

China, the Canadian left, and countering state capitalist apologia

Wednesday 24 March 2021, by [WONG Vincent](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2021).

It was a warm summer night in downtown Ottawa, with COVID-19 restrictions dampening what would otherwise have been a bustling weekend in the capital. As my partner and I crossed Elgin Street, we heard shouting behind us from a few young men in a pickup truck.

“Go back to your country, you fucking Chinks!”

Immediately spooked, we turned away and picked up our pace. One of them laughed and pretended to shoot us in the backs.

“Bang! Bang! Bang!”

Living in Canada as a Chinese immigrant during a rise of anti-Chinese racism stoked by the Canadian right has been extremely unsettling. I’ve spent over 10 years engaged in anti-racism work, but right now racial hostilities toward Chinese people are the worst I’ve ever seen. Yet it’s been equally as disorienting to see some leftists respond to Sinophobia not by building solidarity with Chinese people, but instead by uncritically siding with the Chinese state and their escalating nationalistic rhetoric. Increasingly, we’ve seen some leftists dismissing or justifying the Chinese state’s violence and repression toward Uighurs, Tibetans, and pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong. Unpacking this apparent contradiction is, to me, both politically urgent and very personal.

The Free Meng Wanzhou campaign

On November 24, 2020, a “Free Meng Wanzhou” Zoom event took place, foregrounding a political demand that, at first glance, would seem to be a low priority for the Canadian left: the immediate release of Chinese multimillionaire and Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou and the withdrawal of her extradition case.

Eyebrows were further raised when NDP MP Niki Ashton, a leading Canadian voice on progressive foreign policy reform, was set to speak at the event. Ashton had previously sponsored [an e-petition](#) calling for the Canadian government to release Meng, permit Huawei to participate in the development of Canada’s 5G network, and review its foreign policy.

It may strike onlookers as curious that a left-wing Canadian politician would call for the release of a Chinese multimillionaire corporate executive, but examining the underlying reasons helps us understand the tensions emerging within the Canadian (and more broadly, the Western) left on engagement with China. These tensions are not minor issues – they represent a schism that threatens transnational solidarity and decolonial, anti-carceral, and egalitarian political projects everywhere. It is urgent to raise and debate these issues as Western geopolitical anxiety increases and China prepares to [pass the United States](#) as the world’s largest economic superpower by 2028.

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To be clear, there are sound reasons why progressives want Canada to release Meng. Meng was charged with fraud in the United States because she was allegedly part of a plan to obtain prohibited U.S. goods for Huawei's Iran-based business, thus violating America's trade sanctions against Iran. Canada should refuse to enforce America's crippling economic sanctions against Iran – both because the sanctions are literally [blocking food and medicines](#) from reaching Iranians and because Canada itself does not have sanctions against Iran. There were also [potential violations of Meng's Charter rights](#) prior to her arrest: when she stepped off the plane in Vancouver in December 2018, the RCMP didn't arrest her immediately, instead letting Canada Border Services Agency officers detain and question her alone for three hours, seizing her electronics and asking her for their passcodes without telling her she was wanted for fraud in the United States. Finally, Canada should refuse to become involved in escalating tensions between the U.S. and China, which has already resulted in the [targeting of Chinese international students](#), [a crippling trade war](#), and the fanned flames of anti-Chinese racism [already running rampant](#) thanks to COVID-19.

However, a troubling [campist](#) discourse has been growing within the Canadian left under the guise of anti-imperialism and combatting Sinophobia: pro-CCP (Chinese Communist Party) state capitalist apologia. This discourse appears to be grounded in a particular form of Marcyism, which holds the view that “any nominally socialist country claiming, however tenuously, to oppose the West must be supported without public critique lest criticisms contribute to the imperial repression of global socialism,” as Emmi Bevensee [writes](#) in a post for the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right. Bevensee notes that the logical conclusion of this ideology is that those who attempt to hold non-Western powers accountable are then blamed for imperialist attacks on those powers.

The playbook of Chinese nationalists and their apologists relies on what fascism scholar Jason Stanley calls the “mask of nationalism of the oppressed” to advance their own imperialist conduct. Nationalists rely on genuine oppression of the past (in this case, the “century of humiliation” China suffered under European and Japanese colonialism) to “obscure the contradiction between a struggle for equal respect and a struggle for dominance.”

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This discursive move simultaneously allows the CCP to strengthen the monopoly that it claims over China as a nation and the voices of Chinese people around the world, reinforces the stereotype that Chinese people are overwhelming pro-authoritarian, and deliberately conflates legitimate critiques of Chinese state policies with Sinophobia.

Clearly, there is a desperate need in Canada to oppose the escalation of geopolitical hostilities, anti-Chinese racism, and U.S.-led imperialism. To do this effectively starts with an updated assessment of Chinese history, economics, and politics. That assessment needs to recognize that today, Xi Jinping's China is a powerful, imperialist, state capitalist, and highly carceral actor. A failure to respond to the pro-CCP position would be absolutely disastrous for the Canadian left and surely create irreconcilable divisions for years to come.

Pro-CCP Marcyism in Canada

Examining the political discourse of the organizer of the “Free Meng Wanzhou” event, Hamilton

Coalition to Stop the War, gives us a glimpse into pro-CCP Marcyist rhetoric. In [an op-ed](#) supporting the Free Meng Wanzhou campaign published in the *Canada Files*, authors Ken Stone and David Rennie, executive committee members of Hamilton Coalition to Stop the War, begin with several points that are rather unobjectionable, and were raised in a July 15, 2020 statement by federal Green Party foreign affairs critic Paul Manly – that Canada is being used as a pawn in a trade dispute between the United States and China, and that Meng’s extradition proceedings are part of a devastating campaign of American economic sanctions on Iran.

Stone and Rennie then parrot a set of right-wing talking points in defence of China’s current Xi regime, glorifying Chinese ultranationalist accounts of history. Their assertion that Tibet “has been part of China, almost continuously, for over 700 years” entirely erases the history of Tibetan nationhood, the region’s long struggle for self-determination, and their military annexation, occupation, and cultural assimilation by the Chinese government. [1] Then, Stone and Rennie engage in rank whataboutism – arguing that since Canada engages in settler colonization and oppression of minorities, Canadians are in no position to object to China doing it as well.

The op-ed then turns to the subject of mass incarceration of Uighurs and other non-Han Indigenous ethnic groups in northwest China. [2] Drawing again from the well of right-wing authoritarian ideas, the authors justify these extrajudicial detention camps (alongside a [surge of formal penal incarceration](#)) as necessary in the war against Uighur terrorism. It’s troubling to see leftists throw their weight behind the “war on terror,” a [racist legal and political discourse](#) that has led to the dehumanization and killing of members of Muslim minority groups in [America](#), [Palestine](#), [Myanmar](#), [Indian-occupied Kashmir](#), and, of course, Xinjiang.

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Stone and Rennie overlook copious evidence that has emerged over the past several years in the form of [satellite photos](#), [Chinese government documents](#), [on-the-ground reporting](#), and [the lived experiences of survivors](#) to dismiss outcry against state-sanctioned destruction of Islamic sacred sites, forcible sterilization of Muslim women, and coerced labour camps – waving off all of this evidence as “fiction” and calling the existence of the detention camps “a ridiculous libel.”

Stone and Rennie also overlook the driving motivation behind the Chinese state’s decisions: its settler capitalist project of “opening the West.” When China annexed the region in 1949 from the short-lived Soviet-backed East Turkestan Republic, the Han population of Xinjiang was [slightly more than 6 per cent](#) (Han people are the majority ethnic group in China). Economic migration began in earnest in the 1980s, so that by 2010, the region was over 40 per cent Han. By the early 2000s, Xinjiang (whose name literally means “New Frontier” in Mandarin Chinese) had already been [converted to a peripheral colony](#) whose economic function was to supply large eastern Chinese cities with raw materials. The amalgamation of pre-existing settler capitalist imperatives with war-on-terror discourse and Xinjiang’s [vital location](#) in China’s flagship “Belt and Road Initiative” infrastructure project created an overwhelming impetus to securitize the region.

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In their final point in defence of the Xi regime, Rennie and Stone discuss the Hong Kong protests, taking a statist position in admonishing protest tactics – a truly alarming argument for leftists to make. Specifically, they lament protesters’ “massive disruptions to Hong Kong’s economy,”

vandalism of property, targeting of government sites and transportation infrastructure, and “regular attacks against police.” If police, the economy, public property, and private property are off limits, then one wonders what tactics Stone and Rennie believe are acceptable for communities to resist state and economic oppression.

Ultimately, this view, which deflects, justifies, or outright denies imperialist and colonialist actions on the part of non-Western states, stems from an Orientalist view of the non-West. Writing on the parallels between Indian and Chinese oppression in Kashmir and Xinjiang, Kashmiri scholar Nitasha Kaul [points out](#) that “[i]n the inherited historiography that presents a perennial structuring of colonial power as between ‘the haves’ of the West and ‘the have-nots’ of the non-West, there is no place to perceive a colonial exercise of power by the non-West, unless it is ... seen only as reflective of the divide-and-rule agenda of the West. This is a significant conceptual problem.” To admit that modern-day China (or modern-day India, for that matter) could be a powerful imperialist power in its own right upsets the rigid West/non-West divide that Orientalism demands.

Two sides of the same coin

Marcyist apologia with respect to China is only made possible within the same framework asserted by the Western right wing: that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is a country that is unique and fundamentally different from other countries. This confusion is exacerbated by the fact that the ruling party continues to have “Communist” in its name. However, within an era of global capitalist hegemony, the view that China is fundamentally and irreconcilably different from any other powerful economic state is both flawed and harmfully anachronistic.

In an article for *Spectre* called [“Why China Is Capitalist”](#) Eli Friedman disputes this view. As he explains, “Despite important differences from the liberal Anglo-American model, we will see that China has become capitalist on all counts.” In this article, I’ll highlight several key developments that resulted in the modern form of Chinese state capitalism, but readers are encouraged to study Friedman’s article for a more thorough analysis.

In the 1950s, the beginning of the PRC era under Mao Zedong featured peasant-led and highly violent redistributive land reforms in which privately owned land was forcefully brought under collective ownership in agricultural co-operatives. After countrywide land reform, Mao’s approaches to governance varied widely – from the Soviet-inspired collectivization and centralized economic planning of his first five-year plan in 1953 to the economic disaster of the Great Leap Forward, to the chaotic socio-political radicalizations of the Cultural Revolution.

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After Mao’s death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping began a process of gradual but significant economic reforms in the late ’70s and early ’80s. China “matured” as a market economy in the ’90s, when the state formalized wage labour relations and contracts. In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization and since then has been structured by its leadership as an authoritarian capitalist economy. Although efforts have been made to legislate labour protections, enforcement of labour laws has been [extremely lax](#). Meanwhile, massive privatization during this era has meant that the number of workers in the state and collective sector has declined from 110 million in 1995 to 61 million in 2008, at the same time that China’s population has [risen by 117 million](#). Further, while China’s income inequality has soared, social spending remains [far below](#) the OECD average as a share of GDP.

The right to strike and collectively bargain are de facto banned, subjugating workers to the interests of capital. The only union allowed by the government is the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which, [in the words of Au Loong Yu and Bai Ruixue](#), is “an arm of the party-state rather than an organ that workers can use to fight for and defend their rights and interests.” In the Xi era, there is even less space for collective action. Labour organizing is forced to operate in a clandestine manner and is often subjected to fierce repression, such as with the [Jasic labour struggle](#) in Shenzhen in 2018. In this atmosphere of labour suppression, employer interests are hegemonic and practices such as the [“996” working-hour system](#) (9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week) have been popularized in tech-related sectors. Despite nominal public ownership of land, rural land-use rights are highly restrictive and often forcibly expropriated by local governments to make way for commercial developments. According to a [2011 survey](#) conducted in 17 provinces, average compensation to farmers was a mere 2.5 per cent of market value, and 22.5 per cent of farmers were given zero compensation, leaving many families destitute and homeless. In sum, there is little to nothing left that is substantively socialist about China’s state or economy in 2021.

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Consequently, any attempt to understand the Xinjiang detention camps cannot be separated from the corporate and state-sanctioned drive to capitalize on Xinjiang’s resources and people. As well as being a [critical transportation node](#) in the Belt and Road Initiative, the region supplies 20 per cent of China’s oil and gas and around 20 per cent of tomatoes and cotton globally. As a result, the region is also at the forefront of what scholar Darren Byler calls [“terror capitalism”](#) – a global system that generates profits by subjugating entire populations as potential terrorists, offering lucrative state contracts to private corporations to build and deploy policing technologies, using the vast data collected to improve these technologies, then [selling retail versions of these technologies](#) to other institutions and states. Chinese companies that specialize in mass surveillance and facial recognition, like Hikvision and Dahua, have been able to develop technologies in the “laboratory” of Xinjiang and then sell the technologies as [turnkey solutions](#) to security and police forces around the world.

In addition, the connection between the carceral state, forced assimilation policies, and coercive labour can be found within the very architecture of the Xinjiang camp system itself. Work factories have been placed *within* internment camp complexes, which, from the [available evidence](#), appear to focus on output for textile and garment companies.

Uighur workers who “graduate” from “re-education” camps have been transferred en masse, through a partnership with private industry known as [“Xinjiang Aid,”](#) to factories in Xinjiang and in other Chinese cities. There, they produce goods for both domestic companies and multinationals such as Apple, Nike, Gap, and Samsung. Like many prison-related work programs elsewhere, these workers are paid significantly less than the minimum wage. Furthermore, if they refuse to satisfy their work placement, [they risk \(re\)detention](#). Apple has lobbied to [water down](#) certain provisions of the U.S. Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which would compel U.S. companies to guarantee they do not use imprisoned or coerced workers from Xinjiang.

The region is also at the forefront of what scholar Darren Byler calls “terror capitalism” – a global system that generates profits by subjugating entire populations as potential terrorists.

Since Xi’s appointment as general secretary of the CCP in 2012, China has moved significantly further to the right. Xi consolidated his power as paramount leader quickly, crushing political rivals, attacking independent media, promoting a cult of personality, removing presidential term limits so

that he could rule indefinitely, and eliminating any remaining resistance from domestic human rights lawyers and activists during the [“709 crackdown”](#) in 2015.

Alarming, the Xi era has also coincided with the rise of right-wing Han Chinese nationalism, an ethnonationalist political project that centres ethnic Han people as exalted citizens within the Chinese nation-state. It is within the context of the rise of Han nationalism that Xi announced the [“People’s War on Terror”](#) in 2014, which has further dispossessed ethnic minorities such as Mongolians, Tibetans, and Uighurs.

What must be understood by the Canadian left is that these conditions did not arise in a vacuum. They are part of the broader forces of global right-wing politics that glorify ethnonationalism, eschew human rights and democracy, and demand an all-encompassing security apparatus in the form of a police state.

Commenting on China and Canada’s parallel mistreatment of religious minorities, Rennie and Stone write that “[p]eople in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.” When leftists criticize the hypocrisy of the West’s vilification of China, they’ve got one thing right: the Xi administration is acting fundamentally like any other right-wing government.

A history of imperial partnership

Though today China and the United States have gone their separate ways in their inter-imperialist rivalry, American and Chinese interests converged during the post-9/11 “war on terror” that continues to unleash massive conflict and misery upon the world. Some leftists are too quick to forget this fateful collaboration.

China had a significant role in supporting American imperialism in the Middle East. The Asian country underwrote the Bush administration’s costly war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq (along with its significant wealth transfers to the rich), having purchased [upwards of \\$1 trillion](#) in U.S. treasury bonds and government-backed mortgage debt in the decade up to 2008.

The U.S. Department of State has, for its part, [trained the Hong Kong Police Force](#) (HKPF) for years through its international outreach academies. Until export restrictions in 2020, the U.S. was involved in selling military equipment to the HKPF, along with tear gas, firearms, and policing vehicles – all of which were later used to brutally suppress protests for greater democratization and police accountability. By late 2019, as much as [88 per cent](#) of Hong Kong’s population had been exposed to tear gas.

Perhaps the most striking case study of American, Canadian, and Chinese collaboration in the “war on terror” is the ongoing nightmare of Ayoub Mohammed.

Mohammed was one of the [22 Uighurs](#) who were unjustly detained, interrogated, and tortured at Guantanamo Bay for years. Their detention and treatment as terrorists resulted from a [quid pro quo deal](#) between the U.S. and China in which the former would label a barely existing jihadist group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), as a designated terrorist organization in return for China’s tacit support for the American invasion of Iraq.

We cannot properly explain Canadian authorities’ continued intransigence with Mohammed’s spousal sponsorship case without understanding the racist discourses that ascribe guilt to Muslims, laundered through security and terrorism rhetoric.

After his transfer to Guantanamo Bay, Mohammed [recalls](#) being kept naked in isolation for days at a time, tear gassed until he vomited for refusing to leave his cell, beaten, forcibly shaved, and sexually

violated. In 2005, a U.S. military tribunal found that Mohammed was not an enemy combatant and was being held without just cause. Yet the U.S. would not resettle him, with U.S. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell labelling Mohammed and other victims [“terrorist-trained detainees.”](#) Eventually he was exiled to Albania, where he still lives today.

After Mohammed married, his wife Melike and their two children all naturalized as Canadian citizens. In 2014, Melike applied to sponsor Mohammed to join her, yet the Canadian government continues to this day to block family unification by recycling the discredited and unsubstantiated allegations of Mohammed’s involvement with the ETIM that were initially posed by Chinese and then American authorities at Guantanamo.

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Internationalism from below

Western powers certainly have not hesitated to lie or exaggerate about their past enemies in order to weaken or even invade them. It is understandable that many leftists would oppose aggressive foreign policy actions against even the most authoritarian states. Yet pro-CCP Marcyism takes this view to the extreme, uncritically accepting ultranationalist accounts and erasing the experiences of the oppressed and marginalized. Leftists have a responsibility to base our demands on truthful and accurate information by connecting with the proletariat of different nations.

The best way for the left to address these issues is to turn our attention away from the theatre of Chinese millionaires’ extradition and instead dedicate our efforts to building [internationalism from below](#). In Canada, as in all countries, to quote Karl Liebknecht, [“the main enemy is at home.”](#) We can refuse the Orientalism that enables anti-Chinese racism, oppose Canadian ruling-class moves against China that are motivated by U.S.-led inter-imperialist competition, and facilitate migrant relief efforts.

But most importantly, we can co-operate and build solidarity with [Chinese workers](#), [nascent labour movements in Hong Kong](#), and ethnic minorities resisting dispossession and cultural eradication, instead of siding with the state. Further, Canadian leftists’ positions need to be grounded within affected communities in China and their diasporas (with all of their complexities) so that there is a *real* stake in the outcome of leftist demands, and that those most directly affected are centred, listened to, and supported.

We must learn to resist China’s dispossession and discrimination against Uighurs, Tibetans, and other ethnic minorities as part and parcel of a global movement against racial subjugation (which includes resisting anti-Chinese racism and xenophobia at home in Canada), colonialism, police brutality, surveillance, and incarceration. Only then will we be able to see through the divide-and-conquer strategy of Western and Chinese ultranationalists, reject the “clash of civilizations” narrative, and realize that working-class interests transcend borders, regardless of what the elites in our respective countries keep telling us.

Editor’s note, March 8, 2021: In this piece, we used “Marcyism” to describe the stance of pro-CCP Canadian leftists who oppose any criticisms of China. Marcyism is a strand of campist socialist politics whose origins lie in some orthodox Trotskyists’ adaptation to Stalinism in the 1950s; it is much less present in Canada than it is in the U.S. A more appropriate word would have been simply [“campism.”](#)

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P.S.

Briarpatch

<https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/china-the-canadian-left-and-counteracting-state-capitalist-apologia>

Footnotes

[1] An excellent book on this is Sam Van Schaik, *Tibet: A History* (Yale University Press, 2013). An excellent book on the specific details of Tibet's annexation by the People's Republic of China right after the civil war and the give-and-take from some Tibetan communists at that time is Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A Tibetan Revolutionary: The Political Life and Times of Bapa Phuntso Wangye* (University of California Press, 2006).

[2] I was encouraged to use this framing from a scholar of the area, who pointed out to me that the demographics of those caught in the detention camp system are predominately Uighur, but also include other non-Han ethnicities such as Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tartar, Tajik - not all are Muslim and not all are Turkic.