

The Primary Contradiction - The Left in China, “New Maoists” and Nationalism

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China’s leftist revival is overstated. The country’s new “Maoists” cede too much ground to nationalism and the market.

“It’s a golden period to be a leftist in China.” At least that was the assessment of Minzu University of China professor and well-known Maoist Zhang Hongliang in a recent *New York Times* article. The article went on to suggest that “leftist voices are back in vogue,” while other media outlets have reported widely on President Xi Jinping’s call for more Marxism in the universities. And the Politburo has been holding study sessions to brush up on their dialectical materialism.

But unfortunately, there are more than enough reasons to doubt this analysis.

To begin with, Xi Jinping’s originally ambiguous slogan, the “China Dream,” has come to be officially defined as the “great revival of the Chinese race.” The imperial yearning implicit in this phrase has ominous implications for its neighbors as well as ethnic minorities within China.

Economically, the government is preparing another round of marketization to prop up the flagging debt-fueled growth that China has heavily relied on in recent years. These reforms will include a major wave of privatization of state-owned firms, further commodification of land, reduction in pensions for public employees, and an extension of free trade.

The working class and peasantry remain politically excluded and are viewed with deep suspicion by the state. Insurgent workers and peasants are channeled into byzantine and atomizing bureaucratic processes unlikely to deliver justice — or are simply dispatched with the end of a truncheon. This past December, police beat to death a migrant construction worker who was demanding unpaid wages. Although workers often win particular battles, it is impossible to build sustainable political power.

Moreover, a xenophobic current has gripped many wings of the state of late. Labor rights groups have been subject to increased harassment, violence, or closure. Universities have been wracked by witch hunts for “hostile foreign forces.” Any sustained cooperation with foreigners can be used as pretext for a crackdown.

Thus, declarations of a “golden period” seem highly dubious. But the story is a much more complicated one and is impossible to understand without some historical background about the various currents of the Chinese left.

The origin of this particular brand of Maoism, which still has sway in parts of China, is rooted in the country’s imperial past. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the Qing Dynasty experienced decades of aggression at the hands of European colonialists, and then a brutal invasion and occupation by the Japanese. Under such historical conditions, the struggle for national liberation understandably came to represent the “primary contradiction,” to put it in Maoist terms.

Leading Maoist Han Deqiang recently wrote, “The China Dream is the dream of Chinese people. It will inevitably have strong characteristics of nationalism rather than universal values.”

Though Han and others like him hold positions familiar to the international socialist movement — support for public ownership and robust welfare provision, opposition to American imperialism, and a suspicion of private property rights — their ultimate goal is not liberation from capital.

Rather, it is a project of national liberation and rejuvenation. They see capital as a threat largely because it would imply subordination to the established capitalist powers. Socialism, therefore, is seen as a means for securing China’s autonomy and eventual reinstatement at the apex of the global order.

This brand of nationalism frequently takes on a Han-supremacist tinge. The project of national liberation certainly looks different from the perspective of ethnic minorities, a fact underscored again by the tragic wave of Tibetan self-immolations and ongoing violence among the Uyghurs. The conversation on racial hierarchy in China is one that few Maoists in the country are willing to have, seeing Communist rule in Tibet and Xinjiang as simply a way to liberate these ethnicities from their own backwardness.

A subsidiary problem that emerges from such nationalism is that Maoists maintain a naïve optimism about the Communist Party, rooted in the undoubtedly heroic feats in defeating imperialism decades ago.

But land dispossession on a stupendous scale, the universality of wage labor and commodity production, systematic repression of worker and peasant activism, and the emergence of a seemingly unbreakable alliance between capitalists and the party at all levels of the state are seen as mere deviations rather than symptoms of hegemonic capitalism. Anti-state politics are off the table.

Liberals have justifiably critiqued the Maoists’ opposition to an extension of free speech, freedom of the press, and academic freedom. As a result, Chinese workers continue to be deprived of the political space afforded by “bourgeois rights” in order to articulate and advance their interests.

China has risen to global prominence outside of the umbrella of American empire, which is a truly remarkable feat. While some leftists in China may be unhappy about the impending iteration of marketization, they still see the general tendency as China reassuming its rightful place in the world. And they take at face value the Communist Party’s claim that China is socialist, despite material and social conditions to the contrary.

It is not surprising that this strain of leftism is dominant in today’s China. The symbolism of claiming to uphold the legacy of Chairman Mao gains them a significant degree of protection. And even if the means they are advocating are often at odds with government policy, their ends are the same.

But many leftists in China are not at all happy with recent political developments, including the so-called “new left” (a designation most of its supposed members reject). In general, these intellectuals are cosmopolitan, having been trained overseas or at least having spent considerable time abroad. They have harshly critiqued China’s neoliberal turn and integration into global capitalism. Wang Hui, for example, has bemoaned post-Cultural Revolution depoliticization, and scholars like Wang Shaoguang and Cui Zhiyuan advocate decommodifying policies and public ownership as ends in themselves.

In general, the new left is much less taken by imperial fantasy than they are with making China a more equal and just society. However, this is largely an elite grouping, and many espouse an

uncritical faith in the willingness and ability of the state to address inequality. This may simply be strategic, which would be perfectly understandable given severe constraints on academic freedom. Nonetheless, the autonomous power of social resistance seems a crucial omission in many of their analyses.

More promising is an incipient student left that has gained steam particularly since the 2008 crisis. Although their numbers remain small, recent years have seen a proliferation of left reading groups on university campuses. Moving beyond the official account of Marx, they have found that contemporary China looks a lot like the despotic capitalism of nineteenth century Europe.

While cognizant of the specific postcolonial and post-socialist situation in China, they are open to seeing parallels between the struggles of Chinese and foreign workers. This is important in itself, as the state seeks to short circuit transnational solidarity by advocating a radical incommensurability of experience across borders.

Many of these youth are practically engaged and have left the university to work in factories, visit construction sites, and teach in migrant schools. They have publicized worker resistance and started blogs and publications with radical perspectives on politics. And despite the obvious risks, genuine forms of solidarity have emerged, the best recent example coming from Guangzhou, where students provided critical support during a strike of university cleaners.

While social resistance in China is widespread, it remains largely depoliticized. Historically, alliances between intellectuals and workers have been a crucial constituent of social movements. But as the experience of twentieth century Europe makes painfully clear, such movements are not inherently leftist: conservative jingoism is an equally possible response to the instability wrought by capitalism. Such a development in contemporary China would be a disaster domestically and internationally.

The student left is certainly committed to bettering China, but they have not fallen prey to crude nationalism or naïve faith in the sagacity of the party. The current period has been anything but a golden age for them, as their politics put them at constant risk of harassment or worse.

Still, they are in the process of establishing a new pole of left politics. And most importantly, they understand that China beating the United States at capitalism means we'll all still be living under capitalism.

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P.S.

* "The Primary Contradiction". New Jacobin:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/02/china-leftist-revival-capitalism/>

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