discussed the future *datong* as a utopia in which states will no longer exist; families will be completely different, as men and women will be equal and same sex marriage will be accepted; robotic birds will take the place of servants; and animals will be treated well by a world of vegetarians. Although often full of radical compassion in a way unlike other literature of his contemporaries, Kang and his book were products of their time, and included terrifying prescriptions for the elimination of the black race through a centuries-long programme of eugenics. Kang’s utopia was both highly imaginative and deeply troubling.

However, although Kang was responsible for the reemergence of the terms *datong* and, to some extent, *xiaokang* in modern Chinese intellectual discourse, the concepts were larger than Kang and exceeded his own definitions of them. With the rise of communism and materialist understandings of social evolution, intellectuals preferred to see class consciousness and social change as dictated by selfishness, rather than benevolence (*ren*).

Although disagreeing with many of his core assumptions and conclusions, Mao appreciated Kang Youwei’s vision and referenced it in his speeches and writings. In his 1949 essay ‘On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,’ Mao explained: ‘Kang Youwei wrote *The Great Unity*, but he did not, nor would he be able to, find a way of achieving *datong*. The republican states of the capitalist classes are found in foreign countries, but China could not have such a state because the country was oppressed by imperialism. The only way [to *datong*] is through the People’s Republic led by the working class.’

The appropriation of Kang’s Confucian views to a modern Chinese teleology did not happen quickly. Despite Mao’s occasional use of the terms, *datong* and *xiaokang* were not key elements in early Maoism, and only became ubiquitous during the reform period that began with the rise of Deng Xiaoping after the Cultural Revolution.

Since then, Party elites have regularly invoked the terms to frame China’s progress through the lens of a specific historical and economic period. The prosperity associated with *xiaokang* was identified as a goal through the Four Modernisations (*si ge xiandaihua*), the defining thought of the Deng Xiaoping period, beginning in the late 1970s. Discussing China’s modernisation with Japanese Prime Minister Masayoshi Ōhira in 1979, Deng utilised the concept of *xiaokang* to differentiate the Chinese path of development: ‘The Four Modernisations that we hope to realise are a Chinese Four Modernisations. Our conceptualisation of the Four Modernisations is not like your conceptualisation of modernisation, but is a *xiaokang* family (*xiaokang zhi jia*).’⁷ Although vague, this rhetoric was important as it allowed Deng to discuss capitalist modernisation while avoiding capitalist discourse, a defining moment in neoliberalism. From this moment, *xiaokang* became an essential part of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics.’

At the Sixteenth Party Congress, held in 2002, Jiang Zemin announced that ‘comprehensive *xiaokang*’ (*quanmian xiaokang*) would be achieved by 2020—a promise strongly reasserted by Hu Jintao in his speeches at the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Party Congresses in 2007 and 2012.⁸ This goal later became a key part of Xi Jinping Thought, definitively established at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017, as he has repeatedly declared a ‘decisive victory in attaining comprehensive *xiaokang* society’ as the objective for his next five years in power. Looking back through these speeches, the rise of *xiaokang* is striking, but its role in rhetoric outweighs the importance of its content. Alongside terms such as modernisation, marketisation, and development, Wang Hui points to the popular usage of *quanmian xiaokang* as an example of the depoliticisation of politics in contemporary China due to the careful avoidance of discourse related to the modern political ideologies of capitalism or communism.⁹

An Epitome of Chineseness

The rise of *xiaokang* and *datong* as key concepts for the CCP embodies discursive, practical, and theoretical messaging that the CCP is communicating to its domestic audience. Respectively, these messages indicate that the Party is the epitome of Chineseness; that the current priority of the Party is to address inequality; and that the Party still aspires to communist ideals, polished and sundered from the turbulent politics of the Mao era.

Discursively, the use of classical concepts indicates that China’s modernisation and path through history is unique to China. The nature of this uniqueness is left unclear, but the use of a China-specific terminology is crucially supportive of the nationalist discourse and of the idea of a ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics,’ notions from which the Party derives much of its authority. This discourse signals that Western institutions, definitions, and practices cannot be imported into China because they will fail to take root in Chinese conditions.

Secondly, China’s current affluence is a notable achievement, but it must spread to all people in all walks of life, eliminating poverty by 2020. This is what is indicated by *quanmian xiaokang*, and denotes the Party’s resolve to significantly reduce the inequality that has increasingly plagued the country in recent decades.

Finally, *xiaokang* reveals the position of China on the route to the utopia of *datong*. *Xiaokang* is an imperfect society, troubled by inequality, selfishness, and a lack of public spirit, but defined by a moderate prosperity in which all are adequately provided for. The theoretically identifying feature of *xiaokang*, however, is its penultimate nature and subordination to *datong*, revealing the communist utopia as the ideal still animating Party leadership.

English-language readers of Xi Jinping’s speech at the Nineteenth Party Congress may have been confused by his repeated emphasis on a ‘moderately prosperous society,’ but for Chinese speakers the concept conveyed fundamental messages about the Party’s role and authority in the twenty-first century.

This text is taken from *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/ACC.2019.09



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Title:

Datong and Xiaokang

Date:

2019-06-25

Citation:

Smith, C. (2019). Datong and Xiaokang. Sorace, C (Ed.). Franceschini, I (Ed.). Loubere, N (Ed.). *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, (1), pp.63-67. ANU Press.

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