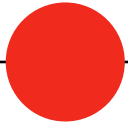
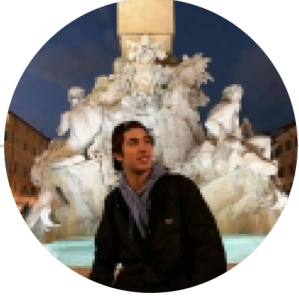


# **The Futurists of Beijing: Alvin Toffler, Zhao Ziyang and China's "New Technological Revolution", 1979-1991**

Julian Gewirtz





# Hello Everybody!

*I am **Domenico Tranquilli***

Third Year Global Governance Student, Political Science



## Key Points

### Historical context:

- Post-Mao era (1979-1991)
- China's going through an economic transformation shaped by S&T policy during the 1980s

### Sources:

Previously unstudied materials:

- Toffler's personal papers
- Internal Chinese sources
  - 500 leaked documents regarding Zhao



## Article's Claims:

---

1. **Toffler's ideas**: the importance of the “actionable futurism”
2. **863 Programme**: reassessing Zhao's central role
3. **China's conception of future**:  
*“crossing the river by feeling for the stones”*



## Bringing Toffler to China

- ◎ Who's Alvin Toffler?
  - sociologist & self-defined futurologist
- ◎ Chinese Scholars and officials engaging in substantive debates:
  - question on socialism, Marxism, and economic engagement...
  - ... but also trying to understand useful or stimulating foreign ideas
- ◎ Dong Leshan (CASS Institute of American Studies) brought Toffler's ideas back in China

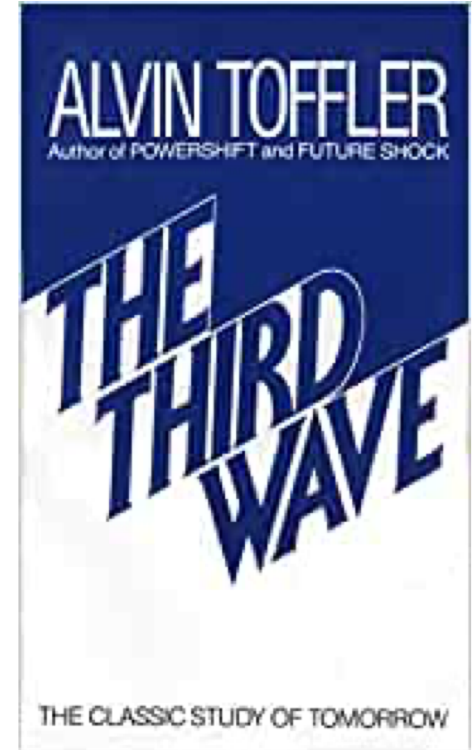




## The Third Wave

Theory of “waves” of change:

1. **First wave**: farming and agriculture (i.e. China)
2. **Second wave**: Industrial revolution
3. **Third wave**: “emerging civilization”





## Responding to the “New Technological Revolution”

- March 1983: Chinese language edition of The Third Wave for “internal” circulation only:
  - non-Marxist three waves theory
  - partial censorship of most critical references to Marxism
- Book circulating among political and intellectual elites:
  - huge discussion of Toffler’s ideas...
  - ... leading to the spread of futurist concepts (debates, symposiums)
- Huan Xiang ( diplomat, State Council official, Zhao’s advisor): Industries permitting China’s long term future goals:
  - labor-intensive
  - capital intensive
  - knowledge/technology intensive

**Toffler’s Three Waves!!!**





## Responding to the “New Technological Revolution”

- ◎ Zhao realised that Toffler’s ideas could address China’s challenges:
  - a. using S&T to facilitate economic development
  - b. connection of domestic initiatives to international trends
  - c. resolve uncertainties about post-Mao era:
    - focus on facilitating high-technology development
  - d. S&T experts and bureaucrats provide political support for wider questions of
  - e. China’s low level of industrial development wouldn’t preclude from the possibility to advance into Information Era (skipping the Second Wave)

**For Zhao, either China would narrow its technological and economic gap, or it would be left even further behind!!!**





## **Catching “Third Wave Fever”, 1983-1984**

14th February 1984: CCP’s conservatives criticising Toffler:

1. seriousness in considering Toffler’s ideas
2. Toffler’s ideas not just used for reference values, but to influence policy outcomes
3. Zhao’s conception of the future branching out from Marxist ideology

**Result:**

- ⊙ temporal ban of The Third Wave
- ⊙ reassessment of public statements: Ma Hong



## Catching “Third Wave Fever”, 1983-1984

- ... However, Ma Hong and Zhao continued to work on Toffler-influenced policies, spreading furtherly futurist ideas:
  - discussion on key new technologies ( e.g. microelectronics and bioengineering)
  - how to “skip” developmental stages
- Prohibition of *The Third Wave* became more relaxed
- 15th May 1984: **reaffirmation of futurist ideas, after difficult months**
- Zhao created the DRC (Economic, Technological and Social Development Research Center), englobing:
  - Economic Research Centre
  - TERC
  - Price Research Centre



## Creating the 863 Program, 1986

- 863 Program: proposed to Deng Xiaoping on 3rd March 1986
- Conventional narrative:
  - erasing Zhao's enormous role
  - overlook the rich S&T debates
- 863 Program:
  - characteristics:
    - Still-embryonic, long range ideas about the future
    - Promote China's high tech development
    - Promotion of domestic innovation and study of foreign technologies
  - Goals:
    - numerous and diffuse
    - more "horizontal" organization
    - longer time frame





## The End of Zhao Era

1989: After 3rd of June, **Zhao's Agenda fell apart:**

- ◎ Zhao removed from his position after refusing to implement martial law
- ◎ Under house arrest until his death on 16th January
- ◎ Completely erased from official accounts





## Author's Conclusion

---

- ◎ Zhao's agenda still influences persistently CCP, despite his erasure from official records
- ◎ Conception of the future being relevant for the exercise of political power
- ◎ Modernization in China played on the terrain of Zhao's actionable futurism
- ◎ Not a whole rejection of capitalist modernization, rather a hybrid model serving country's interest.



## Final Thoughts

- ◎ **Positive features:**
  - clear language, immersion during the reading phase
  - numerous examples supporting his arguments (speeches, letters)
  - use of unique primary resources
  - reiteration of concepts throughout the text, to sustain the thesis
- ◎ **Features to reconsider:**
  - deepening on influence of other futurists
  - wished for a dedicated paragraph for detailed comparison with Mao
  - sometimes too frequent reiteration of concepts

I overall appreciate how the author covered skilfully all of his arguments, taking into consideration multiple stances and making the reader understand the framework in which these policies were being produced.

***Thank you for  
the attention!***



“

