

ADDRESSES

internationalism and democr@cy

N° 8 – January 13, 2025



CHINA

中國

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Issue 8 of *Adresses: internationalism and democracy* is devoted exclusively to the “Chinese question”. It appears simultaneously in French and English.

The texts have been compiled and introduced by Richard Smith. He invites us to unravel the mystery of the Chinese revolution that “under Mao” gave birth to a “totalitarian police state”, which has perpetuated itself as a dictatorship of a party-state organizing what he describes as a hybrid form of capitalism and collectivism.

The most assiduous and attentive readers of *Adresses* will note that two of these texts have already been published in the pages of this magazine. *Adresses* No. 2, “Rivalry between the USA and China, ‘antagonistic cooperation’ and anti-imperialism in the 21st century”, was published in issue 0, and *Adresses* No. 12, “China’s rise as a world power”, in issue 2.

This is no an editorial blunder, but a deliberate choice to group together in this first issue, because, like the discussion of the past on the “nature of social relations” in the USSR (never closed, incidentally), this discussion certainly can’t be exhausted in a few dozen pages.

It is one of the vocations of *Adresses*, whose declaration of intent can be found at the end of issue 8, to enable such a debate... and many others.

The Chinese enigma

Richard Smith

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How can we understand the Chinese enigma? Debate over the nature of Chinese “socialism” has perplexed the western Left since 1949. How did a communist party that was once overwhelmingly comprised of proletarians (60 % workers in 1926) and in the mid-1920s led the largest workers’ and peasants’ revolt in history, morph into a totalitarian police state dictatorship, a communist-capitalist party of kleptocrat gangster capitalists, a party of ultra-nationalist imperialists running prison slave labor factories in its colonies in Xinjiang and Tibet, seizing fishing grounds of neighboring countries, and launching flights of bombers every day threatening war on Taiwan?¹

Mao’s heretical petty-bourgeois party-substitutionist peasant-based national liberation revolution succeeded – spectacularly – in overthrowing feudalism and expelling the last imperialists where the bourgeois revolution of 1912 failed and workers revolution of 1927 was crushed. Yet instead of socialism or even bourgeois democracy, Mao installed a totalitarian police-state party-bureaucratic dictatorship that murdered or locked up millions, including the last thousand Trotskyists, then set out to build socialism-in-one-country by superexploiting the country’s peasant farmers (85 % of the population in the 1950s) to accumulate the funds to import modern industries. As Mao’s Great Leap Forward worked and starved to death some 30-40 million of the same peasants who powered the Party to victory, and his Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution traumatized the whole society and killed another

1. Forced labor and cultural genocide in Tibet is not yet as intensive nor as well documented as in Xinjiang but it is growing: <https://tibet.net/un-experts-express-concern-over-extensive-labour-exploitation-in-tibet-by-china/>.

two million, the country fell ever further behind the West for three decades. By 1978 China had twice as many poor people as it had in 1949 – 800 million versus 400 million – basically the whole population except for a few million CCP cadres.²

With collapse and/or revolt in the offing Deng Xiaoping was enlisted to restore capitalism and save the Communist Party from the fate it its comrades in eastern Europe and the USSR. He liberalized the economy but maintained a ruthless police state. When ordinary Chinese demanded freedom of speech at Democracy Wall in 1978, they were arrested. The Chinese economic “miracle” nonetheless succeeded, also spectacularly, industrializing and modernizing China’s economy in under four decades, lifting living standards, lengthening lifespans, and constructing some of the best infrastructure seen anywhere. But, as articles in this issue show, that miracle was built on the excruciating exploitation and forced labor of hundreds of millions of ex-farm migrant workers – an

2. It is sobering to note that in those same decades, China’s neighbors Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore -- the so-called “Four Tigers” -- which were all at roughly the same socio-economic level as China in 1949 (and Korea would endure another war in 1951-53), by the 1980s were already fully industrialized and modernized economies. By the 1990s they were all, according to the World Bank, first-world “high income” economies whereas Communist China could not even attain “lower-middle income” status until 2001. The capitalist tigers also eliminated mass poverty whereas even after seven decades of “socialist modernization” some 600 million Chinese, 40 % of the population, still live in poverty, according to China’s Premier Le Kaqiang in May 2020. Furthermore, except for Hong Kong which was still a U.K. colony, the other tigers transitioned to democracies by the 1990s. Richard Smith, “Can Xi Jinping’s ‘Chinese Model’ supplant capitalist democracies and why should Western socialists care? – Part 2,” *New Politics*, December 4, 2023.

apartheid class of unfree “illegals” in their own country, purposely kept poor and rightless by the “socialist” government – to enrich the Communist Party and its foreign and domestic capitalist partners. Deng’s marriage of capitalism and Stalinism birthed the most corrupt large economy in the world with extremes of wealth and poverty worse than those in the capitalist U.S. Its model of “cheap and dirty production” turned China into the most polluted industrial economy in the world, with CO2 emissions nearly triple those of the United States.³ When in 1989 a million students filled Tiananmen Square in Beijing to demand democracy and an end to corruption, Deng massacred them, reaffirming the rule of the Party, and opening the way to a gilded age of kleptocrat gangster capitalism in the 1990s and 2000s.

Thus by the 2000s the spread of capitalism, out-of-control bureaucratic corruption, out-of-control pollution, and renewed demands for democracy posed dire new threats to Communist Party rule. So in 2012 the old guard installed Xi Jinping to crush capitalism, civil society, trade unionists, democracy and human rights activists, Marxist and Maoist students, feminists, independent domestic and Western media and restore Party control of everything: “Government, the military, society and schools, north, south, east and west, the Party leads them all,” Xi Jinping reaffirmed.⁴ In the economy, Xi re-centered state-owned industries (SOEs) to dominance, arrested and expropriated many capitalists, suborned the rest including the leading private tech industries to align their pursuit of profit with Party’s goal of self-sufficient nationalization, global tech supremacy, and security. He modernized the military, abandoned Deng’s foreign policy of peaceful co-operation with its neighbors and the West for an aggressive nationalist “wolf-warrior” diplomacy, imperialist military expansions seizing South China Sea at the expense of the Philippines, Vietnam and other countries, seizing bits of India, and threatening daily to invade Taiwan whose indigenous peoples are not Chinese and which China has never

fully ruled. He replaced the Party’s comparatively moderate colonial policies in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia with brutal forced assimilation, fierce cultural and even physical genocide, panopticon surveillance states and, in Xinjiang, huge prison slave-labor factories. And he crushed the Hong Kong democracy movement whose only demands were for China to keep its promise to permit self-government until 2047.

Needless to say, none of this has anything to do with socialism. So how do we explain this dénouement?

This issue of *l’Adresses* brings together essays on these and related questions by Left activist-scholars. It begins with essays by Au Loong-Yu and Richard Smith and on the nature of the system Mao installed and Deng Xiaoping modified with his market reform and opening -- its systemic drivers, built-in contradictions, irrationalities, and their consequences. They show how the bureaucracy’s hyper-growth productivism is rooted in Mao’s Han chauvinist nationalist aspiration to restore what he imagined was China’s feudal-era greatness, and overtake the United States (and, Smith adds, their fear, as Xi Jinping has repeatedly warned his party comrades, that if they fail to win the race for global industrial and technological supremacy, then like Gorbachev’s USSR, the Party could be overwhelmed by global capitalism). To these ends, the CCP has underwritten its seven decades long national self-industrialization drive by maximizing surplus extraction from China’s farmers and workers, suppressing their consumption for since 1949 to accumulate the surpluses to import modern factories and technology, build the infrastructure of a modern economy, and turn China into a world-class military superpower. Mao squeezed the peasants till tens of millions starved. Deng created an entirely new apartheid semi-slave migrant worker proletariat to sell to Western capitalists at the world’s lowest price for manufacturing labor – the “China Price” -- to accumulate trillions of dollars more, both to build wealth and power and to enrich the Party. Yet great power nationalist chauvinism and superpower military competition is not the socialist project. As Au writes, “Socialism is not productivism; its ultimate goal has never been to increase productive forces indefinitely.

3. Richard Smith, *China’s Engine of Environmental Collapse* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

4. *China’s Engine*, xiii. See also “The ‘7 don’t speaks’ in my ‘Chinese Model,’” above, Part 1.

That is the capitalist mindset, not the socialist mindset." On top of this, as Smith shows, the Party's coal-fired race to overtake the US has turned China into the world's leading CO2 emitter by far, hastening the global warming that's on course to flood the world's coastal cities including Hong Kong and Shanghai by mid-century.

A second group of essays analyze labor exploitation by private and state-owned companies and explore the potentials for building US-China labor solidarity. Smith argues that China's unique "comparative advantage" in the world economy is not so much state subsidies as its all-powerful and highly organized police state that has supplied hundreds of millions of ultra-cheap industrial wage-slaves at the world's lowest cost, and also forcefully evicted tens of millions of farmers and urban residents to clear land for rails, roads, telecom, factories, power plants, office buildings, housing, ports, airports and so on, and has funded= and build universities, trade schools, science research institutes to advance China's technological prowess. Zhang Mazi describes the super-exploitation of Foxconn's migrant workers as well as unpaid trade-school student interns, the bullying, sexual harassment, the "closed loop" system that locked up workers in Foxconn's Zhengzhou factory during Covid, the late 2022 worker uprising and its suppression. Zoe Zhao and Oli Shua discuss the plight of women workers in garment and electronic industries who are subjected not only to ruthless exploitation but to sexual harassment, and yet they fight back as best they can by building self-organization and mutual aid.

Labor organizer Ellen David Friedman activist-scholar Kevin Lin, and activist Alex Tom discuss their respective experiences in building labor solidarity during the comparatively liberal Hu Jintao era of the 2000s when pro-labor and pro-democracy NGOs, human rights lawyers, and environmental NGOs enjoyed modest freedoms. In those years Ellen Friedman, amazingly, established a research institute at Sun Yat Sen University in Guangzhou (near Shenzhen and Hong Kong) to educate and train workers to defend themselves against private employers. Kevin and Alex describe their work building solidarity organizations in Chinese communities in San

Francisco, bringing SF labor activists to the 2005 anti-WTO protests in Hong Kong, and bringing Hong Kong dockworkers unionists to speak at ILWU union halls during the great Hong Kong dockworkers strike of 2013. These efforts all came to an end when Xi Jinping took power in 2012. Labor NGOs were shut down, Ellen Friedman was picked up by police and ordered out of the country, labor militants and hundreds of human rights lawyers were arrested, and repression has reigned since. Ruo Yan and Andrew Sebald describe discuss the suppression of labor organizers and the difficulties workers face in consolidating movement gains in China despite the continuing flashes of militancy.

The third group of essays address US-China geo-political rivalry. Promise Li writes that in our era of great power competition, those on the Left who take China's side against US imperialism fail to understand that first, China and the US are partners in maintaining their respective systems of economic exploitation and second, that China is itself a rising imperial power and not in the least anti-imperialist despite official rhetoric. We conclude with a two-part interview with author-activist Au Loong Yu. The first part, "Regarder l'imperialisme chinois en face" is a model argument for socialist anti-imperialists: how to criticize US imperialism without supporting the totalitarian CCP, and how to criticize Chinese imperialism and support self-determinism for Hong Kong and Taiwan without aligning with US imperialism.

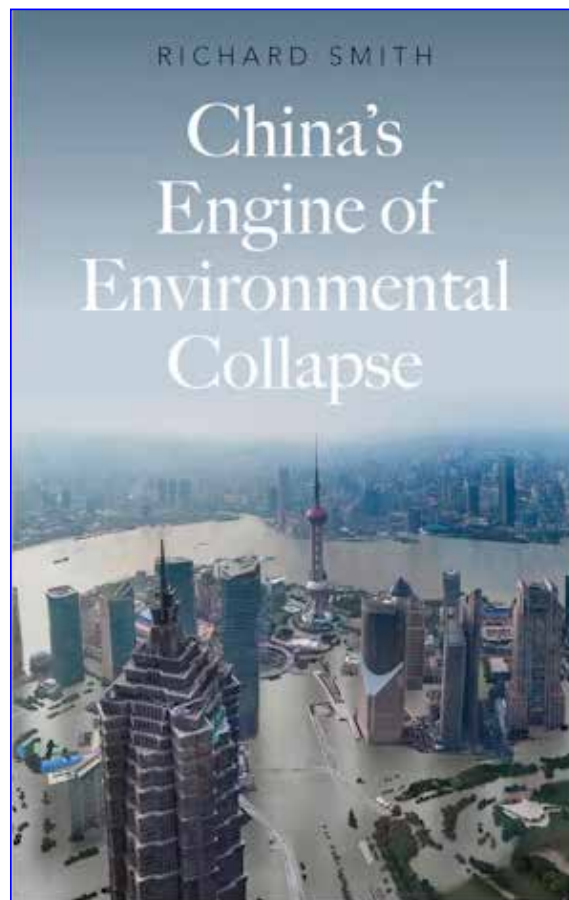
The second part, "The beginning of the end of China's rise" analyses the bases of China's rise, in particular the subordination of consumption to investment. The Party's monopoly of state power has enabled it to maintain the highest rate of capital investment in the world, more than 40 % of GDP, for decades. This has funded China's industrial modernization (but also vast overproduction and overproduction as local officials compete in "GDP tournaments" to please Beijing and win promotions⁵). Yet, Au notes that the super-exploitation of labor that has powered China's rise, now hinders further growth because the country's low-income workers can't afford to buy what the factories produce. So the government is trying to

5. On which, see *China's Engine*, chapter 5

export its overproduction which, because it's based on China's uniquely ultra-cheap labor, is undercutting Western producers and thus provoking defensive trade wars. As China's long boom winds down, as the growth engines of past decades are exhausted, compounded by the bursting housing bubble, the demographic collapse, and the ageing work force, Au considers the country's prospects.

Richard Smith is the author of *Green Capitalism: The God That Failed* (2016) and *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse* (2020).

A first version was published as 'On Contradiction: Mao's Party-Substitutionist Revolution in Theory and Practice' in four parts, *New Politics*, 7 June 2022.



Mao's revolution: a Marxist mode of production reinterpretation

Richard Smith

How is the left to understand China today? How did a communist party that was once overwhelmingly comprised of proletarians (60 % workers in 1926) and in the mid-1920s led the largest workers' and peasants' revolt in history, end up installing a Stalinist totalitarian police state that, under Mao, worked and starved to death 30 to 45 million of the same peasants that powered the party to victory in 1949, then under Deng, sold hundreds of millions of China's workers to foreign capitalists at the world's lowest, Industrial Revolution era, wages?

The maoist myth of Chinese socialism

My approach rejects the standard theoretical framework and historical narrative that has shaped discourse about the nature of the Chinese revolution since the 1950s and is taken for granted by Maoist politicians and most China scholars regardless of their attitudes to Mao and the communists – namely that Mao's revolution installed a socialism of sorts, and Deng Xiaoping restored capitalism. In this view, Mao's China was socialist despite its contradictions and disasters because his revolution abolished capitalism and private property, nationalized the economy, replaced the market with central planning, liberated women, introduced the "iron rice bowl" job guarantees, free medical care, free schooling, and cradle-to-grave state-provided social services. By contrast, Deng Xiaoping and his successors re-introduced the market, broke the "iron rice bowl" job guarantees, privatized housing, medical care, schooling beyond middle school; invited foreign capitalists to ruthlessly exploit Chinese migrant workers, and promoted the

development of domestic capitalists, even inviting them to join the Communist Party.

I maintain that China was neither socialist under Mao nor has become fully capitalist since Deng. As to socialism:

About socialism

Nationalization isn't necessarily socialist.

Under Mao, the party-state nationalized all the land and natural resources, and the entire economy. This all became the exclusive property of the party-state. Ordinary Chinese owned nothing, had no say in any of this.

Economic planning isn't necessarily socialist

It depends on planning for whom for whom. In China planning always been planning by bureaucracy for the bureaucracy. Again, the masses of ordinary Chinese have always been completely shut out of this process. They have no say or rights with respect to what gets produced or not.

"Iron rice bowl" job guarantees weren't necessarily socialist either

Under Mao, workers had the "right" to a state job not because China was socialist but because Mao sought to maximize economic growth by maximizing labor inputs so he needed all hands on deck. In fact they had no right not to work. Under Mao, the state provided industrial workers with jobs, housing, schooling, medical care, and modest retirement benefits because without a market there was no other way for people to access such services. But workers lived their entire lives in conditions of unfreedom. The party-state controlled every aspect of their lives.

They had no private lives. Under Mao, the country was the world's largest open-air prison, sprinkled with forced-labor gulags where millions languished – like Stalin's Russia, which Mao modeled China after.

Likewise, Mao liberated women but only to make them work

Their entire lives were out of their control: China's women were coerced to have children under Mao (birth control was suppressed by Mao), were coerced not to have children under Deng Xiaoping's "one-child policy," and under Xi they're being pressured to become baby-making machines again. Women never had any say in any of this and have always been systematically discriminated against in the party and government since Mao's day. Today, the 24 -member CCP Politburo has zero women. Of the 205 members of the Central Committee, barely 5 % are women. In the sexist capitalist USA, 10 % of Fortune Five Hundred CEOs are women, too small a number, but twice as many as in "socialist" China.

Deng's market reform and opening introduced plenty of capitalism but capitalism has never been fully restored in China

Private property has never been restored, and the old Stalinist state-owned state-planned economy is still dominant. As chief economic planner Chen Yun put it back in the 1980s, we need some capitalism but we keep it "like a bird in a cage." China is neither fully capitalist nor fully Stalinist. It's a hybrid marketized Stalinism, a kind of communist capitalism or capitalist communism. In forty-five years of market reform, China has never missed a Five-Year Plan. What capitalist economy operates on Five-Year Plans?

In his Civil War in France, his book about the Paris Commune, Marx observed the Communard's self-emancipation, their workers' democracy, their elections of representatives by universal suffrage with representatives paid at ordinary workman's wages and subject to recall by the citizenry – and declared that "That's socialism"

That's my definition as well and it was also the vision of the chief founder of the Chinese Communist Party, Chen Duxiu¹.

As a Marxist, the Maoist just-so story never made sense to me. In my experience the ideological framework of Maoism has posed an insuperable barrier to understanding the nature of the Chinese revolution and the regime it installed.

First, it fails to grasp the theoretical originality and non-Marxist character of Mao's party-substitutionist "new class" revolution.

Second, Maoist theory has no capacity to explain the historical contradictions of the system Mao installed because if China was socialist then its horrors were inexplicable.

Thirdly belief in this theory has obliged Maoist China scholars and ideologues to defend (or ignore) indefensible, even criminal practices by the Chinese regime that are blindingly obvious and defy any common-sense definition of socialism.

Fourthly, Maoist theory equally fails to explain why, if Deng Xiaoping and his market reformer successors were "restoring capitalism," have they systematically subverted their own market reforms precisely to prevent the wholesale restoration of capitalism?

In short, the Maoist theoretical framework is not just useless, it's led scholars and Maoist leftists to produce empirically untenable analyses, write shelves full of nonsensical books, and proffer morally indefensible apologetics for China that, like an earlier generation of Western apologists for Stalin's crimes, have only further discredited the very idea of socialism.

So how did Maoism come to dominate Western discourse and China studies despite its manifest contradictions and inadequacies? At least four reasons come to mind.

First, Marxism never had deep roots in China. China's commercial and industrial proletariat in the early 20th century was quite small and China had no tradition of Social Democracy or revolutionary socialist politics. Early 20th century radicals were more attracted to anarchism than Marxism because Marx's focus on the industrial working class

1. Publisher's Note. Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) was one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party. He was expelled from the party in 1927 and joined the International Left Opposition.

seemed irrelevant in the Chinese context. Indeed, the founders of the Communist Party in 1921 were inspired by the Bolshevik revolution but most had little if any knowledge of Marxism when they founded the Party. They converted to communism before they had read Marx and most never became Marxists at all. They became Stalinists and Maoists or were driven out of the Party in the late 1920s and 30s.

Secondly, China's totalitarian police state has been far more effective in completely crushing dissent and erasing virtually all historical memory of non-Maoist currents - the Trotskyists, the Tiananmen democracy activists, the Charter '082 movement and others - than Soviet and East European Stalinist rulers. Mao and his henchmen like Kang Sheng murdered hundreds of Chinese Trotskyists during the 1930s and 40s and in 1952 locked up the last thousand of them for decades, extinguishing the last active alternative socialist political pole of attraction beyond Maoism. There was never space in China for dissidents, samizdat, or a Marxist underground such as the Workers Defense Committee KOR that developed in Poland from 1976 to promote worker self-organization and politicize their movement which ultimately gave rise to the Solidarność trade union in 1981. China's own would-be Marxist theoreticians, socialist labor organizers, and socialist revolutionaries such as 1970s-era Trotskyists and democracy activists Chen Erjin, Wang Xizhe, Wei Jingsheng, Tiananmen and Charter '08 democracy advocates including Liu Xiaobo, have all been ruthlessly crushed, murdered, locked away in prisons or labor camps for decades, driven into exile, and forgotten in China. Today, Xi Jinping talks up Marxism all the time. But when Beijing University students took him seriously and initiated study groups to read Marx, they were arrested and disappeared. As a result, since the 1940s all legitimate political discourse in China has been constrained within the Maoist framework. Today, China's censors have to be taught some of this history because growing up behind

2. Publisher's Note. Published in 2008, the charter declared its support for democracy in the People's Republic of China. It has been signed by more than 5,000 people. One of its authors, Liu Xiaobo, was imprisoned from 2009 to 2017,



the Great Firewall, they had never heard of Trotsky or Chen Duxiu or Wei Jingsheng or Liu Xiaobo or Fang Zhi Li or the Tiananmen democracy protests. Without instruction, they would not know to censor those names and events.

Thirdly, there has been nothing in China studies to compare with the debate around the "new class" theories of Russia and the East European Stalinist regimes advanced by Bruno Rizzi, The Bureaucratization of the World, Milovan Djilas The New Class, Michael Voslensky, Nomenklatura, Konrad and Szelényi, Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power, Max Schachtman, The Bureaucratic Revolution, and others. There are no such equivalents in China or even in Western China studies. In the brief opening in the late 1970s after Mao died, Chinese leftists and democracy activists such as Chen Erjin and Wei Jingsheng did advance some rudimentary theses arguing that the CCP holarad become a new "social fascist" or "totalitarian fascist" ruling class. But they were soon locked up and forgotten in the *People's Republic of Amnesia* (title of Louisa Lim's book).

Fourthly, and closely related to the last point, the left wing of Western China studies was founded by a cohort of young anti-war, Cultural Revolution-infatuated graduate students and young professors in the 1960s and 70s who idealized China and Vietnam in response to U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia. They were liberal anti-imperialists, not Marxists, romantic third worldists who worshiped the Red Sun. As Orville Schell recalls "We were in love with China." As Maoist professors, those scholars misled generations of students with a delusional ahistorical fabulist vision of Mao's China. I know, I sat in their classes.

The net result of the foregoing is that, while there are important Trotskyist interpretations by Livio Maitan and Au-Loong Yu, and state-capitalist expositions by Tony Cliff (Ygael Gluckstein) and Nigel Harris, there are no "new class" theorizations of China either in China or the West. My book-in-progress aims to partially redress that lacuna by presenting a bureaucratic collectivist theorization of Mao's party-substitutionist revolution, as a new class revolution that installed a new class system with its own built-in tendencies

and contradictions which are neither capitalist nor socialist.

My argument in brief

The title of my book in progress is *The Triumph and Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*. The triumph was that Mao's revolution succeeded where the bourgeois revolution of 1912 failed and the workers' revolution of 1925-27 was crushed by Chiang Kai-shek. The tragedy was that Mao's party-substitutionist revolution was a Stalinist-nationalist revolution, not a socialist revolution. It installed the party-army-bureaucracy as a bureaucratic collectivist ruling class modeled on Stalin's USSR, and proceeded to try to build socialism in one even more backward country by exploiting its own peasants and workers.

Mao was first and foremost an ethno-nationalist in the tradition of China's nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century 'self-strengtheners'. From Sun Yat-sen to Mao, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi, China's leaders have all been obsessed with one overarching goal: to overcome China's "century of humiliation", achieve "wealth and power," and "overtake the West" to reclaim what they imagine is China's deserved pride of place as the premier civilization and culture in world history.

Yes, he was also a socialist -- but not a Marxist. Instead, he was a latter-day pre-Marxian utopian "socialism-from-above" kind of socialist. His socialism drew not from the working class, democratic, self-emancipation "socialism from below" ideas of Marx and Engels exemplified by the Paris Commune and the Russian Soviets, but from the pre-Marxian "socialism-from-above" ideas of the utopian socialists, anarchists, and agrarian populists. This was the socialism of self-appointed elites, convinced that they alone possessed the "correct" vision and strategy to create and run a socialist society, so they should rule as beneficent dictators dispensing socialism to the benighted masses. Like the Babouvistes who wanted to set up a well-intentioned "educational dictatorship," like Joseph Proudhon who imagined himself a beneficent "manager-in-chief" ruling a society where trade unions, universal suffrage, constitutions and the like, were all banned. Like Mikhail Bakunin for whom the realm of "absolute freedom"

was to be found in absolute conformity to Bakunin's own "invisible dictatorship" – virtually the model for Mao's own ultra-authoritarian "anti-bureaucratic" "Cultural Revolution." And like Alexander Herzen who claimed that "the advantages of backwardness" could enable agrarian nations to "skip over historical stages" and "pure" peasants could lead Russia to an idyllic rural socialism bypassing the horrors of Western capitalism. Mao repurposed Herzen's idealist vision with his doctrine of socialist construction by means of mind over matter, "red over expert," the power of human will, etc. Mao did not "revise" Marxism. He was a latter-day pre-Marxian utopian socialist.

Mao's theory of party-substitutionist-led peasant revolution proved adequate to lead the first successful peasant-based social and national liberation revolution and provided the model for the entire wave of third world revolutions from the end of WWII through the 1970s. But for all their years of guerilla-war "plain living and hard struggle" nowhere did a single 'substitute proletariat' install any kind of workers' government, any kind of socialist government, or any democracy. Instead, in every case, the petty bourgeois intelligentsia revolutionaries developed their own "new-class" interests which were nationalist,

bureaucratic, autocratic, anti-democratic, and they installed themselves at the head of new class societies: either Stalinist as in Yugoslavia, North Korea, Vietnam, etc. or one-party (or even one-man) dictatorships with capitalist or state-capitalist economies as in Algeria, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe etc.

Furthermore, their strategy of socialism from above, led by self-styled omniscient "savior dictators" like Mao, was doomed from the start in China and everywhere else. In

China, the prototypical case, Mao's overriding priority was to "catch up and overtake the West" by means of forced-march self-industrialization, and this could only be financed by decades of coercive surplus extraction from China's workers and peasants which in turn could only be enforced by a dictatorship that crushed worker struggles for trade unions and all struggles for democracy.

Seen in this light, when Mao's revolution is understood for what it really was – a revolution of, by and for the Stalinist "new-class" party-army-bureaucracy that seized power and installed a totalitarian police state and bureaucratic collectivist economy, then the apparent contradictions of the system vanish.



The Tyranny of State Productivism

Au Loong-Yu

The 2024 National People's Congress is now in session in Beijing, in the midst of a steep economic downturn affecting millions of people's livelihood – the credit crunch in the property market now spreading to other financial sectors there is deflation, a slowing down of manufacturing, a huge outflow of foreign investment, and a rise in unemployment.

In response to all of this, Premier Li Qiang¹ gave a report which was nothing but a long list of tasks laid out by his 26 governmental departments and looked more like an inventory report from a grocery store, along with empty slogans. What is in the head of Li Qiang concerning his main strategy for solving the emerging crisis is still a mystery. He did acknowledge that there have been "interwoven difficulties and challenges," but reassured his audience about China's bright future stating that "under the strong leadership of the CCP Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core, the Chinese people have the courage, vision, and strength to meet any challenge and overcome any obstacle." Indeed, he mentioned Xi 19 times, showering him with all kinds of praise. If there is a main theme running through the Premier's grocery inventory report, it is the cult of a top leader.

The Premier's grocery inventory report

But this is precisely the reason why we should worry about this report, and not because the present economic downturn is entirely Xi's responsibility. Long before his coming to power the economic imbalances between investment, production, and

consumption had already reached gigantic proportions and the day of reckoning has only been getting nearer. The problem with Xi, however, is that his policies have further deepened the imbalances and in some areas, he has been simply shooting his own feet, as his zero-Covid policy has shown. His disproportional crackdown in Hong Kong has not only wiped out the opposition and organized labour but has also done more than enough to kill the goose that once laid golden eggs for the party state – the city's financial market has always been Beijing's US dollars printing machine, but now Hong Kong is "over", as announced by Stephen Roach, former chair of Morgan Stanley Asia who started working there in the late 1980s. Certain Western mainstream media outlets have lectured Beijing about how he should do what his predecessor Wen Jiabao did in 2008-9 – rolling out a 634 US\$ rescue package to stimulate the stagnant economy, or at least do something to raise consumer confidence. While their advice is highly disputable, the crux of the matter right now is that Beijing has no credible strategy at all to tackle the sinking economy.

In order to better understand the structural problem of the Chinese economy, we may need to revisit the Mao era, and upon finishing the journey our readers may understand that despite all the rupture between Mao and Deng's China there is also great continuity as well – the eagerness to "surpass Britain and catch up with the US" runs through both eras, hence the growth strategy of an abnormally high investment rate has been remarkedly the same. This is so obvious to Li Qiang that he did not bother to elaborate on it at all. He just needed to carry on the CCP's tradition. Our readers need to come back to this under-reported but utmost important issue,

1. Publisher's Note. Li Qiang should not be confused with the previous Premier Li Keqiang, who was unceremoniously sidelined in March 2023.

however, because this will not only expose the absurdity of the strategy. but also shed some light on the question of how successful Beijing's economic policy will be.

“Production must be Prioritised Over Livelihoods”

In Mao's era the party's rapid industrialisation program was implemented through its “centrally planned economy.” But the tension between the central government and the provincial bureaucracies has always been one of the major obstacles for the economy to grow in a less imbalanced way. The “centrally planned economy” was infamous for its lack of efficiency, and provincial governments were always starved of necessary materials, professionals or simply incentives, which soon forced the central government to periodically resort to devolution again – not to the local people but to the provincial bureaucracies. The latter, prompted by their own self-interests, were always ready to seize any opportunity to gain more power (and hence more material interests), only to find out that the time of reckoning was to arrive quickly as decentralisation soon caused over-investment and enough chaos to convince the central government to take back power from the provinces. This “cycle” of *shou, si, fang and luan*, or the repetition of centralisation, decentralisation and re-centralisation plagued the economy from the beginning.

The regime's cruel extraction of labour surpluses enabled the state to fund the absurdly high investment rate between 1958 and 1980, which had always been nearly 30 % (except the aftermath of the famine in early 1960's). This had resulted in not only a lot of waste but first and foremost the fall of living standards of ordinary people. Wages had been frozen for the entire period despite an annual economic growth average was more than 4 %. In response to disgruntled workers the party's propaganda rolled out the slogan of “production must be prioritised over people's livelihood”.

The four decades of “reform and opening-up” was a period where state capitalism (in partnership with the private sector) replaced the “centrally planned economy”, but the absurdly high investment rate promoted by the state has been perpetuated until to-

day. This time it was much higher, surpassing 30 % and then staying at more than 40 % for the past 20 years, at the expenses of a steep drop in the relative share of household consumption of GDP, from more than 50 % in the early 1980s to below 35 % in 2010. Although it has begun to rise since then, it has never reached 40 % in recent years. The basic reason for such a decline in household consumption comes from a declining share of labour income in the national income.

Two Chinese scholars warned about the situation several years ago in their article and said that: “China's investment rate is 30 % higher than the world average, while its consumption rate is 30 % lower than the world average, ... and this resulted in more and more serious excessive capacity.”

Exporting Excessive Capacity

Beijing has no intention to drop its obsession about productivism, as long as it can continue to export its excessive capacity. The recent news about BYD EV cars sales surpassing Tesla and how the US and Europe are now thinking of retaliation is just one example of how, in exporting its problems to the rest of the world, the world's sweatshop is now drawing more and more resentment and retaliation from other countries.

In terms of the domestic market, the CCP has disregarded the constraint of the relatively low household disposable income among working people, and continues to encourage people to buy their own homes and then second homes, while allowing local governments to pile up debts just to promote the property market and urbanisation projects. Now the day of reckoning has arrived, and boom turns into bust. Xi did intervene to deal with the mega bubble in the end of 2020 (the three red lines policy) but it was too late. He has presided over the rapid growth of the bubble since he came to power in 2012, but for ten years he did nothing substantial to cool down the mad speculation, not to mention to right the wrongs in relation to the structural problems of productivism. “Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!” But the Victorian free market capitalism that Marx depicted looks pale in comparison to today's Chinese state capitalism. However, the inconvenient truth is that there is always a limit to everything, especially in

relation to the impulse to accumulate and the impulse to abuse power. In China's case we are now in great trouble because the two impulses are entangled, as the ongoing People's Congress has revealed to us.

What if the Pilot has never Flown a Plane ?

This session of the Congress was very different from previous ones because the tradition of having the premier hold a news conference at its conclusion, as has been done every year since 1993, was cancelled. This has always been a very important moment to allow outsiders a glimpse into the balance of power among different factions in the top leadership. Giving the premier the limelight is Deng Xiaoping's political legacy - "we would never allow the party's grip over the government to ever loosen up, not even a single millimetre, but neither should we allow the return to the Mao era autocracy." However, what Xi is doing right now is not only to bring back autocracy but also to turn his abuse of power into the new normal. He is not content with putting all the branches of power into his hands, he also keeps on making himself the head of a dozen high level working groups in order to grasp more power. In the midst of the credit crunch, last October Xi set up a new organisation, the Central Financial Commission (CFC), in appearance under the auspices of the Central Committee of the CCP. Although the head of the CFC is Li Qiang, the present session of the People's Congress has already shown clearly who the real boss of this CFC is. Xi's intention seems to be a further weakening of the established state's financial institutions such as different branches of regulators. But does Xi know anything about how capitalism or its financial markets work? Last January we saw the market regulators, in a rush to save the market from falling sharply, giving out orders to institutional investors not to do any net selling of stocks on certain days. This is like closing the lid of a boiling pot to stop it from overflowing. The measure actually further erodes the confidence of the market. To be fair, Li Qiang announced that he is going to issue one trillion RMB (or 139 billion US\$) worth of government bonds to raise money for the liquidity squeezed economy. This

is miniscule in relation to the risk of default among local governments which had 94 trillion RMB of debt and among this 3.2 trillion would mature at the end of this year. Not to mention that developers also need 2 trillion US\$ just to liquidate their inventory.

Teacher Li has Something to Tell You

Or has Xi a more radical plan in mind? The only thing we can be sure is that Xi has a lot of policies at his disposal to solve the emerging crisis. If there is any unpleasant market update, he can just make the news disappear into thin air. After statistics last May showed that youth unemployment had reached more than 20 %, the government simply stopped releasing the figures. Very soon more statistics were added to the list of censored news - the falling birth rate, diving consumer and financial market confidence and so on. Our leader has solved all these problems by simply sweeping them under the carpet.

So the People's Congress has done a great job, again, in reminding the people that with Xi Jinping as their leader no one should worry about anything - he is so good at eliminating problems by eliminating those who report the problems, as the Chinese saying goes. Foreign readers are rarely aware that throughout the sessions of the Congress there are petitioners trying to petition the government over all kinds of grievances, since these petitioners are not allowed to be seen publicly at all. The "People's Delegates" inside the Great Hall couldn't care less about these petitioners. Neither does the official media. Occasionally the plight of these petitioners is recorded through private social media accounts. The followers' comment of this particular post about the petitioners is worth quoting :

"Lucky them that they could leave their own provinces and head onto Beijing in the first place!"²

"The damaging effect of brain washing is that the petitioners do not know that the National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration (that the petitioners are approaching) is nothing but the employee of their own wrongdoers."

2. Note by author : it is common for local authorities to stop, by force, the petitioners from heading to Beijing to petition the central government.

“There is no other way out except overthrowing the Communist Party.”

The people are deprived of the right to be heard; at most they may only voice their discontent in private through social media, but even this is regularly suppressed. Occasionally their voices are shared publicly by certain online influencers. Nowadays the very well known “Teacher Li” “has become a one-person news outlet and a crucial source of information about the protests in China for those both inside and outside the Great Firewall”, as reported by the Nation.

Teacher Li is a 32 year old Chinese immigrant living in Italy who has enough Chinese contacts to be able to post all kinds of news on his Twitter account and became famous during the White Paper movement at the end of 2022. According to a recent report, the authorities decided to crack down on him by harassing his online followers, who have grown to a million in number. Foreign readers who want to listen to voices from below should follow “Teacher Li” - but meanwhile, watch your back.

Source: [Europe solidaire sans frontières](#),
March 10, 2024.



Why China can't decarbonize

Richard Smith

This essay argues that regardless of President Xi Jinping's stated intentions, China cannot meet its carbon-neutral pledge. First, there are insuperable technical barriers to decarbonising the 'hard-to-abate' industries that account for about half of China's carbon dioxide emissions. Second, there are insuperable political barriers posed by Xi's overriding concern to save the Chinese Communist Party from the fate of the Soviet Communist Party by winning the race to technical supremacy and overtaking the United States to become the world's top superpower. To this end, he has no choice but to maximise the growth of the very industries that are driving China's emissions off the charts?

My book *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse*¹ opens with a question: given that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) runs one of the world's most ferocious police states, why can't its leaders compel their subordinate officials to suppress pollution, including carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, even from the state's own industries? Indeed, as recent studies have highlighted, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from individual state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in power, steel, cement, oil refining, and other industries exceed those of entire industrialised nations. Last year, China Baowu, the world's largest steelmaker, pumped out more emissions than Spain – the world's twenty-fourth-ranked emitter. China Petroleum & Chemical pumped out more than Canada – the world's eleventh-largest emitter². In his wide-

ly acclaimed speech to the United Nations General Assembly on 23 September 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged to 'transition to a green and low-carbon mode of development' and to 'peak the country's CO₂ emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060'³. Since the companies mentioned are directly controlled by Beijing, one would think Xi should be able to force them to clean up. After all, it is often argued – as by Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro, for example – that China's dictatorship should be an advantage in this context:

'Given the limited time that remains to mitigate climate change and protect millions of species from extinction, we need to consider whether a green authoritarianism can show us the way'⁴.

Since CCP bosses do not have to contend with public hearings, environmental studies, recalcitrant legislatures, labour unions, a critical press, and so on, Xi should be able to force state-owned polluters to stop polluting or else, and ram through his promised transition to renewable energy⁵. So why is he not doing that?

In its most dire assessment yet, in April, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

1. Richard, Smith, *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse*, London, Pluto Press, 2020.

2. "The Chinese Companies Polluting the World More than Entire Nations", *Bloomberg*, October 24, 2021; Aaron, Clark, "State-Backed Firms Emit 7.5 Billion Tons of Carbon a Year, Study Finds", *Bloomberg*, February 3, 2022; World Population Review, "CO₂ Emissions by Country 2022".

3. Jinping Xi, "Full Text: Xi Jinping's Speech at the General Debate of the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly", *CGTN*, September 23, 2020; Richard Smith, "Climate Arsonist Xi Jinping: A Carbon-Neutral China with a 6 % Growth Rate?", *Real-World Economics Review*, n° 94, December 9, 2020.

4. Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro, *China Goes Green: Coercive Environmentalism for a Troubled Planet*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020.

5. Richard Smith, "China's Drivers and Global Ecological Collapse", *Real-World Economics Review*, n° 82, December 13, 2017; Richard Smith, "Climate Arsonist Xi Jinping...", art. quoted.

Change⁶ declared that ‘it’s now or never’. Only ‘rapid, deep and immediate’ cuts in carbon dioxide emissions can prevent run-a-way global warming and the collapse of civilisation. To keep global warming below 1.5°C, coal use must decline by 95 per cent by 2050, oil by 60 per cent, and gas by 45 per cent. The decreases required to limit warming to 2°C are not much different. Under all scenarios, no more fossil-fuel power plants can be built and most existing ones must be decommissioned. The IPCC’s message is clear: ‘Any further delay in concerted anticipatory global action will miss a brief window of opportunity to secure a liveable planet and sustainable future for all’⁷.

Most of the world’s leading capitalist industrial democracies have reduced their GHG emissions to an extent. In the United States, carbon dioxide emissions in 2020 were down 14 per cent from their peak in 2005; emissions in the 27 member states of the European Union were down 32 per cent from their peak in 1981; and Japan’s have dropped 14 per cent from their peak in 2013⁸. To be sure, those reductions are still insufficient to meet their respective Paris commitments (and their Paris commitments are themselves insufficient to prevent global temperatures rising above 1.5°C), but at least they are declining.

By contrast, under Xi Jinping, as much as under his predecessors, China’s carbon dioxide emissions have relentlessly grown, more than quadrupling from 1990 to 2020. Climate Action Tracker estimates that in 2021 China’s emissions increased by 3.4 per cent to 14.1 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (GtCO₂e) – nearly triple those of the United States (4.9 GtCO₂e) with a gross domestic product just three-fourths as large⁹. Since 2019, China’s emissions have

exceeded those of all developed countries combined and presently account for 33 per cent of total global emissions¹⁰. Paradoxically, China leads the world in the production of installed capacity of both wind and solar electricity generation. Yet, 85.2 per cent of China’s primary energy consumption in 2020 was still provided by fossil fuels – down just 7 per cent from 92.3 per cent in 2009¹¹. And despite huge investments in giant solar and wind farms across multiple provinces and autonomous regions, fossil fuels (mostly coal) still accounted for 67.4 per cent of electricity generation in 2021, while wind contributed just 7.8 per cent and solar barely 3.9 per cent¹². In the first half of 2021, rebounding from the first wave of Covid-19, China’s carbon dioxide emissions surged past pre-pandemic levels to reach an all-time high 20 per cent increase in the second quarter before dropping back in late 2021 and the first half of 2022 as the real estate collapse, Omicron lockdowns, and drought-induced hydropower reductions slashed economic growth to near zero in the summer¹³.

Doubling Down on Coal and Dooming the Transition to Renewables

Since 2016, the Chinese Government has repeatedly promised to phase out coal and coal-fired power production only to renege

6. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “IPCC Sixth Assessment Report”, Geneva, IPCC, www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg3, 2022.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Climate Action Tracker (CAT), “Climate Action Tracker website. climateactiontracker.org/countries/, sd.

9. Energy Information Administration, “US Energy-Related CO₂ Emissions Rose 6 % in 2021”, *Today in Energy*, May 13, 2022; Climate Action Tracker (CAT), “Climate Action Tracker website. climateactiontracker.org/countries/, art. quoted.

10. International Energy Agency (IEA), “Global Energy Review 2021”, Paris, 2021, www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-review-2021; Kate Larsen and col., “China’s Greenhouse Gas Emissions Exceeded the Developed World for the First Time in 2019”, *Research Note*, May 6, 2021.

11. BP, “Statistical Review of World Energy 2021”, Londres, 2021.

12. Lauri Myllyvirta, “Analysis: What Do China’s Gigantic Wind and Solar Bases Mean for Its Climate Goals?”, *Carbon Brief*, May 3, 2022; China Energy Portal, “Electricity & Other Energy Statistics (Preliminary)”, *China Energy Portal*, January 27, 2022.

13. Tom Hancock, “Top China Forecaster Sees GDP Growth Near Zero in Third Quarter”, *Bloomberg*, December 17, 2021; Lauri Myllyvirta, “Analysis: China’s CO₂ Emissions Fall by Record 8 % in Second Quarter of 2022”, *Carbon Brief*, January 9, 2022; Primrose Riordan and Leslie Hook, “China’s Carbon Emissions Fall 8 % as Economic Growth Slows”, *Financial Times*, August 31, 2022.



on those commitments¹⁴. While coal-fired power plants are being de-commissioned around the world, China has approved a raft of new coal mines and coal-fired power plants. In March 2022, the National Development and Reform Commission committed to boosting domestic annual coal production by 300 million tonnes. In April, the government approved a new mega-coalmine in Ordos that will produce 15 million tonnes each year and could do so for nearly a century¹⁵. China produces and consumes half the world's coal and the nation's coal production hit re-cord levels in 2021. The new Fourteenth Five-Year Plan stresses the critical role of coal in 'ensuring basic energy needs' and supporting the nation's power system¹⁶. China promised to stop building coal-fired power plants abroad, but it is building more than 200 new coal-fired plants at home in a drive to boost economic growth, maintain jobs in coal-dependent regions, and ensure energy

self-sufficiency - locking the country into coal reliance for many decades to come, derailing the transition to renewables, and dooming Xi's UN pledge to transition to a green and low-carbon mode of development¹⁷. In 2020, the Chinese Government approved 47 gigawatts of new coal power projects - more than three times the new capacity approved in 2019. In 2021, it approved another 73.5 gigawatts of coal power - more than five times the 13.9 gigawatts proposed in the rest of the world in that year¹⁸. And with the unprecedented summer drought this year that dried up rivers across southern China and cut hydropower generation by 40 per cent, the government is doubling down on coal and officials are concerned about the reliability of renewables, even voicing scepticism about the very idea of phasing out coal¹⁹.

14. Richard, Smith, *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse*, *op. cit.*, p. XV-XVI.

15. "North China's Energy Center to Launch a New Coal Mine with Over 2 Billion Tons of Reserves", *Global Times*, April 7, 2022.

16. Nadya, Yeh, "China Doubles Down on Coal", *SupChina*, April 7, 2022.

17. Echo Xie, "China's US\$7 Trillion Spending Spree Aims to Save Economy - But Will Its Reliance on Fossil Fuels Put the Planet at Risk?", *South China Morning Post*, Marc 23, 2020.

18. Michael Standaert, "Despite Pledges to Cut Emissions, China Goes on a Coal Spree", *Yale Environment*, n° 360, March 24, 2021.

19. *Ibid.*

And not only coal. China's government has been pouring investments into oil and gas production, refineries, and building pipelines from Kazakhstan and Russia to import natural gas. The Siberian pipeline alone will enable China to import 1.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas a year (two-thirds as much as Russia supplies to Germany) through to 2049²⁰. China is now the world's largest importer of natural gas and oil. Pipelines are huge investments and require years to construct. It strains credulity to believe that the same government that is investing hundreds of billions of dollars in new coalmines, oil wells, refineries, and gas pipelines really intends to start shutting them just seven years from now.

In sum, far from 'transitioning to a green and low carbon mode of development', ultra-authoritarian Xi Jinping is developing the most carbon-intensive large industrial economy in the world. The Party-State has abandoned the transition to renewables in favour of an 'all of the above' approach to energy generation: more solar and wind, but even more fossil fuels. The question is why? I contend that there are two main reasons for this.

Technical Barriers to Decarbonising the 'Hard-to-Abate' Industries

The first reason is technical. I claim that there are insuperable technical barriers to decarbonising China's economy, especially in any time frame that matters for human survival. Let us start with what are collectively termed the 'hard-to-abate' industries that account for about half China's GHG emissions. Xi's first problem is that China is home to the world's largest concentration of carbon-intensive, hard-to-abate industries like steel and cement. Thermal electricity generation (90 per cent from coal, 10 per cent from gas) accounts for 32 per cent of China's total carbon dioxide emissions. For this reason, replacing coal-fired power plants with solar and wind-powered generators could cut China's emissions by about one-third - a huge

gain if this transition can be implemented²¹. But electricity generation is the low-hanging fruit of carbon mitigation - one of the very few sectors in which economic growth can be de-coupled from emissions growth.

At least 47 per cent of China's GHG emissions come from hard-to-abate manufacturing and other industries, most of which cannot be significantly decarbonised with current or anticipated technology either at all or in time to avert runaway global warming and climate collapse. Steel, aluminium, cement, aviation, shipping, heavy road transport, chemicals, plastics, synthetic textiles, and electronics stand out. As I have explained elsewhere²², decarbonising those industries has defied all efforts to date both in China and in the West, and while scientists and engineers are working on many new technologies - green hydrogen steel, electric and hydrogen airplanes, carbon capture and storage, etcetera - commercialising these, where possible at all, will require many decades.

For example, Bloomberg's New Energy Frontier analysts estimate that with a crash program, the global steel industry could replace coal with hydrogen for 10-50 per cent of output before 2050²³. McKinsey estimated that with massive funding, hydrogen could meet 14 per cent of total US energy needs by 2050²⁴. At those rates, why bother? Worse, 96 per cent of the world's commercially available hydrogen is derived from fossil fuels. Producing 'green' hydrogen would require the rapid construction of a huge and stupendously expensive new 'electroliser' industry based on technologies that are still in their infancy and unproven at scale. Even if such an industry could be built in the next decades, the daunting hazards of transporting, storing, and safely fuelling steel mills and vehicles, let alone airliners, with hydrogen have no ready solution either. Cement, aluminium, aviation, chemicals, plastics, and all the other hard-to-abate industries face

20. Robert Darwell, "China's Green NGO Climate Propaganda Enablers", *Real Clear Energy*, December 21, 2020.

21. Richard Smith, "Climate Arsonist Xi Jinping...", art. quoted, p. 49-51.

22. Richard Smith, "Climate Arsonist Xi Jinping...", art. quoted.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.

24. Ivan Penn and Clifford Krauss, "California Is Trying to Jump-Start the Hydrogen Economy", *The New York Times*, November 11, 2020.

similar constraints. Furthermore, the technical barriers to carbon mitigation apply as much to the capitalist West as to communist China. As *The Guardian's* environmental columnist George Monbiot wrote in 2007 with respect to the aviation industry:

There is no technofix. The growth of aviation and the need to address climate change cannot be reconciled ... [A] 90 percent cut in emissions requires not only that growth stops, but that most of the planes which are flying today are grounded. I recognize that this will not be a popular message. But it is hard to see how a different conclusion can be extracted from the available evidence²⁵.

Fifteen years on, the global aviation industry still has no viable alternative to kerosene jet fuel for airliners – but the climate emergency we face today is far more desperate, hence the need to park those planes (and the cars, trucks, cruise ships, container ships, etcetera) is far more urgent. Climate activist Greta Thunberg is right: ‘Our house is on fire. We need to act like it.’²⁶

All talk of carbon taxes, cap and trade, and carbon capture and sequestration is delusory²⁷. The only way China can effect ‘rapid, deep and immediate’ cuts in carbon dioxide emissions is to ‘grab the emergency brake’: immediately begin retrenching and/or shutting the country’s thousands of needless, wasteful, harmful, and polluting industries, such as the shockingly wasteful production of disposable products, from flimsy unrepairable plastic household goods and appliances to disposable shoes, ‘fast fashion’, bottled water, chipboard IKEA furniture, and high-end but disposable new versions of iPhones; halt the ‘blind production’ of steel, aluminium, glass, cars, ‘Made in China’ airliners, self-driving cars, cruise ships, ‘smart’ appliances, copy-cat theme parks, glass bridges, and recreational drones; end the

‘blind construction’ of Ponzi-scheme condominium blocks, ‘ghost cities’, useless ‘international’ airports in provincial towns, empty high-speed trains on little-used routes, the tallest skyscrapers, longest bridges, longest tunnels, and similar ‘blingfrastruc-ture’ projects built not for the needs of China’s people but for the glory of CCP officials; and shut all but critically essential coal-fired power plants and halt the stupendous waste of power used to produce all this needless junk and over-illuminate China’s cities²⁸.

I am not singling out China. I have made the same arguments with respect to the capitalist West²⁹. Nor am I saying we must go back to log cabins and horses and buggies. What I am saying is that the pursuit of infinite economic growth on a finite planet is going to kill us all, and soon. With more than 7 billion people crowded on one small blue planet, we need to slam the brakes on out-of-control growth. We need to ‘contract and converge’ production around a globally sustainable and acceptable average that can provide a dignified living for all the world’s peoples while leaving ample resources for future generations of humans as well as for the other fauna and flora with which we share this planet and on whom we critically depend. If we do not do this, we are doomed (I have tried to show how such a wholesale reorganising of our economies could give us not only an environmentally sustainable economy but also a better mode of life³⁰).

But suppressing production is the one option President Xi cannot accept because those hard-to-abate industries have been indispensable to China’s rise and underpin his aspirations to ‘make China great again’, win the technology race, and overtake the United States.

Political Drivers of and Barriers to Decarbonisation

25. George Monbiot, *Heat: How We Can Stop the Planet from Burning*, Cambridge, Penguin, 2007, p. 174.

26. Greta Thunberg, “‘Our House Is On Fire’: Greta Thunberg, 16, Urges Leaders to Act on Climate”, *The Guardian*, January 25, 2019.

27. Richard Smith, *Green Capitalism: The God That Failed*, Bristol, World Economic Association Books, 2016; Richard Smith, “An Ecosocialist Path to Limiting Global Temperature Rise to 1.5°C.”, *Real-World Economics Review*, n° 87, March 19, 2019.

28. “Cruises Boom as Millions of Chinese Take to the Seas”, *Bloomberg*, May 14, 2017; Richard Smith, *China’s Engine of Environmental Collapse*, op. cit., chap. 7; Barry van Wyk, “The Age of Smart Homes and Smart Products Has Started in China’s Cities”, *SupChina*, April 4, 2022.

29. Richard Smith, *Green Capitalism: The God That Failed*, op. cit.

30. Richard Smith, “Six Theses on Saving the Planet”, *The Next System Project*, November 14, 2016.

Thus, the second reason is political. What drives growth in China? China is the most complex economy in the world, with numerous built-in drivers of and barriers to emissions mitigation. It has every kind of capitalism: state capitalism, joint-venture capitalism, gangster capitalism, regular chamber of commerce capitalism – the lot. Roughly speaking, the industrial economy formally comprises the state-owned state-planned sector (50 per cent of industrial output), the foreign-invested joint-venture sector (30 per cent), and the private sector (20 per cent)³¹. The private and joint-venture sectors are of course driven by profit maximisation. The government also owns some foreign companies (such as Syngenta and Volvo) which it runs as state-capitalist companies. The state-owned economy has been modernised and partially marketised, but structurally remains little changed from Mao Zedong's day. This sector operates on different maxi-mands. State-sector growth is driven by the CCP ruling class, by their subjectively felt needs, fears, and ambitions, and projected by central planners into five-year plans geared to achieve their goals. I contend that China's state-led economic development is propelled by five unique drivers of hypergrowth.

First, at the highest level, hypergrowth is driven by CCP ambition and fear.

Since Mao took over the CCP in the 1930s, the Party-State has been led by a self-appointed elite of ultranationalists. Mao was first and foremost an ethno-nationalist in the tradition of China's nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century 'self-strengtheners'. They were concerned not merely with modernising and industrialising their country to catch up with the West. From Sun Yat-sen to Mao, Deng Xiao-ping, and Xi, China's leaders have all been obsessed with one overarching goal: to overcome China's 'century of humiliation', achieve 'wealth and power', and 'overtake the West' to reclaim what they imagine is China's de-served pride of place as the premier civilisation and culture in world history. In their view, China should be the 'natural leader of humankind', the rightful successor

31. Richard Smith, "Why China Isn't Capitalist (Despite the Pink Ferraris)", *Spectre*, August 17, 2020.

to 'the declining West', because China is a morally and politically superior 'new-type superpower'³². Since 1949, China's leaders have also been motivated by a deep fear of capitalist restoration or even a takeover of their economy by Western corporations. As a state-based communist party ruling class in a world dominated by more advanced and powerful capitalist nations, Mao and his successors understood, like Stalin and his successors, that they must overtake the United States to become the world's leading superpower. The Russians' failure to win the economic and arms race with the United States doomed the Soviet Communist Party, and Mao's successors – notably, Deng and Xi – have been determined to avoid that error. Thus, the leading driver of hypergrowth is the party's determination to build a relatively self-sufficient industrial superpower by protecting state industries (regardless of their pollution), ramping up import substitution, and achieving technological superiority over the West.

Second, China's rulers need to maximise employment to maintain 'stability' even if this often means producing superfluous coal and steel, needless infrastructure, ghost cities, and so on. Maximising employment is a major driver of overproduction, overconstruction, 'blind growth', 'blind demolition', 'blind investment', and profligate waste of energy and resources across the economy.

Third, they also need to maximise consumerism. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party in 1991 and the Chinese communists' own near-death experience with the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the CCP leadership resolved to create a mass consumer economy and raise incomes to divert people's attention from politics to consumption. Since the early 1990s, the government has promoted one consumer craze after another: cars, condominiums, shopping malls, tourism, golf courses, theme parks, cruise boats, food delivery, vid-

32. Angang Hu, *China in 2020: A New Type of Superpower*, Washington, Brookings Institution, 2011; Richard Smith, "On Contradiction: Mao's Party-Substitutionist Revolution in Theory and Practice [in 4 parts]", *New Politics*, June 7, 2022; Mingfu Liu, *The China Dream*, New York, CN Times Books, 2015.



eo games, online shopping, and more. After centuries of poverty and decades of Maoist austerity, the Chinese were overdue for improved living standards³³. Yet, the promotion of mindless consumerism for the sake of consumerism on the model of Western capitalism has contributed mightily to China's and the world's waste and pollution crises³⁴.

Fourth, intra-bureaucratic competition drives more growth. In 1992, Deng cut a profit-sharing deal with local and provincial officials (the nominal owners of most SOEs) giving them the right to sell over-plan and side-line production on the free market, and split the profit with the state³⁵. He then exhorted them to 'grow the gross domestic product' (GDP). This certainly jumpstarted growth, providing a wider array of goods and services. But the introduction of market incentives within the framework of the old bureaucratic system of collective property and surplus extraction also exacerbated many of the irrationalities of that system while adding new irrationalities of capitalism³⁶. In this compartmentalised particularistic system, opportunities for officials to boost the income of their counties, municipalities, or provinces (and enrich themselves by legal and illegal means) were largely confined to the perimeters of their own bailiwicks. Thus, they found themselves in a zero-sum competition with officials in other municipalities or provinces over markets, central appropriations, and promotion such that, as one official put it, 'every locality sees itself as if it's a separate country'³⁷. As a result, Deng's exhortation led in short order to GDP 'tournaments' as local officials competed to boost their growth rates to polish their credentials. For example, while the Eleventh Five-Year Plan set the national target for GDP growth at 7.5 per cent,

33. "Cruises Boom as Millions of Chinese Take to the Seas", Bloomberg, 2017, art. quoted.

34. Jing Li, "China Produces about a Third of Plastic Waste Polluting the World's Oceans", *South China Morning Post*, 13 février 2015; Ronggang Chen, "The Mountains of Takeout Trash Choking China's Cities", *Sixth Tone*, October 15, 2017.

35. Jinglian Wu, *Chinese Economic Reform*, Mason, Thomson, 2005, p. 146-151.

36. Richard, Smith, *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse*, *op. cit.*, chap. 5.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

all 31 of China's provinces set higher targets. The average was 10.1 per cent. Competition-driven local GDP growth in turn has driven national GDP to overshoot planned targets. Since 1978, central planners never set growth targets higher than 8 per cent per annum, but that target has been routinely exceeded. In the period 1983-88, GDP growth averaged 11.9 per cent, hitting 15.2 per cent in 1985. From 1992 to 2011, GDP growth averaged 10.5 per cent, topping 11 per cent and 14 per cent on the crest of the boom in 2006 and 2007, respectively. The government has been trying to suppress 'zombie' overproduction of coal, steel, aluminium, glass, housing, cars, and other commodities for decades – largely without success.

Fifth, corruption is a major driver of hypergrowth. Thanks to market re-form, the Chinese Government became the richest state in the world, with rivers of cash flowing in from SOE profits, taxes, trade surpluses, and so on. Its US\$3 trillion foreign exchange hoard is the world's largest. All this tressure is the property of the Party-State, but individual CCP officials have no legal right to any of it. They are legally entitled only to their trivial salaries and perks. Yet, as we know, China's rulers are filthy rich³⁸. The only ways officials can take 'their share' of these social surpluses are illegal. Thus, from princelings down to local mayors and party secretaries, officials have used and monetised their power to loot the state. Hundreds of high officials have been prosecuted for bribery, embezzlement, sale of offices, and related crimes. Corruption also fuelled growth. From ghost cities to high-speed gravy trains, an unknowable but no doubt huge proportion of China's overproduction and overconstruction would not have been produced were it not for the new opportunities they afforded cadres to steal even more³⁹.

In sum, planned growth targets of 6-8 per cent per annum plus intra-bureaucratic competition to maximise GDP plus government efforts to maximise employment and con-

38. Juliette Garside and David Pegg, "Panama Papers Reveal Offshore Secrets of China's Red Nobility", *The Guardian*, April 6, 2016.

39. Richard Smith, *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse*, op. cit., chap. 6.

sumerism plus corruption are, in aggregate, even more powerful drivers of hypergrowth than profit maximisation under capitalism. Those drivers have powered China's growth at three to four times the rate of growth of Western capitalist economies for the past three decades and generated soaring carbon dioxide emissions in the process.

Rejuvenation Submerged

This summer, China endured what scientists have called 'the most severe heatwave in world history'⁴⁰. Startling in its scale, duration, and intensity, record-shattering temperatures baked the southern half of China, drying up hundreds of rivers, withering crops, igniting wildfires, forcing factories to close, and pushing people to seek refuge in caves or at higher altitudes⁴¹. Yet, awful as this was, it will seem mild compared with what is coming. Global average temperatures have not yet breached 1.5°C above preindustrial levels but are projected to exceed 3°C before the end of the century. In October 2019, climate scientists published research showing that on present trends, global warming is going to 'all but erase' Shanghai, Shenzhen, and 'most of the world's great coastal cities by 2050'⁴². There will not be any 'great rejuvenation' and glory for the CCP when its cities are under water, when the glaciers melt, and farming collapses across the country. There will be ecological apocalypse, famine, and untold human suffering.

Source: *Made in China Journal*, n° 2, vol. 7, 2022, The Australian National University, Canberra.

40. Michael Le Page, "Heatwave in China is the Most Severe Ever Recorded in History", *New Scientist*, August 23, 2022.

41. Matthew Bossons, "What My Family and I Saw While Trapped in China's Heat Wave", *The New York Times*, September 9, 2022; Shehnaz Ali, "Toyota and Foxconn Hit as Drought Leads to Low Yangtze River Level", *Financial Times*, August 17, 2022.

42. Denise Lu and Christopher Flavelle, "Rising Seas Will Erase More Cities by 2050, New Research Shows", *The New York Times*, October 30, 2019.

Tariffs or democratic rights ?

Richard Smith

China's emergence as the world's pre-eminent low-cost manufacturer in the 1990s and 2000s devastated Western industries cost millions of American jobs and was heavily responsible for the election of anti-free trade Donald Trump in 2016 against Hillary Clinton who championed the Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade deal that would have shipped more jobs to Asia just as her husband's "NAFTA WE HAFTA" accelerated the deindustrialization of America in the 1990s¹.

Trump pulled out of the TPP on his first day in office and then launched his trade war with China imposing tariffs of 25 % to 50 % on Chinese solar panels, washing machines, steel, aluminum and other commodities. Biden maintained Trump's tariffs and added more. In 2024 his campaign, Trump threatened to levy 60 % tariffs on all Chinese goods, but as president-elect he dialed this back to an additional 10 % on all Chinese goods.² Yet Trump's tariffs are an inept strategy that has not "reshored" industry to the U.S.A.³

According to the World Bank, between 2017 and 2022 China's share of U.S. imports fell from 22 to 16 percent - largely thanks to Trump's tariffs. But instead of reshoring production back to the U.S. as Trump promised, Chinese companies just relocated much of their final assembly of Chinese components to Vietnam and other countries that

are "deeply integrated into China's supply chains" with the result that, directly or indirectly via re-exports from Vietnam etc., China "remains the top supplier of imported goods to the U.S. in 2022"⁴. And while "there is some evidence of nearshoring [mainly to Mexico], there is no consistent evidence of reshoring." In fact, Trump's tariffs not only failed to bring back jobs, more jobs were lost to retaliatory tariffs from China and the EU.⁵ Meanwhile, American consumers have been saddled with paying for his tariffs via inflated prices.

In my view, the Left should do what it can to shift the conversation about tariffs on Chinese goods to a conversation about leveling the playing field by fighting to win workers everywhere the right to unionize and to strike and to achieve the democratic rights of free speech, free press, habeas corpus, and meaningful elections⁶.

[...] They're doomed because Chinese companies' advantage in the world market is not so much massive state subsidies, which thanks to Biden's industrial policies American companies now also enjoy, nor even to their huge economies of scale, vertically integrated in-house production of EV batteries,

1. Dan Kaufman, "How NAFTA broke American politics", *New York Times*, September 3, 2024. China did not take part in the TPP negotiations but, as the AFL-CIO pointed out, "China is already deeply integrated into all the TPP countries [which] will enable China to reap the benefits without even joining", AFL-CIO, "The IC relationship: The TPP is not the answer", *Report*, March 16, 2016.

2. *Truth Social*, November 25, 2024.

3. See Shawn Donnan and Bill Allison, "What really happens on the ground when the US slaps tariffs on China", *Bloomberg*, October 7, 2024.

4. Caroline Freund and col., "Is US trade policy reshaping global supply chains?", *Working Paper*, October 2023.

5. Omar Faruque, "What happened to Donald Trump's planned Foxconn factory in Wisconsin?", *WGTC*, 10 juillet 2024; Ann Swanson, "Trump's tariffs hurt U.S. jobs but swayed American voters", *New York Times*, February 2, 2024.

6. In the same vein, see the arguments for international left-wing solidarity with Chinese workers put forward by Eli Friedman and al. in their important new book, *China in Global Capitalism*, Chicago, Haymarket, 2024.

and coordinated national supply chains, as to their deeply below-market labor costs. That's the main reason why China's leading EV manufacturer, Warren Buffet-backed BYD auto, can profitably sell a Tesla-equivalent in the United States for \$12,000, which means that "Even with a 100 % tariff, BYD will have the cheapest EV in the market at under \$25,000."⁷

According to a recent Reuters analysis of Chinese job listings, current Chinese auto manufacturing wages are from 9 to 19 times lower than in the U.S.:

"Adverts from 30 auto firms showed hourly salaries of 14 yuan (\$1.93) to 31 yuan (\$4.27), with Tesla, SAIC-GM, Li Auto and Xpeng at the higher end."⁸

By comparison, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in March 2024 U.S. average hourly wages in motor vehicle manufacturing were \$37.18. The UAW's victorious six-week strike last year won a 25 % hike, boosting wages to \$42.60 for assembly line workers and \$50.57 for skilled trades over the four and a half years of the contract⁹. U.S. auto industry labor costs are comparable to those in Europe's leading manufacturing economies.

In China's democratic neighbors, auto manufacturing wages are lower but still multiples of those in China. South Korean auto workers earn an average of U.S.\$11.60 per hour, Taiwanese U.S.\$9.85¹⁰. Furthermore, China's labor cost advantage in auto assembly extends all the way through the supply chain from manufactured components to raw material inputs as both Chinese and Western automakers in China "buy Chinese" to take advantage of China's ultra-low-cost producers in every field.

Why is industrial labour so cheap

7. Gregor Sebastian, "Ain't no duty high enough", *Rhodium Group*, April 29, 2024; Ryohei Yasoshima and Azusa Kawakami, "Chinese EVs still cheaper than Teslas in US after tariff hike", *NikkeiAsia*, September 15, 2024.

8. *Reuters*, "China's auto workers bear the brunt of price war as fallout widens", September 5, 2023.

9. US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "National Average Hourly Earnings, Motor vehicles manufacturing, mars 2024"; Kristopher J. Brooks, "UAW contract breakdown: Here's what union members are getting", CBS, October 30, 2023.

10. *Salary Expert* (Corée); *Salary Expert* (Taiwan), 2024.

in China? Because the Chinese police state guarantees access to an unfree workforce.

The reason labor is so cheap in China is because the so-called "People's Republic" of China isn't a democracy. It's a totalitarian police state dictatorship that bans independent unions and has ruthlessly suppressed wages to enrich the communist ruling class, attract foreign capital and companies to modernize China's economy, and export goods at prices that undersell manufacturers in capitalist democracies.

The Chinese have no freedoms, no civil rights, no human rights, no property rights - none that can be defended in China's courts against the arbitrary power of the party-state. The party-state can do whatever it wants to its subjects who have no recourse. They're effectively state slaves. Chinese "netizens" regularly complain on Weibo (China's twitter equivalent) that Xi Jinping is turning China into "West North Korea."¹¹

China's constitution formally enshrines numerous freedoms. Article 35 of the 1982 iteration of its constitution stated that "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration." In the early morning of June 4th 1989 at Tiananmen Square, Beijing, thousands of workers, students, and common people who had come out to support the million-strong two-month long democracy protests were massacred for the "crime" of attempting to exercise those bogus freedoms and rights. Government troops reserved special brutality for the members of the Beijing Autonomous Workers Federation (BWAR), formed in April in bold imitation of Poland's Solidarity trade union. When Premier Li Peng declared martial law on May 19, the incipient union called for a general strike to prevent a military onslaught. When the PLA tanks and APCs finally broke into the square at 1:15AM the morning of the 4th, the BWAR tent encampment was their first target. According to UK documents released in 2017, more than 10,000 students, trade unionists and their supporters were mowed down with machine guns,

11. Evan Osnos, "China's age of malaise", *New Yorker*, October 23, 2023.



run over by tanks and bayoneted by the self-styled socialist party-state.¹²

With all the powers of the police state arrayed against its politically powerless captive working classes who, realistically, cannot escape China, this has enabled domestic and foreign private companies and state-owned employers to impose the harshest, most exploitative - and immensely profitable - labor regimes seen anywhere in the world since the industrial revolution and plantation slavery of the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries: excruciating wage-slavery, forced labor, and prison slave labor.

“Wage slavery” is no joke in China. Chinese workers are not just “overworked and underpaid.” They are, in Chinese University of Hong Kong professor Jack Linchuan Qiu’s words, “modern twenty-first century slaves.”¹³

12. Orville Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 122; Robin Munro, *Black Hands of Beijing*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1993, chap. 14 and 15; [BBC](#), “Tiananmen Square protest death toll was 10,000”, December 23, 2017.

13. Jack Linchuan Qiu, *Goodbye iSlave*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2016.

Formally free but substantively unfree, tens of millions of China’s workers aren’t even formally free¹⁴.

At Foxconn’s notorious militarized factories that make iPhones and iPads for Apple and devices for other companies, the workers are nominally free. They hire on and can quit. But the work regime is so intense, so brutal, the hours so exhaustingly long (12+ hour days, commonly 20 days straight without a day off) and the pay so low that since 2010 the bosses have had to wrap the factories with “anti-suicide” nets and install jail bars on the windows of its worker dormitories to stop desperate workers from embarrassing the company by jumping to their deaths to escape the despair and hopelessness of their factory lives, as many continue to do¹⁵. On the first page of their book *Dying for an iPhone*, Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai quote from a workers’ blog: “To die is the only way to justify that we ever lived. Perhaps for the Foxconn employees and employees like us, the use of death is to testify that we were ever alive at all, and that while we lived, we had only despair.”

14. “Workers Voice”, *China Labour Bulletin*, November 2024.

15. Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, Ngai Pun, *Dying for an iPhone*, Chicago, Haymarket, 2020.

Worker turnover is high at Foxconn but the available alternatives are not necessarily better so Foxconn has not yet run out of unfree wage-slaves.

Then there is the *laogai* archipelago of “reform through labor” camps where since 1949 some 50 million prisoners have endured years, decades, even lifetimes of slave labor producing products for domestic consumption and export.¹⁶

Finally, there are Xi Jinping’s notorious Xinjiang Uyghur prison slave-labor factories where millions of workers produce cotton, aluminum, electronics, solar cells, inputs for EVs, and other products.¹⁷ Fast-fashion giants Temu and Shein can sell their garments and other products at prices “too cheap to be true” because they use forced-labor inputs and compel their piecework garment workers to work 18 hour days 7 days a week for 2 U.S. cents per item¹⁸.

In 1982, after the rise of the Polish Solidarity trade union, the Communist Party deleted the right to strike from its constitution (not that it was ever actionable anyway)¹⁹. China’s

only union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), does not represent workers against the state or private employers. It represents the state against the workers. Its job is to “act as a transmission belt to transmit labor policy from the Party down to the workers.”²⁰ Independent trade unions are illegal. Collective bargaining for wages and conditions is not permitted, only party-controlled “consultation.”²¹. Labor organizers who have tried to organize independent unions are jailed and/or “disappeared”²².

“Socialist” China lacks even basic regulatory agencies to protect workers’ health, safety and job security – no OSHA, no NIOSH, no NLRB. China’s regulatory agencies, like its courts and police, are toothless tools of the Communist Party.²³

Strikes are illegal but since 2010 workers in China’s autos, electronics and other plants have fought back with thousands of wildcat strikes, winning wage concessions and forcing the government to repeatedly raise the minimum wage.²⁴ [...] Wages are higher today but still far below those in industrialized capitalist democracies. Even with thousands of strikes every year, the current average hourly wage for factory workers across all industries in China is just 28 yuan (\$3.87).²⁵ [...]

No tariff can offset China’s police state-enforced union-free, OSHA-free, NLRB-free, EPA-free, human rights-free labor-cost advantage, let alone compete with tens of millions of *laogai* and prison slave workers.

[...] Recently, some Chinese EV manufacturers have responded to tariffs by announcing plans to produce cars in Europe. That’s a start. But if they just assemble knocked down kit cars produced in China and shipped to Europe in boxes to avoid tariffs, they will still

16. Hongda Harry Wu, *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag*, Boulder, Westview, 1992; Kate Laycock, “Laogai camps”, *DW*, January 15, 2013; Daniel Vector, “Inside Christmas card, girl finds plea from Chinese prison laborers”, *New York Times*, December 23, 2019; Steven Jiang, “Chinese labor camp inmate tells of true horror of Halloween ‘SOS’”, *BBC*, November 7, 2013; Danny Vincent, “China used prisoners in lucrative internet gaming work”, *The Guardian*, May 25, 2011. For a look back at the 1950s and 1960s, see the films by Wang Bing on the survivors of these labor camps: *The Ditch* (2010) and *Dead Souls* (2018). In 2013, the CCP announced that it would close these “re-education through labor camps”, but it seems that they have been replaced by others (Frank Langfitt, “China ends one notorious form of detention, but keeps others”, *NPR*, February 5, 2014).

17. [Human Rights Watch](#), “China carmakers implicated in Uyghur forced labor”, February 1st, 2024; [US Department of Labor](#), “Against their will: The situation in Xinjiang”, sd; Chris Buckley and Austin Ramzy, “Inside China’s push to turn Muslim minorities into an army of workers”, *New York Times*, 30 décembre 2019; Darren Byler, *In the Camps: China’s High-Tech Penal Colony*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2021.

18. “China: Shein factory employees work 18 hours a day with no weekends earning just two cents per item, report finds”, [Business & Human Rights Resource Centre](#), October 16, 2022.

19. This “right”, which could never be exercised, was recalled in 1975 by Mao Zedong for his “class struggle” against an imaginary “bourgeoisie”, decades after the real capitalists had been expropriated and fled the country.

20. Tianjiao Yu, *Right to Strike: Comparison of Canadian and Chinese Law*, thèse, Dalhousie University, 1998.

21. *Idem*.

22. Grace, “Student activists and China’s evolving labor movement”, *China Digital Times*, August 17, 2018.

23. Richard Smith, *China’s Engine of Environmental Collapse*, Londres, Pluto, 2020, chap. 1-3.

24. [China Labour Bulletin Strike Map](#).

25. “Factory worker salary”, [Economic Research Institute](#), 2024.

benefit from most of that extra-economic forced-labor “China price” advantage over EU producers.²⁶ [...]

Ultimately, the only way to level the playing field to the advantage of workers in both China and the Western democracies is to raise wages in China. That’s why the UAW supports trade unions in U.S. auto plants in Mexico. As the Detroit News reported in February 2022, the union views higher wages in Mexico as good news for workers on both sides of the border. Unionization in Mexico is giving U.S. workers an equal chance of winning future products to build, while simultaneously boosting Mexican wages: “Their wages go up, that helps us, said Eric Welter, UAW Local 598 shop chairman at Flint Assembly [...] it makes us more competitive and helps us not to have to make future sacrifices. We’re on a more level playing field in the future²⁷.”

Whither China ?

Of course, China is not Mexico. The only way Chinese workers are going to win wages and conditions comparable to the capitalist democracies is when the Communist Party falls and is replaced by a political democracy. To be sure, that seems unlikely anytime soon. Yet police states were peacefully replaced with democracies in neighboring Taiwan and South Korea.

And for his part, Xi Jinping faces an unprecedented convergence of economic, social, and political crises, what he calls: “unimaginable perils and dangers,” “terrifying tidal waves and horrifying storms”²⁸: a demographic crisis expressed in the country’s collapsing birthrate and rapidly ageing society; a ramped up trade war with Trump; a deepening economic slowdown and spreading unemployment despite surging

exports and global dominance of solar panels, EVs and batteries; a deflating housing bubble kept aloft only by infusions of state funds to build more ghost cities for China’s ever fewer and older people; hopelessly indebted local governments after decades of splurging on bling infrastructure and need-less housing now forced to cut salaries and unable to pay maintenance workers, teachers, police, etc.²⁹; sharply increasing strikes and protests combined with shocking incidences of mass stabbings, murder by car crash, and other indices of societal disintegration. And this is not to mention the Communist Party’s heavy responsibility for cooking the climate that’s on course to flood the world’s coastal cities including Shanghai and Hong Kong by 2050.³⁰

On top of all these threats, Xi’s decade-long anti-corruption drive which has taken down more than a million officials and his jailing of prominent capitalists and seizure of their companies has earned him millions of enemies inside and outside the Party and accelerated flight of talent and capital out of the country³¹. Xi has purged so many generals (52 since 2014 including heads of the nuclear Rocket Force that he himself appointed) and defense ministers (2, also loyalists hand-picked by Xi) over allegations of “deep-seated problems with politics, ideology, work style, discipline” and dubious “political loyalty” that even though he reigns as supreme commander, he can’t trust his own praetorian guards to protect his personal safety.³² That’s why this past summer he resorted to the desperate expedient of appointing his wife, singer-turned-first-lady Peng Liyuan (who also held the rank of Major General in

26. Melissa Eddy, “Chinese automakers’ answer to EU tariffs: build in Europe”, *New York Times*, September 19, 2024; Anthony Palazao and col., “China’s made-in-Europe EVs pose new threat to region’s carmakers”, *Bloomberg*, July 26, 2024.

27. Jamie L. LaReau and Eric D. Lawrence, “New union at GM Mexico plant could benefit US workers,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 6, 2022,

28. Zhou Xin and col., “This is what Xi Jinping says can help save China from ‘terrifying tidal waves and horrifying storms’”, *South China Morning Post*, December 18, 2018.

29. Li Yuan, “China’s police are preying on small firms in search of cash”, *New York Times*, November 26, 2024; Laura He and col., “Chinese cities desperate for cash are chasing companies for taxes – some from the 1990s”, *CNN*, June 21, 2024.

30. Richard Smith, “Why China can’t decarbonize”, read p. 18.

31. Lynette H. Ong, “Fleeing Xi’s ‘China Dream’: the great exodus of people and capita”, *Asia Society*, October 2, 2024.

32. Shashir Gupta, “President Xi Jinping purges PLA generals in massive military overhaul”, *Hindustan Times*, July 14, 2024; Nectar Gan, “Xi brought down powerful rivals in the military. Now he’s going after his own men”, *CNN*, December 15, 2024.

A VERY SPECIAL UNION

The ACFTU is the only authorized central labour body. Base unions do not have the right to coordinate independently. According to the law, the ACFTU “shall resolutely observe [...] the line set by the CCP, the principles of Marxism-Leninism, the thought of Mao and the doctrine of Deng Xiaoping, as well as the policy of reform and opening-up”. According to the 1992 law, “the establishment of a grassroots trade union organization, [...] a national or local industrial trade union is subject to the approval of the higher-level trade union. [In the private sector, unions are often subordinate to company management, which appoints the vast majority of union officials. The union’s priority is to work for production growth, not to fight against it. Its role is not to fight for a balance of power that will enable it to negotiate under the best possible conditions. It is revealing that the term ‘strike’ is not mentioned in the 1992 law: it only refers to ‘the voluntary stoppage or slowing down of work’. The demands function is limited to the extreme: it essentially consists of providing employees with assistance when their rights have been violated. The ACFTU’s 1.13 million full-time permanent staff are not ordinary employees temporarily placed at the disposal of the union. They have the status of party mass organization officials, and as such enjoy material and career benefits. Union premises are usually located on the party’s premises. Very often, the union president also has responsibilities within the local political power structure. According to the China Labour Bulletin, “the ACFTU, whose leaders are appointed by the party [...] is more active than the police in blocking the formation of independent unions”.

Source: *Solidaires International*, «Chine: où en est le mouvement ouvrier?», Paris, Syllepse, 2019.



the Song and Dance Division under the PLA’s General Political Department), to the Central Military Commission (CMC)’s little-known Examination and Evaluation Commission to vet prospective top military appointees and insure their loyalty to Emperor Xi.³³ Like Mao Zedong himself who turned against so many of his closest allies, and in his last years turned on his protégé, defense minister, and heir apparent Lin Biao to rely on his wife Jiang Qing (herself arrested weeks after Mao’s death in 1976), Xi is well aware that there is no lasting loyalty, no guaranteed security in the Game of Thrones that is China’s gangster Communist Party mafia.³⁴

Xi and his Party have no solution to any of these deep problems and systemic contradictions. His only “solution” is fiercer repression, tighter censorship, and intensified surveillance³⁵, but this only postpones the inevitable reckoning. Xi Jinping’s situation today is not so different from that of his “deep friend” and “strategic ally” Bashar al-Assad.³⁶

Chinese were shocked, and many inspired by, the completely unexpected and abrupt collapse of Assad’s all-powerful and Russian-backed police state. “Could that happen here too?” many are asking. Given that the ideologically bankrupt Communist Party has run out of ideas and has no plausible alternative, no Deng Xiaoping waiting in the wings, a Syrian-like collapse of the Party is not so hard to imagine as it used to be.³⁷ The East German Communists never saw it coming either.

Joe Biden made history as the first American president to stand with workers against

33. Katsuji Nakazawa, “Analysis: Military purges put Xi Jinping’s singer-wife in the spotlight”, *NikkeiAsia*, July 11, 2024. Like Mao, who had turned against his closest allies and got rid of his protégé, defense minister and presumed heir Lin Piao, to rely on his wife Jiang Qing (herself arrested a few weeks after Mao’s death in 1976).

34. Richard Smith, “Guanxi and the Game of Thrones: Wealth, Property, and Insecurity in a Lawless System”, *China’s Engine*, chap. 6.

35. Daisuke Wakabayashi and Claire Fu, “China’s censorship dragnet targets critics of the economy”, *Bloomberg*, January 31, 2024.

36. Xinhua, “Xi, Assad jointly announce China-Syria strategic partnership”, October 10, 2023.

37. Ileana Wachtel, “When Chinese citizens are surveyed anonymously, support for party and government plummets”, *USC Dornsife*, January, 29 2024, .

the bosses when he walked the picket line with UAW workers' Local 174 Willow Run plant at Belleville Michigan in September 2023³⁸. If only he had adopted the same approach to China. But in this and in so many other areas (Ukraine, Palestine), Biden was politically conflicted and a coward. Instead of decrying "China's unfair advantages" he should have publicly supported striking Chinese workers against their bosses and the police state.³⁹ He should have publicly told Xi Jinping to tear down its Great Firewall, restore the right to strike, permit free independent trade unions, permit the free speech, free press, freedom of association and right to protest that are inscribed in the country's bullshit constitution.⁴⁰

Xi says "universal rights, freedom, democracy, and a free press are bourgeois values and inappropriate for the Chinese people."⁴¹ China's people beg to differ. In every upsurge from the 1919 May Fourth Movement to the 1989 Tiananmen protest, to the "white paper protests" in November 2022 against Xi's Covid lockdowns, the cry of the Chinese people has always been for democracy and human rights. In cities across China, the "white paper" protestors chanted:

We want freedom!

We don't want to be slaves!

We want human rights! We want democracy!

We don't want dictators, we want to vote!

Xi Jinping step down!

Communist Party step down!⁴²

38. "Remarks by President Biden at United Auto Workers Picket Line, White House", September 26, 2023.

39. Simon Han and Jessica Song, "The return of strikes in China", *Asian Labour Review*, June, 2024.

40. Neil J. Diamant, *Useful Bullshit: Constitutions in Chinese Politics and Society*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2022.

41. Massimo Introvigne, "Xi Jinping explains why he is against human rights", *Bitter Winter*, September 7, 2021.

42. Nectar Gan and Selina Wang, "At the heart of China's protests against zero-Covid, young people cry for freedom", *CNN*, November 28, 2022.



Global trade union solidarity across supply chains

Zhang Mazi

33

I am a Chinese socialist, and a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the Tempest Collective. I immigrated to the United States in the last couple of years. Before that, I worked in the Chinese tech industry for many years, and I hope to draw from that experience in my talk. Today, I will discuss labor solidarity through supply chains, focusing mainly on Foxconn. The focus on Foxconn is meant to be a starting point for understanding the possibilities for organizing across U.S.-China supply chains. We can apply many of these observations to other Chinese companies, and indeed to other global companies as well.

First of all, what is Foxconn?

Foxconn is the largest electronic contract manufacturer in the world, with an annual revenue of more than \$200 billion. Foxconn's headquarters are in Taiwan, but it has factories all over China, as well as in Brazil, India, Mexico, and the United States. So, Foxconn is truly a global conglomerate. And what does Foxconn manufacture? As a contract electronics manufacturing company, Foxconn does not produce anything branded as Foxconn. However, most of the major electronics we know and use in our daily lives bear Foxconn's mark somewhere inside them. Foxconn is most well-known as a contract manufacturer for Apple. Your iPhone, your iPad, your Mac PCs, or your other Apple products either have been assembled in a Foxconn factory or have components manufactured in a Foxconn factory. Outside of Apple, various components of Android phones are also produced in Foxconn factories. Your Android phone may be assembled in Vietnam, Thailand, or elsewhere, but the audio or Wi-Fi module inside the phone may have gone through a Foxconn assembly line.

PlayStation, Nintendo, and Amazon's whole line of electronic products (i.e., the Echo Dot and its AI assistants), are all manufactured by Foxconn. These are the biggest products that we know of. Besides these company's products, Foxconn manufactures several other electronic products. It is estimated that more than 50 percent of all electronic devices in the world contain components manufactured by Foxconn. That includes routers, IoT (Internet of Things) devices, smart appliances like smart fridges, and even your washing machine might have a Foxconn chip in it. Likewise, 5G chips inside your phones, biotech solutions, TV servers, computers, tablets, cameras, speakers, etc., were probably created in a Foxconn factory at some point.

Since Foxconn is such a giant conglomerate that manufactures so many things, it also employs many workers. Although it is a Taiwanese company, Foxconn has its primary manufacturing hub located in China. It was one of the first foreign companies to move to China after it opened up to foreign investment under Deng Xiaoping. Foxconn helped pioneer the entire Chinese manufacturing model: underpaid workers live inside these large complexes, then work in buildings opposite from the dormitories in which they live.

Currently, Foxconn employs more than 800,000 workers in China. That number fluctuates yearly, depending on how well the company is doing, and on their hiring and production quota. Usually, more than half of the workers in Foxconn factories are "dispatch workers." Dispatch workers are temporary workers who are not directly employed by Foxconn, but are contracted with third-party dispatch labor agencies - which are notorious for regularly flouting labor law. Foxconn subcontracts its human resources

and hiring departments to other agencies, and workers sign up with these agencies to work at Foxconn. The benefit for Foxconn is that they get to maintain a flexible labor force. Global demands shift from season to season with electronic devices. For example, iPhone sales may ramp up during Christmas, as everyone in the United States buys the latest versions of iPhones as gifts for all their friends or families, while for other seasons, those sales might go down. So, Foxconn needs to be flexible to meet this shifting demand, which is why more than half of its workers are dispatch workers. However, Chinese labor law mandates that no more than 10 percent of a business's workers can be dispatch workers. Foxconn has a pattern of hiring substantially more dispatch workers than is legally allowed. Foxconn has been violating that labor law for years, if not decades, to maintain a flexible labor force and to protect itself from all labor responsibilities if a labor dispute happens. If Foxconn owes wages to dispatch workers, they can blame the problem on the workers' dispatch agency instead. In that way, Foxconn manages to avoid responsibilities regarding hiring and retaining labor in China.

Aside from the dispatch worker issue, Foxconn also utilizes vocational school students as free labor in China. Some Foxconn factories might have contractual relationships with local vocational schools teaching their students about electronic manufacturing or electronics engineering. Those vocational schools will send their students into Foxconn factories ostensibly as interns, using them as unpaid laborers for Foxconn under the guise of providing job experience. Foxconn puts these students onto the assembly line so they can assemble electronic devices for free. Foxconn workers also experience rampant sexual harassment, bullying, excessive overtime wage errors, and inadequate safety training. In addition, Foxconn does not have a good record of teaching its workers how to safely handle toxic chemicals. And aside from all these things, workers' suicides are rampant in Foxconn factories. Though the media largely stopped reporting these suicides from 2015 onwards, they are still happening every year.

Employer repression and workers' revolt

During COVID-19 and the Zero-COVID policy in China, Foxconn implemented the so-called "closed loop production system" inside its Zhengzhou factory, which is located in central China. A closed-loop production system meant that workers had to work, eat, sleep, and live all inside the factory, 24 hours a day. Workers were essentially not allowed to leave the Zhengzhou factory premises during their contract. Foxconn installed security and barricades to prevent the workers from leaving. There was a lot of overtime, very little rest, and few safety procedures implemented on campus to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In fact, the closed-loop system exacerbated the transmission of the virus. In late 2022, an internal outbreak of COVID-19 flared up, and because of the closed-loop production system, many workers were getting infected, while Foxconn was covering up these issues. But we learned from workers' testimonies on social media that Foxconn was not providing adequate housing services to them. Because of the conditions, service providers refused to enter the compound to assist these workers. Trash started piling up, all the dorms became extremely unsanitary, and COVID-19 began to spread throughout the compound unchecked. These conditions led to a spontaneous uprising by Foxconn workers; they started breaking down barricades and going to management, with many demanding to leave their jobs. Many of them jumped through the barricades and started walking home, even if it took them a day or two to get there. That was how desperate the situation was. The local government even sent cadres to help fill Foxconn's supply chains, essentially having party members act as scabs, as workers began leaving en masse, with the company refusing to budge on basic demands at first.

Workers also began posting videos of this growing unrest at Foxconn on social media, and the videos went viral. Foxconn called in the local government for help, and the government sent in the police against workers who were just demanding basic human rights, lost wages, and better working conditions. Police dressed in all-white protective suits started beating up workers. This is what

companies in China typically do, and this is the modus operandi for any labor action in China.

This Foxconn uprising in Zhengzhou eventually snowballed into the A4 movement, which ended China's Zero-COVID policy. The uprising at Zhengzhou Foxconn was followed by a tragedy in Urumqi, where an entire apartment complex under lockdown due to COVID-19 caught on fire, and firefighters could not get into the building, so residents were asphyxiated and died in what was a preventable disaster. There was a lot of frustration with Zero-COVID policies, where people in big cities, like Beijing and Shanghai, had been locked in their residential compounds for months, unable to access basic necessities. Older residents were dying because they could not leave their homes to get to a hospital for conditions that needed treatment. All the government's hotlines were flooded during that period. All of these

frustrations, plus the Zhengzhou Foxconn workers' uprising, led to the brief but monumental White Paper Movement that saw masses of people in the streets all over China. To me, this has been illuminative of the potential power labor has in China, where workers led the charge in this entire moment, and it shows that further down the line Chinese workers can be better organized and take action, and that there is hope that change can take place in China.

Building transnational solidarity

I use Foxconn as an example, but we can apply the following tactics to different companies and workforces. One way to build this solidarity is by hitting Foxconn where it hurts - by targeting its partners abroad. Foxconn manufactures many products for companies based in the United States, so we can target plenty of sites abroad to pressure



Foxconn and amplify Foxconn workers' demands. We can take lessons from the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in solidarity with Palestine. Many companies on the BDS list from Palestine are also manufacturing with Foxconn right now. For example, Google, Amazon, Siemens, and Hewlett-Packard all have contracts with Foxconn. Not only can we adopt lessons from BDS to support Chinese workers, but also combine our movements. Like the ongoing labor solidarity work for Palestine in the United States, trade unions can play a leading role in solidarity with Foxconn workers. Raising the issue of solidarity with Chinese workers in emergent union efforts like the Apple Retail Union, Amazon Labor Union, and Alphabet Workers Union, can also encourage U.S. workers to think more expansively about their organizing horizons. All of these unions can come together and say that they won't tolerate their employers manufacturing with a company that notoriously treats its workers

so poorly. Unions in the United States can apply pressure on Foxconn, especially as the space to organize in China is rapidly narrowing because of increased repression.

Lastly, Foxconn's expansion into electric vehicle (EV) production may be another opportunity, as the United Auto Workers (UAW) is spearheading a drive to unionize EV plants. Foxconn's global partnerships may lead to more opportunities to connect struggles. For one, Foxconn recently bought an EV plant in Lordstown, Ohio. The UAW is quite active in Lordstown, and as we saw with their labor organizing and contract negotiations last year, the UAW has the ability to exert an immense amount of pressure on these car companies. This work is also important to provide a concrete alternative to the rampant anti-China nationalism of some American workers by emphasizing the organic interconnections between U.S. and Chinese capitalists on the one hand, and U.S. and Chinese workers on the other.

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Source : *New Politics*, Summer 2024.



Gender and the Chinese working class

Zoe Zhao and Olia Shu

Zoe Zhao

For today's talk, I will focus primarily on the conditions of women workers and Olia will talk more about self-organization and NGOs. Some of the discussion will draw from my own fieldwork in China during the pandemic.

To understand gender relations in the Chinese working class today, we must first examine how production chains are organized. Beyond large factories, smaller-scale family-based workshops are the main suppliers for big e-commerce platforms in China. In China's e-commerce and fast fashion industry, which are increasingly integrated into the global supply chain with the rise of the two China-based online shopping platforms Shein and Temu, this model of family-based production has greatly intensified rather than weakened. Temu and Shein's profits are doing quite well. Part of the reason is that they intensify competition between smaller workshops and select the cheapest supplier, which also tends to have more exploitative labor practices.

Many family workshops cluster in urban villages with affordable rent and food costs, and workers sometimes live close to or even within their workshops.

“The issue with the family-based workshops is that they are more likely to reflect the existing gendered division of labor in traditional patriarchal families”.

For instance, within these workshops, women tend to shoulder the tasks of cooking, grocery shopping, and doing laundry for others, while men do more heavy lifting tasks such as operating and cutting “tables” (the large, flat surfaces used in the garment industry for laying out, measuring, and cutting

fabric). Studies of garment workshops by Duke's Nellie Chu have shown that due to common oppression, female workers from different regions are more likely to bond with each other and even develop a sense of solidarity with female factory owners, which is quite different from male workers who are often segregated by their origin cities. Research by Lin Zhang of the University of New Hampshire reveals the marginalization of rural women weavers in e-commerce. They are in the lowest rank of the supply chain and can barely earn any profit.

“Typically, feminized occupations pay less than masculine ones”.

Many service industries in urban areas, especially those newer ones such as bubble tea shops, attract young female workers who either want to stay closer to the urban lifestyle or are rejected by factories. I saw a job ad in a Shenzhen-based bubble tea shop in late 2020 that indicated 3800 RMB (around \$526) as the starting salary for a new worker, which is much higher than the base salary of Shenzhen Foxconn (2650 RMB) - but does not offer overtime pay like factory work. And so, the actual take-home income and benefits are worse than those of factories. Many service industry workers vent about their working conditions on social media. Beyond describing the laborious nature of the work, they also say that the actual income can be much lower than promised, as small mistakes can result in extra penalties in pay.

Because of the rise of digital platforms and the shrinking pay in both factories and the urban service sector, platform workers, like in food delivery (with over 13 million workers now), occupy an increasingly significant part of the workforce in China, just as in most other countries. In Asia, platform food delivery

is primarily a masculine job. However, female delivery workers have increased dramatically and nationally since the pandemic. Around 10 percent of food delivery workers in China are women, and the percentage is higher in large cities. Ping Sun's research group has estimated that the percentage of women delivery workers increased from 9 percent in 2020 to over 16 percent in 2021. Another interesting fact is that women are usually older than men because many have been laid off from the traditional service industry. Overall, women delivery workers also suffer from an income gap and more harassment from clients and other workers. For these reasons, many do not join online support groups that are self-organized by delivery workers, which are the main mode of communication among delivery workers in China.

There is also a notable gendered division of labor between onsite and virtual platform economies. Women are significantly more likely to work in virtual industries such as live-streaming and online customer service. Many women workers deem remote work to be a safer option. In my own research, many women acknowledge that rampant sexual harassment is one major factor that leads them to avoid working in onsite service jobs.

Another related trend is the absorption of rural female surplus labor into new supply chains. Women workers returning home to inner provinces such as Henan and Gansu are forming a key part of the data labeling industry that drives global AI production. Local governments promote many of these initiatives as part of poverty alleviation campaigns. With the high demand of global AI companies, this gendered "ghost" work will most likely continue to grow.

"The rise of day labor in multiple large cities is one of the most contradictory trends of work feminization over the past decade."

Most day laborers are male migrant workers. Many have given up on securing long-term or salary work. Instead, they gather in numerous labor markets, trying to secure gigs for a day or two and rest for the remainder of the week. Numerous video clips on social media, particularly on Douyin and

Kuaishou, are about young male workers trying to broadcast their day labor experience.

However, there is an additional gendered dimension of day labor. Despite the higher representation of male workers, female workers are over-represented in labor agencies: they serve as mediators between male workers and hiring corporations. The rationale behind this is that the agency owners believe that women are better at communicating with men, and also, interestingly, that they could offer an illusion that there are many young women inside factories. One such labor agency is even named "Good Sisters Human Resource"!

China is also suffering from an aging workforce, and so we must also consider gender relations among older workers. The average age of the working population in urban and rural regions is increasing rapidly. A study by Yige Dong, a sociologist at the University of Buffalo, SUNY, on gig manufacturing shows that the percentage of unmarried young workers has decreased significantly. While Foxconn still recruits people under 40 or 45, the proportion of Foxconn's employees under 30 dropped from more than 90 percent to 48 percent. This is particularly true for factories in the inner provinces, as they attract workers from the same province. It is also more challenging for older workers to go on strike or protest as they have more to lose and more family members to worry about. Older workers face not only deteriorating health and occupational diseases but, more importantly, a hostile job market. Typically, female workers over 50 and male workers over 60 are unlikely to be hired.

I will end with some examples of hiring posters that I observed in a working-class neighborhood in Yangpu District, Shanghai, in 2021. A majority of hiring ads ask only for women under the age of 40-50, and under 60 for men. One was explicitly looking for "women, 18-42 years old." When I tried to raise the issue of unequal pay and age discrimination at a job agency, I was told that "older women should feel grateful they can still work as nannies and caretakers," and I was then unceremoniously removed from an online group. One way for older workers to bypass the age limit is to buy fake identity cards on the illegal market. However, many

migrant workers look older than their actual age due to years of drudgery, so they are more likely to be questioned by the police.

Olia Shu

Building on Zoe's remarks, I will mainly discuss the intersection between feminist organizing and workplace activism. Of course, simply looking at women workers will not give us a full picture of gender dynamics in the Chinese working class, but their experiences form a key part of the story when interrogating the dynamics of a capitalist system structured by patriarchy. It is no surprise that women tend to be more marginalized and vulnerable in their social lives and in the labor market.

“Chinese women spend twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic labor, face more harassment in the workplace, and are paid less”.

While important documentaries and other footage of Chinese women workers' organizing are available – like *We the Workers* (2017) and *Outcry and Whisper* (2020) – they are seldom discussed in mainstream Chinese media and receive little public attention. They show instances of militant agitational organizing by women workers, but I also want to call attention to different nuanced models of organizing that have become increasingly prevalent as room for mobilization has become more difficult, with more severe consequences from state repression. Only very particular conditions allow for mass protests and other confrontations with the police and employers.

We must also consider the less flashy aspects of organizing by women workers that are crucial in workplace activism today. Older workers guiding younger ones, or workers speaking the same dialect from the same region, often self-organize small groups to support one another. These spaces provide key starting points for workers to figure out and bring up collective grievances and discover the confidence and agency to fight. Workers also use digital media to teach each other and circulate labor laws and other institutional tools. While some supportive lawyers, students, activists, and journalists often receive the most attention after workers' actions,

everyday workers without a platform often face the most direct and harshest retaliation. Many workers are also teaching themselves how to organize and use the law to their own advantage, even though many do not have professional hats.

The Sunflower Service Center for Female Workers is a good example of these kinds of women workers' self-organizing. A few workers started the center in Guangzhou in 2011, wanting to collaborate to provide childcare and host various recreational and cultural activities. Guangzhou had over a hundred thousand women workers, and the center hosted many popular cultural events and won attention from local media, even receiving official endorsements for these events.

“One event invited men and women workers to wear red women's shoes publicly to promote awareness of gender issues in the workplace”.

Eventually, workers at Sunflower began cultivating more legal knowledge and collective power, and workers at the center were soon advising each other on how to negotiate successfully with companies around issues of wage theft. Word about the center began to spread. At one point, over a thousand workers who had worked at a local toy factory for over 20 years failed to receive their full compensation and social security benefits upon reaching retirement age. They contacted the Sunflower Center, which helped them win an important lawsuit that same year against the company.

Thus, Sunflower began moving from cultural activities toward militant actions in the early 2010s, eventually leading to its repression. Since the toy factory workers' case, it began facing more direct and indirect pressure from authorities and other actors to shut down. At one point, the landlord started shutting off their water and electricity; another morning, organizers discovered that someone had welded their metal door to the frame so they could not open it. Local authorities eventually gave the representatives of the Sunflower Center an ultimatum: either close down themselves or wait for an official notice to shut down. By 2015, they were forced to shut down.

While militant organizing became increasingly persecuted after 2015, some centers for women workers continued to survive and worked through more subtle and creative avenues. Ding Dang, for one, is a co-founder of the Green Roses Center of Social Work, which still exists in Shenzhen today. She was a worker-leader who began to work when she was 14 and had to drop out of school to work to provide for her family. She moved from her rural hometown of Gansu to the urban center of Shenzhen, where she experienced the plight of working in large industries, something that later informed her organizing. After reading and learning more about labor and social issues at a workers' center, she identified gender as a key concern that shaped her and other female colleagues' labor conditions. She discovered that six out of the ten members of her friend group at work had faced abandonment by their parents because of their gender. She began to understand that factories liked hiring women because they thought women workers would be easier to manage. She noticed that though many of her female co-workers were usually quiet in public, they shared their thoughts quite openly with each other privately. She continued encouraging other co-workers to find ways to speak out, creating her magazine and other forms of public content.

The Green Roses Center of Social Work that Ding founded hosts activities like a "Mother's Day singing performance" and "Bread and Roses poetry exhibition," centered on women workers, alongside various childcare and mutual aid work for migrant workers to better adapt to city life. Green Rose also effectively uses digital platforms to reach workers, such as through their public accounts on WeChat, Weibo, or Xiaohongshu.

"Indeed, as Zoe mentioned, digital platforms are becoming an increasingly important organizing tool for Chinese women workers".

Worker-activists are moving from traditional newspapers, magazines, and online blogs to more decentralized models of reporting and expression, such as through social media. Some produce short-form content, while others produce longer newsletters, podcasts,

and documentaries - all to find ways to bypass the prevalent state-imposed censorship on Chinese social media. Da Gong Tan, for example, conducts interviews with workers from diverse backgrounds, featuring domestic workers from local factories and international graduate workers in the United States. Audio recordings, the use of pseudonyms, and private email subscriptions are some ways to bypass censorship. Workers' blogs like Spicy Pepper or Jianjiao Bu Luo circulate and comment on relevant statistics, with charts showing for example that birth rates for women are declining or that women are migrating into cities more than men.

Women truck drivers, like Li Xin, have started vlogs on a platform called Kuai Shou to call attention to their working conditions. Li documents her own life as a truck driver and a mother of two who drives around to work with her husband, and she can only go home once every few months. Such stories gain traction among other drivers and others on social media. So, more and more workers rely on digital platforms to discuss their working conditions. Some cases catch government attention and are co-opted into state narratives that glorify their "sacrifices" without doing much to change workers' social support and long-term security. Li later became more integrated into official media, participating in a famous singing contest, and had to moderate her content away from agitation, even as she invited other truckers on her platform to share about their working conditions, including a case of a worker dying in a traffic accident. There is not much more she is allowed to safely express, besides the kind of sentiment that she ended with in a recent vlog: "reality is cruel, but life has to go on."

We must also remember that digital and broader literacy is not entirely common among female workers yet, and so key work for Green Rose and other labor groups is designing different kinds of writing and media literacy workshops. One literacy class teaches women how written characters pictorially correspond to different parts of the body, allowing them to discuss general concepts of wellness, health, and maternal care.

I want to conclude by emphasizing that the precarity of workers' conditions in China means there is no one-size-fits-all model for organizing workers. Activists must navigate harsh conditions to meet people where they are with limited resources and the constant threat of repression.

Zoe Zhao is a researcher and activist interested in the relationship between technology, work and social movements.

Olia Shu is an activist interested in alternatives to capitalism and the theories and practices of decolonization.

Source : *New Politics*.



United States-China workers' solidarity

Interview by Andrew Sebald

Ellen David Friedman

I am a retired union organizer. I've spent about fifty years working in the U.S. labor movement, but I spent ten years living and working in China. I was drawn by a compelling need to try and understand what was happening in China after Deng Xiaoping's "opening up" began in the 1990s. I spent ten years living and getting involved with the labor movement at many levels. In the United States, I volunteer primarily through the portal of *Labor Notes*, where I'm honored to serve as chair of the board.

I traveled to China around twenty-five years ago. I was motivated to go to China because I was an ardent follower of the Chinese Revolution. I had been impressed and intrigued by some of the earliest accomplishments of the revolution, but then watched as history unfolded. I saw terrifying turns in the direction of authoritarianism in China, suppression of the working class, and so on. At that point, I had a background of almost forty years organizing in the U.S. labor movement in various sectors, from manufacturing to public education. I was despondent about what neoliberalism had brought about in this country: the hollowing out of our unions that abandoned the idea of worker power, and unions turning in the direction of relying on the state to solve the contradictions of capitalism. I did not consider that a productive direction of progress, so I wanted to see something different.

My experience in China coincided with a period of liberalization under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, when activists from abroad were tolerated to a remarkable degree. I could live and teach at a university in Guangzhou named Sun Yat-Sen University, where I established an International Labor

Research Center. It was sponsored for four or five years, supporting exchanges of labor activists. People were flocking to China, particularly to the Pearl River Delta, which had become "the world's factory." There were thousands of strikes going on all the time in thousands of factories. It was very compelling, and we were able to turn these moments into researchable topics. There was a brief period when we could both engage in research and exchange with workers directly at the worksite level, from meeting people in their dormitories at their factories in public places to conducting educational and organizer training. People were coming from all over the world to research this. It was very fruitful and thrilling.

Then, Xi Jinping came to power, and the walls closed in on us. By 2013 or 2014, our center was closed. We were no longer able to invite foreigners to come. I was picked up by the national security police and told to leave the country. Since 2015, I have been trying to develop avenues for creating U.S.-China labor solidarity under unbelievably restrictive conditions.

Kevin Lin

I became interested in labor issues in China between 2009 and 2010. Those years were significant moments in recent Chinese labor history in terms of the scale of workers' struggles. I was fortunate to be attracted to the labor movement in China when there were militant workers' struggles.

I finished my undergraduate degree around 2009 and 2010. I read about the latest labor developments in China on a daily basis, from strikes to labor reforms to tragedies. At that time there was rapid development in labor relations and escalations in worker struggles. I was part of a generation

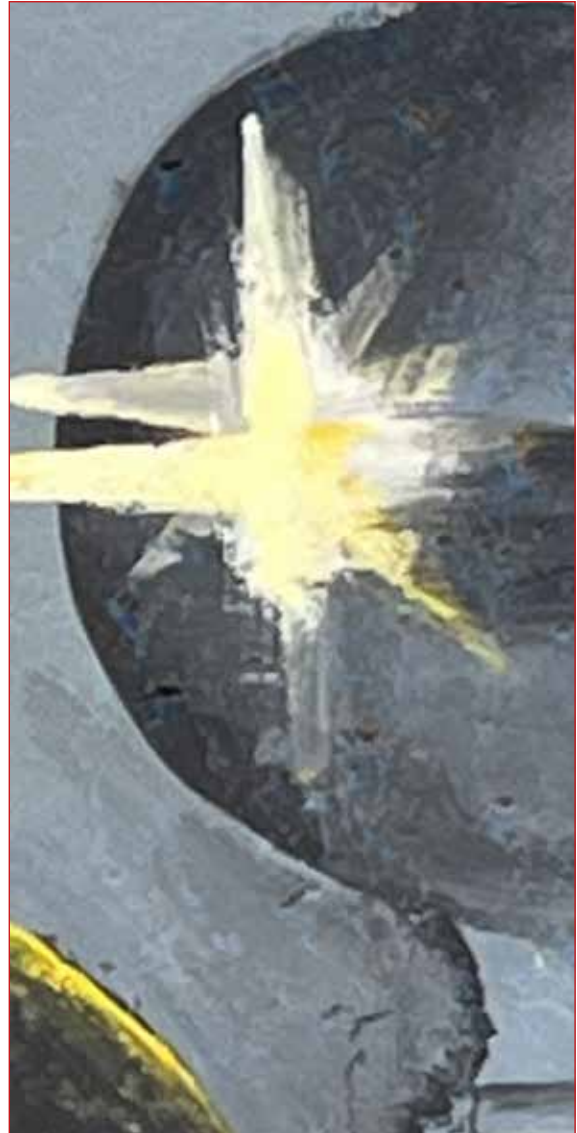
of young people who were attracted to the labor movement in China because of those struggles. A transition in consciousness was taking place, where people in China no longer saw rural migrant workers as mere victims of an oppressive system. This period, between the late 2000s and early 2010s, was when people really changed their attitude from sympathy to solidarity. People in China did not just pity migrant workers, but actually wanted to join them in struggle. That's the kind of solidarity that emerged in this period. It's the kind of solidarity I believe in now, beyond holding moralistic sympathies for people in poor working conditions.

Alex Tom

I would describe myself as a movement activist and organizer for the past 25+ years. I was with the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) in San Francisco for over 15 years. The CPA, which started in the early '70s, established numerous branches and chapters nationwide. The CPA was a key force in the Chinese immigrant community in advocating for the normalization of U.S.-China relations, and was a strong supporter of the Chinese revolution. That was a very taboo thing to do in Chinatown, which back then was controlled mainly by the Kuomintang (KMT).

Our community has a history of people-to-people diplomacy that is part of our legacy. It's also important to remember that Chinese workers were also living and working in the United States, and many of the founders of the CPA were undocumented workers. This is important because we're now seeing the potential of diasporic organizing here in the United States.

Many splits have also materialized in the organization in the past fifty years. One of the biggest splits was about the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Our organization and other CPA branches took a position to support students and workers. Not everyone on the left supported this, but there were definitely people on the left and in mass organizations that did. That split is really important because some believe people-to-people diplomacy is unconditionally supporting the positions of revolutionary governments. But we need to continue to stay grounded and build with whoever represents the conscience of the



working people, whether or not they are in power.

When I started at CPA in 2004, I connected with Ellen and then later with Kevin. China was entering the World Trade Organization (WTO), which marked an important milestone for globalization. In 2005, we felt compelled to bring Chinese workers, students, and young people from the United States to protest the annual WTO meeting being held that year in Hong Kong. While many people viewed the 2000 Seattle protests as the big breakthrough for the anti-globalization movement, for many Asians it was the 2005 protests in Hong Kong. This was the first time Chinese immigrant communities openly criticized and mobilized against globalization. Some perceived this as "China-bashing" within our own community and membership. Of course, this changed after we conducted more community education about the

working conditions in China and other parts of Asia.

CPA has been around for many decades and has navigated various political conditions and ideological struggles within our ranks. In the end, this is how we maintained our mission and values – striving to represent the conscience of the people. Together, they joined the WT-NO delegation, which included over 40 leaders from Los Angeles, Philadelphia, New York, and other U.S. cities.

In the Summer of 2010, CPA organized a memorial vigil in front of the Apple store in San Francisco for Foxconn workers who had committed suicide. Foxconn is the largest electronics manufacturer in the world, and a prime source of Apple products. The conditions in the factory are so difficult for young workers that dozens have attempted suicide, but multiple efforts to raise wages have still not improved conditions.

What are the similarities between the conditions faced by U.S. and Chinese workers?

Ellen

After settling in China and grappling with its complex societal layers, I became aware that the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is essentially a government entity rather than a mass organization representing the interests of the working class. Under the pressures of neoliberalism, the ACFTU, despite being enormous and possessing numerous resources, has become a hollow, top-down organization that was totally removed from the needs of its rank-and-file members. For those of us who believe unions should be homes for workers to learn how to fight for the working class, we accept that labor-management relationships are antagonistic. But this idea is completely absent in the ACFTU. When I returned to the United States, I saw similar problems in many of our unions here too. Certainly, not all U.S. unions are hollow, and the recent labor upsurge clearly reveals an undercurrent of democratic reform. However, in the United States and China, union leadership tends to be very top-down, conservative, bureaucratic, and focused on building relationships with politicians rather than their workers. In China, any attempt by rank-and-file workers to independently organize within unions is heavily repressed,

and democratically-led unions seem very far away.

Kevin

In the last twenty or thirty years, China's economy has been driven by export-driven industrialization. Factories sprung up everywhere in China; rural migrant workers moved to cities, and low-wage, low-skilled industrialization drove China's economy. The core of China's worker struggle was the industrial working class. This was not the case for the United States at that time. At that point, the country had already deindustrialized over the previous twenty or thirty years. I recall sitting in meetings with delegations of Chinese workers and activists with U.S. unionists, and the U.S. workers, while expressing interest and solidarity, had trouble relating to the struggles of the Chinese working class because the Americans were mainly in the service sectors. Now, I think there is increasingly less misalignment between the U.S. and Chinese working classes. China is experiencing the beginning of its own post-industrialization, and more young Chinese people are white-collar workers and beginning to work in the tech and service sectors. More Chinese workers are feeling bleak about their futures, similar to what American workers started feeling many years ago.

I believe workers can best build solidarity through shared experiences of concrete conditions. Building solidarity on the basis of moralistic abstractions is not sustainable and does not effectively drive organizing. Now that the U.S. and Chinese working classes are starting to experience similar struggles, an arena is emerging where they can organize together.

Alex

I want to build off that with a story of my own. In our WT-NO delegation, we had workers from Chinatown, one of whom had been a garment worker during the Cultural Revolution. Before our trip, our delegation members held a sense of pride in China. We had expressed a critique of globalization, and they often said we should be more "dialectical" about it. Globalization might have bad consequences, but it was hard not to be patriotic about China's meteoric rise to the international stage. When they visited China, they

only witnessed the rapid development and modernization of their hometowns. Many of the delegation members believed we were lying about the conditions of workers, stating that we had been listening to too much anti-China rhetoric. However, shortly afterwards we traveled to the special economic zone (SEZ) in Shenzhen and they were shocked by how bad the working conditions were. The worker who had worked at a cotton factory during the Cultural Revolution remembered that her minimum wage was a lot higher than at the factories in the SEZ. She was shocked that the wages were so low.

Are there other important moments of U.S.-China labor solidarity in the past few decades? How can they inform us about such solidarity in the future?

Ellen

In the 20 years that I have conducted this work, the high point of U.S.-China worker solidarity for me was the Hong Kong Dockworkers' Strike of 2013. A small group of crane operators initiated the strike. While few in number, they were highly skilled, so when they stopped working, everything else stopped too. The strike expanded quickly. In Hong Kong, trade unions were in contention at that time. One was the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Union (HKFTU), which was closely associated with the ACFTU of the mainland and was typically more docile. The other was the pro-democracy Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), which had to dissolve after the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020. Both of these labor federations were present, but the militancy of the dockworkers associated with the HKCTU was so powerful and charismatic that it quickly drew widespread movement support. Students, socialists, and other trade unionists rallied to support the dockworkers. The mobilization of public sentiment of this magnitude was astonishing.

I was in Guangzhou then, so I could go back and forth between Guangzhou and Hong Kong to witness the strike. When I returned to the United States, we organized a speaking tour for the leaders of the Dockworkers Union. They first came and spoke at the Labor Notes conference in 2014; then they participated in a whirlwind tour to

garner support from the West Coast dockworkers' unions. It was rather frenetic, but we hit every dock on the West Coast represented by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). The ILWU has a long-standing history of internationalist unionism, one of the few U.S. unions with that legacy. The ILWU hosted these leaders for talks in Los Angeles, Oakland, Tacoma, Portland, and several other docks. They raised a lot of money to support strike expenses. We also met with several affinity groups and community groups, like the CPA. One could feel that workers' comparable positions, even though their unions were different, enabled them to recognize similar conditions and their power over the global movement of capital. It was very powerful.

I have to say that anything like that is beyond our imagination right now. We must be extremely sober in our assessment and expectations of possibilities of worker-to-worker contact. Right now, anyone who came from China and held a very public position around labor militancy would be in very grave danger when they returned home. Needless to say, they want to avoid exposing themselves to that, so horizons like that are not in front of us at the moment.

Alex

Building on what Ellen said, hosting worker-to-worker conversations qualitatively shifted our base in the United States because many workers had been afraid to take a stand. However, after seeing Hong Kong dockworkers or young women workers organize, I heard some of those same people in the United States say, "Wow, if they can do it, we can do it". There is a very important connection when people see struggle and protest in China.

I want to also stress that organizing is still happening in China. However, as Ellen said, having a sober assessment of what is possible in China is important. It could be decades before conditions shift. The way to move forward is to assess the moment and ponder the role of diasporic organizing. There are hundreds of thousands of Chinese internationals in our midst. Some of them have also been part of movements in China, and one of the interventions I have been pushing for within the Asian American community is to

embrace those international students as part of our movements and communities. They need space to build and strategize around political issues: labor, questions of sovereignty and democracy at home, climate, feminism, and so on. But we must create a strategic space for them to struggle, build, and connect with other movements.

Kevin

I want to conclude with something a little more abstract. I have been reading two recently published books about this question of solidarity. One is *Struggle and Mutual Aid in the Age of Working Solidarity* (Other Press, 2023) by Nicholas Delalande, which is a history of the First International. The book goes through the historical experience of forging links between the European and American working classes to transcend national borders and build deep relationships with each other. The other book is *Solidarity: The Past, Present, and Future of a World-Changing Idea* by Leah Hunt-Hendrix and Astra Taylor (Penguin Random House, 2024). This book tells us that the idea of solidarity itself is relatively young, as it mostly emerged out of the Industrial Revolution. Of course, communities have been mutually supporting each other for most of history, but the term and modern practice of solidarity is quite a recent phenomenon. It came out of this sense that people are indebted to one another, not just through moralistic or political means, but also economic ones, thanks to the development of capitalism. The idea is that we should be in debt to each other materially to support one another.

This material aspect is important because the First International established that solidarity is about workers wresting control of the economy from the capitalists and the capitalist state. The book made me think even more about what it means to practice solidarity, and how or where it failed. Solidarity is not only found in visible demonstrations of support; it is also built through everyday deeds of translation, deep understanding of each others' struggles, and long-term relationship building. These are the solid foundations upon which we can build our solidarity.

Ellen

You have laid the table nicely for a point I would like to add, Kevin. When facing conditions in which many people live in exile or are living under incredibly restrictive constraints at home, we often think of this isolation as a huge impediment to a material form of solidarity. The most critical form of solidarity is when people continue to develop a set of values and analytic tools to assess reality and commit themselves to a certain intention over time, regardless of the conditions surrounding them at a particular moment. I have seen some beautiful examples of this. At the most recent Labor Notes conference, we had people worldwide who have developed democratic unionism in practice – even in conditions of growing authoritarianism. We are seeing a tremendous thirst for radically democratic practice, not just voting, but learning how to conduct themselves with each other in radically respectful ways. This movement of solidarity of beliefs and goals, building across great distances, is going to be an enduring and sustainable form of power as we move forward.

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Kevin Lin is editor-in-chief of *Asian Labour Review: A Journal for Labour Movements across Asia*. He has published *The China Question: Toward Left Perspectives* (Verso, 2022), *China from Below: Critical Analysis & Grassroots Activism* (Gongchao, 2023) and *China in Global Capitalism: Building International Solidarity Against Imperial Rivalry* (Haymarket Books, 2024). He is a member of the editorial board of *New Politics*.

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Source: *New Politics*.

Internationalism and the Chinese working class

Ruo Yan and Andrew Sebald

In January 2014, Xu Lizhi penned “A Screw Fell to the Ground”, one poem in a collection he wrote during his soul-crushing experience as a Foxconn worker:

A screw fell to the ground
In this dark night of overtime
Plunging vertically, lightly clinking
It won't attract anyone's attention
Just like last time
On a night like this
When someone plunged to the ground¹.

The poem is just one of several glimpses into the harrowing conditions of Foxconn workers in China. The circumstances were so oppressive that various workers committed suicide, believing it was their last hope for escape. Xu Lizhi himself committed suicide in October of the same year.

Xu's tragic death ironically came at the height of China's world-historic economic rise. Wage growth in China remained constant from 2007 to 2013, even as countries around the world suffered from the 2008 economic crisis. Even the rate of wage inequality, which had been rapidly increasing for decades, began to decline in the immediate years following 2008². For some left-wing researchers and activists, China's model of development offers the beginnings of an alternative to Western imperialism and capitalism, a bulwark of the global South. The Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, for example, touts the Chinese regime for “combining an ‘industrious revolution’ that is based on a social division of labor and

small-scale decentralization with strategic socialist planning.”³ Debates about China's economic model continue to rage on the socialist left, sharpened in recent years by the rising tensions between the United States and China. However, the experiences of Chinese workers like Xu are rarely centered in these discussions. Seldom is the connection made between the Chinese working class and its position in the present global economy, where China's communist past stands in contradiction to the struggles that the Chinese working class faces on a daily basis. Even on the rare occasions in which working-class voices and organizations are heard, there is little sense of how reforms are often carried out only after the repression, demobilization, or co-optation of independent workers' organizing.⁴

The silencing of the Chinese working class was no sudden disaster, but an escalation of bureaucratic suppression of independent working-class organization over decades. Shortly after Deng Xiaoping established four Special Economic Zones in the eastern coastal regions, workers' right to strike was removed from the state constitution in 1982. The ferocious crackdown on Tiananmen Square in May and June of 1989 crushed

1. English translations of Xu Lizhi's poetry can be found on [Libcom](#).

2. Björn Gustafsson and Haiyuan Wan, “Wage growth and inequality in urban China: 1988-2013”, *China Economic Review*, n° 62, 2020.

3. “Looking to China: Multipolarity as an Opportunity for the Latin American People”, *Tricontinental*, Institute for Social Research, April 11, 2022.

4. Manfred Elfstrom, a labor researcher, observes that Chinese government authorities are “experimenting with new, more pro-worker policies, while at the same time cracking down on union organizers and ordinary strikers”. Manfred Elfstrom, “Workers and Change in China”, interview with Ivan Franceschini, *Made in China Journal*, 18 janvier 2021. For an analysis of how local authorities co-opted and suppressed independent self-help efforts in the early days of the pandemic in Wuhan, see Chuang, *Social Contagion*, Chicago, Charles H. Kerr, 2021.

the last great uprising of Chinese workers, whose demands against the adverse effects of market reforms far exceeded the student protesters' liberal vision. Deng Xiaoping's policy decisions conveyed that China would no longer aim to challenge Washington's imperial liberal order; rather, it would aim to adapt to it and profit from it. Just as workers had been at the center of the resistance for freedom, so they were shoved into the crux of the burden of capital.⁵ China's turn to U.S. capital was only enabled by the crushing of Chinese workers' mass mobilization in 1989. By the end of the following year, Huang Wenjun, then commercial minister at the Chinese Embassy in the United States, boasted to the *Los Angeles Times* that "the pace of U.S. investment [in China] has actually accelerated since June," and that "the prospects for U.S. investment in China are very bright."⁶

The party bureaucracy and affiliated elite firms and actors continue to be enriched by constraining the collective power of Chinese workers. While neoliberalism may not have razed China's economy as it did in Russia and other parts of the global South, it ravaged the agency of the Chinese working class in order to meet global demand, saving capitalism when it faced a crisis of profitability at the time it forced vast de-industrialization across Latin America. Political labor organizing in China abruptly halted in the 1990s with the fall of the China Free Labor Union in the wake of growing authoritarianism. The assurances of the "iron rice bowl" from Mao's era – stable job security for life and other benefits – were robbed from the Chinese workers, while State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) withheld menial payment from their furious employees. Workers organized while gaining little success, if any. Labor NGOs emerged as ersatz centers for worker advocacy in the brief period of liberalization, but they would meet fateful ends with the rise of President Xi Jinping's administration. The brutal suppression of the JASIC strike in 2018, and the everyday violence that labor organizers like Meng Han faced marked the logical end of the journey the Chinese ruling

class had embarked on since the 1980s: the Chinese economy was catapulted into greatness on the bleeding backs of its once-heralded workers.

On the Labor movement in China

This special section presents the texts of five talks on Chinese labor, revised for publication. The series of talks had two key aims: 1) to equip socialists, radical students and workers, the Sinophone diaspora, and other fellow travelers with a basic understanding of the state of the Chinese working class; and 2) to encourage different organizations to develop concrete forms of international solidarity with Chinese workers – grounded on the principle of working-class political independence. The current terrain of internationalism unfortunately is dominated by forces antagonistic to the Chinese working class. Opposition to the Chinese regime is largely led by warmongering liberals (backed by some diaspora and human rights NGOs) eager to stoke Sinophobia and Great Power rivalry to preserve U.S. imperialism. On the other hand, though not at the helm of the imperialist system, the Chinese regime and its proxies are the most direct force of persecution of Chinese workers, keen on surveilling, targeting, and neutralizing any opposition at home and abroad. Worse yet, there is little space for trustworthy outlets to learn about the basic conditions of Chinese workers and labor organizers, independent of state-sponsored media, whether *China Daily* or Radio Free Asia. And so, the international left's basic understanding of the state of the Chinese working class is still far too impoverished. Especially since the heightened repression of the mid-2010s, very few, if any, on-the-ground activists and organizations can safely offer critical analysis of labor conditions in public without threats to personal safety from the state. Because of this, most of the authors of these talks – ranging from long-time Chinese labor organizers forced into exile to overseas Chinese feminists – live abroad and write under pseudonyms. All publicly hosting and endorsing organizations were based outside of China.

"The State of Labor Resistance and Repression in China" and "Gender and the Chinese

5. Yueran Zhang, "The Forgotten Socialists of Tiananmen Square", *Jacobin*, June 4, 2019.

6. George White, "US Firms Lift Taboo on Doing Business in Beijing", *The Los Angeles Times*, December 1st, 1990.

Working Class” provide a basic overview of what everyday Chinese workers and labor organizers have faced in recent years. These talks index past and ongoing broad changes in the Chinese working class, different modes of organizing, and how they have adapted over the years to shifting economic conditions and modalities of state repression. The next two talks have a more specific focus, featuring examples of sites ripe for developing practical campaigns. The aim is to be as concrete as possible about the avenues for international solidarity. Inspired by Zhengzhou’s Foxconn workers’ mass protests and overseas Chinese activists’ global solidarity campaign in late 2022, “Labor Solidarity Through Supply Chains” unpacks the links between Foxconn and U.S. tech giants like Apple. The talk concludes with some suggestions for how unions in the United States, like the Apple Retail Union and the United Auto Workers, can show solidarity with Chinese workers by pressuring sites of collaboration between U.S. and Chinese capital abroad. “Between Chinese Surveillance and Israeli Settler-Colonialism” centers on the ongoing genocide in Palestine, which features an emergent network of Sinophone activists across different continents raising awareness of how Chinese surveillance firms, like Hikvision, play a role in assisting U.S.-backed Israeli settler-colonialism. Such technologies, as the talk shows, intertwine with Western forms of policing to discipline and surveil communities beyond Israel, from Uyghur workers in Xinjiang to Black and Brown communities in New York. Last but not least, “History of U.S.-China Labor Solidarity” brings together three veteran labor activists in the United States to share their experiences organizing solidarity work in recent decades, reflecting on past lessons relevant to rebuilding international solidarity in the future.

We designed this set of talks to help build the international socialist movement, but we do not seek to advance one particular organization or ideological tradition. We are members of a caucus in DSA, Bread and Roses, and another socialist organization, the Tempest Collective, who – with the help of other individual DSA members and overseas Chinese activists – organized these talks. We also thank our endorsers, Haymarket Books, *New Bloom Magazine*, Students

4 Hong Kong, Justice is Global, and *Asian Labour Review*. We hope this network of organizations, building across differences and constituencies, models the approach needed to meaningfully rebuild solidarity with the Chinese working class. Just as the socialist left must rediscover its identity anew from the successes and failures of the 20th century, a global solidarity movement with the Chinese working class must be reinvented by gathering diverse militants, unions, and socialist organizations together in collective thinking and struggle. A united front of working-class and socialist organizations, left-wing and labor media outlets, and diaspora collectives would be the mirror image of the internationalism of the U.S.-China ruling class, which jointly maintains the capitalist system, even in the face of geopolitical rivalry.

Few avenues remain for the political self-organization of the working class in China, which makes an enlarged role for diaspora and socialist organizations abroad necessary. Because of the state of repression and co-optation, it is difficult to consolidate any movement gains in China despite the constant flashes of militancy: survivor-led feminist struggles against powerful abusers since #MeToo, the returning wave of wild-cat strikes, and the short-lived but explosive White Paper movement⁷. However, there is more space to do so among overseas Sinophone communities, which often overlap with struggles back home: the extension of feminist advocacy for survivors within dissident spaces, the global solidarity campaigns around Sitong Bridge and the White Paper movement, and the emergent self-organization of rank-and-file Chinese international workers in higher education labor struggles. Many young overseas activists directly participate in and learn from the struggles of other communities abroad, like the recent upsurges for Black and Palestinian libera-

7. Rong Xiaoqing, “How #MeToo Divided NYC’s Chinese Democracy Movement”, *The Nation*, May 24, 2024; Liu Xiang and Ruo Yan, “After Workers Flee the China’s Largest iPhone Factory, Activists Demand Accountability from Apple”, *Labor Notes*, November 10, 2022; Noturlilpink, “Observations and Reflections on Sitong-Bridge-Banners-Inspired Poster Campaign: ‘Courage emerges from practice, and trust is also grown from connection and collective actions’”, *Medium*, November 1st, 2022.

tion. Thanks to social media and the fluidity of migrant communities, these movement gains can be deepened, shared, and circulated across borders. The responsibility of internationalists abroad is to hold space and provide resources for this exchange.

We hope this series equips readers with the tools to begin this work. Ultimately, working-class internationalism can only be forged in practice beyond these pages. In the face of imperialists of all stripes taking advantage of American and Chinese workers in this deepening new Cold War, the left must provide a political alternative - the struggle demands it.

Ruo Yan is a labor activist from the Chinese diaspora and a member of the *Tempest Collective* (USA).

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US-China rivalry, ‘antagonistic cooperation’ and anti-imperialism in the 21st century

Interview with Promise Li

Federico Fuentes

Over the past century, we have seen the term imperialism used to define different situations and, at other times, be replaced by concepts such as globalisation and hegemony. Given this, what value remains in the concept of imperialism and how do you define imperialism? And in defining imperialism, how much of Vladimir Lenin’s writings on the subject remains relevant? What elements, if any, have been superseded by subsequent developments?

Promise Li

The concept of imperialism, especially as theorised by classical Marxists, is definitely still useful for us today – but we need to update and calibrate their analyses to contemporary conditions. Lenin’s observation¹ that a “characteristic feature of imperialism is finance capital” rings true, perhaps even more so today than in his times with the massive expansion of finance capital. More importantly, global imperialism remains a volatile formation – not a “peaceful cooperation” between capitalists, as Karl Kautsky ventured – featuring a “rivalry between several great powers in the striving for hegemony,” as Lenin described.

Lenin said that “the briefest possible definition of imperialism” is “the monopoly stage of capitalism.” If this represents an advanced stage of capitalism that began in his time, then we are currently living through the advanced stages of this advanced stage. Monopolies have only grown larger and more all-consuming. Capitalists are finding even more intricate ways of merging and associating with each other, from multilateral institutions such

as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to “universal owners” such as BlackRock and Vanguard, which own majority shares in state-led or public-private partnerships associated with countries in supposedly rivaling geopolitical blocs. Lenin also describes how “the monopolies, which have grown out of free competition, do not eliminate the latter, but exist above it and alongside it, and thereby give rise to a number of very acute, intense antagonisms, frictions and conflicts.” This contradiction between monopolies and competition has only grown more intense with the rise of multipolarity.

So, this rise of a new era of inter-imperialist rivalry is far from linear, nor does it clearly disrupt the imperial hegemony of Western capital. Here, I think, we do not pay enough attention to other classical Marxist theories of imperialism beyond Lenin. Though crude, Rosa Luxemburg’s formulation of imperialism correctly understands² imperialism as a “political expression of the process of the accumulation of capital in its competitive struggle over the unspoiled remainder of the non-capitalist world environment.” She sees imperialism as a way to describe not simply the characteristics of distinct imperialist powers, but the very logic of how the capitalist world economy develops – by aiming toward the development of new actors in facilitating a global process of capital accumulation. Nicholai Bukharin expanded³ on this by identifying a dialectical feature in the capitalist world system, which is both “an

1. Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

2. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, Section Three, “The Historical Conditions of Accumulation”.

3. N. I. Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy*, Chapter IV: The Inner Structure of “National Economics” and the Tariff Policy.

internationalisation of capital” and “a process of ‘nationalising’ capital.”

Luxemburg and Bukharin’s focus on imperialism as a unified global process (though one rife with internal tensions) allows us to understand the new rise of national economic blocs, geopolitical tensions, and forms of industrial nationalism that have emerged within a world economy that is more interdependent than ever. Pronouncements about the decline of neoliberalism are premature: what we see today is really just a reconfiguration of different state capitals that are integrally connected through financialisation. New industrial policies and nationalisms merely dictate new terms in which globalisation persists. For one, economists are overstating the decline of Chinese imports to the United States: in reality, most of these commodities are only re-routed⁴ through countries such as Mexico and Vietnam. Working-class people, especially in the global South, continue to be exploited. New alliances and rivalries may shuffle around the relations between different bourgeoisie in the global South and traditional imperialists, but the core structure of global imperialism remains highly durable.

Of course, Lenin and Bukharin’s conception of inter-imperialist rivalry continues to be relevant. But unlike World War I, economic interdependence even across geopolitical blocs – reinforced by new multilateral financial organisms – establishes new terms through which inter-imperialist rivalry takes shape. For example, as economists such as Minqi Li⁵ and Michael Roberts⁶ point out, countries such as China receive less value than they export. But as John Smith⁷ has noted, dynamics like this are not all that determines if a country is imperialist. He names resource imperialism as a form of imperialism – one that goes beyond considerations of

value transfer – that such countries engage in alongside traditional Western imperialist powers. Revanchist politics also strengthens the imperialist horizon of rising imperialists such as Russia. As Russian president Vladimir Putin openly admits, Russia’s⁸ interest in securing its sphere of influence in Ukraine through violently expansionist means goes beyond pressure from NATO (which undoubtedly play a key, but not all-encompassing, role in shaping the Russian invasion).

The persistence of traditional Western imperial claims (evidenced by France’s response to developments in Niger) and renewed revanchist claims by rising imperialist powers confirm another key feature of imperialism that Lenin (building on Rudolf Hilferding) identified⁹: among the myriad social antagonisms intensified by imperialism, a key one is “the intensification of national oppression”. Rohini Hensman underscores¹⁰ the persistence of “ethnic chauvinism” today, which Lenin highlighted as a fundamental characteristic of not just the ruling bloc but also workers, and even socialists, in the oppressing nation. Just as importantly, as Lenin emphasised in his writings on national self-determination, the fact that certain oppressing nations are subordinate to stronger imperialist powers in the world system does not erase the legitimacy of national liberation movements against those nations. Lenin wrote that “even Russia, for example, is entirely dependent, economically, on the power of the imperialist finance capital of the ‘rich’ bourgeois countries ... even nineteenth-century America was, economically, a colony of Europe ... but that has nothing whatever to do with the question of national movements and the national state¹¹.” In other words, Western imperialist powers have no monopoly on imperialism and national chauvinism – Lenin’s constant attacks on Great Russian chauvinism highlighted this. With the

4. www.nytimes.com/2023/02/03/business/china-mexico-trade.html.

5. Minqi Li, “Imperialism or Semi-Periphery?”, *Monthly Review*, July 1st, 2021.

6. Michael Roberts, “IIPPE 2021 : imperialism, China and finance”, <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2021/09/30/iippe-2021-imperialism-china-and-finance/>.

7. John Smith & Federico Fuentes, “Twenty-first century imperialism, multipolarity and capitalism’s ‘final crisis’: Interview with John Smith”, *Links*, August 1, 2023

8. Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>, July 12, 2021.

9. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism”.

10. Rohini Hensman, “Socialist Internationalism and the Ukraine War”, *Historical Materialism*, June 2, 2022.

11. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination”.

rise of new imperialist and advanced capitalist countries outside of the Western bloc, we must remember how Lenin underscored the right of nations to self-determination, even those caught between imperialist powers.

Of course, no principle should be so absolute that – as Lenin¹² criticised Kautsky for weaponising Serbian national liberation against Austria to justify socialist support for imperialist war – it justifies “any isolated examination of an object.” At the same time, he also refused¹³ to dogmatically delegitimise all national liberation movements just because they are weaponised by other imperialist actors: “The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilised by another ‘Great’ Power in its equally imperialist interests should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination than the numerous case of the bourgeoisie utilising republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial robbery, for example, in the Latin countries, have had in inducing them to renounce republicanism.” The key¹⁴ is not to peddle in generalities, but to “investigate any social question ... within definite historical limits, and, if it refers to a particular country (e. g., the national programme for a given country), that account be taken of the specific features distinguishing that country from others in the same historical epoch.”

The rise of fascism and intensification of the entanglements between inter-imperialist war and different national liberation movements in World War II called for a new approach to questions of national liberation and anti-imperialism (which Ernest Mandel¹⁵ ventured to answer). Similarly, we must update our analyses to account for old and rising imperialists to most effectually empower revolutionary movements not just in one locale, but for many living through vastly

different political legacies – from the bureaucratic capitalism of formerly “actually-existing socialist states” to the horrors of neoliberal shock therapy under “liberal democracies”.

Federico Fuentes

Following the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, global politics seemed largely dominated by wars that sought to reinforce US imperialism’s role as the sole global hegemon. However, in more recent years, a shift appears to be taking place. While the US has been forced to withdraw from Afghanistan, we have seen Russia invade Ukraine, China’s expanding economic role abroad, and even relatively smaller nations such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia flexing their military power beyond their borders. In general terms, how would you understand the current dynamics at play within the global imperialist system?

Promise Li

I want to revive a term first coined by German Marxist August Thalheimer, and expanded by Austrian-Brazilian Marxist Erich (Erico) Sachs and other members of the Brazilian Marxist collective Política Operária (POLOP), that adequately describes the global imperialist system today: “antagonistic cooperation”. The term was used by Thalheimer, following Bukharin’s analysis of the capitalist world system as a contradictory unity in *The Politics and Economics of Transition Period*, to account for how sharp and even violent tensions between capitalist states can exist, while all continue to maintain the same global process of capital accumulation. As POLOP’s 1967 program describes¹⁶, antagonistic cooperation illustrates “a cooperation aimed at the conservation of the system and which has its basis in the very process of centralisation of capital, and which does not eliminate the antagonisms inherent in the imperialist world.” POLOP theorists went beyond Thalheimer to specify that such an impulse to preserve capitalist social relations can characterise ruling classes that express an “anti-imperialist” foreign policy. Anti-imperialist sentiments among the people can force these bourgeoisies toward this position,

12. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “[The Collapse of the Second International](#)”.

13. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “[The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination](#)”.

14. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “[The Right of Nations to Self-Determination](#)”.

15. Ernest Mandel, *The Meaning of the Second World War*, Londres, Verso, 2011.

16. “[POLOP Uma Trajetória de Luta pela Organização Independente da Classe Operária no Brasil](#)”.

but in turn, “this nationalism, often taken advantage of by the native bourgeoisies, serves as pressure on the imperialist powers to improve the terms of their economic relations [which ensured] the continuity of imperialist exploitation was assured after the withdrawal of the colonial armies.”

This perfectly describes the actions of BRICS+ countries today. Patrick Bond, Ana Garcia, Miguel Borba¹⁷, among other political economists, have long pointed out how these regimes “talk left, walk right”. Growing rivalries between different states do not cancel out interdependence. BRICS has missed countless opportunities to break free of Western economic hegemony in practice, despite its anti-imperialist rhetoric. The New Development Bank, touted by some as an alternative to Western banking institutions for the global South, recently formalised its partnership with the World Bank. Bond observes¹⁸ that China has increased and consolidated the third-highest voting power in the IMF, even gaining some at the expense of global South countries such as Nigeria and Venezuela. Public-private partnerships¹⁹ and institutional investors²⁰ represent ways Saudi Arabia, China, Brazil, etc. develop new nodes of accumulation – and perpetuate existing ones in collaboration with the West. US-China rivalry has led to some strategic decoupling of industries, just as many commodities are merely being re-routed through third parties. The horrific Russian invasion of Ukraine supposedly introduced a new era of Western isolation of Russian capital through sanctions, but the Caspian Pipeline Consortium²¹ – which sees Chevron executives working alongside sanctioned Russian companies

– continues uninterrupted. Growing tensions between China and India are one example of how potentially irreconcilable contradictions exist within the BRICS+ bloc too. As Tithi Bhattacharya²² writes, “the new Cold War allegiances are made of a looser fabric. They tend to be less absolute; they are partial, and subject to ongoing push-and-pull.”

The US remains the dominant imperialist power in the world, though the left often overlooks how its supposed rivals actually help maintain its power, just as they challenge aspects of it to get a share of the pie for themselves. The interests of different national capitalists also do not often neatly align: major US and German CEOs eagerly accepted Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang’s invitation for meetings and deeper collaboration, just as the US’s House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) further fuelled anti-China policies. Any proper analysis of the global imperialist system today must consider such contradictions and fluidity between imperialist powers. Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh recently called this “liquid imperialism²³”, in the context of the US and Russia’s shared interest in maintaining Bashar al-Assad’s rule in Syria. Such new concepts get us closer to understanding the world system today, more than straightforward US unipolarity or traditional inter-imperialist rivalry without qualifications, but still more analyses are needed. .

Federico Fuentes

In light of current debates, how do you view China and Russia fitting into the global imperialist system today? And how do you view the issue of multipolarity?

Promise Li

Multipolarity, without the influence of militant anti-capitalist mass movements, can be just another expression of global imperialism. Indeed, neoliberalism has persisted with the help of these new poles. Vijay Prashad admitted in 2013 that BRICS is nothing but “neoliberalism with Southern characteristics.”

17. Patrick Bond, Ana Garcia, Miguel Borba, “Western Imperialism and the Role of Sub-imperialism in the Global South”, [CADTM](#), January 13, 2021.

18. Patrick Bond, “Brics joins the reigning world order”, [Mail&Guardian](#), March 31, 2017.

19. Kjeld van Wieringen and Tim Zajontz, “From Loan-Financed to Privatised Infrastructure? Tracing China’s Turn Towards Public-Private Partnerships in Africa”, [Sage Journals](#), September 11, 2023.

20. Ilias Alami, Adam D. Dixon, Emma Mawdsley, “[State Capitalism and the New Global D/development Regime](#)”, April 7, 2021.

21. Jeffrey Dunn, “[The Caspian Pipeline Consortium: Russian and Western Accountability in the Oil and Gas Sector During Wartime](#)”.

22. Tithi Bhattacharya & Gareth Dale, “Is BRICS+ an Anti-Colonial Formation Worth Cheering From the Left? Far From It”, [Truthout](#), September 13, 2023.

23. Yassin al-Haj Saleh, “The Liquid Imperialism That Engulfed Syria”, [New Lines Magazine](#), September 7, 2023.



Prashad has since grown much more hopeful about BRICS, which is astounding given the recent entry of authoritarian neoliberal monarchies such as Saudi Arabia into BRICS and Russia' blatantly imperialist invasion of Ukraine. There is now less and less basis for an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist ideological cohesion – much less than what united the ruling elites at the Bandung conference²⁴ in the past – and only more room for continuing capital accumulation.

The two key leaders of BRICS+, China and Russia, may be spearheading economic independence from the West in some aspects. But these measures fail to break with capital accumulation. Worse yet, BRICS+ sometimes reinforces the central role of Western imperialist institutions. The Johannesburg II Declaration²⁵ in August upholds the authority of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and G20, and "encourage[s] multilateral financial institutions and international organisations to play a constructive role in building global consensus on economic policies and preventing systemic risks of economic disruption and financial fragmentation." As the Brazilian theorists of antagonistic cooperation once described, the national bourgeoisie

of so-called non-aligned or "anti-imperialist" countries can struggle for a greater share of the profits without fundamentally altering the global imperialist system. In this sense, China (like Russia) is increasingly developing what Minqi Li calls "imperialist-like behaviours in developing countries"²⁶, just as it has certainly played a sub-imperialist role. Multipolarity, far from being an alternative to imperialism, indexes a new terrain in which large and mid-sized powers both preserve and challenge different aspects of Western imperialism, each to secure a greater sphere of influence in the capitalist system. Regardless of one's assessment of whether China or Russia is an imperialist country by whatever metric, it should be undoubtedly clear that these countries reinforce global imperialism in some capacity, rather than challenging it.

Anti-imperialism today must begin with this recognition, not with a naive hope that the very existence of different poles will open up space for revolutionary practice. Samir Amin²⁷ warned about this in 2006, saying that "necessary economic options and political instruments will have to be developed in accordance with a coherent plan; they will not arise spontaneously within the

24. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bandung_Conference.

25. <https://brics2023.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Jhb-II-Declaration-24-August-2023-1.pdf>.

26. Minqi Li, "China: Imperialism or Semi-Periphery?", *Monthly Review*, July 1st, 2021.

27. Samir Amin, *Beyond US Hegemony*, Bloomsbury, 2013.

current models influenced by capitalist, neoliberal dogma.” In countries such as China, Russia and Iran, spaces for mobilisation such that movements can come together to formulate such coherent plans have drastically narrowed, not expanded, with the rise of BRICS+. Movement-backed electoral victories in Latin America for the left in recent years – also now under renewed attack from the right – do not automatically translate into better conditions for movements on the other side of the world. Depending on the strength of movements on the ground, multipolarity can lead to better conditions for struggle than US imperialism – or turn out to be just as bad, if not worse. The point is that multipolarity itself does not guarantee any of these realities, it is the relationship between objective conditions and the real activity of movements that determines its future.

Federico Fuentes

How have US-China tensions impacted upon politics and struggles in Hong Kong and among the Hong Kong/Chinese diaspora in the US?

Promise Li

Inter-imperialist rivalry between the US and China has made sustaining independent movements in Hong Kong and in the diaspora much more difficult. The pro-Western bent of many dissidents in these communities is undeniable, and why this inclination exists is a complicated question. In my writings, I explore²⁸ why many Hong Kong dissidents are predisposed to the West. For one, generations of influence by Sinophone liberal dissidents who are averse to class critique and endorse Western liberalism. Another key reason is that US-China tensions have exacerbated what Yao Lin calls a politics of “beaconism²⁹” among dissident communities. As Lin explains, “the traumatising experience of Party-State totalitarianism propels Chinese liberals on an anti-CCP pilgrimage in search for sanitised and glorified imageries of

Western (especially American) political realities, which nurtures both their neoliberal affinity and their proclivity for a Trumpian metamorphosis.” The polarisation of tensions, and parts of the US establishment’s hypocritical support for the Hong Kong protests, only accelerated this beaconism.

A shared goal among the US and Chinese ruling elites, bolstered by some among the pro-democracy dissident camp, is to dissuade the growth of a political alternative grounded on building independent mass organisations toward an anti-capitalist horizon. The main problem is not just that the left was weak and fragmented in Hong Kong and the diaspora even before the repression began in 2020, but that for decades people have been unable to even conceive of what left-wing – let alone socialist – politics or models of organisation even means. (Many Hongkongers unfortunately associate “the left” with the CCP or the US Democratic Party!) This confusion emerges from, but cannot be reduced to, any of these factors alone: the legacy of British colonialism, the longstanding liberal horizon of the pro-democracy opposition, and the CCP’s betrayal of socialist principles. US-China tensions have only exacerbated this problem, limiting people’s political horizons and forcing them toward one or the other hegemon as the political solution to their ills.

Furthermore, the jingoism both countries are fuelling as an effect of this geopolitical rivalry dangerously energises both states’ capacity to weaponise suspicion of “foreign interference” to suppress domestic movements. Anti-China³⁰ rhetoric and policies in the US establishment grant further power to the state to limit civil liberties and discriminate against Chinese and other Asian American communities. This is only a mirror image of how China has enormously extended its attacks³¹ on people’s democratic rights in Hong Kong. It uses national security laws to accuse and detain many more activists and everyday people beyond those with actual links to the US state – without proper evidence or due process. Thus, both regimes

28. Promise Li, “From the ‘Chinese National Character’ Debates of Yesterday to the Anti-China Foreign Policy of Today”, *Made in China Journal*, March 8, 2022.

29. Yao Lin “Beaconism and the Trumpian Metamorphosis of Chinese Liberal Intellectuals”, *SSRN*, December 30, 2020.

30. Promise Li, “The US Government Is Ramping Up an Anti-China Witch Hunt”, *Jacobin*, June 7, 2023.

31. “Explainer: Hong Kong’s national security crackdown – month 38”, *HKFP*, September 2, 2023.

are furthering imperialist aims under the guise of nobler causes, with one weaponising the discourse of freedom and democracy and the other anti-imperialism and peace.

Military tensions between the US and China are undoubtedly threatening the livelihoods of people everywhere. Socialists must work to combat rising geopolitical tensions, but the ultimate solution is also not the fantasy that both regimes can be brought together to cooperate on solving the urgent issues of our times: climate change, rising authoritarianisms, economic precarity, etc. The last time the US and Chinese regimes peacefully cooperated marked the mass proletarianisation and exploitation of hundreds of millions of Chinese workers for the consumer markets of the global North. We must strengthen – and, in the case of China, rebuild – independent movements everywhere to posit a political challenge to these nation-states, instead of hoping for, as Luxemburg³² once said, “the utopia of a historical compromise between proletariat and bourgeoisie to ‘moderate’ the imperialist contradictions between capitalist states.” In doing so, the left must focus on building links between those resisting US and Chinese imperialisms, countering the internecine narrative of civilisational rivalry that liberals and the ruling elites have forced upon us.

Federico Fuentes

You have criticised the limitations of the “No New Cold War” campaign promoted by sections of the peace movement and left. Why is this the case? What kind of peace initiatives should the left promote? Do you envisage any possibilities of promoting a common security policy/architecture that both fosters a more peaceful and cooperative order while prioritising the needs of small nations over larger powers?

Promise Li

Last year, for the Democratic Socialists of America’s Socialist Forum³³, I highlighted the limitations of the “No New Cold War” framework because the slogan not only offers no

concrete solutions for those facing the threat of China’s surveillance and repression, but also because this framework does not allow us to identify that economic interdependence continues to structure the relations between the US and China, despite the geopolitical tensions. I am not saying that the discourse of the Cold War completely obscures the dynamics today: Gilbert Achcar’s definition³⁴ of the New Cold War as the readiness for war among different major powers is useful to understanding the political and economic decisions of key sections of the ruling classes, especially the military-industrial complex. But the dynamics of global imperialism go beyond that. The interests of other key sectors of capital also go beyond that. As Thomas Fazi puts it, “the greatest resistance to the new Cold War isn’t coming from a global peace movement, but from the boardrooms of Western corporations³⁵.”

So the real question is, what can an anti-war and peace movement look like that can posit a clearly anti-capitalist perspective, without throwing different movements under the bus? There have been useful attempts to talk about reforms to current global security frameworks such as the United Nations (UN) from Taras Bilous³⁶ and Trent Trepanier³⁷, among others. But a genuine security policy that fosters peace and protects the right to self-determination can only emerge after a revolutionary break with capitalism across the world. For such an enormous task, the most urgent ingredient right now is not calculating an exact program or blueprint for this security architecture, but maximising spaces for independent movements to grow, mobilise, and develop political solutions collectively. In this sense, I am inspired by Argentinian feminist Verónica Gago’s impulse to ground her conception of a “feminist international” on “the feminist strike.” Instead of prioritising a new institutional framework for security and accountability in the current

34. Gilbert Achcar, *The New Cold War*, Chicago, Haymarket, 2023.

35. Thomas Fazi, “[The capitalists are revolting over China Western hawks face an unlikely resistance](#)”, June 6, 2023.

36. Taras Bilous, “A letter to the Western Left from Kyiv”, *Open Democracy*, February 27, 2022.

37. Trent Trepanier, “[Taiwan and Self-Determination as a Core Principle](#)”, 2023.

32. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/anti-critique/ch06.htm>.

33. Promise Li, “[China, the Chinese Diaspora, and Internationalism from Below](#)”, Spring 2022.

system, especially in relation to femicides in Latin America, Gago³⁸ understands that “a strategy of organisation and self-defence” emerges from empowering the masses to develop “a collective practice that seeks to understand the relations of subordination and exploitation” on their own terms. Such a perspective “rejects the institutional responses that reinforce the isolation of the problem and that seek to resolve it through a new government agency or program.”

Movements in the past year have shown us that the best “security” for working people begins not from a new institutional framework that accommodates the capitalist system on different terms, but by troubling the very legitimacy of existing institutions that falsely claim to guarantee our safety. Zhengzhou workers at the Foxconn factory protected themselves against rising COVID-19 infection rates and poor habitability conditions, forced onto them by corporations working with the approval of local government to lock them in their workplaces under the guise of pandemic control, by revolting. In 2018, Indigenous activists resisted³⁹ the Ecuadorian government’s attempt – in collaboration with Chinese mining corporations and US firms – to violate the sovereignty of their lands in the Amazon by marching on Quito.

The most effective peace initiative can only be conducted by strengthening domestic movements against their ruling bourgeoisie, from the US to China, not by seeing anti-war and peace work as simply a matter of improving global security institutions or opposing one warmonger at the expense of others. At some point, the left needs a unified and coherent political program that movements can rally behind and identify a global security framework beyond the rule of capital. In the meantime, we need to restore the political consciousness of people across the world before we can meaningfully speak of programmatic unity on these grounds.

Federico Fuentes

Do you see any possibilities for building bridges between anti-imperialist struggles

38. Verónica Gago, *Theses on the Feminist Revolution*, Londres, Verso, 2020.

39. “Ecuador’s indigenous march over 600 km to demand an end to mining”.

internationally, taking into consideration that local movements have different Great Powers as their principal enemy and might therefore seek support (even military aid) from different imperialist countries? Can the left advance a position of non-alignment with blocs (neutrality) without abandoning solidarity? In sum, what should 21st-century socialist anti-imperialism look like?

Promise Li

Absolutely – the reason why I am keen to emphasise the persistence of inter-imperial or inter-capitalist interdependence in the global imperialist system, despite the rise of geopolitical rivalries, is that this analysis directly provides us with concrete paths for left-wing international solidarity. Understanding the world economy as an antagonistic unity allows movements to discover sites where different imperialist powers or institutions remain inextricably connected. By designing campaigns to target these sites, movements can provide an alternative to militaristic solutions that US, Chinese, Russian and other ruling elites promote. For example, a broad anti-globalisation movement against multilateral neoliberal institutions would be key for a 21st-century socialist anti-imperialism. The IMF has both the US and China among two out of three of its highest voting members, where they regularly collaborate, just as China has quietly approved⁴⁰ US-led decisions on climate, trade and other policies on international bodies. A genuine campaign against these institutions would be antithetical to campism, which posits a false binary between the Western bloc and champions of multipolarity – all of which collude together.

Joint campaigns against the IMF, BlackRock and Vanguard can provide new grounds to break the impasse between different anti-imperialist movements often pitted against each other too, while offering a clear alternative to liberal forms of advocacy. Calls for the IMF to abolish Ukrainian debt, or to resist Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky’s neoliberal deals with BlackRock for Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction, are compatible with similar campaigns for other regions in the global South, such as Sri Lanka. In another

40. Michael Hudson and Patrick Bond, “China – a sub-Imperial ally of the West?”, April 5, 2022.

example, we should also recognise that China's economic stability is partly grounded on its vast import market to Israel and, in turn, Israel heavily relies on Chinese imports for infrastructural development. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign in solidarity with Palestinian resistance would actually benefit from support from those resisting the Chinese state abroad. On the other hand, deepening relationships between both movements, which currently have few overlaps, can provide concrete ways for Chinese, Hongkonger and other dissident diaspora communities to resist the Chinese state, but beyond the solutions offered by the hawkish right. Cultivating solidarity between campaigns, often seen as distinct, practically strengthens each other. It can provide real alternatives beyond Western militarism without downplaying the threats from other imperialists such as China and Russia. The key impulse behind these suggestions is that the left must articulate practical demands and campaigns that can move the masses toward a revolutionary horizon distinct from the liberals. Abstract slogans of "international working-class solidarity from below" will not cut it. We should not dismiss the possibility of broad coalitions on certain issues with other groups beyond the left, but must centre on building campaigns that can strengthen the political independence of the left.

Socialists should defend the right of national liberation movements against foreign forces to demand arms from wherever they can, just as socialists did when Spanish republicans asked for arms from capitalist states against fascist rule during the Spanish Civil War. At the same time, we must recognise that Western countries are weaponising Ukraine and Taiwan, for example, to massively expand their imperialist military budgets. No matter what one's position on Ukrainians receiving arms from the West is, it should be clear that the issue of weapons should not be the be-all and end-all horizon for international solidarity on the left. Hawkish liberals are calling for increasing arms supply to Ukraine, and the left needs to think about how our organising can distinguish ourselves from them, not just tail the liberals and uncritically lobby for more. We can support the right of Ukrainians to demand arms, just as we oppose every effort by Western imperialists to

use defensive and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine as an excuse to increase military budgets and infrastructure. On the other hand, those who focus all their efforts on opposing arms shipments, without putting in concrete work to support Ukraine's fight for self-defence and bridge it to other liberation struggles, are not conducting anti-imperialism. Karl Liebknecht's slogan "the main enemy is at home" does not mean disavowing the core socialist responsibility of international solidarity with oppressed peoples struggling against other enemies abroad. It is the responsibility of the left to both oppose imperialist military budgets at home and discover alternative ways to extend solidarity abroad. .

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Facing up to Chinese imperialism

Au Loong-Yu and Frederico Fuentes

“Opposing US militarisation in the Asia-Pacific must not mean remaining silent in the face of China’s emerging imperialism.”

One of the biggest challenges facing the left is coming to grips with China’s status within the global capitalist system. China’s meteoric rise has led many to ask whether China remains part of the Global South or has become an imperialist country. How should we understand China’s status today?

The issue is that for the past three decades China has not been a regular Third World country. From a largely peasant-populated country 40 years ago, today it is 60 % urbanised and fully industrialised. Its manufacturing rolls out both low and high end products. As a result, China has crossed the threshold to become an upper-middle income country according to the World Bank. Yet, at the same time, 600 million Chinese have a monthly income of only US\$140. China simultaneously contains many elements, making it very unique. Simply looking at GDP per capita or monthly income might lead you to believe that China is part of the Global South. But no single metric or economic indicator can provide us with a definitive answer on China’s status. Today’s China still has elements of being a Third World country, but the significance of these elements has diminished over time. We can’t dismiss them, but they remain just elements in defining China’s status. To draw any useful conclusion on China, we have to look at the country as a whole, taking into consideration all its elements.

But if China is no longer a regular developing country, does this automatically mean we should characterise it as imperialist?

China’s status is complicated and messy. There is no clear cut yes or no answer; rather the answer is yes and no. I describe China as an emerging imperialist country – a very strong regional power with a global reach. It possesses the intention and potential to dominate lesser countries but has not yet consolidated its position in the world.

Why this definition? Well, let’s start with the basic criteria for imperialism. [Vladimir] Lenin’s analysis needs a lot of updating, especially since the postwar decolonisation period. But if we take Lenin as our starting point, he refers to the degree of monopoly, the merger of industrial and bank capital, the formation of financial capital and the level of capital export as defining features of imperialism. If we apply these criteria to China, they are all present in a very significant manner.

The Chinese property market bubble bursting once again. People often overlook the fact that it is only thanks to the privatisation of state-owned urban land (or more correctly the sale of the right of land-use) that the mega-bubble in the property market exists. The “state-owned land” regime also determines the main players in the market: municipal governments, banks (mostly state-owned) and developers. Together, they have formed an alliance of land-based financial capital to facilitate the enrichment of the bureaucracy and its crony private partners.

Whereas in other parts of the world imperialist logic is driven by private capital with support from the state, in China the state and state capital are the major players. This is despite the fact that the private sector accounts for more than half of the economy. Some might respond: “If the commanding heights of the economy are heavily monopolised by state enterprises, then they are under social

ownership or public ownership, which is a feature of socialism or, at a minimum, state ownership is a bulwark against profit-seeking private capital.” This is to forget that long ago, Friedrich Engels mocked those who thought Bismarck’s state ownership schemes were a feature of socialism. In reality, state ownership and social ownership are two very different things.

China’s state is a predatory state entirely controlled by an exploiting class whose core is Chinese Communist Party (CCP) party bureaucrats. I refer to this exploiting class as a bourgeoisified state bureaucracy. This means that we have in China a kind of state capitalism, but one deserving its own name. In my view bureaucratic capitalism is the most appropriate term for China because it captures the most important feature of China’s capitalism: the central role of the bureaucracy, not only in transforming the state (from one hostile to capitalist logic – though never genuinely committed to socialism – to one thoroughly capitalist), but also in enriching itself by fusing the power of coercion and the power of money.

This fusion gave new impetus to the bureaucracy’s drive towards industrialisation and state-led investment in infrastructure. That is why China’s capitalist restoration, driven by the state and CCP, was accompanied by rapid industrialisation, in contrast to the fall of the Soviet Union. It is also why China’s state-owned enterprises are in practice controlled by the party bureaucracy. Through its grip on state power, it continuously denies the working class basic rights to organise. On the operational level, these companies are “owned” by different sections and cliques of the bureaucracy, often via highly secret arrangements.

It is worth remembering two things. First, Imperial China was also characterised by its bureaucracy, to the extent that some sociologists consider China a “bureaucratic society”. The absolutism of the empire was possible only because it successfully replaced the noble class with loyal bureaucrats administering the state. When tensions arose between the bureaucracy and the emperor, the emperor won certain battles but the bureaucracy won the war, turning the emperor into its nominal head. Second, it is also worth remembering Imperial China’s long history of

state-owned and state-run enterprises. Much of the wealth generated by these enterprises went into the pockets of the bureaucrats who managed them. This bourgeoisification of a section of the bureaucracy was visible in Imperial China; it was present during the rule of the Kuomintang (KMT); and reappeared under the CCP after 1979, eventually becoming a dominant feature of Chinese capitalism.

Does China’s state also exhibit expansionist features, which is a common characteristic of imperialist powers?

As a strong bureaucratic capitalist state, it necessarily carries a strong expansionist imperative that is not just economic but political. Consider this: China’s extensive capital export, which often takes the form of long-term investments, means Beijing necessarily requires global political leverages to protect its economic interest. This objectively encourages an imperialist logic to dominate lesser countries and compete with leading imperialist countries.

But there is also a political expansionist logic. China’s century-long “national humiliation” under colonialism between 1840-1949, led CCP ruling elites to vow to strengthen the country at all cost. [President] Xi [Jinping]’s dream for China should be interpreted in light of Mao Zedong’s dream of *chaoying-ganmei* (surpassing Britain and catching up with the United States). While the slogan should not be interpreted literally, China’s ultra-nationalist rulers will not accept China remaining a second-rate power for another century. This ambition, born from China’s contemporary history and the party’s great Han Chinese nationalism, has led Beijing to seek global political influence. It will also, sooner or later, lead them to seek global military power – if China can consolidate its status in the coming period.

Any discussion about China and imperialism cannot just focus on economic aspects; on the contrary, it must also take into account this political side. China’s contemporary rulers, from the KMT to CCP, have all wanted to restore the territory and influence that Imperial China had under the Qing Dynasty. Long before Beijing made its nine-dash line claim over the South China Sea, the KMT had already rolled out its “eleven-dash line” claim over the same area. In this sense, the CCP is

following in the not-so-successful imperial footsteps of the KMT – only this time it has, so far, worked out much better for them.

Focusing for a moment on the economic aspects, does this mean China offers no kind of alternative to US imperialism for Global South countries, as advocates of a multipolar world seem to suggest?

I do not agree with the notion that China is some kind of alternative for the Global South. Just look at what it did to Sri Lanka when the latter could not pay back its loan: China made Sri Lanka hand over greater control of its Hambantota port. China's corporations, including those that are state-owned, generally perform no better – or worse – than the companies of any other imperialist country.

But we need to analyse this question on two levels. China, like the US, maintains relations with most countries in the world. No sweeping generalisation is capable of explaining each and every relationship these two countries have with others. This is even more so for China because it is not yet a global empire. A general critique of Chinese expansionism should not preclude us from carrying out a concrete analysis of each relationship. Whenever we are confronted with a specific case, we should be sceptical of China's actions – and those of all great powers – but also analyse the specific relationship, paying special attention to the voices and interests of local people. Only by weighing up both the general and the specific can we, as outsiders, judge whether what China is doing is right or wrong.

Take, for example, the Belt and Road Initiative. It is possible that some of China's overseas investments via this project may benefit other countries, or at least cause more good than harm. Here, the voices of local peoples can provide us with the most relevant information we need. But this does not mean we should drop our general criticisms of the Belt and Road Initiative. Whatever good a specific project may bring, it remains the case that in general, the Belt and Road Initiative is driven by the logic of profit and the geopolitical interests of the CCP's monolithic regime. A win-win scenario might emerge in specific cases, but it is highly improbable that this will be the case for most host countries, regardless

of whether the BRI ultimately ends up a success or failure for China.

Overall, China's going global strategy, which it embarked on at the start of the century, represents a clear regression in China's foreign policy: from relatively progressive Third-Worldism to prioritising Chinese companies' commercial interests and Beijing's global influence. Even if China's performance in developing countries is not as bad as that of Western countries, this qualitative change from promoting autonomous development in the Third World (as advocated by Mao) to seeking to profit from the Third World is clearly a backwards step. Moreover, China's entrance into competition with the West for markets and resources necessarily accelerates the race to the bottom for labour rights and environmental protection.

Given all this, could you summarise your view on China's status today?

Taking all this and more into consideration, I think we can say that China is an emerging imperialist country. It is far from consolidated as an imperialist power, but it has the potential to achieve this status if left unchallenged from within and without for long enough.

In my opinion, the term emerging imperialism allows us to avoid certain errors. For example, some argue that since China and the US are not on a par, therefore China can not be imperialist, and that the label of "developing country" continues to apply. This argument fails to capture the constantly changing situation within China and globally. For example, China's spectacular rise to become an industrialised nation in less than 50 years is unprecedented in contemporary history.

That is why we must be able to grasp both the universal and the particularities when it comes to China. Its potential to develop into an imperialist power is immense. It is also the first emerging imperialist country to have previously been a semi-colonial country. On top of this, China has to confront the issue of its backwardness. These factors may have in part contributed to its rise, but certain aspects also continue to cripple its capacity to develop efficiently enough and, more importantly, in a more balanced way.

The CCP will have to overcome some fundamental obstacles before it can consolidate China as a stable and sustainable imperialist

country. Xi's clique knows that before China can achieve its imperial ambition it has to overcome the burden of colonial legacy and China's backwardness. That is why Beijing sees "taking back" Taiwan as strategic to its national security. The fact that Taiwan has remained separated from mainland China ever since Japan took it in 1895 haunts the CCP.

Here, once again, sweeping generalisations do not help us when dealing with China's "colonial legacy". Instead we need concrete analysis. Not all of China's colonial legacy is a burden for its development. Take the case of Hong Kong. Hong Kong's autonomy allows the city to preserve its British legal system, which is no doubt a colonial legacy. China is attacking the city's legal system in the name of maintaining national security and "patriotism". Yet from the people's point of view, no matter how flawed the British legal system is, it is still much better than China's. Furthermore, smashing it would harm the collective interest of bureaucratic capitalism. It is precisely this colonial legacy that allowed the city to evolve into the financial centre that China depends on even today – half of China's foreign direct investment goes through the city. Xi can not achieve his dream for China without Hong Kong's autonomous capitalism, at least for the coming period.

This brings us to the most glaring contradiction in China today. Xi wants China to take a great leap forward in terms of modernisation. But he simply does not have the knowledge or enough pragmatism to turn his dream into coherent and feasible plans that can be implemented. The foolish act of shooting one's own foot when it comes to Hong Kong reflects the party's cultural backwardness; its failure to establish a stable succession of power is another example. If we factor in the party's failure to modernise its political culture of personal loyalty and cult leaders, we can see why China's ability to consolidate its position at the table of imperialist powers faces difficulties.

What can you tell us about China's actions in the South China Sea and how, if at all, they have contributed to rising tensions and militarisation in the Asia Pacific?

China's nine-dash line claim over the South China Sea was a fundamental turning point, because it represented the start of China's

overseas expansion, politically and militarily. First, because its claim is entirely illegitimate. China, for example, also claims the Senkaku Island, which Japan disputes. There you can at least say China has a stronger case for its claim while Japan has no basis, either under so-called international law or from a leftist point of view. It is simply an imperialist claim by Japan, in alliance with the US. By contrast, China has never effectively ruled the whole area of the nine-dash line its claim (excepting some islands, such as the Paracel Island). Its claim over most of the South China Sea is not only not justified, it is a pronouncement of its hegemonic ambitions in Asia, which run parallel with its global economic ambitions represented by the BRI.

Some would respond that China's actions in the South China Sea are largely defensive and aimed at creating a buffer against US militarisation in the region. How legitimate is this argument?

I think that was true of China's actions prior to its nine-dash line claim. Even if we accept that China continues to act defensively and is simply responding to US aggression, you do not do this by invading huge territories that never belonged to China and which surrounding countries have claims over – including some who were victims of Imperial China's aggression for hundreds of years. This is an invasion of the maritime economic zones of several countries in Southeast Asia. It can no longer be deemed to be defensive.

It is also worth noting that there is no Great Wall separating defensive from offensive actions, especially when we consider how rapidly the context has changed in China and internationally. Today, Beijing has both the intention and capacity to kick start a global contest with the US. From the point of view of the collective interest of the bureaucracy, it is clear that Xi prematurely dropped Deng Xiaoping's advice of "keep a low profile and bide one's time".

Of course, we must continue to oppose US imperialism and militarisation in the region, but this should not mean supporting or remaining silent about China's emerging imperialism. Just how close or far China is to being on a par with the US empire is not the decisive issue in this regard.

How does Taiwan fit into US-China tensions?

The fundamental issue here is that China's claim over Taiwan has never factored in the wishes of the Taiwanese people. This is the most important point. There is also the secondary issue of US-China tensions. But these tensions have no direct bearing on the fundamental issue.

Taiwanese people have a historic right to self-determination. The reason is simple: due to their distinct history, Taiwanese people are very different from those of mainland China. Ethnically speaking, most Taiwanese are Chinese. But there are ethnic minorities, known as Austronesian peoples, who have inhabited large parts of Southeast Asia including Taiwan for thousands of years. The CCP never mentions this fact; it pretends that Taiwan was always Chinese-occupied. This is not true: indigenous peoples have existed in Taiwan for much longer and their rights must be respected.

As for those who are ethnically Chinese, we are really dealing with two distinct groups. About 15%, an absolute minority, only moved to Taiwan in 1949 after the Chinese revolution. The majority have descendants who have been living in Taiwan for up to 400 years. This is very different to Hong Kong, where a big chunk of the population is composed of mainland Chinese who have relatives in mainland China and still view mainland Chinese as their homeland. In Taiwan, most Chinese have no such connection to mainland China – any such connections were broken hundreds of years ago. Taiwan has been a separate nation for many years. It therefore has a historic right to self-determination.

The situation is not entirely comparable, but I would also say that the same applies for Hong Kong. We should not forget that for 150 years, Hong Kong's historical trajectory was also very different to that of mainland China: no one can deny that, or our right to self-determination. Any Western leftist who denies this is either uninformed or their claim to being a socialist is quite debatable.

Of course, it is true that all this is now entangled with US-China tensions. In this sense it is similar to the Ukrainian situation. In that case too, there are those who support Russia or hold a neutral position. In my opinion, they are wrong. There is no doubt that the US is a

global empire that pursues its agenda everywhere. I understand that some Western leftists do not want to be seen as aligning with their own imperialist governments. But our support for smaller nations' right to self-determination – as long as we conduct it independently – has nothing to do with the US, or China for that matter.

We support these struggles based on our principle of opposing national oppression. Our principles should not be compromised just because our stand may occasionally coincide with the US' agenda. Opposing your own ruling class should not mean prioritising your hatred of it over peoples' resistance to foreign oppression in other parts of the world. To see politics this way largely reflects one's arrogance and, at the same time, sense of helplessness in relation to their own ruling class.

What kind of solidarity campaigns should the left focus on when it comes to Taiwan or the South China Sea?

Any solidarity campaigning on these two areas – to which I would add Hong Kong – should consist of at least three points: respecting the Taiwanese and Hong Kong peoples' right to self-determination; accepting that China's nine-dash line claim in the South China Sea has no basis; and acknowledging that agency for opposing China's stance lies, first and foremost, with the peoples of these three areas and surrounding countries. As far as the US is concerned, we should remain sceptical of its motivations but, again, when it comes to particular issues we have to weigh up all the pros and cons in a concrete way, and especially take into consideration the wishes of the people.

For example, the issue of Taiwan buying arms from the US: we need to be aware that all war games scenarios suggest that Taiwan would not be able to resist a Chinese invasion for more than a week and, in worst case scenarios, for more than a few days. It is obvious that Taiwan needs to buy arms from the US. None of this means that we support US rights over Taiwan. Agency must lie with those directly affected – the people in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and in and around the South China Sea.



As part of their war drive on China, Western leaders have sought to stoke nationalism and anti-Chinese racism. In response, some on the left have sought to mute their criticisms of China in order to not contribute to their government's reactionary campaign. What are your thoughts on how the left in Western countries can oppose their own government's propaganda without becoming uncritical supporters of China?

The crux of the matter is that the campist notion of "anti-imperialism" is not only half-hearted, in that they only target old imperialisms while overlooking emerging imperialisms, but also state-centred. Their concerns are always about this or that state. They forget that we should never prioritise states over working people, where agency must lie – and this extends even to "worker states".

Genuine socialists should be people-centred. If someone refuses to see how the CCP treats Chinese working people, and is content with repeating Beijing's propaganda or refuses to listen to the voices of working people, then I would say they are not genuinely socialists. They just look up to certain states, viewing them as some kind of bulwark against their own imperialist government. Their powerlessness leads them to applaud any foreign state at odds with their ruling class and to abandon those facing repression, simply to fulfil their own psychological yearnings.

But you will never defeat your own nationalism by supporting or tolerating Han

Chinese nationalism. We can support, within certain boundaries, the nationalism of oppressed nations. But, today, Han Chinese are not oppressed by any foreign nation; on the contrary, they are oppressed by their own government. Hence Han Chinese nationalism has no progressive value.

Furthermore, the CCP's version of "patriotism" is a kind of ethno-nationalism, which makes it even more reactionary. It seeks a kind of *dayitong* (great unification) not dissimilar to that practised by fascism, in which people's thoughts must be brought under the control of the government and books not promoting official values banned. To be silent on this version of Han Chinese nationalism is to forget the immense tragedy of the Han Chinese – now oppressed by their own rulers to the point that they mock themselves as being little more than "Chinese leeks" waiting to be harvested by the party on a regular bases – and the brutal repression of minorities.

By supporting or refraining from criticising a totalitarian state such as China, we are digging our own graves. It is a betrayal of basic internationalism and discredits the left. Internationalism is, first and foremost, solidarity with working people of different nations, not with states, and it is on this basis that we should judge relationships between states, not vice versa.

Source: [Links](#), 2 décembre 2023.

China's rise as a world power

Au Loong-Yu interviewed by Ashley Smith

China's rapid rise as the new centre of capitalist accumulation is bringing it into confrontation with the United States. And its emergence as a new world power, despite the persistence of certain weaknesses, reflects the great ambitions of the Xi Jinping clan, fuelled by reactionary nationalism. Chinese and American workers have a common interest in opposing the imperial ambitions of these two superpowers.

One of the most important developments in the world system over the last few decades has been the rise of China as new power in the world system. How has this happened?

China's rise is the result of a combination of factors since it reoriented on production within global capitalism in the 1980s. First, in contrast to the Soviet bloc, China found a way to benefit in a twist of historical irony from its colonial legacy. Britain controlled Hong Kong up until 1997, Portugal controlled Macau up to 1999, and the US continues to use Taiwan as a protectorate.

These colonies and protectorates connected China to the world economy even before its full entry into the world system. In Mao's era, Hong Kong provided about one-third of China's foreign currency. Without

Hong Kong, China would not have been able to import as much technology. After the end of the Cold War, during Deng Xiaoping's rule, Hong Kong was very important for China's modernization. Deng used Hong Kong to gain even more access to foreign currency, to import all sorts of things including high technology, and to take advantage of its skilled labor force, like management professionals.

China used Macau first as an ideal place for smuggling goods into mainland China, taking advantage of the island's notoriously lax enforcement of law. And then China

used the Casino City as an ideal platform for capital import and export. Taiwan was very important not only in terms of capital investments, but more importantly in the long run was its technology transfer, first and foremost in the semiconductor industry. Hong Kong and Taiwanese investors were also one of the key reasons for rapid growth of the Chinese provinces of Jiangsu, Fujian, Guangdong.

Secondly, China possessed what Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky called the "privilege of historical backwardness." Mao's Communist Party took advantage of the country's precapitalist past. It inherited a strong absolutist state that it would retool and use for its project of national economic development. It also took advantage of an atomized precapitalist peasantry, which had been accustomed to absolutism for two thousand years, to squeeze labor out of them for so-called primitive accumulation from 1949 through the 1970s.

Later, from the 1980s on, the Chinese state drafted this labor force from the countryside into the big cities to work as cheap labor in export processing zones. They made nearly 300 million rural migrants work like slaves in sweatshops. Thus, the backwardness of China's absolutist state and class relations offered the Chinese ruling class advantages to develop both state and private capitalism.

China's backwardness also made it possible for it to leap over stages of development by replacing archaic means and methods of development with advanced capitalist ones. A good example of this is China's adoption of high technology in telecommunications. Instead of following every step of more advanced capitalist societies, beginning first with using telephone lines for online communication, it installed fiber optic cable throughout the country nearly all at once.

The Chinese leadership was very keen to modernize its economy. On the one hand, for defensive reasons, they wanted to make sure that the country was not invaded and colonized as it was a hundred years ago. On the other hand, for offensive reasons, the Communist Party wants to restore its status as a great power, resuming its so-called heavenly dynasty. As a result of all these factors, China has accomplished capitalist modernization that took one hundred years in other states.

China is now the second largest economy in the world. But it is contradictory. On the one hand, lots of multinationals are responsible for its growth either directly or through subcontracting to Taiwanese and Chinese firms. On the other hand, China is rapidly developing its own industries as national champions in the state and private sector. What are its strengths and weaknesses?

In my book *China's Rise*, I argue that China has two dimensions of capitalist development. One is what I call dependent accumulation. Advanced foreign capital has invested enormous sums of money over the last thirty years initially in labor-intensive industries, and more recently in capital-intensive ones. This developed China but kept it at the bottom of the global value chain, even in high tech, as the world's sweatshop. Chinese capital collects a smaller part of the profit, most of which goes to the US, Europe, Japan, and other advanced capitalist powers and their multinationals. The best example of this is Apple's mobile phone. China merely assembles all the parts which are mostly designed and made outside of the country.

But there is a second dimension, autonomous accumulation. From the very beginning the state has been very consciously guiding the economy, funding research and development, and maintaining indirect control over the private sector, which now accounts for more than 50 percent of the GDP. In the commanding heights of the economy, the state maintains control through the State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). And the state is systematically conducting reverse engineering to copy Western technology to develop its own industries.

China has other advantages that other countries do not have; it is huge, not just in size of territory, but also in population. Since

the 1990s, China has been able to have a division of labor within three parts of the country. Guangdong has a labor-intensive export processing zone. The Zhejiang delta is also export oriented, but it is much more capital extensive. Around Beijing, China has developed its high tech, communication, and aviation industry. This diversification is part of the state's conscious strategy to develop itself as an economic power.

At the same time, China suffers from weaknesses as well. If you look at its GDP, China is the second largest in the world. But if you measure GDP per capita, it is still a middle-income country. You also see weaknesses even in areas where it is catching up to advanced capitalist powers. For instance, Huawei mobile phone, which is now a world brand, was developed not just by its own Chinese scientists, but more importantly, by hiring four hundred Japanese scientists. This shows that China was and is still heavily reliant on foreign human resources for research and development.

Another example of weakness was revealed when China's ZTE telecom company was accused by the Trump administration of violating its trade sanctions on Iran and North Korea. Trump imposed a trade ban on the company, denying it access to American-designed software and high-tech components, threatening the company with collapse overnight. Xi and Trump eventually worked out a deal to save the company, but the crisis ZTE suffered demonstrates China's ongoing problem of dependent development.

This is the problem that China is trying to overcome. But even in high tech, where it is intent on catching up, its semiconductor technology is two or three generations behind that of the United States. It is trying to overcome that with dramatically increased investment in research and development, but if you look closely at China's huge number of patents, they are still mostly not in high tech but other areas. So, it still suffers from indigenous technological weakness. Where it is catching up very fast is in artificial intelligence, and this is an area that the US is very concerned about, not only in terms of economic competition, but also military, where artificial intelligence plays an increasingly central role.

On top of these economic weaknesses, China suffers from political ones. China does not have a governmental system that ensures peaceful succession of power from one ruler to the next. Deng Xiaoping had established a system of collective leadership term limits that began to overcome this problem of succession. Xi has abolished this system and reinstated one-man rule with no term limits. This could set up more factional fights over succession, destabilizing the regime, and potentially compromising its economic rise.

Xi has dramatically shifted China's strategy in the world system away from the cautious one pioneered by Deng Xiaoping and his successors. Why is Xi doing this and what is their program for assertion of China as a great power?

The first thing to understand is the tension in the Communist Party over its project in the world. The Chinese Communist Party is a big contradiction. On the one hand, it is a force for economic modernization. On the other hand, it has inherited a very strong element of premodern political culture. This has laid the ground work for conflicts between cliques within the regime.

Back in the early 1990s there was debate among the top echelons of the bureaucracy over which clique of rulers should have power. One clique is the so-called blue bloods, the children of the bureaucrats that ruled the state after 1949 - the second red generation of bureaucrats. They are fundamentally reactionary. Since Xi has come to power, the press talks about the return to "our blood," meaning that the old cadre's blood has been reincarnated into the second generation.

The other clique is the new mandarins. Their fathers and mothers were not revolutionary cadres. They were intellectuals or people who did well in their education and moved up the ladder. They usually climb up the ladder through the Young Communist League. It is not accidental that Xi's party leadership had repeatedly and publicly humiliated the League in recent years. The conflict between blue-blood nobles and the mandarins is a new version of an old pattern; these two cliques have had tension for two thousand years of absolutism and bureaucratic rule.

Among the mandarins, there are some who came from more humble backgrounds like Wen Jiabao, who ruled China from 2003 to 2013, that are a bit more "liberal." At the end of his term, Wen actually said that China should learn from Western representative democracy, arguing that Western ideas like human rights possessed some kind of universalism. Of course, this was mostly rhetoric, but it is very different than Xi, who treats democracy and so-called "Western values" with contempt.

He won out in this struggle against the mandarins, consolidated his power, and now promises that blue-blood nobles will rule forever. His program is to strengthen the autocratic nature of the state at home, declare China a great power abroad, and assert its power in the world, sometimes in defiance of the United States.

But after the crisis over ZTE, Xi conducted a bit of a tactical retreat because that crisis exposed China's persisting weaknesses and the danger of too quickly declaring itself a great power. In fact, there was an outburst of criticism of one of Xi's advisors, an economist named Hu Angang, who had argued that China was already a rival to the US economically and militarily and could therefore challenge Washington for leadership in the world. ZTE proved that it's simply not true that China is on par with the US. Since then, a lot of liberals came out to criticize Hu. Another well-known liberal scholar, Zhang Weiying, whose writings were banned last year, was allowed to have his speech officially posted on line.

There was already hot debate among diplomacy scholars. The hard-liners argued for a tougher stand in relation to the US. The liberals, however, argued that the international order is a "temple" and as long as it can accommodate China's rise, Beijing should help build this temple rather than demolish it and build a new one. This diplomatic wing was marginalized when Xi chose to be more hard-line, but recently their voice has reemerged. Since the conflict over ZTE and the trade war, Xi has made some tactical adjustments and retreated slightly from his previously brazen proclamation of China's great power status.

How much of this is just a temporary retreat? Also, how does China 2025 and One Belt One Road factor into Xi's longer-term project of achieving great-power status?

Let me say clearly that Xi is a reactionary blue blood. He and the rest of his clique are determined to restore the hegemony of China's imperial past and rebuild that so-called heavenly dynasty. Xi's state, the Chinese academy, and the media have churned out a huge number of essays, dissertations, and articles that glorify this imperial past as part of justifying their project of becoming a great power. Their long-term strategy will not be deterred easily.

Xi's clique is also aware that before China can achieve its imperial ambition it has to eliminate its burden of colonial legacy, i.e., take over Taiwan and accomplish the CCP's historic task of national unification first. But this will necessarily bring it into conflict with the US sooner or later. Hence, the Taiwan issue simultaneously carries both China's self-defense dimension (even the US acknowledges that Taiwan is "part of China") and also an interimperialist rivalry. In order to "unify with Taiwan," not to speak of a global ambition, Beijing must first overcome China's persistent weaknesses especially in its technology, its economy, and its lack of international allies.

That's where China 2025 and One Belt One Road come in. Through China 2025 they want to develop their independent technological capacities and move up the global value chain. They want to use One Belt One Road to build infrastructure throughout Eurasia in line with Chinese interests. At the same time, we should be clear that One Belt One Road is also a symptom of China's problems of overproduction and overcapacity. They are using One Belt One Road to absorb all this excess capacity. Nevertheless, both of these projects are central in China's imperialist project.

There has been a big debate on the international left about how to understand China's rise. Some have argued that it is a model and ally for "third-world" development. Others see China as a subordinate state in an American informal empire that rules global neoliberal capitalism. Still others see it as a rising imperial power. What's your viewpoint?

China cannot be a model for developing countries. Its rise is the result of very unique factors I outlined previously that other third-world countries do not possess. I don't think it's wrong to say that China is part of global neoliberalism especially when you see China come forward and say that it is willing to replace the US as a guardian of free-trade globalization.

But to say that China is a part of neoliberal capitalism doesn't capture the whole picture. China is a distinctive state capitalist power and an expansionist one, which is not willing to be a second-rate partner to the US. China is thus a component part of global neoliberalism and also a state capitalist power, which stands apart from it. This peculiar combination means it simultaneously benefits from the neoliberal order and represents a challenge to it and the American state that oversees it.

Western capital is ironically responsible for this predicament. Their states and capitals came to understand the challenge of China too late. They flooded in to invest in the private sector or in joint ventures with the state companies in China. But they did not fully realize that the Chinese state is always behind even seemingly private corporations. In China, even if a corporation is a genuinely private, it must bow to the demands put to it by the state.

The Chinese state has used this private investment to develop its own state and private capacity to begin to challenge American as well as Japanese and European capital. It is therefore naïve to accuse the Chinese state and private capital for stealing intellectual property. That's what they planned to do from the beginning.

Thus, the advanced capitalist states and corporations enabled the emergence of China as a rising imperial power. Its peculiar state capitalist nature makes it particularly aggressive and intent in catching up and challenging the very powers that invested in it.

In the US there is increasingly a consensus between the two capitalist parties that China is a threat to American imperial power. And both the US and China are whipping up nationalism against each other. How would you characterize the rivalry between the US and China?



Some years ago, many commentators argued that there was a debate between two camps over whether to engage China or confront it. They called it a struggle between “panda huggers versus dragon slayers.” Today the dragon slayers are in the driver’s seat of Chinese diplomacy.

It is true that there is a growing consensus among Democrats and Republicans against China. Even prominent American liberals bash China these days. But many of these liberal politicians should be blamed for this situation in the first place. Remember that after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre it was liberal politicians like Bill Clinton in the US and Tony Blair in Britain that forgave the Chinese Communist Party, reopened trade relations, and encouraged massive investment flows into the country.

Of course, this was about padding the ledgers of Western multinationals, which reaped super profits from exploiting cheap labor in Chinese sweatshops. But they also genuinely, if naively, believed that increased investment would lead China to accept the rules as a subordinate state within neoliberal global capitalism, and “democratize” itself in the image of the West. This strategy has backfired, enabling the rise of China as a rival.

The two camps of panda huggers versus dragon slayers also find their theoreticians in academia. There are three main schools of the foreign policy establishment. On top of that, all three schools have their own panda

huggers and dragon slayers, who could also be called optimists and pessimists. Within the optimist camp, different schools argue different perspectives. While the liberal internationalists thought that trade would democratize China, by contrast, the realists argued that even if China had its own state ambitions to challenge the US, it was still too weak to do so. The third school is social constructivism; they believe international relations are the result of ideas, values, and social interaction, and like the liberals, believe economic and social engagement would transform China.

In the past, most of the American establishment bought the optimist liberals’ case. The liberals were blinded by their own belief that trade could change China into a democratic state. China’s rise has thrown all of the optimist schools into a crisis because their predictions about China have been proven wrong. China has become a rising power that has begun catching up and challenging the US.

Now it is the pessimist camp of these three schools that is gaining ground. The pessimist liberals now believe that Chinese nationalism is much stronger than the positive influence of trade and investment. The pessimist realists believe that China is rapidly strengthening itself and that it will never compromise over Taiwan. The pessimist social constructivists believe that China is very rigid in its own values and will refuse to change.

Yet if the pessimist school is now proven right, it also suffers from a major weakness.

It assumes US hegemony is justified and right, ignores the fact that the US is actually an accomplice of China's authoritarian government and its sweatshop regime, and of course never examines how the collaboration and rivalry between the US and China occurs within a deeply contradictory and volatile global capitalism, and along with this a whole set of global class relations. This should not surprise us; the pessimists are ideologists of the American ruling class and its imperialism.

China is moving in an imperialist trajectory. I'm against the Communist Party dictatorship, its aspiration to become a great power, and its claims in the South China Sea. But I don't think it's correct to think that China and the US are on the same plane. China is a special case right now; there are two sides to its rise. One side is what is common between these two countries - both are capitalist and imperialist.

The other side is that China is the first imperialist country that was previously a semi-colonial country. That is quite different from the US or any other imperialist country. We have to factor this into our analysis to understand how China functions in the world. For China there are always two levels of issues. One is the legitimate self-defense of a former colonial country under international law. We should not forget that even as late as the 1990s US fighter jets flew on the southern border of China and crashed into a Chinese airplane, killing its pilot. These kinds of events naturally remind Chinese people of their painful colonial past.

Britain until recently controlled Hong Kong, and international capital still exerts enormous influence there. An example of Western imperialist influence just came to light recently. A report revealed that just before Britain withdrew from Hong Kong, they disbanded their secret police and reassigned them into the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). The ICAC enjoys huge popularity here as it makes Hong Kong a less corrupt place. But only the head of the Hong Kong government, formerly chosen from London and now chosen from Beijing, appoints the commissioner, while the people absolutely have no influence over it at all.

Beijing was very concerned that the ICAC could be used to discipline the Chinese state

and its capitals as well. For example, in 2005 the ICAC prosecuted Liu Jinbao, the head of the Bank of China in Hong Kong. It appears that Beijing is trying hard to take control of the ICAC, but the public is kept in the dark about this power struggle. Of course, we should be happy that the ICAC goes after people like Liu Jinbao, but we must also recognize that it can be used by Western imperialism to advance its agenda. At the same time, Beijing asserting its control will mean consolidation by the Chinese state and capitalists, something that will not serve the interests of the Chinese working masses.

There are other colonial holdovers from the past. The US basically maintains Taiwan as a protectorate. We should, of course, oppose China's threat to invade Taiwan; we should defend Taiwan's right to self-determination. But we must also see that the US will use Taiwan as a tool to advance its interests. This is the downside of the colonial legacy that motivates the Communist Party to behave in a defensive manner against American imperialism.

China is an emerging imperialist country but one with fundamental weaknesses. I would say that the Chinese Communist Party has to overcome fundamental obstacles before it can become a stable and sustainable imperialist country. It is very important to see not just the commonality between the US and China as imperialist countries, but also China's particularities.

Obviously for socialists in the US, our principal duty is to oppose US imperialism and build solidarity with Chinese workers. That means we have to oppose the relentless China bashing not only on the right but also among liberals and even the labor movement. But we should not fall into a campist trap of giving political support to the Chinese regime, but with the country's workers. How do you approach this situation?

We must counter the lie used by the American right that Chinese workers have stolen American workers' jobs. This is not true. The people who really have the power to decide are not the Chinese workers but American capital like Apple that choose to have its phones assembled in China. The Chinese workers have absolutely zero say over such decisions. Actually, they are victims, not

people who should be blamed for job losses in America.

And as I said, Clinton, not China's rulers or workers, was to blame for the export of these jobs. It was Clinton's government that worked with China's murderous regime after Tiananmen Square to enable big American corporations to invest in China on such a massive scale. And when jobs in the US were lost, those that appeared in China actually were not the same kind of jobs at all. The American jobs lost in auto and steel were unionized and had good pay and benefits, but those created in China are nothing but sweatshop jobs. Whatever their conflicts today, the top leaders of the US and China, not workers in either country, put today's wretched neoliberal world order in place.

One thing we have done here in the US is help to put on tours of Chinese workers on strike so that we can build solidarity between American and Chinese workers. Are there other ideas and initiatives that we can take? There is a real danger of nationalism being whipped up in both countries against workers in the other country. It seems overcoming this is very important. What do you think?

It is important for the left in the rest of the world to recognize that China's capitalism has a colonial legacy and that it still exists today. So, when we analyze China and US relations, we must distinguish those legitimate parts of "patriotism" from those whipped up by the Party. There is an element of common-sense patriotism among the people that is the result of the last century of imperial intervention by Japan, European powers, and the US.

It does not mean that we accommodate to this patriotism, but we must distinguish this from reactionary nationalism of the Communist Party. And Xi is certainly trying to whip up nationalism in support of his great power aspirations, just like American rulers are doing the same to cultivate popular support for their regime's aim to keep China contained.

Among common people nationalism has been declining rather than rising because they despise the Chinese Communist Party, and more of them now don't trust its nationalism, and hate its autocratic rule. One funny example of this is a recent opinion poll that asked if people would support China in a war with the US. Netizens' response online

was really interesting. One of them said, "Yes, I support China's war against the US, but we first support sending the members of the Political Bureau to fight, then the Central Committee, and then the entire Chinese Communist Party. And after they either win or lose, we at least will be liberated." The censors, of course, immediately deleted these comments, but it is an indication of the deep dissatisfaction with the regime.

That means there is the basis among Chinese workers to build international solidarity with American workers. But that requires American workers to oppose their own government's imperialism. Only that position will build trust among Chinese workers.

American imperialism's threats are real and known in China. The US Navy just sent two warships through the Taiwan Strait in a clear provocation to China. The American left must oppose this militarism so that Chinese people understand that you oppose the US imperialist agenda on the Taiwan question – although one should also acknowledge Taiwan's right to purchase arms from the US. If the Chinese people hear a strong voice of anti-imperialism from the American left, they could be won over to see our common international interests against both US and Chinese imperialism.

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The beginning of the end of China's rise ?

Au Loong-Yu

Interview by Federico Fuentes

Could you outline the key factors that help explain China's phenomenal economic rise over the past few decades ?

China's rise has been spectacular. For the past 20-30 years, China's average annual GDP [Gross Domestic Product] growth has been about 10 % or slightly less. This has meant China has managed to double its GDP every eight years. Generally speaking, any underdeveloped country that converts huge numbers of small farmers into factory workers in such a short time will experience high economic growth, given the big differential in productivity between the two sectors. Achieving this is not easy, however, because it requires a huge amount of capital. In my opinion, there are three important factors that, although inadequate in terms of providing a full explanation, are indispensable – and yet often overlooked – to explain this rapid rise.

Factor no. 1 : the highest rate of investment in the world

The first factor is China's investment rate that, as a share of its GDP, is the highest in the world. China's ability to maintain such a high investment rate for such a long time is unprecedented. For the past 20-30 years, China's investment rate has stayed above 40 %, peaking at 45-46 % in 2014-15. Some readers might remember the so-called miracle economies of the "Four Dragons": South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The first two in particular had very high investment rates. But even they only got to slightly more than 30 % of GDP. So we are talking about a huge share of GDP being directed towards investments in new plants and infrastructure. That is the first explanation for China's rise:

an abnormally high investment rate over a sustained period of time.

I would add, though, that to fully understand this factor we must look at what happened in Mao [Zedong]'s era. During the first three decades of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) regime, China's investment rate was also very high: between 1958-80, the investment rate was almost 30 % each year (excluding the period after the famine in the early 1960s). By the time Mao died in 1976 the country was exhausted, but China had laid the foundation of its modern economy. It had a level of infrastructure and manufacturing that was more diversified and self-sufficient than most countries with a similar level of development. It also had a labour force with a relatively high literacy level. Without these, China's later rise would have been improbable.

But to sustain even higher investment rates required more capital, something China could not obtain solely from domestic resources. This was the context for Deng [Xiaoping]'s historic compromise with the United States and Britain, which enabled China to start attracting foreign capital and integrate into global capitalism. At first, Western capital was hesitant to invest on a mass scale, especially after the June Fourth Massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989. That is why during the first stage of "reform and opening up", the extra capital came from Hong Kong and Taiwan, two former colonies of Britain and Japan, respectively. .

Factor no. 2 : the colonial heritage

This brings us to the second factor, China's colonial legacy, which is important but sometimes overlooked in analysing China's rise.

Readers may be puzzled by this idea, given colonial legacies are generally viewed as an inherent hindrance to development for developing countries. But we need to analyse this issue concretely. At particular moments, for particular reasons, the opposite can also occur. That is exactly what happened in China's case after Deng's historic compromise with the US empire and the replacing of Mao's command economy with a capitalist economy.

Taiwan and Hong Kong enabled China's rise by contributing industrial and service capital (creating jobs for rural migrant Chinese workers) and by training up the first generation of entrepreneurs and managers (which were especially rare in Mao's China). Hong Kong was important in other ways. During the Cold War, Beijing obtained one third of its foreign currency through trade with Hong Kong, despite being tightly contained by the West. From there, Hong Kong went on to play the unique role of financial hub for "greater China", helping Chinese corporations raise huge amounts of capital and laying the foundation for their global ambitions. Between 2010-18, Hong Kong became home to two-thirds of initial public offerings of mainland Chinese corporations. Today, more than half of China's incoming and out-flowing foreign direct investment (FDI) goes through Hong Kong. Moreover, Hong Kong essentially fulfils the function of a US dollar printing machine for China, given that the Hong Kong dollar is pegged to the US dollar. Macau also played its role, even if it was more symbolic. When Deng agreed to keep the casino city open after it was returned to China, it was his way of saying to the West: "Look, if we can even allow a huge casino city with hundreds of gambling houses to exist right on the doorsteps of China, imagine how friendly we can be to capitalism."

The importance of these colonial legacies is evidenced by the fact Deng wanted to keep "foreign forces" in Hong Kong and Macau through his promise of "One country, two systems" (hence Hong Kong's autonomy) even after the leases on these territories expired in 1997 and 1999, respectively. Deng offered a similar compromise to Taiwan, which the latter declined. Regardless, it is true to say that without Hong Kong, Taiwan

and Macau, we would not have seen China's rise – at least not on the same scale.

Factor no. 3: the party-state

The third factor is the party-state, which was capable of bringing together the other two factors and making them possible in the first place. Unlike what happened in Russia with the fall of the Soviet Union, when Deng reintroduced capitalism, he held onto the existing party-state. This enabled his regime to be much more ruthless in crushing any challenge from below. Beijing apologists praise China as a model "development state", but ignore the price Chinese people have paid in pursuit of such high investment rates. Guaranteeing such a high investment rate requires suppressing consumption and wages. That means having to suppress workers to ensure they cannot organise or go on strike. Hence why during Mao's era wages remained frozen, despite an annual average economic growth rate above 4 %.

Herein lies the continuity between Mao and Deng. Deng was only a bit more moderate in the aftermath of Mao's death, but he and his successors soon returned to Mao's extremely high investment rate policy. Despite the CCP's rhetoric of "serving the people", since Mao's era the CCP has always prioritised the pursuit of its neck-breaking industrialisation – summarised in Mao's slogan *chaoyingganmei* (surpassing Britain and catching up with the United States) – over the welfare and living standards of the people. When workers become disgruntled, the party's propaganda machine simply rolls out the slogan *xianshengchan houshenghuo* (production first, consumption later) or its military equivalent *ningyao yuanzi(dan) buyao kuzi* (atomic bomb first, trousers later).

There is, of course, a rationale for poor countries investing resources in infrastructure and means of production. But, in the CCP's case, this was grossly overdone. Its abnormally high investment rate was less about socialism and a sensible modernisation program, and more about the vanity and pipe-dreams of its top leaders. In this they share much in common with voluntarist emperors such as Qin Shi Huang, the founder of the first unified state of China in 221 BC whom Mao praised for his ruthlessness.

It is important to add that alongside official propaganda about the “China dream”, which is used to justify the CCP’s ruthless pursuit of economic growth, the bureaucracy has always pursued its own dream of self-enrichment. The result of this is that the bureaucracy has hijacked the “China dream” for its own ugly ambitions. Accountable to no one except party bosses, bureaucrats have used all kinds of modernisation programs to plunder the nation’s wealth through corruption and kick-backs or founding companies.

This is not completely new. But whereas Mao’s bureaucracy could only appropriate social surplus in the form of use value, the post-Mao bureaucracy has combined the coercion of the state and the power of money to achieve its own enrichment in the form of exchange value. Through this process, the bureaucracy has consolidated itself into a new surplus-appropriating ruling class – one that views its own endless reproduction as its top priority. To ensure this it has continuously perfected the party-state’s mechanisms of coercion in order to extract as much social surplus as possible.

From Deng’s compromise to Xi’s aggressiveness

I want to return to the nature of this bureaucracy, but first: you referred to the historic compromise Deng made with the US. As a result of that compromise, the US began offshoring its manufacturing to China not long after. What impact did this have on China’s rise? And how can we explain current US-China tensions given this process of economic integration that has taken place over the past decades?

A decade after Hong Kong and Taiwanese companies started investing in and shifting manufacturing to China, Western and Japanese capital began to do the same. Back then, the far right ran small campaigns in Britain demanding “British jobs for British workers” in protest against such offshoring. Something similar occurred in the US. But there is a fatal mistake in the idea that Chinese workers took jobs off US or British workers. What really happened was that capitalists in the West and Japan took jobs off their “fellow citizens” and, in collusion with the Chinese regime, created much worse jobs in

China. Even if the plant was the same and the numbers of workers were the same, the jobs were not the same when lower-end manufacturing shifted to China. Not only because pay and conditions were drastically worse, but because workers in China were also denied basic civil liberties and the right to organise, leaving them largely powerless.

We should also note that this process of offshoring was accompanied in China by the privatisation of many medium- and small-sized state companies and the sacking of more than 30 million workers. In this sense, China’s rise as the world sweatshop was guaranteed through the downsizing of its state sector and recruitment of an entirely new working class from the countryside to be exploited in new factories funded by foreign capital.

The end result was that capitalists in the West and Japan as well as the Chinese regime benefited greatly from offshoring and the super-exploitation of 250 million powerless Chinese rural migrant workers. At the same time, deindustrialisation in the West and Japan along with privatisation and mass sackings in China made it a lose-lose situation for working people on both sides. That was the essence of the deal struck between Deng and [US president George HW] Bush.

It is important to understand, however, that this deal began to come to an end when Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. By that point, both sides were sensing that the honeymoon period was over, particularly as the US empire had not expected China to rise so quickly. Xi’s ascension, and his subsequent Belt and Road Initiative, can in many ways be understood as a response to the US’ “Pivot to Asia” under then-Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in 2009. This was followed by the trade wars started by [former US president Donald] Trump, who argued the US needed to impose tariffs because China had achieved a trade surplus while the US was suffering a huge trade deficit.

Trump’s argument is deceiving, though, as it ignores one important thing: much of what China exports is simply assembled parts, materials and technology imported from elsewhere in the world. That means only a very small percentage of the profits stay in China. So, the excuse for the trade war was wrong; the real reason behind the trade war was that

the US – being the empire it is – could never allow a rising China to challenge its global status.

But it is also important to say that China shares responsibility for rising tensions. Deng always maintained that China's approach towards the US should be to *Tāoguāngyǎng-huì, yǒu suǒ zuòwéi* (keep a low profile and bide our time) and not try to challenge its global hegemony, at least not in the short to medium term. Xi, on the other hand, basing himself on the assessment summed up by the phrase *Dōngshēng xī jiàng* (The East is rising, the West is declining), decided it was time to challenge US hegemony. Hence his slogan on foreign policy became *Ganyudou-zheng* (dare to struggle). The first step Xi took in that direction was his decision to militarise the South China Sea in 2015. At that point, China's actions could no longer be defined as defensive. In militarising the South China Sea, China was not fighting the US empire; it was, first and foremost, taking away the rights of surrounding countries over their economic maritime zones. Such moves must be opposed.

How has this shift in orientation under Xi impacted on China's rise?

Xi's assessment not only led him to confront the US head on but to also crush Hong Kong. Of course, from the point of view of the autocracy, that the Hong Kong people would dare defy Beijing's law on extradition was intolerable and had to be punished. The problem is that, even from the viewpoint of the collective interest of the regime, Xi went too far. Xi not only annihilated the opposition, but in practice destroyed the very institutions that underpin Hong Kong as China's financial hub. By killing Hong Kong's autonomy, Xi is killing this goose that lays golden eggs for Beijing.

Something similar is happening with regard to Taiwan. The truth is that the CCP has successfully integrated Taiwan economically into its orbit. If Taiwan was to sever its economic relations with China, its economy would suffer a huge blow, if not completely collapse. Moreover, the CCP's tactic of winning over the KMT (Kuomintang) to its side has been working. But its hawkish approach towards Taiwan is increasingly counter-productive.



Previously, the West's focus was on Taiwan's strategic role in East Asian geopolitics. But with the advance of AI, there is now an additional concern among developed countries given the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) produces half of the world's chips and about 90 % of the most advanced chips. This is Taiwan's bargaining chip. Unlike Hong Kong, Taiwan has much more leverage to fend off Beijing's aggression because if Beijing takes Taiwan by force, this would antagonise many countries. Here again, Xi's premature showdown with the US has only worsened China's position, as the response from Washington has been to block China from importing high-end products, especially cutting edge technology. All of this reaffirms that we are at the beginning of the end of the historic compromise between Deng and the US/Britain.

China is going to find it harder to continue growing as it has up until now. Its annual growth rate has been slowing down from 10 % to 5 %. On top of this, China's economy is experiencing both a cyclical and structural crisis. Previously, China could just throw big chunks of money towards buying foreign high-tech companies or hiring top engineers

from around the world as a means to catch up with the West. This option is becoming less available. Instead, it has resorted to producing high-end products at non-profitable levels through state subsidies, and the super-exploitation of workers and the environment. But this option too faces important obstacles, given not just Washington's actions but China's economic downturn makes it more difficult to invest as much money as before. I would also add that innovation is incompatible with the Chinese autocracy and its Orwellian society.

In all this, it is important to remember that the US empire is clearly not the "good cop" – but neither is China. The US empire is steadily declining, but China's rise has not reached a point where Beijing can impose its will on the West. Despite this, rather than follow Deng's advice, Xi has sought to strike out, creating enemies in the process. Xi's leadership has not only been a disaster for Chinese people but is now even a liability for the regime. Xi must therefore assume his fair share of responsibility for the immense difficulties China faces at home and abroad.

This takes us back to the issue of the party-state bureaucracy. Given what you have said about Xi's leadership, why does the bureaucracy not act to remove Xi? More generally, what does all this tell us about the nature of the bureaucracy?

First, it is important to say that we cannot blame everything on Xi. Hearsay suggests that Xi, in response to critics inside the party, blames his predecessors for leaving China's economy in a mess. In some sense, this is true. After setting an example in crushing public dissent through the June Fourth Massacre, many bureaucrats felt assured that they could plunder the country's wealth without restraint. The subsequent Global Financial Crisis of 2007-8 created a golden opportunity for municipal governments to enrich themselves by hijacking funding from the central government's rescue package and channelling it into mega projects and real estate, while pocketing unknown portions for themselves. This paved the way for the property bubble and its eventual bursting, the effects of which Xi is now having to deal with. All those ruling elites are accomplices of the crisis facing China today. They also know that

allowing Xi to remain in power means more harm than good for the country and regime. At the same time, they are deadly afraid of what may follow if they plot against Xi: what if it triggers a mass movement from below?

To fully grasp what is going on, it is useful to better understand the nature of the Chinese bureaucracy. The Chinese regime carries with it a lot of pre-modern political culture, such as blue blood worship and the hereditary "rights" of the "second or third red generation", as well as mechanisms of personal loyalty that run through the whole bureaucracy. This means that, in contrast to the Weberian ideal concept of the impersonal characteristic of bureaucracy, China's version is highly personal. This triggers a second mechanism, the negative selection of officials. By this I mean that the worst kind of people are more likely to get promoted while those who speak the truth or possess more merits, independent thinking and talents tend to be sidelined. In the end, what you are left with are leading bureaucrats whose most important task is to appease the emperor and work for the latter's wildest dream, while behind the scene they nurture their own plots for personal gains.

That is why I said that innovation is incompatible with the Chinese autocracy. This does not entirely preclude China making further advances in innovation, but it does hinder it from reaching most of its potential. What effect it will have on the science and technology community, for example, is unclear. But if we look at Xi's Zero-COVID policy, we can get a glimpse of how little influence medical specialists, for example, possess in shaping state policy. Not to mention the fact that every technological advance comes at a much higher cost as it implies terrible corruption.

Overall, the regime is entering a period of great difficulties, in which it has not yet realised that it is not an answer to the problems; rather it is a big part of the problems. That does not mean it will easily collapse of its own accord. But it does mean that any steps it takes in the technological, economic and armament race it is now engaged in with the US will bring with it immense suffering for the people.

What does the bursting of China's property bubble and its ongoing debt crisis tell us about the state of the Chinese economy?

If you look at China's debt-to-GDP ratio, which refers to total debt including all government and private household debt, you will see it was about 87 % in the early 1990s but rose to 211 % in 2010 – a rise of more than 100 % in 20 years. Figures from late 2023 now put it at closer to 300 %, meaning China's debt level is triple its GDP. While some advanced economies in the West and Japan have a similar debt-to-GDP ratio, China is the only higher middle-income country with such high debt. The average debt-to-GDP ratio for middle-income developing countries is about 124 %. What this tells us is that China's high investment rate has been partially funded by a sea of debt. The property market is a typical example.

In my opinion, the bursting of this property market bubble marks a turning point in China's rise. The reason for this is that the three factors I mentioned earlier as having contributed to China's rise have now all exhausted their potential. Take China's colonial legacy: this factor was always underpinned by the historic compromise between China and the US/Britain. But Xi's annihilation of Hong Kong's autonomy and decision to bring forward the showdown with the US has not only deprived China of a vibrant financial centre – which it badly needs amid the economic downturn – but made China vulnerable to US hostility.

The same is true for China's high investment rate. This factor has always depended on a high growth rate, which was previously driven by converting huge numbers of small farmers into factory workers. But the regime's rapid urbanisation program caused this pool of rural labour to dry up: while 76 % of the population lived in rural areas 40 years ago, today the percentage is 35 %, and most of them are women, kids and elderly. Ironically, the regime's super high investment rate has ended the initial advantage it gained from China's huge rural population. This problem has been further aggravated by the former one child policy – itself once an incentive for China's high growth rate, given that the financial costs of raising many children was saved, even if only at the expense of future generations. The resultant accelerated trend

towards an ageing population and lack of young workers has contributed to driving down China's growth rate.

Furthermore, the previous high investment rate was only possible at the expense of household consumption and low wages. China's household consumption level has declined dramatically since the early 1990s, from about 50 % of GDP at the start of the 90s to a low point of 34-35 % in 2014. It has gone up a bit since then, but has not hit 40 %. The result is that China faces neverending overproduction and overcapacity, but a relatively narrowing domestic market as people are too poor to buy what is produced.

In practice, the Chinese government's response has been: "Well, we do not need to do anything about this, we can just export our excess production and capital." That is one reason why China became a leading merchandise exporter and, since the turn of the century, has become a leading capital exporter. This is also why China's Belt and Road Initiative is not just a geopolitical project but an outlet for this overcapacity. China has basically sought to export its problem.

But this can not go on forever for the simple fact that a new trade war is looming. European countries are complaining that China's EV cars are too cheap due to Chinese state subsidies and the US government has already said: "If you subsidise your cars, we will subsidise ours as well." So, we are witnessing a second round in the trade war. This one is different from the first, however. In this round, I have no sympathy for the Chinese government. How can you continue to contribute more than 40 % of GDP to investment when 600 million Chinese are forced to live off a monthly income of 1 000 renminbi [roughly US\$140]? This is super-exploitative and the exact opposite of socialism.

Socialism is not productivism; its ultimate goal has never been to increase productive forces indefinitely. That is the capitalist mindset, not the socialist mindset. By maintaining such a high investment level, the Chinese government is hurting the Chinese people and the environment – and the world. This is not to say that the retaliatory actions taken by US and European governments are right. The new trade war is a result of the toxic capitalism and productivism that they pursue. But

China too has played its role in championing toxic capitalism and productivism.

It is true that one thing China counts in its favour is that much of this debt is not foreign debt. The Chinese government is very sensitive to the idea of foreign powers gaining leverage inside China, including through debt. That is why the Chinese government has always preferred to borrow a lot from Chinese people. This is safer for the regime because it knows that it can always shift the burden onto Chinese people in various forms. For example, when the trade war started in 2016, China maintained it was not scared of a trade war. One state official went as far as to say that Chinese people were ready to eat grass for a whole year if needed, as an indication of how much pain Chinese people were willing to endure.

This brings us to the third factor, the party-state. It has been the main actor forging together the two other factors to bring about China's break-neck paced modernisation – which has become increasingly unbearable for society, people and the environment. Today, the party-state's two inner logics – boundless greed for corruption and boundless appetite for perfecting state coercion – have created a monster in which the two logics feed into each other. The more "perfect" the state coercion, the more the bureaucracy is free from any accountability for its actions. This creates more incentives to get rich through corruption, which in turn requires more state coercion to protect the bureaucracy. But everything has a limit.

The bursting of the property market illustrates the limits of the first logic. Given urban land is state-owned and managed by local governments, this was a market that was dominated from the start by local governments, their "financial vehicles" (LGFV), and cronies bankers and developers. They were responsible for the piling up of billions of dollars of debt. They created a mega bubble in which so many new flats have been built since 2009 that alone they could house 250 million residents while the current housing vacancy rate stands at 25 %.

On the other hand, the emergence of the White Paper movement in response to the government's zero-Covid policy is an example of the limits of the second logic. The regime's zero-Covid policy was never a regular

"lockdown" to prevent the spreading of the virus. It was what I called a "lockup", because for three years, people were locked up in their communities or homes over just a single case of Covid, with no regard for whether they had the food or medications they needed. And what for? For the naïve idea that zero Covid was achievable. Meanwhile, the regime did not even bother importing adequate amounts of the more efficient Western vaccines. What this policy did, however, was give the regime a golden opportunity to further perfect its control over people. The seeming madness also had another rationale: it was highly profitable for municipal officials and their cronies, from groceries suppliers to Covid testing companies.

The inconvenient truth for the regime, however, is that there is a limit to how much pain Chinese people are willing to endure before they rebel. And this regime has become increasingly unbearable, as we saw with the White Paper movement. .

Could you tell us a bit about the significance of the White Paper movement?

The White Paper¹ movement began as a direct response to the zero-Covid lockup but became a historically significant moment because the movement achieved a victory and, to a certain extent, the regime suffered a defeat.

In talking about this movement, it is important to acknowledge the role played by Peng Zaizhou, who, amid the pandemic and lockdown, staged a one-man protest on Sitong Bridge in Beijing on the morning of October 13, just three days before the 20th CCP Congress. As part of his protest, Peng hung two banners over the bridge, including one that read: "We want food, not PCR tests. We want freedom, not lockdowns. We want respect, not lies... We want to be citizens, not slaves". While at the time no one heeded his call for protest, the Urumqi residential block fire on November 24 did kick off a wave of protests in more than 20 cities against the CCP's zero-Covid lockdown policy. Protesters' anger was largely driven by the fact that the 10 deaths in the fire were the direct result

1. Au Loong-Yu "Chinese New Youth taking on the Imperial Dragon", *Amandla*, Oct. 27, 2023.

of the regime's lockup policy, which meant no fire truck was close enough to save the victims.

From there, protests quickly came to echo Peng's demands and ultimately forced the government to back down from its zero-Covid policy. Of course, people may dispute this, saying: "Well, the government specialist was already advising to end the zero-Covid policy because it was not working and had become impossible to implement." That may be true. But everything that happens in China is the result of political decisions, not the decisions of specialists; it is the top leaders, the politburo, who are responsible for making the final decision. This leads us to ask a legitimate question: why the abrupt change in their policy? We do not have enough information to ascertain which was the decisive factor: dissident voices in the party leadership, specialist's advice, or mass protests. But those dissident voices and the specialist's advice should not be seen as counterposed to the contribution made by the mass protests. Anyone who tries to minimise or dismiss the movement altogether is wrong.

This victory was important because Chinese people have been oppressed to the point that they have essentially been denied their right to self-esteem. Many have taken to referring to themselves, in a self-mocking way, as "garlic chives" (*jiucai*), by which they mean vegetables that are endlessly harvested by the CCP regime. Others use the term "huminerals" (*renkuang*), or human minerals, which are mined by the CCP. This gives us a glimpse into the deep pessimism that exists among the people and the sense that one cannot do anything about being repressed and exploited. Of course, not everyone thinks the same. There has been resistance – strikes have been reported in social media, for example – but it has been very fragmented, very partial and rarely political.

The significance of the White Paper movement is that though we cannot say it represents a complete shift in people's mentality from accepting the status quo to brave resistance, the movement has awakened young people. It not only prompted common citizens to protest against lockup and workers to protest against being forced to work, sleep and eat in the same place, but resulted in them winning their own freedom – even if

only temporarily. This was eye opening for many, in particular the youth.

One of the horrible legacies of the post-1989 repression was depoliticisation. We had 30 years in which young people did not dare to talk about politics. They simply focused on their studies and professional careers. But with the White Paper movement, young students took the lead in protests and became more outspoken and sharper in their attacks on the regime. They started to meet on the internet and at protests and began saying: "We should repent for the fact that we stayed silent during the Hong Kong uprising and repression, and during the repression against the Uyghur peoples. We should not allow the government to divide and rule over us." This is very significant.

Of course, we need to be cautious about the extent of this reawakening – it is very uneven and, as a matter of fact, the movement has died down since the end of the zero-Covid policy. While at that time thousands of overseas Chinese students were demonstrating in New York, London and so on, their numbers have shrunk quite quickly, with the remaining activists now comprising very small circles. That is not surprising given the severity of repression and the unpreparedness of these young people. But the fact that discussions have taken place on social media channels such as Twitter, Instagram, Telegram and so on, among overseas Chinese students and thousands of mainland Chinese, exchanging all these political ideas and opinions, is significant progress compared to the past 30 years of depoliticisation, even if there is still a long way to go.

How does all this fit into the question of China's rise? Well, what we are seeing is that China's rapid modernisation and industrialisation has also transformed Chinese class structures and cultures. Today workers, partly due to their concentration in cities and partly through their own spontaneous struggles – together with the conscious work of labour NGOs in the previous stage – are no longer easily fooled by their employers. As for the urban middle class, while there was hope this class would lead the democratic movement, this never materialised. But they have gradually adopted very rudimentary ideas of accountability, of human rights, and so on.

While the CCP's modernisation project has not yet brought about the forces that could undermine the regime in a fundamental way, it has created increasing impatience with the party itself. It is now becoming increasingly difficult for the CCP to continue with its extreme modernisation project. Even if Chinese people have not yet won any democratic rights, the White Paper movement has shown that their mindset is changing and their political awareness is rising – very slowly, from a very low starting point and in a very unbalanced manner, but nevertheless progressing.

Of course, no one can say what will happen next. We should not try to project some kind of linear progress when talking about China's future. The CCP is acutely aware of what is happening and is thinking of ways to revert the situation. One card they may play is diverting people's attention away from domestic issues towards external enemies – half real and half imagined. That is why the Chinese government has been increasingly adopting a war-like stance in its diplomacy. The CCP believes it may perhaps solve its domestic problems through a war with some foreign country, especially over Taiwan, or by greatly escalating existing tensions.

It is difficult to guess what the regime will do next. Nevertheless, we are clearly entering a new period, and we must prepare ourselves for it.

Source: [Links](#), *International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, July 19, 2024.



Inaugural address for a Journal

Adresses, n° 0, January 23, 2024

All the previous issues can be download at [Entre les lignes entre les mots](#), [Réseau Bastille](#) and [www.syllepse.net](#).

It was a long time ago

The war drums of the Vietnamese FNL were announcing incredible news: the invaders were not invincible. Almost everywhere, campuses were aflame, workers' insubordination was spreading like wildfire, the old world was being turned upside down, Paris, Mexico City, Berlin, Berkeley, Turin and Prague were becoming one.

Youth, in colleges and factories alike, were shaking up the old society, hierarchies, powers by divine right, inalienable property, patriarchy, predatory and liberticidal bureaucracies. The walls began to speak, and the barricades opened up unsuspected avenues.

Climatic disorder in the world of Yalta disrupted the cycle of the seasons. Spring came to Czechoslovakia and, in France, May lasted until June. In Italy, May crawled and autumn was warm. In the years that followed, everything had seemed possible in Santiago and Lisbon, which had been covered in carnations.

The air was red and the long breath of revolution undermined private ownership of the means of production, established morality, gendered social relations, ethnic divisions and single parties. There was protest and subversion, strikes and workers' councils, expropriation and self-management, burnt military booklets, battles for civil rights, struggles for equality and women's liberation, the new emergence of ecology and, on a scale hitherto unknown, a feminist tidal wave. Unfulfilled or betrayed freedoms were at hand, and the whipping fathers and guardians of society were in the grip of the dogs. The world could change its basis: it now seemed possible to regain control of the mechanisms of life in society. Democracy could be boundless, no longer stopping at company gates and

borders, nor in neighborhoods and relations between peoples.

Today

The world has changed. Spring was shattered in Prague and Santiago, stifled in Lisbon. A deathly silence fell over Tiananmen Square. But the "Soviet" prison wall collapsed, freeing both a space for freedom and an entire continent for predators. The multinationals' grip on the world knows few limits. Imperialism now has many faces. And so does barbarism. The planet is burning from the predations inflicted on it by capitalist civilization. The world is heavy with the peril of the war of all against all. The air is dark, sometimes even brown. The fascisms of the 21st century don't just wear black shirts.

Tomorrow has already begun

It's been more than half a century since some people announced that "civilization was at a crossroads". We had to choose an itinerary that would involve democratic policies that would put the benefits of social, cultural, scientific, technological and human progress at the service of as many people as possible.

Civilization is now on the brink of the abyss: the forces of capital, imperialism and sub-imperialism, barbarism and fascism are on the offensive across the planet, and the planet is burning.

As for emancipatory forces, they have often done what they could, in part, but they have also often strayed into various impasses whose names appear on the maps like so many obstacles to be avoided: "campism", "avant-gardism", "substitutism", "statism", "sectarianism", "authoritarianism", "relativism" and many others.

So yes, we need to get out of it. Hence the idea of a review

One more review, you may say. That's true. But its title is a nod to Marx and Bakunin's International Workers' Association, and a call for the creation of an international, internationalist tool for reflection, sharing and exchange.

It was waiting for something to click. This came from across the Atlantic with the text "For a democratic and internationalist left", written by Ben Gidley, Daniel Mang and Daniel Randall, which several of us signed in response to their call, and which we publish on page 5 of this issue 00. It's a text that puts its foot down and calls for a renewal of practices and ideas in order to remain faithful to what we've been fighting for for decades: we're committed to a revolutionary vision and practice in which democracy, self-organization and self-government - in all their forms - are at the heart of the project. Not democracy as an abstraction, but democracy as an objective.

Our ambition is clear: to revive the ability to discuss and elaborate together, so that - in the light of our multiple experiences, which have often rubbed up against each other - a wide-ranging discussion opens up to make revolution a concrete utopia, to enable syntheses, to preserve and transmit the memory of struggles, experiences and revolutions, to contribute to the socialization of the oppressed and exploited.

So, yes, we need a global magazine that sets up the conditions for global exchange and gives "the greatest number" of people access to the archipelago of articles and texts contributing to the search for a way out of the crisis of the emancipatory project

A magazine to explore internationalism and democracy

Our "political base" will be articulated around the following themes: emancipation of labor, self-government, self-determination, self-management, self-organization, feminism and gender, revolution, overthrowing/overcoming capitalism, alternatives, the right of peoples to self-determination, socialist democracy, industrial reconversion for

socially useful and ecologically sustainable production, rejection of campism and the struggle against all imperialisms and sub-imperialisms...

A singular magazine made up of "cahiers" containing texts and articles culled from sites and magazines around the world, a sort of platform, a hub where reflections can cross-fertilize, according to a mechanism to be constructed and with no other guidelines than to enable exchange and reading.

A magazine that won't deliberately compete with existing paper or internet publications, but rather will act to synergize them.

Amagazine that avoids second-rate polemics or narrowly political texts.

An open project under permanent construction.

