

A Chinese Alternative? Interpreting the Chinese New Left Politically

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In a country where the Communist Party has dominated “left-wing” politics for over sixty years, dissent has often been deemed a “right-wing” or “counterrevolutionary” affair. Subsequently, many dissidents and parts of the general population have embraced the term “right-wing” as implying something antiauthoritarian or progressive. To make things more confusing, since 1978 the CCP itself has moved farther and farther to the right while still claiming to be socialist. All this has contributed to a very strange political environment in mainland China. On the one hand, Chinese liberals employ the rhetoric of individual rights, parliamentary democracy, and free market capitalism in opposition to the state, yet find themselves in open support of the CCP’s drive to “liberalize” and push forward market reforms. By contrast, the Chinese “New Left” is left defending many aspects of the pre-1978 Maoist system and the last vestiges of state control over the economy while opposing state-driven market policies. With but a few exceptions, what remains is either tacit or explicit support for the CCP on both sides of the political spectrum. This rather bizarre phenomenon is related to the peculiar nature of the contemporary Chinese state. Thus, a clear understanding of the nature of the state is indispensable if the Chinese “left” is to have any hope of moving away from both its authoritarian past and its current capitalist trajectory.

In China, the terms “left” and “right” or “radical” and “conservative” produce somewhat different associations in the popular mind than what we are used to in the West. While in most capitalist countries “left” and “right” are understood largely in economic terms, in China these concepts tend to be deeply entangled within a framework defined by the state, the Communist Party, and nationalism. As a result, Chinese political debates have tended to presume a rigid dichotomy between “left-wing” state socialism and “right-wing” capitalist liberal democracy. The denominations “radical” and “conservative” are equally problematic because they are not fixed to any objective criteria and refer merely to the degree to which one desires change in the status quo. The latter terms have become particularly ambiguous in China since the 1980s, when CCP ideologues began to present Maoism as a “conservative project” and neo-liberalism as a “radical” freeing of productive forces.[1] Despite attempts by a few intellectuals within the “New Left” to move away from such simplicity and distortion and create a more nuanced political landscape for China, such efforts have failed in at least two respects. First, these intellectuals have not succeeded in disentangling Chinese “left-wing” political debates from an excessive identification with the state. Second, and more importantly, what achievements have been made in the realm of academia have so far failed to translate into concrete political action.

The term “New Left” was first used by Chinese liberals in a pejorative sense to describe a group of intellectuals who emerged during the 1990s as opponents of market reform. With the repudiation of “radicalism” that began in China after the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the designation “leftist” came to be associated with militarization, ideological controls, national isolation, and ascetic egalitarianism. Because of these adverse associations most intellectuals within the New Left reject the label yet continue to use it for lack of a better term. Irrelevant to its negative connotations however, the term has also been disputed on ideological grounds by scholars like Wang Hui. Wang sees the crude dichotomy between liberal and New Left as a myth created by Chinese neoliberals intent on appropriating liberalism for themselves. Wang insists that “liberals” in China actually

divide into two categories—the first, socially progressive liberals (which would include members of the New Left); and the second, neoliberals and neoconservatives.[2] A similar remark was made by Xudong Zhang who pointed out that “an advocate for New Deal-style economic and social policies in China was considered to be a liberal in the 1980s, but ‘New Left’ by the century’s end.” [3] This has prompted some to embrace the name “liberal left” (ziyou zuopai) in order to stress the group’s continuity with the proponents of “democratic socialism” and “humanistic Marxism” of the 1980s.[4] While this enthusiasm for liberalism may seem reassuring to a more conservative Chinese audience, it leaves non-Chinese radicals rather disheartened.

By all accounts, the New Left does not maintain or seem to desire a unified ideological perspective. Its emergence should be understood against the backdrop of the fall of the Soviet Union, the harsh neoliberal shock therapy impressed upon Eastern Europe, and the massive restructuring of State Owned Enterprises (SOE) and dismantling of social welfare that began in China in 1993. In the 1990s, as the Chinese state moved from an authoritarian “left” to an authoritarian “right” position in an attempt to duplicate the success of the Asian tigers, Chinese liberals began to call for increased “liberalization” and a further push toward the “right.” It was this shift within the doctrine of liberalism that caused a rupture with and the eventual formation of the New Left. In a certain sense then the theoretical positions of the New Left were born in opposition to a neoliberal turn among Chinese intelligentsia and the world at large. Despite claims of being grounded in the liberal tradition, in reality, most in the New Left have been heavily influenced by Marxism (though some identify with both traditions). Many are advocates of developing a novel form of market socialism which would blend aspects of both capitalism and socialism. That being said however, the New Left also manages to evade easy definition. This is in part due to the plural nature of their ideological commitments. But more importantly it is because they embrace aspects of both Western liberalism and Marxism on the one hand and elements of Maoism and Confucianism on the other. In fact, one of their main points of contention with Chinese liberals is over the uncritical appropriation of values and institutions historically specific to the West. This tendency to reject universal values and the linear development path offered by modernity clearly distinguishes the Chinese New Left from not only their liberal opponents but also from Leninist and social democratic orthodoxy. Some have noted that this postmodern slant shares certain continuities with Maoism.[5] Whatever the case may be, the desire to move beyond the simple binaries of tradition and modernity, capitalism and socialism, democracy and dictatorship has received considerable support among some of the intellectuals associated with the New Left. It has even led some to hope for the creation of a “Chinese alternative.”

Wang Hui is perhaps the most well known scholar associated with the Chinese New Left. He has published widely in both Chinese and English on issues relating to literary criticism, Chinese intellectual history, and contemporary politics. Unlike the other prominent figures in the New Left, Wang was educated in China, not the United States (though he has since spent considerable time abroad). Wang is by far one of the most original thinkers in China today. Both his polemical work and intellectual history borrow heavily from world-systems and postcolonial theory. However, his uniqueness is reflected in a Daoist inspired advocacy of transcending binary oppositions and a Foucauldian desire to recover subverted histories with which to continually critique the present. It is through this project of recovering lost history that Wang has tried to approach the question of a Chinese alternative.

In contrast to Arrighi and others who have dealt with this question,[6] Wang Hui does not see China’s current development path as representative of a meaningful alternative. Moreover, he has shied away from a serious proposal for what a Chinese alternative might look like. Instead, Wang has taken on the more modest task of outlining a history of attempts by Chinese intellectuals to criticize, resist, and transcend global capitalist modernity. Wang first came to prominence in 1997

for an article he wrote in *Tianya* (Frontiers) entitled *Contemporary China's Ideological State and the Question of Modernity*.^[7] He has since published a four volume intellectual history called *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*.^[8] In this latter work Wang interprets Chinese modernity as being rooted in fundamental contradictions. On the one hand, historically China recognized the necessity of entering into and competing within a modern system of nation-states. On the other hand, China's modernization process was based on resistance to certain aspects of modernity and was pitted against Western imperialism.^[9] Wang sees the project of Chinese "socialism" then as a failed attempt to build a Chinese alternative to capitalist modernity. He traces these attempts not only to the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party but more importantly to earlier encounters with socialism beginning in the late-Qing (1644-1911) and even further back to neo-Confucian critiques of the dramatic changes China underwent during the Song dynasty (960-1279). Thus, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* is a genealogy of "alternatives to modernity" as conceptualized by Chinese intellectuals.

Wang Hui's interpretation of Chinese modernity as a kind of "anti-modernity" is closely connected to the issue of the nation state. For Wang the Chinese nation was built on the contradiction between a multi-ethnic "empire" with the potential to transcend the system of nation states and a Han nationalism rooted in the acceptance of China's place within that system.^[10] Wang thus presents a deconstruction and subtle critique of Chinese nationalism and the state—which he appropriately describes as the natural political form of capitalist modernity. Yet for all his suspicion of the nation state, he seems to waver at the prospect of rejecting the state's basic structural logic. Although he is rarely explicit about his own political views, this ambiguity is quite apparent in his more recent writings.

Wang's latest work has focused on the problem of the de-politicization and bureaucratization of party politics.^[11] He convincingly argues that both one-party dictatorships and multiple-party representative democracies have bowed their heads to the interests of global capitalism; that popular struggles to eliminate class disparity have been replaced by compromise and bureaucratization; and that society in general has become depoliticized. Wang sees certain aspects of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as having acted to correct these bureaucratic tendencies within the CCP. Here again using the past to critique the present, he highlights the pressing need for both "political and economic" democracy in China. He points to the possibility of mass participation in politics as a remedy to the potential bureaucratization and de-politicization of political parties. This call for participatory democracy (not to mention his skeptical attitude toward the Chinese state) allows Wang to challenge liberal claims about the supposed antiauthoritarianism of the free-market. It also makes him one of the more anti-authoritarian Chinese within the "left" political spectrum. But what exactly is meant by "political and economic" democracy? And how is China going to get there?

Wang Hui is not the only voice within the New Left to pose the question of a Chinese alternative. Much of Cui Zhiyuan's work is centered around this issue as well. Unlike Wang however, Cui has focused less on abstract sociological problems and more on an analysis of concrete institutions in his critique of market reforms. A University of Chicago political science graduate, Cui was one of the initial "liberals" to break with the turn toward neo-liberalism in the mid-1990s. The reaction to his 1994 article *Institutional Innovation and a Second Liberation of Thought* ^[12] first established the name "New Left" as political terminology, which was branded upon Cui in a derogatory sense by his critics. Where Wang Hui frames his discussion of a Chinese alternative largely in historical terms, Cui Zhiyuan points to specific examples—such as rural industrialization—in order to express this potential alternative in concrete terms. By the late 1980s, China's rural industries had grown to employ a quarter of the rural workforce and were contributing to half of rural domestic product.^[13] Rural enterprises, or Township and Villages Enterprises (TVE), consisted of local factories, mills, and

foundries geared primarily toward the production of light industry. These ranged from being genuine village collectives to private entrepreneurial ventures to offshoots of local government. However by the 1990s, growth in rural industry had begun to stagnate, China's vast peasant population became increasingly seen as a hindrance to development, and calls for further marketization and urbanization started to overshadow the past achievements of the TVEs. As academic opinion started to turn against the TVEs, Cui Zhiyuan, along with another well known "left-liberal" Gan Yang, began to champion small rural industry and collectives as not only economically practical (in regards to absorbing labor and raising income) but as a possible alternative to Fordist models of large-scale capitalist industry. For Cui, TVEs were seen as a means of avoiding village dependency on industrial products from the cities, as well as a positive counter to increasing rural/urban disparity. Cui provocatively linked this to the legacy of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and Maoist attempts at local self-sufficiency. Many of these arguments were later incorporated into Wang Hui's depiction of Chinese modernity as an anti-modernity. Thus, for both Cui and Wang rural industrialization became seen as fundamental to China's attempt to seek out and pursue an alternative to a capitalist model of industrial development.

Cui Zhiyuan has also written at some length about the prospects and meaning of democracy in China. Like Wang Hui, Cui is a proponent of "political and economic" democracy and is probably the one in the New Left with the most libertarian leanings. For Cui, democracy is not merely about a parliament and national elections but more importantly about "bringing politics into the economic sphere." In several articles written over the past fifteen years, he has tried to uncover concrete examples of "native" institutions that could serve as a basis for moving ahead with local village elections and economic democracy in China.[14] One of the things that distinguishes Cui's approach from others is that he likes to take aspects of China's past and present that are depicted as "backward" or "anachronistic" within liberal discourse and then demonstrate their actual similarities to current institutions in Japan and the West. By doing so, like Wang Hui, he is interested in cutting through the presumed binary opposition between capitalism and socialism. In addition, he intends to show how certain "collectivist" institutional structures can be both ethically just and practically efficient; and how modern capitalist nations have adopted these institutions to their advantage. Cui's 1996 article *The Angang Constitution and Post-Fordism* is a good example of this.[15] In it Cui compares the "worker's management" clause in the 1960 Angang Constitution of China's Anshan Iron and Steel Complex with contemporary trends in the Japanese and American automobile industries. His suggestion is that certain institutions from the Maoist period are entirely compatible with the most advanced organizational methods and demands of modern industry. However, despite the radical implications of many of his proposals, Cui's writings on economic democracy generally display sympathy toward profit and management sharing schemes which reduce the tension between labor and capital. This compromising approach is consistent with his vision of a Chinese "mixed" economy that blends elements of capitalism and socialism.

While Cui goes much further than Wang in trying to articulate what a Chinese alternative might look like, it remains somewhat unclear as to whether he believes China is actively pursuing such an alternative or is in need of a radical reorientation. In the early 1990s, as the New Left was starting to coalesce, universal integration of China into the capitalist world economy had only just begun to take off. As a result, novel experimentation and reform still seemed possible on a wide scale. Such hopes were the basis for Cui's call for a "second liberation of thought" in 1994. But a decade later this optimistic attitude was to prove untenable in the face of the competitive realities of the capitalist world market. Following Deng Xiaoping's "southern tour" in 1992, a significant reorientation of China's economy from a centrally planned system with limited markets to a kind of authoritarian capitalism in line with "the Asian tigers" began in earnest. Nine cities in the Northeast and Northwest and five cities on the Yangzi River were opened up to foreign trade and investment. New experiments in stock markets and private ownership as well as the granting of full business

autonomy to state enterprises followed on the heels of these reforms.[16] This marked the beginning of a massive restructuring of SOEs that persists into the present and has resulted in workers being laid off on an unprecedented scale. According to official statistics, in the ten-year period between 1993 and the end of 2002 layoffs in SOE and urban collectives amounted to 63 million jobs, with the biggest losses taking place after 1997. This represents a 44 percent decrease in employment within the state sector.[17] In addition to layoffs, increased urbanization and capitalist style boom-and-bust cycles began to define a new kind of development path for China. Cui Zhiyuan's response to these changes was to advocate a "return" to the novel social experimentation of the pre-1992 period. In 2004 Cui began to promote the idea of what he dubbed a "petty-bourgeois socialism." [18] By this he meant a kind of market-socialism that mixes both collective and state ownership of the means of production with private property and markets. Cui pointed to the economic writings of European "socialists" such as John Stewart Mill, Henry George, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon as examples of alternatives to orthodox notions of both capitalism and socialism. His arguments were also heavily indebted to American analytical Marxist thinkers such as John Roemer.[19]

When taken together—the development of rural industry, political and economic democracy, and market-socialism—we begin to get a basic picture of what Cui Zhiyuan's vision of a Chinese alternative would entail. But there are several obvious problems with this vision. First, as Wang Hui himself has pointed out, it shares a naïve belief in the possibility of reform to significantly shape the contours of a capitalist-driven economy. Secondly, presuming that we accept reform as a strategy of change, will reforms be won from the bottom-up or handed down from the top? What is the role of the state in promoting a Chinese alternative and how does it differ from liberal strategies of tacit support and jockeying for political influence? Does Cui believe that China is moving toward this alternative? If so, what is there for him to be critical of?

Both Wang Hui and Cui Zhiyuan, though acknowledging certain positive aspects of the Maoist era, actually trace their roots to the "humanistic Marxist" tradition that came to fruition in the 1980s, as well as sharing a lineage with earlier traditions such as the May Fourth movement (1919-1927). This seems to be one of the clear divides among those within the New Left. While some New Leftists such as Wang, Cui, and Gan Yang have embraced the May Fourth spirit of pluralism and critique (while advocating a vague market socialism), others have affirmed a clear ideological commitment to a kind of "neo-Maoism." This latter group would include scholars such as Gao Mobo, Li Minqi, and Han Yuhai. Still others identify with a more "conventional" program of nationalization of production and social democracy. A well-known representative of this third position would be Wang Shaoguang.

Although such ideological commitments are quite diverse, there are a few points where members of the New Left do in fact converge. Aside from their obvious opposition to neo-liberalism, most of those associated with the New Left have also challenged (to greater or lesser degrees) the Communist Party's official interpretation of Maoism. This is usually characterized by a tendency to treat the Cultural Revolution as a rejection of Soviet-style political economy and a struggle for China to forge its own path. The notion of Maoism as a Chinese alternative is something that has received considerable attention both inside and outside China since at least the late 1960s and continues to feature prominently within New Left debates. In light of this it may be helpful to briefly review the arguments for and understand the various complications surrounding this view.

As an ideological position, Maoism is somewhat hard to identify. This is due in part to the different phases of Mao Zedong's life and the consequent changes in his thinking which accompanied these phases. Moreover, it is also due to the difficulty of separating Mao's thoughts and actions from that of the CCP as a whole. Maoists tend to stress the differences between Mao and the Leninist orthodoxy of the CCP. This is usually accomplished by a careful examination of Mao's writings, in particular his Critique of Soviet Economics,[20] which first appeared in print during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. To his supporters, Mao Zedong Thought represents not only an

alternative to capitalist liberal democracy but also to the Soviet path of devolution into “state capitalism.” In fact, the whole notion of socialism with “Chinese characteristics”—which became popular during the reform period—was largely carried over from earlier Maoist rhetoric. According to Maoists, the Maoist model of socialism is exemplified by peasant revolution, rural industrialization, national and local self-sufficiency, partial decentralization of economic and political authority, mass participation in politics, the integration of mental and manual labor, and a strong emphasis on class struggle and voluntarism.[21] In this interpretation (which is ironically similar to the CCP’s 1981 evaluation, only with the values negated) the Cultural Revolution looms powerfully in the foreground as an attempt by Mao to lead the masses in a revolt against party bureaucracy and toward the creation of a more democratic and egalitarian communist future. If we are to take these claims seriously then Maoism would surely appear much less authoritarian than say Stalinism.

There are some significant problems with this portrayal of Maoism however. The first is that it takes Mao’s writings and professed ideological commitments at face value and thus conveniently sidesteps much of the reality of Maoist political economy. The disasters associated with both the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution are often qualified either by blaming party bureaucrats (as opposed to Mao) for their failings or by claiming the true history of these events has been distorted in the post-Mao era. While admitting that the repudiation of Maoism and the restoration of Marxist-Leninist “orthodoxy” after 1978 have served a clear political agenda, the wholesale detachment of Maoism from its nexus within the Chinese Communist Party is another matter entirely. Such a task is not only quite formidable but also obscures the many parallels between Mao and the CCP. How can we judge Maoism on the basis of Mao Zedong Thought alone? After all Mao himself betrayed much of his “Maoist” rhetoric during the Cultural Revolution—this includes backing away from a more autonomous restructuring of the People’s Communes, turning against the worker’s revolution in Shanghai and the various ultra-leftist groups, and even normalizing relations with the United States.[22] Surely Mao’s actions and not just his words are fundamental to an assessment of the sincerity of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution.

The second problem with this portrayal relates to means and strategy. While the stated goals of Maoism may be worthy of respect if taken at face value, the question of how to realize these goals is as important as it is overlooked. This is closely connected to the discussion of Maoism as a real alternative in practice. Although the Cultural Revolution and certain aspects of Maoist political economy clearly represent a decentralization of power away from the party, they were supplemented with an ideological centralization around Mao himself. While Mao presented his rift with other top-ranking members of the CCP as one of socialism versus state-capitalism, it seems to have been equally related to the role of ideological controls in developing China’s productive forces (and building Chinese modernity). This again draws into question the sincerity of the Cultural Revolution as a genuine challenge to the status quo and an alternative path to socialism. One cannot brainwash, manipulate, and coerce people to revolt if it is to have any kind of emancipatory potential. Such has more in common with obedience than with rebellion. Arif Dirlik’s insights into the contradiction between Maoist means and ends are quite helpful here.

...the Cultural Revolution was doomed to failure because the policies that motivated it, if they were to be workable, required a social and political context different from the structure of power that had been put in place after 1949...rather than challenge the existing structure of power as the Cultural revolution professed, Maoist policies ended up as instruments in a competition for the conquest of power within the existing structure, a competition that the Cultural Revolution did much to unleash.[23]

Though the view that Mao was opposed to party bureaucracy certainly has some legitimacy, his alternative vision of mass campaigns controlled ideologically from above seems to seriously contradict the idea of decentralization and participatory democracy. The role of the state is crucial

here. For it was precisely Mao's position as Chairman, his control of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and his access to and manipulation of media outlets which enabled him to steer the Cultural Revolution. Despite the Maoist condemnation of party bureaucracy, the state apparatus was never challenged and its coercive powers as well as an ardent nationalism remained an integral feature of the Cultural Revolution. In practice therefore, Maoism, though somewhat divergent from the Soviet model, remains incredibly authoritarian in many respects; particularly in regards to its reliance on ideological controls and the coercive powers of the state.

Maoism as a Chinese alternative is thus highly problematic. Most neo-Maoists in the New Left have admitted the overall failure of the Cultural Revolution yet wish to vindicate Maoism based on its professed aims.²⁴ But how are these aims to contribute to a Chinese alternative in the present if the means to achieve them have been proven so misguided in the past? New Leftists in general tend to remain silent on the issue of strategy. While people like Wang Hui and Cui Zhiyuan have harbored reservations toward the state, they have not suggested any alternatives to a top-down model of change supported by the state apparatus. Liberals and neoliberals, despite all their rhetoric, are avid proponents of state-lead market reforms and state protection of the private sphere. Why then do Chinese political debates lack a serious voice critical of the state? One reason is surely due to state control of the press and publishing agencies and the party's blatant intolerance of dissent. Another reason may have to do with the legacy of a China divided from within and without and the sense of national vulnerability that is perceived to accompany a weak state. A third reason, however, stems from the state's ambiguous role as both mitigator and patron of capitalism. No doubt it is this latter phenomenon that stands as the major obstacle to the creation of a real Chinese alternative.

As China's GDP continues to grow at an astonishing rate (while much of the rest of the world languishes in recession) we would do well to remind ourselves that the likelihood of radical changes taking place there are slim. No meaningful alternative will be implemented from the top down. And there will be no significant challenge to the status quo so long as economic growth continues. Although the Chinese New Left has had some limited success in de-linking the positions of the "left" from those of the Chinese Communist Party, none of their ideas have yet developed into serious political demands. With the exception of some support from NGO and student volunteer groups, the New Left remains almost entirely academic in nature. Whatever one's thoughts are on the idea of a "Chinese alternative" and the various problems that surround it, to think that an alternative of any kind is possible without a grass-roots political base is pure fantasy. In all fairness, however, without freedom of speech, press, and association, support for any independent social movement will not be easily forthcoming. It is the ultimate irony that the Communist Party now plays the most important role in the capitalist exploitation of the peasant and working classes. The CCP uses the powers of the state (both local and central) to keep wages low, working conditions horrendous, and squash dissent. Yet at the same time it is the state that has thus far prevented the complete privatization of the economy (perhaps most importantly the privatization of land). This contradiction presents a major obstacle to the Chinese New Left. If they are sincere in their attempt to break with the CCP and the old Stalinist "left" then a thorough examination of the state's role in supporting capitalist exploitation is in order. This is true for not only the post-Maoist but for the Maoist period as well. While intellectuals like Wang Hui, Cui Zhiyuan, and Gan Yang have begun to move in this direction, they hesitate to take their arguments to their logical conclusion. Moreover, their ideas have been largely confined to the realm of academic and political debate. As China's role in the world economy becomes increasingly important, it is imperative that the Chinese left break free of the dogmatism, nationalism, and authoritarianism which has defined its past. Only then can we begin to talk about alternatives.

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Notes

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24. Apologists for the Cultural Revolution usually emphasize its achievements in the areas of mass education and healthcare, for which there is considerable supporting evidence.

P.S.

* From China Study Group website (Originally published in Insurgent Notes #1):

<http://chinastudygroup.net/2010/07/a-chinese-alternative-interpreting-the-chinese-new-left-politically/>