

## CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON CAPITALIST CHINA: Notes from the China Lectures

*Dedicated to all those killed by COVID-19 and its murderous accomplice, the capitalist states of the world (in all their various guises).*

On Saturday, July 14, 2018, I arrived in China, in Xi'an in Shaanxi Province. It was a two-hour flight from Beijing. The flight from Chicago to Beijing was thirteen hours. I had never before been to China, and at home in the United States, I am not a China scholar.

The basic idea for this essay follows that of Audre Lorde's "Notes from a Trip to Russia," which was comprised of edited journal entries from her two-week visit to Russia in 1976.<sup>1</sup> Lorde visited Russia in a different century, during the time of the Cold War, and as a critic of US capitalism and its culture. I visited China in the post-Cold War twenty-first century, and also as a critic of capitalism and its culture. In the United States, it is largely held that the Soviet Union was the iconic example of communism, but that communism "still exists in China" today.<sup>2</sup>

Before saying anything else, however, it must be said that I cannot speak about China in general terms. Many reading this essay may know more about China than I do. I shall only offer some carefully considered theoretical and political reflections drawing on (a) a specific experience in Xi'an in the summer of 2018 and (b) research in the variegated currents of Marxist philosophy and scholarship on China. In this essay, I draw on both (a) and (b) to make some modest contributions to understanding the capitalism of "communist" China. I argue that the spectacle of communist China has evolved into a new contradiction of the Chinese Communist Party as the greatest harbinger of twenty-first century global capitalism so far. But I also claim that Chinese students and workers remain capable of a politics from below that is well-positioned for both a critique of Western capitalist and Chinese bureaucratic power. In addition to substantiating these discrete points *and their intersecting significance*, I hope to critically appreciate Chinese politics and culture in relation to the purportedly rival model of the United States. In that regard, I also offer an impressionistic-comparative account.

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1 Audre Lorde, "Notes from a Trip to Russia" (1976) in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007).

2 See "What Is Democratic Socialism? Whose Version Are We Talking About?" by Maggie Astor, June 12, 2019, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/12/us/politics/democratic-socialism-facts-history.html> (accessed June 13, 2019).

But in every case, we must not speak of a nation as a model. Each nation contains a history of violence and catastrophe, but never only that. Any analysis of a nation that treats it as a unified and cohesive being-in-the-world announces its failure from the start. Every nation on Earth is a complex, variegated and internally heterogeneous intergenerational construction. But this does not mean we can say nothing at all. Some things should be modeled, while others deserve ruthless criticism and condemnation. It is therefore not necessary to say nothing, but to say everything that can be said with the necessary qualifications.

I travelled to China to give two full weeks of daily lectures at Shaanxi Normal University under the course title, “Twenty-First Century Political Philosophy: New Theories, New Horizons.” I lectured on Partha Chatterjee, Martha Nussbaum, Silvia Federici, Franco Berardi, Antonio Negri, Paul Virilio, Jacques Rancière, my own research, and some other subjects and thinkers.

My host, a Chinese Political Scientist Jinhao Zhao, had attended some of my lectures at the University of Illinois while he was a visiting professor here in 2016.<sup>3</sup> Having read my work and enjoyed my lectures, Jinhao had resolved to bring me to China.

### **I. Cultural and Political Reflections on Chinese “Communism” from an Ancient City**

There is no shortage of North American political scientists and Western Marxist theorists who regard the category “culture” as more or less politically insignificant, as an immaterial or epiphenomenal accumulation of signs, language, practices, and values generated by the political-economic structure of society. That classical orientation suggests that things like art, food, language, and style are superstructural contingencies of a macrosocial and political-economic reality that would change along with a structural transformation (i.e., revolution) of politics and economy. All such “miniaturizers” of culture should visit China.

Language, food, and style are, in China, very consciously part of a political assertion of national identity, and convey a conscious resistance to commercial Western culture. It is critical to note that Anglophone assumptions and Western capitalist interests swirl around China looking for points of entry and conquest. We can think of this as a kind of encroachment of Western capital, which is visible throughout China and understood as such by the people. Just for example, in Xi’an, Kentucky Fried Chicken (more commonly known as KFC) is a US export modified with local spices to appeal to culinary tastes in Xi’an. People in China know that KFC is not Chinese, and the Xi’an KFC was surrounded by bustling indigenous fare that appeared to shrink the corporate

<sup>3</sup> I have changed the name of my host to avoid associating him with this essay.

export into what looked like a precarious experiment in business. Surrounding businesses like KFC and Starbucks are more prominent communist party flags, portraits of Mao, hammers and sickles, and Chinese food and traditional attire. Seeing so much communist iconography adjacent to Starbucks made me wonder if culture may be a space in which Chinese people assert a kind of “communist” sensibility against the increasing marketization of life. Is it possible for a communist sensibility, or a communist aesthetic, to lay on top of a capitalist base? In Western Europe, the United States, and in places like Singapore and Japan, there is no mainstream and highly visible aesthetic juxtaposition to the capitalism of society and life, because the brazen capitalism of those places is open and accepted without the circulation of popular anti-capitalist discourses. But this is not so in China, where it is common to think about national identity as variously communist or Marxist in both explicit and public ways.

But let us be clear: China is a capitalist country. Increasing integration into global capitalism since the 1970s, accelerated vastly in the 1990s, has made China—and specifically Chinese production and consumption—into one of the most indispensable capitalist powers on Earth. While many commodities remain inexpensive in China, and many services and institutions remain free and open to the public, capital governs China more than China governs capital, and this has been true for a long time. Subsequently, life in China is organized—to a large extent—by the logic of capital. A reliable indication of capitalist rule can be seen wherever daily life, work, and opportunities to do what one desires are decisively governed by money. Governments that call themselves communist have long been contradictions in terms, and governments that call other governments “communist” tend only to do so when the term can be used to vilify. This was the case in Russia and Romania and Hungary and elsewhere during the twentieth century, and remains true in China in the twenty-first century, over thirty years after the Cold War’s end.

Autonomist Marxists, left communists, Marxist-humanists, and others who read Marx carefully know that “communist government” is a nonsensical term. The major countries that declared themselves communist were state capitalist bureaucracies, and in fact that remains the best frame within which to characterize China today (although not totally or categorically). The United States government and much of its media and people like to refer to China as communist for the same reasons its conservative and liberal mainstream like to call Bernie Sanders or Venezuela “socialist.” There is, perhaps more reliably in the United States than in any other country, an enduring reality from decades of Cold War propaganda: namely, one can still win political arguments by convincing enough people that one’s enemy is a communist. And since the economic crises of 2008 have shaken the confidence of people in capitalism (including many capitalists), there has been a resurgent new wave of communist vilification.

So it is that China, a major and dominant capitalist power, is still regularly denounced as communist by its detractors, while internally, ongoing identification with communism is seen to be a distinguishing virtue. The different signification of communism inside and outside of China allows for both an internal and external assertion of China as communist, but assertions do not constitute reality. In fact, even long before China's opening up in the late 1970s to an accelerated integration in global markets, even during its most fervently communist identification, we could have spoken of capitalist China.

Raya Dunayevskaya frequently wrote about China in the four decades from the 1950s to the 1980s. In 1957, Dunayevskaya wrote:

The Chinese Communist regime is a state-capitalist society. It was born out of the revolution against the corrupt feudal-capitalistic society under Chiang Kai-shek. There is no doubt that when Chiang and his Guomindang regime were overthrown, a much wider base was created for the new state-capitalist regime. Chinese capitalism was finally stripped of its feudal trappings and its corrupt warlords. Honest or otherwise, however, state-capitalism is an exploitative society.<sup>4</sup>

This is an important and accurate observation which remains necessary for understanding present-day China. Chiang and his Guomindang regime had to be overthrown, but this was mainly a transition from one form of capitalism to another form of capitalism, and we know this because Chinese production and consumption were still governed by a capitalist profit-logic throughout the transition, and for that reason remained (and still remain) exploitative of the impoverished workers of the country.

Aside from the retention of a capitalist organization of life and labor, Chinese so-called communism attempted to fuse nationalism with Marxism, which constitutes a fundamental and direct rejection of Marx's consistent and committed internationalism. Marx was unwavering in his insistence that nationalism and patriotism pervert and undermine the activity and possibility of communism in the world. But because of nationalism and patriotism in China, people came to see the state-ownership of the means of production as the peoples' ownership, which it never was in fact. This is one of the dangerous outcomes of over-identification with the state. According to Dunayevskaya: "*That is to say, Communism tries to keep the theory of liberation known as Marxism imprisoned in its own perverse philosophy that State property equals socialism.*"<sup>5</sup> I observed that nationalism remains remarkably pervasive in China, and that the people who adopt a staunchly nationalist point of view do not—in general at least—perceive their nationalism as a contradiction with communism. Mao had much to do with this impossible fusion, because he sought to imbue Chinese nationalism with Marxism in a new

<sup>4</sup> Raya Dunayevskaya, *Russia: From Proletarian Revolution to State-Capitalist Counter-Revolution*, edited by Eugene Gogol and Franklin Dmitryev (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 354-355.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

synthesis, a move that Marx would have opposed and warned against. Though another and more significant cause of Chinese nationalism is the country's historical experience with colonization (discussed more fully below),

Dunayevskaya noted "that in Mao's China, the state, *and not the people*, rules over production, in agriculture as in industry."<sup>6</sup> This is what some call an administered economy, but we should call it state-capitalism when the purposes of production, consumption, import, export, and the whole of agriculture and industry are carried out for profits derived from surplus labor. Today, Xi Jinping is totally open about the capitalist power of China. Nothing is hidden or concealed on that front, although strangely, a discourse of Chinese socialism, communism, and Marxism continue less as a way of specifying a political or economic philosophy, and more as a way to distinguish and tout the country's collectivism and purported equality as virtues preferred to individualism and personal freedom.

But Dunayevskaya's insights about state-capitalism in China, perhaps surprisingly, were also confirmed by Mao himself. In 1953, Mao wrote:

The present-day capitalist economy in China is a capitalist economy which for the most part is under the control of the People's Government and which is linked with the state-owned socialist economy in various forms and supervised by the workers. It is not an ordinary but a particular kind of capitalist economy, namely, a state-capitalist economy of a new type. It exists not chiefly to make profits for the capitalists but to meet the needs of the people and the state. True, a share of the profits produced by the workers goes to the capitalists, but that is only a small part, about one quarter, of the total. The remaining three quarters are produced for the workers (in the form of the welfare fund), for the state (in the form of income tax) and for expanding productive capacity (a small part of which produces profits for the capitalists). Therefore, this state-capitalist economy of a new type takes on a socialist character to a very great extent and benefits the workers and the state.<sup>7</sup>

Mao did not deny that post-revolutionary China was capitalist, but he claimed it was a capitalism under the control of the People's Government. Naming one's government "the People's Government" is simply a way to say that the economy is being governed for all of the people, even if not *by* the people. This is an attempt to make a simple endorsement, much like naming the United States a democracy even when the *demos* governs nothing.

What does Mao mean when he says that the economy is supervised by the workers? How can a whole people supervise an economy in a nation like China through a government they have no part in? This is the same ideological non-

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>7</sup> Mao Tse-tung, "On State Capitalism" from a document of the *National Conference on Financial and Economic Work* (1953), [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5\\_30.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_30.htm) (accessed June 12, 2019).

sense spoken by all heads of state, but at least Mao was more honest than most of his detractors in the West. Mao at least admits that his China is “a particular kind of capitalist economy” called “state-capitalism,” which maintains its connection to Marxism in one way only. According to Mao, the capitalist economy is not governed by a profit logic, but to satisfy everyone’s needs. If this is true, why call it capitalist at all? What is capitalism without its profit logic? Especially since, in the next breath, Mao confesses that a small part of the profits go to the capitalists. What Mao means to say in 1953 is quite simple; it is that the capitalists are regulated by a government with a socialist sensibility.

This is state-capitalism according to both Mao and to Dunayevskaya. However, Dunayevskaya grasps the fact that capitalism is antithetical to communism and to Marxism, whereas Mao does not. This remains crucial to understandings today because so many people are yet again mistaking any and all statist regulation of capital as communist, socialist or Marxist. But today, such imprecators are right-wing reactionaries or neoliberal capitalists.

In the summer of 2018, the major news in China was the reaction against Donald Trump’s “trade war” hostility directed at China’s position in the global market. One of the most peculiar features of this coverage was that China was presented as defending the free market while Trump’s posturing against Chinese business was presented as undue government blockage to the free flow of capital. It was stunning to see that so-called “communist China” was frustrated by the insufficient commitment to capitalism of Donald Trump, a casino and resort businessman. Chinese officials and the Chinese business community were on Chinese television almost every day arguing for greater freedom of capital in the global capitalist market. In a twist, then, “communist” China appeared to be more committed to capitalism than the United States.

One of the most important China scholars working today, Kellee S. Tsai, has shown that China has become more and more capitalist while becoming less and less democratic. Her book, *Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China*, gives the lie to the deception that capitalism generates democracy. China may be the best example of the fact that capitalism is not causally related to democracy, and if anything, undermines democracy more than it democratizes society. Tsai writes about adaptive informal institutions, by which she means all of the private businesses and active conduits of capital that evade, dodge, and effectively betray the socialistic character presented by China’s formal institutions of government. “Although most observers focus on the formal institutions governing China’s political economy, the emergence of adaptive informal institutions represents a significant part of the story about how capitalists could thrive in an authoritarian regime that claims to adhere to a socialist ideology.”<sup>8</sup>

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8 Kellee S. Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 42-43.

Economically, China may end up having a good run of influence and control over global capital. BRICS (the association of the five national economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) appears as a strong union, and the red carpet (literally) was being rolled out everywhere in 2018 throughout Africa and the Middle East for Xi Jinping. Jinping is the head of state with whom the political and business classes in BRICS regions most desperately want to make a deal in the interest of their own prosperity. In the summer of 2018, more and more countries seemed to be lining up to cooperate with China, not only motivated by their economic interests, but also symbolically, in order to take sides against Trump's discourse of American chauvinism.

Indeed, when one takes a close look at commercial centers in China, coupled with the global sway of Chinese capital, the thinness of the socialist presentation of the country's formal institutions appears only convincing to those who have committed themselves ideologically to insisting on the truth of Chinese communism no matter the reality. The productive pervasiveness of China in the West, in the form of every kind of commodity from toys to technological hardware, is just one of the major features of China's role in global capitalism. Consumption, however, is another aspect, and includes consumption of Western commodities like Starbucks, KFC, Pizza Hut, and Haagen-Dazs, all of which shared real estate in a close vicinity to a major Xi'an shopping center.

But some things trouble the present spectacle in China. On my way to class one day, I saw from the taxi a small protest. I asked the graduate assistant assigned to my class, Zhao, if she knew what the protest was about.<sup>9</sup> She told me that these were residents who had been asked to leave their homes in an apartment building that the government wanted to commandeer for public services of some kind, she didn't know what. She told me that the people did not want to leave their homes, but that they eventually agreed to do so after the government promised to pay them a sufficient compensation, which according to the protest, had never come. The protestors were demonstrating against the government's failure to make good on its promises, especially now that the people were vacating their homes but had not yet been paid any of the promised compensation.

I found the sight of the protest reassuring, despite the bad news of its making. While it is generally a good idea to take the side of protestors against any government—certainly true in this case—we in the West must be careful to not misuse such stories in order to justify a sense of our relative greatness. The fact is that there are protests against governments and government policies throughout North America and Western Europe, people are evicted regularly there too, homes are foreclosed, homeless and impoverished people can be found in every city, and without any government assistance to aid them. Any honest accounting of real problems in China cannot be exploited to make Western governments

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<sup>9</sup> I have changed the name of my graduate assistant to avoid associating her with this essay.

look better. No government should be spared fierce and ongoing protests, and protest can indeed be seen in China (but is far more prevalent in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, or contested locations like Hong Kong).

As well, it would be unfair to retort that the protests in China do not change anything because of the government. Protest demonstrations are expressions of disaffection, and very rarely do they lead to measurable major outcomes. We cannot say that protest in China is less effective than protest in other capitalist countries. Also, even where protest is generally ineffective (most everywhere), it remains a necessary substantive activity of democracy. Therefore, I am happy to see protest and, aside from the question of its efficacy, am more worried by its absence than by its presence.

But there is another side to this. Protests by impoverished workers or displaced tenants in China, no matter how ineffective, reveal that the so-called communism of China has not reached those who need communism. If communism is really communist, and not only a spectacle of communism, then it would not be targeted by the protests of the poor, evicted, and vulnerable. Real communism is opposed by the rich. In 1967, Guy Debord wrote “The Explosion Point of Ideology in China,” in which he reviewed political and social crises within China that undermined the government’s claims of a socialist reality.

The workers could not fail to realize what the Maoist perspective implied for them; as for the peasants, who saw their patches of land threatened, they proceeded in several provinces to share out the fields and equipment... Rail strikes were followed by a general strike in Shanghai (denounced, as in Budapest, as the favourite weapon of the capitalists); by strikes in the industrial conglomeration of Wuhan, in Guangzhou, in Hubei, and among metal-workers and textile-workers of Chongqing; and by attacks mounted by peasants in Sichuan and Fujian.<sup>10</sup>

Debord’s point here is that the ideological lie of socialism in China could be exploded by the uprisings of the very people who would be the active subjects of revolutionary movements. Every time the state is challenged by strikes and rebellions, rather than confessing their disproven and untrusted communism, they declare the revolts “revisionist” or counterrevolutionary “capitalist plots.” In 1967, with major crises in the bureaucratic government of China, Debord thought that the spectacle of communism in China might soon be abolished. While he was right about the communist spectacle, he was wrong about its explosion. To this day, the peculiar and highly ideological socialist and communist identity of China is still asserted from the inside and outside, a lie that continues on with astonishing credibility.

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<sup>10</sup> Guy Debord, “The Explosion Point of Ideology in China” (1967) in *A Sick Planet*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London, New York, and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2008), 57.

In making such an analysis, we should beware a common tendency in Western political discourse to use that analysis to make countries like the United States seem enviable by comparison. But I did not leave China with any clear sense that life is better in the United States. Politics in the United States is commonly associated with corruption, universities are privatized and increasingly defunded, and for all of our beloved freedom, our big cities are full of homelessness, racism, and poverty. This is not to say that the same things don't also exist in China. The point is that an honest consideration of China today cannot be counted on to make Chinese life and politics look worse than American life and politics.

Comparisons of a US free-market capitalist utopia to a repressive communist regime of enforced Chinese equality are utter nonsense taken seriously only by patriotic idiots whose chauvinism is shielded by ignorance. Nonetheless, there are different forms of repression in the United States and China. It is always easier to condemn the repressive aspects of other peoples' societies while ignoring the normalized-yet-repressive aspects of one's own society. This is true of American-capitalist ideology, and I think it is also true in China.

I would like to focus here on a particular repression in China. Let's consider the Museum of Education in Xi'an, one of the biggest museums in all of China and (I was told) the largest education museum in the country. Whole sections of the museum were devoted to different eras in the long history of China. When I say "long history," I mean stretching back to the Neolithic period and to the Han Dynasty. There are 55 ethnic minority groups (referred to in China as "nations"), 22 provinces, and about one and a half billion people. The Museum of Education attempts to cover all of the vast historical and cultural ground encompassed by that, and physically, the museum is massive in size. There are rooms full of the earliest money from ancient times, samples of the first writing in China, a wide array of different traditional clothes on exhibit, showcases in separate installments featuring the customs and styles of each of the distinctive nations. The museum provides thorough coverage of how education changed after the 1949 Chinese Revolution, what the classrooms and textbooks looked like before and after, how Russian became a second language in the schools, and even included an entire section comprised of many rooms devoted to the history of women in China from antiquity to the present.

In the giant wing of the museum devoted to culture, however, I was stunned to find that the Cultural Revolution was skipped over, deleted. When you get to 1966 in China, it seems that nothing particularly notable was happening. The term "Cultural Revolution" is mainly spoken in whispers in Xi'an (and certainly to a foreigner like me). I cannot say if there is a different approach in other parts of the country, but in Xi'an, students spoke with marked caution

about the Cultural Revolution after class, and even then it seemed dangerous. Zhao regularly cautioned students to say little to me about it. Cultural Revolution is indeed a forbidden subject in China, variously repressed and erased, and this fact requires some explanation here.

The Cultural Revolution, from roughly 1966 to 1976, was a sociopolitical movement variously encouraged by Mao and by Maoists as both an official and an unofficial policy of the Communist Party of China. Cultural Revolution aimed to establish and preserve communist culture and ideology in part by eradicating any capitalist or traditional and religious elements from Chinese society (more on this below).

In China today, traditional culture and the rich and multifarious heritages of Chinese people going back to the earliest records are celebrated as essential to a more cohesive national pride and self-understanding. Since the Cultural Revolution was hostile to the traditional culture that is now cherished and defended, and since it refers to a decade of hostilities and destructions throughout China, the Chinese people are not proud of it. The period of the Cultural Revolution is for many (certainly not all) Chinese today a “bad chapter,” and perhaps it is too soon (since the Cultural Revolution ran to almost 1980) for the Chinese people to focus on such a recent period of “bad government,” especially since Mao is still lionized as a great national hero. Mao is on the money, appears in statue form and hung portraits, and his ideas are widely taught throughout the country as those of one of the greatest Chinese philosophers. Many of Mao’s ideas are still so beloved and taught that it is easy to see how the Cultural Revolution threatens to besmirch ongoing currents of Maoism.

I asked my host about this, and he confessed that it was a difficult question. He said that they only teach about the Cultural Revolution lightly and quickly in the classroom, and that it is a lesson written and approved by the government. Perhaps it is something like in the United States, where it took just as long for people outside of the antiwar movement to even begin criticizing the imperial catastrophe of the Vietnam War. There are still many Americans who are reluctant and unable to speak frankly about that chapter of US history in anything but the most patriotic of apologetics. To take another example, we still have not begun to reverse the inverted understanding of the Cold War in mainstream American politics.

But these are different forms of repression. Repression in China is primarily state-instituted whereas US repression is largely (not only—i.e., mass incarceration, inequality, poverty, and other problems) a cultural and ideological phenomenon. To decide which one is worse may be like choosing between one and another cancer. There are different ways of dissuading dissent.

Things are surely different in Shanghai, Peking, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, but in Xi'an, I see no graffiti on the walls, no young people dressed in political t-shirts or wearing punk styles, and I see no visible evidence of any kind of subversive or underground culture. Perhaps I was not intended to find it, or maybe it's just very well hidden. Or maybe it has to be hidden, as some examples discussed below suggest.

Interpersonally, some interactions with the people of Xi'an stand out. In one instance, a man approached me in the street and said in fairly good English that he wanted to repair something for me. He is good with technology and fixing things, he said, and he would fix just about anything for 100 yuan. The problem, he says, is that he cannot get a job because he is considered too old. He is 40 years old. He said to me: "I went to the university and got my training. I love my country and the party. But, because I am 40, no one will hire me." I don't know what to make of this, but I didn't need anything to be fixed. I tell him that I cannot hire him, and he is kind and grateful that I paid him attention. He was pleasant to talk to. Was he homeless? He told me that he was unemployed, but in Xi'an I saw no one sleeping in the streets. I saw no homeless encampments. Are there homeless people in Xi'an? One would have to ask. It is a huge city, and in cities across America the homeless are visible on almost every corner. Even in smaller US cities like Springfield, IL, the homeless gather around the library downtown and can be seen there at any time of the year. Maybe homelessness is also in Xi'an, but it is not visible as in the United States. I also don't see or hear any music outside or on the streets.

There are so many people in Xi'an. Nearly every man and woman I saw was very thin. I felt like I was carrying around the largest body in China. I am six foot two. I am more than 200 pounds. I am not fat. I am not skinny. Children pointed at me and their parents sometimes told me that their son or daughter thinks I am tall. There is no litter on the ground. But the ground is old and broken.

Xi'an is an ancient city.

## **II. Theoretical-Political Collisions: Students and Lectures**

Most of my young Chinese students expressed pride in their collectivist sensibility. In every discussion, inside and outside of the classroom, they were keen to shun any kind of individualism; they did this often in conversation with me largely because they associate ruthless individualism with American culture. Their proudly collectivist spirit may not solve real problems of poverty or exploitation. But it does help to keep a general cultural-valuational norm in place, which is regularly and effectively leveraged in discussions about education, politics, work, and social relations.

Liu Kang refers to this cultural topography as “aesthetic Marxism.” In China, a certain conscious rejection of Marxism is counterbalanced with an aesthetic Marxism. As discussed above, the Cultural Revolution remains a sore point in China today. According to Kang: “At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the tendency to politicize culture was evident. It then escalated into a massive ‘grand cultural inquisition,’ not unlike medieval Europe’s Christian Grand Inquisition in its fervor and paranoia.”<sup>11</sup>

The Cultural Revolution was catastrophic and regrettable in most ways, even if philosophically and politically it did express a certain critical insight. Mao was right to reject the classical Marxian faith that culture would invariably come to reflect the conditions of life. Mao understood that culture would remain a battlefield regardless of transformations in political-economy. Indeed, as many Marxists since Antonio Gramsci understood well, culture can be separated from the political reality, and nowhere was this better proven than in China. Because of the historical proximity of the Cultural Revolution to the present, and current government ideology on that period of politics, the people I spoke with in China were not eager to answer my questions about this feature of repression. The Cultural Revolution was followed in the 1980’s by a period (roughly a decade) known as the Cultural Reflection, led by the idea of a necessary reversal of the Cultural Revolution, and organized as a range of coordinated efforts across China to retrieve what was destroyed. This was a period of recovering many ancient and traditional aspects and artifacts of China’s long history, and of returning them to schools, museums, and public life.

What I’d like to focus on in the Cultural Revolution is the way it centralizes the importance of culture to politics, a basic understanding that still pervades Chinese politics. Today, however, this understanding gives rise to a particular perversion, namely the total betrayal of culture and ideology in political and economic practice. For example, in China today, there is the open promotion of a totally global capitalist political economy within a culture of socialist ideology. Kang observes that most China scholars agree that

the CCP itself has substantially transformed from a revolutionary, idealist party into a power holder and corporate manager in a capitalist economy and autocratic political system. A consensus seems to prevail, though implicitly, in China today: revolution is dead and socialism only retains its name, insofar as the CCP still rules.<sup>12</sup>

While Kang agrees with most scholars on this point, he holds out some hope that China, haunted by the specter of revolution, may become revolutionary once again. I hold out a similar hope, and only disagree with the general consensus in one way.

<sup>11</sup> Liu Kang, *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 155.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

Whereas the consensus says that the CCP has “substantially transformed” into a capitalist power, I claim that this transformation is total and complete.

But that does not mean that the aesthetic Marxism of China’s cultural politics is irrelevant. I marveled with appreciation at the stunning sight of the unabashed School of Marxism at Shaanxi Normal University. The School of Marxism building, located on the new campus, was constructed in the late 1990s and 2000s, well after what we in the West often perceive as the post-Cold War extinction of communist politics. But in China, in 2018, there hung a huge poster for a recent conference dedicated to a Marxism bi-centennial event that was held earlier in the year.

I wondered how heterogeneous and critical the discussions of Marxism might be in the School of Marxism. I asked Jinhao about this, and he reported that it was very common throughout China to discuss Marxism and to do so openly and with multifarious interpretations. I did not witness this myself, but I expect that such discussions do take place in many circles throughout the country. Perhaps more interestingly, the School of Marxism at Shaanxi Normal University was a government mandate, a nation-wide mandate that establishes one or two such schools on every major national university campus in China. So, this School of Marxism was not one of a kind; Schools of Marxism throughout the country are both an expectation and a mandate.

My understanding is that this mandate is not received in China with scorn by non-Marxist or even neoclassical economists because they recognize that studying Marxism is necessary to studying their own history. The government in China today, which could scarcely be further removed from Marx’s ideas, continues to mandate Marxist schools—not from any deep and abiding philosophical agreement—but rather, out of an obligation to understand the last 200 years of Chinese political history. Non-Marxian liberal and conservative Americans may scoff at this notion, but we require civics courses and United States history curricula while banning studies of Marx, mostly informally, by way of stigmatization, persecution, and the professional punishment of Marxists in academia and politics.

Of course, even one such school on any public university in the United States would be scandalous and shocking. But the fact is that it would make just as much sense to mandate studies of Marx and Marxism in the United States too. Can one really understand US politics in the twentieth century without studying Marx? One could only understand a history of deliberate misunderstanding without studying Marx. Americans cannot understand American history without studying the transatlantic slave trade, the history of labor struggles, Black revolt, and the women’s movement, among many other struggles for and

against power. We cannot understand the Cold War without understanding Russia's side in the conflict. Understanding one's self always requires understanding the other or others from which one is distinguished.

What was it like to teach radical theory within such a school in China?

My class in China had 60 students enrolled. Not one of these students was required to take the course, so the fact that they were there indicated that they chose my lectures for reasons of interest. The classroom was very hot, as are most places in July in Xi'an. The Chinese use air conditioning sparingly, and they do not leave unoccupied rooms air conditioned. They turn on the air conditioning only when entering rooms, but with the humid summer heat it could take up to an hour to cool them. I was not accustomed to sweating constantly, and I did not like it. But with a great deal of self-consciousness, I seemed to be the only one so discomforted by the heat. In the United States, I am used to the constant cooling of buildings and rooms, including even the empty ones, but here, even the airports bake in the hot sun, so that you walk out of the plane into hot, heavy, humidity. This is part of a government mandate having to do with conserving energy, and is part of the country's environmental and economic policy. Indeed, it is probably a good idea to get more accustomed to living in heat.

One of the students in my class, during a discussion about nationalism and the colonial world, described how Japanese imperialism figures prominently in Chinese history textbooks and as a major feature in the history lessons they learn from grade school. In this way, Chinese nationalism is very much connected to the story of a country moving through a postcolonial history, getting out from being bullied, beaten, and occupied by an oppressive foreign power. Chinese nationalism thus resonates with Partha Chatterjee's analysis of distinctive non-Western nationalisms as discussed in his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (1986). Outside of Europe, Chatterjee observes, "national identity was, therefore, a form of the struggle against colonial exploitation."<sup>13</sup>To some extent, the history of Japanese imperialism is necessary to understanding why China strives to remain a dominant political-economic power in the world today, including why it wants to hold economic sway over countries that previously determined China's reality. It is understood as part of an empowering postcolonial passage.

My students frequently voiced a defense of Chinese patriotism, which they were keen to distinguish from any self-interested nationalistic chauvinism. Chinese patriotism was defended as essential in a country with long history of being abused and beaten, where strong national identity and pride seem to them critical to the recovery of the confidence necessary to mobilize any kind of collective sensibility throughout the nation.

Some of these discussions reminded me of Frantz Fanon's analysis of the in-

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<sup>13</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 8.

strumental necessity of nationalism in struggles against colonization, according to which, before you get to humanism, you need a phase of emancipatory nationalism to rise to the challenges of national liberation.<sup>14</sup> As Fanon put it, nationalism, “that magnificent song that made the people rise against their oppressors, stops short, falters, and dies away on the day that independence is proclaimed.”<sup>15</sup> This last part was surely wishful thinking on Fanon’s part, as nationalism never “dies away” easily after a political victory. Once nationalism is built up in political culture and education, it is not so easy to overcome. And it does not appear to be dying away as China rises to the top of global economic power. Here, I likewise recall Immanuel Wallerstein’s essay “Neither Patriotism Nor Cosmopolitanism,” in which he said we should never commit to one or the other categorically, but consider which one (if either) best serves liberation struggles.<sup>16</sup> Wallerstein articulated a kind of Marxist utilitarianism about such ideologies, whereby we should use whatever theory is most promising to get the emancipatory outcomes we need and seek. But China is in a different situation today than it was during Japan’s imperial rule, and it is difficult to imagine that Fanon or Wallerstein would view Chinese nationalism as emancipatory for the people of China today. Nonetheless, such thinking remains part of Chinese defenses of their own nationalism.

Other permutations of Chinese nationalism could be observed. Some students came to my lectures on subversion, revolt, and radical theory and wanted to talk about problems in China. There was an interest—certainly not unanimous—in sharing criticisms and concerns about China and its politics. However, Shaanxi Normal University—as with all top public universities in China—is lavishly funded by the government, and the government spares no expense in making sure its professors live good lives, at least in terms of financial reward, housing, and esteem. Professors are neither mobilized nor expected to bite the hand that feeds them, and my understanding is that most professors in China are treated in such a way that the motivations to bite are relatively minimal.

My colleague Jinhao has an incredible deal. He and his family are given a home on campus by the university. When applying for promotion to full professor, he is asked to design the home of his dreams and the university promises to build it for him pending the promotion. He may move into the home before his promotion, but after the promotion is approved, the home becomes his property. There are, no doubt, regulations restricting what he may do with this asset. I toured his house while it was still under construction, and could not imagine such a lavish home being given to a professor in the United States as part of a promotion package. Beyond such perks as this, politics and politicians

14 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1991). See especially the chapter “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness.”

15 *Ibid.*, 203.

16 See Immanuel Wallerstein’s short essay in Martha C. Nussbaum’s book *For Love of Country?*, edited by Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 122-124.

in Chinese culture are vested with a certain respectability and honor, on par with professors. There is what I would describe as a certain class solidarity between professors and politicians, and Jinhao had little by way of an anarchist sensibility with which to rail against the government. It seemed to me that many (not all) of the students felt the same way. This is a different aspect of Chinese nationalism.

Still, I asked about contentious politics in China every day, and was told that there are regular and fierce debates about the “best policies” on things like traffic, educational exams, pollution, etc., but that such debates are watched and listened to closely by the government. Jinhao, and perhaps a dozen of the students I spoke with, insisted that the Chinese government tries to be responsive to grievances. Part of what is happening in China is that professors and universities are paid very close attention by the government (a double-edged sword, to be sure), so that the political recommendations of scholars are seen and taken seriously by the state. The Chinese government has a staff of political-academic officials charged with reading every article published by every professor working at a major national public university. As to one edge of the sword, there is clearly a feature of surveillance and biopolitical control in this government attention to academic workers, and it is something that definitely constricts academic freedom. I do not think academic freedom is a central virtue of intellectual life in China. There is, however, another edge of the sword. Whereas in the United States, we bemoan the stupidity of a government that seems resolutely uninterested in the analyses of its scholars, China is studying the work of its scholars and is fully invested in the importance and production of their scholarship.

Some students wanted to talk to me after my lectures about what they described as low-levels of freedom in China, and in particular, the dangers of public political speech. One student told me that s/he was directed to give me a good impression of China and not to tell me about any problems in the country. Another student told me that professors are afraid to criticize China and Chinese politics because the professors could lose their jobs, be denied promotions, or worse, be thrown into jail. I could not test these claims with confidence, but even Jinhao confirmed that while he can speak freely in his classes, he cannot publish anything critical of Chinese government and politics. In terms of published writing, he says that only constructive recommendations are allowed, and since everything published is read by government officials, there have been and can be serious consequences including job loss or imprisonment. A less severe example, professors who are not members of the Chinese Communist Party cannot expect decent careers in academia, cannot work at major national universities, and/or do not get promotions. For that reason, most everyone joins the party.

To American ears, this sounds repressive, and indeed, I think that it is repression.

Nonetheless, many in China insist that Western notions of repression are misplaced in China because professors who follow the rules are actually and genuinely happy with them. Following the rules is a reliable path to personal reward and remuneration in Chinese academia, so the rules at least assure intellectuals a fruitful passage through their professional life.

But it was bizarre to be on a university campus with so little criticism directed at the head of state. Respect for president Xi Jinping seemed to me near universal within Xi'an, and his philosophy (referred to as "Xi Jinping Thought") is heralded in economic, domestic, and foreign policy. Chinese media as well expresses total satisfaction with the direction that the government is taking the country in.

Of course, China has its problems. But it did not seem to me a comparatively bad place to live, and in many ways and for many people, life is better in China than in the United States. Some readers may suggest that this only shows that the propagandistic impressions planned by my hosts were successful. But that would not account for the fact that any university professor in the United States would love to be given a house on or nearby their campus like Jinhao's, which I estimate would be a three-to-four-million-dollar property in New York City, California, or Chicago. I would also quite like to live in a society where collective concern is regarded as a virtue and inculcated as such from preschool on up. I can only imagine what it would be like to live in a society where the universities, instead of being defunded, merged, and closed down, were instead a top priority and top-tier commitment for national investment. Not to mention that the food was good, there was plenty to do—most especially for young children—and one could rather easily get to big cities like Beijing or Shanghai from most points in the vast geography. The question of "freedom" surely looks differently from the perspective of many (not all) Chinese who are living good lives, with rich social lives, a good education, good food, entertainment and public space, and rewarding family life. Of course, that experience is not everyone's in China. But from the perspective of those Chinese who are living full and fulfilling lives, Western accusations of "unfreedom" appear as the predictable ideological trope of so-called capitalist democracies.

The students at my lectures were somewhat resistant to contemporary critical theory and Marxist philosophy from the West (Western Europe and the United States), which is mostly—though not exclusively—what I was teaching. I was told time and again that students in China would be comparatively docile and agreeable. But my students defended Chinese nationalism against Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism, claiming that their colonial past requires them to assert national pride and patriotism. They also challenged criticisms of nationalist thought provided by Chatterjee, pointing out that Chinese nationalism is neither classical liberal nor deviant and racial, that Chinese nationalism eludes the categories of nationalist thought in postcolonial theory. What I

experienced was that, when students detected a potential criticism of Chinese culture and politics, they (not all of them, but several a day and reliably at each lecture) aimed to distinguish China as an exception to the analysis. Some of the students—I think rightly—observed that while Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri speak a revolutionary language, their politics are basically reformist. Some defended speed as a virtue against Paul Virilio’s dromological concerns. Others defended insecurity and precarity against Franco Berardi’s criticisms.

I don’t want to make it sound as if the students were flatly oppositional. They were not. They were critical, as they were thinking about the theories in relation to their own lives. And while many students challenged the material, there were many others who were clearly challenged by it, who found it useful to their critical understandings of themselves and their world. Some wrote me letters and notes to that effect. My favorite said: “What you are teaching is what I have never touched before.”<sup>17</sup>

In short, my Chinese students were quite like students in the United States. But, unlike Americans who know little to nothing about Chinese philosophy and politics, Chinese students read widely in multiple languages and are well-read in Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel; they have a good idea of Western thinking and they characterize it well in their comments and questions. Also unlike American students, and because of mandatory classes in Marxism, Chinese students speak freely about capitalism and dialectics and they use the word “proletariat” as if it were a common Chinese term.

Perhaps the two most interesting lectures for me to give were the ones on Jacques Rancière and on my own book, *Specters of Revolt*. I learned a lot from those discussions especially.

I used Rancière’s book *Hatred of Democracy* to introduce the arguments that democracy is not a form of government and that all governments are oligarchies. I explained how and why the word and image of “democracy” had come in the twentieth century to essentially mean “good,” despite the fact that those who most proclaim to love democracy secretly hate it (something you can observe in negative reactions whenever the *demos* actually rises up and asserts itself against oligarchic power).

With Rancière, students in China began with the assumption that Western democracy is a fraud. Some students pointed out that Trump actually lost the so-called “democratic” vote and yet won anyway, and others noted that Americans declare everything that they don’t like “antidemocratic.” These basic sensibilities are much harder to develop in US classrooms, where they are not the starting assumptions of my students. In the United States, such points

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17 Letter from a student in Xi’an, Shaanxi Normal University, July 2018.

are destinations not starting positions.

My lectures were all video recorded. Some students told me after class that they preferred to say things that were critical of the Chinese government after the camera was turned off. I asked them about this. They told me that while it was perfectly safe for a foreigner like me to say whatever I pleased, professors and students often got into trouble for speaking critically of Chinese politics. In the safe space of “off-the-record” conversation, some students told me that they wished they had term limits, as in the United States, and that they wished there was not such an unshakeable one-party rule in China. Others stressed that Chinese politics is highly collaborative with minority parties throughout the country, and that they have a less competitive and a more cooperative national politics than in the United States. For example, some students told me about annual meetings with citizens and civil society organizations and active and ongoing government solicitation of critical perspectives for them to learn from.

I pointed out that, even though we do have term limits in the United States, the fluctuations between Republican and Democratic Party administrations are not radically different in terms of substance and commitment. I explained that the small differences do matter to real people in the real world, so we do have to pay attention to our elections, but that the changes from one party in power to another do not necessarily make for more drastic changes in policy and practice than China would see over the same period of Communist Party rule. In other words, while I’m opposed to one-party rule, I am not convinced that our two-party system promises more and greater political change or reform than they would see under a one-party system. This idea fascinated them. They had gotten the message from or about the United States that our political debates are so wildly divergent that the victors can and do take the country down totally different paths. I admitted that Trump was perhaps closer to doing that than previous presidential administrations in recent decades, but that things have been largely status quo in between international outrages over important issues like immigration, healthcare, and environmental policy.

At the same time, they understood that the major Western “democracies” are full of corruption and money-politics, they know about US bullying in the global economy, and even about the common American distrust of politicians. So, Rancière ended up not as surprising as to US students who have only ever thought of American democracy as a really existing phenomenon. Conversations surrounding democracy and its contradictions were utterly fascinating. Most of my Chinese students began with deep suspicion of democracy. Others, with a more glowing idea of the United States, held that American freedom was the real virtue, not democracy: “Yes,” several students said, “you don’t have democracy and you have many problems, but at least you have freedom.” Off-camera, students returned time and again to the idea that China does not have freedom, whereas the United

States, in their opinion, does.

I conceded that the United States government seems less interested in what professors and students say and think, but questioned their idea of our freedom. There is repression in both countries, but it is carried out in different ways. The Chinese government has its hands in everything. In the United States, there is instead a certain formalization of informal biases. This means that people are watching for and reporting on scandals and transgressions to the point where the repressive apparatus is diffusely integrated throughout the social body. We have seen so many professors getting in trouble for Twitter tweets, comments spoken on radio interviews, and offensive utterances dug up by white nationalist militias across the country. We have seen right-wing activists team up informally but effectively with people like Tucker Carlson in order to formalize punishment in terms of harassment, threats of violence, job loss, etc., which has recently been aimed at antifascist activists and others.<sup>18</sup> While professors do not need to be in the Republican or Democratic Party in order to get promotions in the United States, they still have to watch what they say.<sup>19</sup> And, even where we do have great freedoms, we often don't make use of them. We have many formal freedoms that we do not exercise, and in the case of tenured university professors, many are terrified of touching any controversy, even though they are "free" to do so.

My own theory of revolt was surprisingly resonant in China because many Chinese students both (1) learned about the importance of revolt in their own national history and (2) see the Chinese government as a government of control and surveillance (i.e., as a government that is worried about revolt). For reasons (1) and (2), I suggested that Chinese society is haunted by the specter of revolt.

Yet, Chinese students expressed concern about the specter of revolt in China today, simultaneously confessing its presence and denouncing its materialization. Some simply thought that revolt would be ineffective or destabilizing, whereas others would only sing the praises of party and state. My impression was that such praises were sincere.

Many of my students in Xi'an view the Chinese Communist Party and Xi Jinping as responsible for a high level of social and political stability, growing prosperity since the late 1970s, and much opportunity both domestically and globally. Many (if not most) view Jinping and the Communist Party as looking out for the whole of the people, notwithstanding mistakes. One student told me

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the case of Yvette Felarca, <https://www.berkeleyinsider.com/2019/04/10/berkeley-teacher-yvette-felarca-ordered-to-pay-conservative-group-20000> (accessed June 12, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Here, consider the cases of George Ciccariello-Maher, Steven Salaita, Johnny Eric Williams, and Norman Finkelstein, for just some examples from a much longer list: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Professors-Growing-Risk-/240424> (accessed June 12, 2019).

that we should not expect to see revolt in China because people do not rise up when things are good enough to the point that they have their basic needs met.

Nonetheless, the government does worry about uprisings, and seeks to exert a certain discursive control throughout society.

For example, there was a scandal in late July 2018 about a government-owned drug company that knowingly cut corners in the manufacture of a rabies vaccine for children. It was all over Chinese Global Television Network (CGTN) for days. But the main line in the story was that the government was going to punish all those responsible. One student told me that this was the government's typical line aimed to keep people from directing their outrage at the state, who should have perhaps regulated this company better in the first place (and especially since this was not the company's first time in trouble).

Students also told me on numerous occasions that WeChat, the social media app most widely used throughout all of Asia (far more than Facebook, which did not work well in China), is under constant surveillance by the state. The WeChat app is very good, and everyone in China uses it because it not only provides free phone and video calls, but also because it serves as a digital wallet. Many stores in Xi'an, for example, did not accept credit cards and only took payment through WeChat. The app has an excellent translate function from Chinese to English, which nearly everyone used to communicate with me; it was fast and reliable, with no advertisements, no fees, and no bugs or functionality issues working seamlessly from one side of the globe to the other. But many of the students who "friended" me on WeChat did not have their pictures there. I asked them why they did not use their pictures on WeChat, which would have made it easier for me to know who I was talking to. "WeChat is under surveillance, and anything you say or do there is watched by the government," I was told time and again. One student took a picture with me, but she was travelling home to a different province later in the week and she wanted the picture off of her phone because she was sure they would not allow her to travel back into her province if they saw a picture of her with a foreigner. It would have to be explained to the authorities. Therefore, she sent the photo to a friend staying in Shaanxi province, and asked her friend to send it when she arrived at her destination. This was part of what students meant by a lack of freedom.

During my lecture on revolt, I asked the students why they thought the Chinese government was so concerned about what people said, published, posted online, etc., if the government was not concerned about becoming the target of disaffection. Everyone agreed that the fear of revolt governs much of what the government does.

This could be seen in many examples, but recently in programs like China's

social credit system, announced in 2014 and already well underway. The social credit system is to be fully implemented nationwide by 2020, and was already being carried out during the time of my visit by staffs of neighborhood behavior monitors who report and publicly post points earned and lost within the community. “Like private credit scores, a person’s social score can move up and down depending on their behavior. The exact methodology is a secret — but examples of infractions include bad driving, smoking in non-smoking zones, buying too many video games and posting fake news online.”<sup>20</sup> Some people have had their ability to travel restricted as a result of poor scores.

We mustn’t forget, however, that China has seen major revolution in 1911 and in 1946-1950, which radically transformed the country, firstly from Imperial to Republican rule, and secondly, to one of the last nationwide “communist” experiments of the twentieth century. The Chinese Communist Revolution happened long after the Russian Revolution, and just after the Second World War, so the historical proximity of Chinese people to life-altering revolt is near. Revolt and revolution are also major parts of the historical education of Chinese students and something that they proudly claim in present political culture. Though again, the Cultural Revolution is the glaring exception, which the Chinese I spoke with wanted to avoid speaking about (at least with me).

Ultimately, I cannot know what was kept from me. That fact constantly reminded me of James C. Scott’s theory of hidden transcripts. A foreigner such as myself should not expect to be given access to “the privileged site for nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident, subversive discourse.”<sup>21</sup> So in addition to temporal, geographic, and linguistic limitations to my knowledge, there are also those pertaining to ideology and political discourse.

### III. Conclusion: Tiny Little Weapons

It was a happy discovery to see the resonance and electricity of my theory of revolt in China. I suggested to the students that all “societies of control” or “control societies” (as Bernard Stiegler calls them)—of which China is most certainly one—are haunted by specters of revolt that will materialize at various points in the twenty-first century.<sup>22</sup> We had already seen major global revolts in the decade of 2008-2018 around the world, from Greece to Spain to the

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20 See Alexandra Ma’s October 29, 2018 article in *Business Insider*, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-social-credit-system-punishments-and-rewards-explained-2018-4> (accessed June 12, 2019).

21 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 25.

22 See Bernard Stiegler, *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 2*, translated by Daniel Ross (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013)

Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, Nuit Debout, and Gilet Jaunes in France. I concluded my summer seminar by suggesting to these young people that they should be prepared to understand the next revolts in China with sympathy and attention. I suggested that reading theory could help prepare them for participation in the next revolts, wherever such participation makes sense politically, morally, economically, etc.

It is hard to say as a grateful guest, but I think it is also necessary: The Chinese people are being taken for a global capitalist roller-coaster ride, and while right now that ride comes with some thrill and excitement, and with the hope that often attends promises of prosperity and personal wealth and well-being, capital is a fatal logic to follow.

There is much in the cultural orientations of China that derives from non-capitalist sources: first, there is ancient China and its traditions; second, are basic sensibilities of socialism and communism. The latter remains a kind of beating heart in the cultural politics and general ethos (*Sittlichkeit*) of the Chinese people and can even be seen in the political rhetoric of the Chinese state. Among the young students I spent my time with, they repeatedly touted Chinese emphases on equality, collectivism, and social harmony as proud distinguishing features that set them apart from Westerners. They wanted me to see this in their country and repeatedly asked me if I did. I did find evidence of this sensibility, including in the way they regarded one another and welcomed me.

I would say that the Chinese people possess a real and conscious communist sensibility, but by no means a communist reality. I witnessed something like a socialist culture encircled and grounded by and in a capitalist political-economy. This is perhaps the strange permutation and legacy of Maoism into the present. But China's capitalist commitments have only deepened since Mao's death, with Jinping traveling the world in July 2018 arguing in no uncertain terms for the necessity of a totally free capitalist world order, a world where it would be immoral for countries to wage trade wars or punish capital with rules and regulations. The strangeness of hearing this argument from Jinping is evident to anyone who knows well or has lived through the Cold War—here is a communist party fully committed to the totality of global capitalism. The most profound oddity was that Jinping was arguing for an unbounded capitalism against the rival vision of Donald Trump's United States.

If capitalist power is actively disfiguring of social relations and if it is destructive of the natural environment and exploitative (extractive) of human life, a socialist *culture* with communist sensibilities cannot hold up against it. Commitments to privatization, growth, and accumulation cannot remain merely economic commitments, for they inevitably shape the commitments of the people whose lives are necessarily impacted and molded by such values and trajectories. Materialism is

an imperfect and problematic philosophy, but it contains much truth. Signs of individuation in cultural life (particularly through social media and technology) are present, though students in Xi'an seemed aware of this and expressed wanting to resist it. They seem to simultaneously take pride in socialism with Chinese characteristics and to fully endorse Jinping's restructuring of the communist party into an unequivocal capitalist power.

My students in Xi'an enjoyed reading and discussing critical theory and Marxian philosophy, and they wanted to reconcile it with the Chinese reality. I wanted to see them do this as well, to see what possible uses they might make of the theories. I sensed from beginning to end a certain dangerous excitement, a more or less concealed appetite for some criticism of power in China. It was impossible, however, to separate this critical interest from an otherwise unshakeable patriotic nationalism. Perhaps matters are less muddled in the hidden transcript I cannot see, or perhaps things that are not muddled only appear so to an alien perspective. In any case, I don't think that I've ever felt such a sense of the subversive power of a lecture as I did at Shaanxi Normal University. I teach the same material in the United States, and students here know that it is subversive when they read and discuss it. But such theorizing is somewhat safe in the United States. Students in the United States are essentially unworried by the fact that what they are reading is subversive and they jump straight to analyzing, criticizing, or applying the arguments.

What is different in China is that without a foreign visitor like me, most of the things that I said would not be heard in classrooms on the mainland. Criticizing government in the United States is almost everyone's favorite pastime, but in China, it comes with some fear and trembling. I often felt that our sessions were on the line of acceptability, and that my hosts were restrained by an obligation to impress me.

It is important to emphasize that while the official position of the Chinese Communist Party is to claim itself as Marxist, those same "Marxist" officials have been worried about the growing popularity of Marxism amongst Chinese students. *The Economist* recently reported (2018) that Marxist student clubs in Beijing and Nanjing are struggling for institutional support and being shut down.<sup>23</sup> "Last November Zhang Yunfun, a 20-something former member of Peking University's club, was arrested during a Marxist study session he had organized at a university in the southern city of Guangzhou. He was given a six-month jail sentence for disturbing public order. The country's rulers tremble at the thought of a Marxist revival."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See "A spectre is haunting China: Officials in Beijing worry about Marx-loving students," September 27, 2018, *The Economist*, <https://amp.economist.com/china/2018/09/29/officials-in-beijing-worry-about-marx-loving-students> (accessed June 12, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Even more recently, CNN reported that young Marxists are going missing in China. According to a student at Peking University, “The whole of Peking University is like under the white terror now, (the security guards) will come after you even if you were just at the scene where the student activists were distributing leaflets.”<sup>25</sup> Today’s young Marxists in China are “calling for greater workers’ rights” and they have “become a growing problem for the Chinese government in recent years.”<sup>26</sup>

It is interesting to see that the origins of these disputes are anchored to workers’ struggles. In southern China, in June 2018 (just before my visit), a group of workers attempted to form an independent union, a request that was prohibited by the government. This led to protest demonstrations that gained nationwide visibility. Around the same time of my visit, in late July 2018, “a group of left-wing students, proclaiming themselves Maoists, traveled from around the country to join in the protests, drawing national attention.”<sup>27</sup>

Protest demonstrations and social upheaval are more common and contentious in places like Hong Kong, which while remaining a special region of China, maintains a separate political apparatus and identity than that of mainland China. Hong Kong was under British colonial rule from about 1841 until 1997. It was ceded back to China on the agreed-upon premise of one country, two systems. The majority of people in Hong Kong are proud of the region’s relative autonomy from China and are keen to defend that autonomy from mainland encroachments. Most living in Hong Kong identify as “Hong-kongers,” not primarily as Chinese, and thus, criticism, anger, and resentment are more readily expressed there toward a Chinese government that is often seen as meddling in their affairs.

In June of 2019, massive protests broke out against an extradition bill that would allow the Chinese government to deport criminals and fugitives (and criminal and fugitive businesspeople) from Hong Kong to mainland China, and to stand trial in China. Hong Kong police enforced official Chinese policy and were aggressive in a counterinsurgent response full of physical conflict, tear gas, and rubber bullets. What began as tens of thousands of young demonstrators swelled to a million people over several days, leading to a rare small business and workers’ strike on June 12. Quentin Cheng Hin-kei, chairman of a major union told Reuters: “Even if we call off the strike, we cannot call off the anger.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, one year after my trip to China, I watched from a distance as a formidable revolt in Hong Kong grew in size and intensity. By the end of July 2019, it was

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25 See “Young Marxists are going missing in China after protesting for workers” by Ben Westcott and Yong Xiong, November 14, 2018, CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/13/asia/china-student-marxist-missing-intl/index.html> (accessed June 12, 2019).

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 See “Hong Kong shops, workers in rare strike to ‘defend freedom’” by Kate Leung and Vimvam Tong, June 12, 2019, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-extra-dition-strikes-idUSKCN1TD0TG> (accessed June 12, 2019).

clear that the Hong Kong uprising had well exceeded the seemingly defeated extradition bill that triggered the upheaval in June. What was clear from the start had been confirmed: the Hong Kong uprising expresses a broader disaffection. But there have been several dominant analyses of the Hong Kong revolt that need to be refuted. These problematic analyses claim (1) that the revolts are manufactured by the West, and/or specifically by the United States government, (2) that the revolts are nothing more than a demand for Western-style capitalist democracy, and (3) that the revolts are in no way a demand for Western-style capitalist democracy. Let's briefly touch on each of the above.

First, some critics of the Hong Kong revolt portray the uprising as a program of US foreign policy. Multiple and independent reliable sources document that some of the groups involved in the uprising "receive significant funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a CIA soft-power cutout that has played a critical role in innumerable US regime-change operations."<sup>29</sup> US interest in Chinese instability is hardly surprising, and in fact, it would be far more surprising to discover that US power holders had no geopolitical or economic investments in powerful protests against the Chinese government. The US always seizes its interests in every global crisis. But the indignation and disaffection of over a million Hongkongers is not a product of the NED. The relationship of Hong Kong to China is complex and the extradition bill only created an opportunity to express longstanding disaffections (about many other things as well) that remain in the hearts, minds, and mouths of the insurrectionists. Most in Hong Kong have had too much of foreign government usurpation and much of the revolt is rooted in that sentiment. The young people are also not happy with their own leaders for being too beholden to outside powers. To take a close look at the diversity and ferocity of the uprisings in a range of clashes with police, the smashing of government building windows, and to listen to the young people speak openly in their own words, is to recognize the agency of real people who are putting themselves (and their bodies) on the line. To claim that all of that activity is manufactured by the NED reveals a brazen reductionist audacity, both insulting and unsupportable by the facts.

On the other hand, conservative and liberal onlookers from the West have been inclined to read the uprising as the people of Hong Kong demanding a spitting-image of Western-style capitalism and rejecting the so-called "communist" tyranny of China. Unsurprisingly, the perspective of Western power can only see that everyone everywhere wants whatever can be seen in the West. But that view is simple to the point of stupidity. Many in the Hong Kong upheaval have expressed anti-authoritarian opposition to creeping Chinese overstep, but they have also condemned their own institutions and representatives by name, and have articulated an emancipatory hope for a form of life ungoverned by the rich and

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<sup>29</sup> See "American Gov't, NGOs Fuel and Fund Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Protests" by Alexander Rubinstein, June 13, 2019, *Mint Press News*, <https://www.mintpressnews.com/hong-kong-protests/259202/> (accessed July 15, 2019).

powerful. Moreover, participants frequently invoke their history of colonization as a source of mobilization against any foreign or outside usurpation, including ones from the West (which they have already had enough of). According to reportage on the ground, “the mainly younger protesters think the government has robbed them of opportunity while pandering to the rich and powerful” and one protester proclaimed, “There’s nothing that we own except this city. There’s nowhere to turn and nothing to lose.”<sup>30</sup> Some of them have likened their situation to that of the Palestinians. The oft-repeated sense of a long struggle against the interests of money and political power should suffice to prevent Western capitalists and pundits from concluding that Hong Kong dreams about becoming US city governed by a different set of moneyed interests.

Finally, we cannot simply assert that the Hong Kong revolt is a new anti-capitalist insurgency for real communism against its spectacle. Participants are by no means single-mindedly focused on opposing capitalism. Like any uprising, this one is heterogeneous and expresses a range of disaffections, often conflicting ones, and does not produce a simple ideological script. We cannot deny that some participants have been seen holding signs appealing to the governments of the United States and Britain for assistance, while some even “waved British and American flags.”<sup>31</sup> By all accounts, that is not an overwhelming sight in the upheaval, but it is in there too along with everything else.

I spoke with one of my students about the latest revolts, and she told me that, even though she is on the mainland and away from the action, she “stands with those protestors,” and she reminded me that she “watched the Umbrella Revolution in 2014” and “saw how the police attacked unarmed people, and how the protestors support one another.”<sup>32</sup> But I would not be surprised if many of my students who lamented deficits of freedom in China were indeed hoping that Hong Kong may agitate for a more Western-style capitalism.

So there is complexity in the uprising, and we must resist any totalizing view of what’s happening there. And yet I am inspired whenever I see young people confronting established powers in this way. Some things we can know with confidence, for example, that this revolt is an experience and realization of a certain power of young and everyday people in Hong Kong. Those in the uprising can see that the government is afraid of what they can mobilize. One of the lasting outcomes of rising up is the realization that a different power can be generated,

30 See “‘Nothing to lose’: The Hong Kong protesters taking on China” by Violet Law, July 11, 2019, *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/lose-hong-kong-protesters-china-190710062708453.html> (accessed July 15, 2019).

31 See “Clashes break out as Hong Kong protesters escalate fight in suburbs” by Donny Kwok and Felix Tam, July 14, 2019, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-ex-tradition/clashes-break-out-as-hong-kong-protesters-escalate-fight-in-suburbs-idUSKC-N1U904G> (accessed July 15, 2019).

32 Personal correspondence with a student, July 2019.

and in this case, I think it is an accomplishment that young Hongkongers shall not soon forget. No doubt, this upheaval is the experience of a lifetime, and they shall want to return to it again as they already have since the Umbrella Revolution and Sunflower movement in 2014. This should remind us that when an uprising settles down, that does not mean that it's over and done. Revolt can always pick up its unfinished business later on, and it usually does.

But I think that current problems in China are not being—and will not be—solved within the limits of its twenty-first century capitalism. They have only been exacerbated. Some of China's own critics on the inside are calling for one form of capitalism over another. And I am not sure that hope resides in Hong Kong as much as it does in the possibility for similarly contentious movements on the mainland. Such upheaval would be more surprising and destabilizing on the mainland than in Hong Kong, for political, cultural, and historical reasons. Hong Kong is expected to let loose unrulier social energies than those that have been acculturated under the surveillance and reprisals of China's sole domain. There, we would find the most promising contradictions: Maoists against Maoists, Marxists against Marxists! The ones outside of power standing up against the ones inside of power! Such an opposition should come as no surprise to anyone who understands Marxism as a philosophy from below, the distinguishing feature of which is to challenge the codified state powers of capitalist society. Simply, what we may hope to witness on the mainland is that old opposition of Marxism to "Marxism," of the real thing in opposition to its spectacle form.

I refuse to overstate the significance of my China lectures, for the obvious fact that nothing beyond some tiny segment of the thinking of a small subset of my students in Xi'an could have possibly been affected by them. Nonetheless, I felt that the course could have been a tiny little preparation for struggles on the horizon. We don't know what those struggles may be. The students would have a better sense than I about what is on China's horizon, and I left them to make connections between what they knew and the texts we read.

Perhaps the only serious role of academic theory in politics is as a means of preparation for unknown struggles on the horizon. Theory is, of course, done elsewhere too, outside of academia and outside of texts, but my context in Xi'an was to do it with books in a university classroom. Such a practice has its limitations. I told my students that some of what we studied would quickly be forgotten, that some of it was probably irrelevant to their life and to politics in China. But I also conveyed my sincere hope that something—even if just some *one thing*—could be taken forward into future fights for a possible and desirable future as they saw fit. I confess that I am partial to the old notion of theory as a weapon. I think it was therefore appropriate that my last three words to the students in China were "choose your weapon."

