

FAREWELL TO LIBERAL IDEAS? CHINA'S INTELLECTUAL SHIFTS, 2001–2023

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Shifts in intellectual culture offer key insights into China's political future. Since the May Fourth Movement of 1919, a student-led call for science, democracy and national renewal, intellectuals have shaped China's reform agendas and political imagination. New evidence from two decades of book sales at a leading academic bookstore shows a clear trend: liberal discourse, once dominant in the 1980s and 1990s, has steadily declined. The liberal enthusiasm that once linked China's future to Western-style democracy is fading. In its place, interest in Marxism, feminism and practical social issues is rising. Attention to Western history and culture remains steady, but the retreat from liberalism suggests that democratic change, if it comes, may take non-liberal forms. This shift in elite thinking signals that China's future trajectory will be shaped by alternative frameworks, making it more complex and less predictable than what many Western observers once assumed.

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French:

ADIEU AUX IDEES LIBERALES? LES EVOLUTIONS INTELLECTUELLES EN CHINE, 2001–2023

Les évolutions de la culture intellectuelle offrent des clés essentielles pour comprendre l'avenir politique de la Chine. Depuis le Mouvement du 4 Mai de 1919, lancé par des étudiants en faveur de la science, de la démocratie et du renouveau national, les intellectuels ont façonné les programmes de réforme et l'imaginaire politique de la Chine. De nouvelles données, issues de deux décennies de ventes dans une grande librairie universitaire, révèlent une tendance nette : le discours libéral, dominant dans les années 1980 et 1990, a décliné de manière constante. L'enthousiasme libéral qui associait autrefois l'avenir de la Chine à une démocratie à l'occidentale s'estompe. À la place, l'intérêt pour le marxisme, le féminisme et les questions sociales concrètes progresse. L'attention portée à l'histoire et à la culture occidentales demeure stable, mais le recul du libéralisme laisse entendre que, si changement démocratique il y a, celui-ci pourrait prendre des formes non libérales. Cette inflexion de la pensée des élites indique que la trajectoire future de la Chine sera façonnée par des cadres alternatifs, la rendant plus complexe et moins prévisible que ce que beaucoup d'observateurs occidentaux supposaient auparavant.

Spanish:

¿ADIÓS A LAS IDEAS LIBERALES? LOS GIROS INTELECTUALES DE CHINA, 2001–2023

Los cambios en la cultura intelectual ofrecen claves fundamentales sobre el futuro político de China. Desde el Movimiento del Cuatro de Mayo de 1919, un llamamiento estudiantil a la ciencia, la democracia y la renovación nacional, los intelectuales han moldeado las agendas de reforma del país y su imaginación política. Nuevas evidencias, procedentes de dos décadas de ventas en una librería académica de referencia, muestran una tendencia clara: el discurso liberal, antaño dominante en las décadas de 1980 y 1990, ha disminuido de forma sostenida. El entusiasmo liberal que en otro tiempo vinculaba el futuro de China con la democracia de corte occidental se está desvaneciendo. En su lugar, crece el interés por el marxismo, el feminismo y las cuestiones sociales prácticas. El interés por la historia y la cultura occidentales se mantiene estable, pero el retroceso del liberalismo sugiere que un eventual cambio democrático, de producirse, podría adoptar formas no liberales. Este giro en el pensamiento de las élites indica que la trayectoria futura de China estará marcada por marcos alternativos, volviéndola más compleja y menos predecible de lo que muchos observadores occidentales suponían en el pasado.

Executive Summary

1. Chinese intellectuals have been instrumental in driving social and ideological change since the May Fourth Movement. As such, understanding their shifting values is essential for anticipating China's future cultural and political directions.
2. Monthly sales rankings of one of China's most influential academic bookstores provide insight into the evolving cultural values of the country's intellectual elites from 2001 to 2023.
3. The most striking finding is a pronounced decline of liberal discourse, as terms related to liberalism and freedom have steadily diminished in prominence, in sharp contrast to the widespread embrace of such ideas by Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s.
4. This decline stems from multiple factors: diminishing official tolerance for liberal ideas, rising nationalism and state-centrism, disillusionment with market reforms, and the ascendancy of alternative ideologies such as Marxism and feminism.
5. Interest in Marxist themes has moderately increased since the early 2010s, while feminist discourse has gained visibility since 2017.
6. Books addressing economic development, education, social stratification and technology make up a considerable portion of the rankings, with their prevalence rising notably since the mid-2010s.
7. Despite ideological shifts, sustained interest in Western history and culture shows that China's intellectual elites remain globally attentive.
8. The decline of liberal discourse suggests waning appetite among elites for Western-style democratic ideals, carrying significant implications for the future of political reform and democratic transition in China.

9. The rise of Marxist, feminist and practical issue-oriented discourses indicates that China's intellectual elites remain actively engaged in critical reflection and in exploring alternative frameworks for analysing social and political changes.