

Stand from the Left: No to Chinese Authoritarianism, No to “Yellow Peril”

Friday 24 January 2020, by [LI Promise](#) (Date first published: 20 January 2020).

Article published on the website of the Democratic Socialists of America.

The People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s rise in recent decades has confounded the Western left. Touted as the great economic miracle of the twentieth century, the PRC lifted hundreds of millions out of ‘extreme poverty’ only to plunge them into deeper class stratification, economic precarity, and exploitation [1]. We’ve watched as the neo-colonial Belt and Road project colludes with the likes of the IMF and the World Bank to leave the structures of debt imperialism intact from Western governments in countries in Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Beijing state media openly prides itself on borrowing from Western governments’ Islamophobic techniques against millions of Uyghurs in Xinjiang [2], as government surveillance and policing separate ‘good’ from ‘bad’ Muslims, straight from the United States’ murderous playbook [3].

Despite these problems, a sizable section of the international left seems unable to consider people’s movements for liberation in and around China, however heterogeneous, as legitimate. This campist logic presumes that global geopolitics work in a strict binary, and that any state ‘allied against’ the U.S. is worthy of support. These problematic views are fueled by a disinformation campaign from right-wing outlets, like the Grayzone, that pose as being ‘anti-imperialist,’ with whole mass-led movements reduced to the positions of their cherry-picked individuals and organizations- thus smearing millions of protestors, from Hong Kong to Xinjiang, as U.S.-backed fascists and imperialists.

Conveniently, little mentioned in these narratives are the PRC’s manifold abuses: its massive exploitation of cheap labor, in order to transfer trade surplus to U.S. markets [4], or its systematic displacement of working-class and indigenous communities from Beijing slums [5] to Dumagat ancestral lands in the Philippines [6]. Who is there to cry ‘Western interference’ when Walmart cuts wages and hours for workers in China with no response from the state-sanctioned unions, or when U.S. tech corporations are solicited to help build the PRC’s state surveillance infrastructure?

Pro-PRC perspectives are touted as ‘anti-imperialist,’ wielded against age-old, racist rhetoric of “yellow peril” deployed by generations of Westerners fearing East Asians as an existential threat to Western civilization. In reality, a similar Orientalist impulse, which insists upon an exaggerated difference and other reductive tropes between ‘the East’ and ‘the West,’ emerges when we refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of Asian peoples’ struggles for basic human and economic rights and reduce whole peoples’ views to those of their sovereign states. As socialists, we struggle with the complexities of mass movements to fight for the interests of the international working class and all marginalized people.

The solution to combating the U.S. state is not uncritically identifying with its sovereign counterpart, reproducing a Cold War rhetoric desired by the reigning elites of both states. A truly anti-racist and anti-imperialist praxis is to struggle and show solidarity with all the disenfranchised, recognizing the

complexities of people's struggles.

Non-white leftists in the United States must also take responsibility for neglecting solidarity with the working class for the fetishization of non-Western states and their leaders. From W.E.B. DuBois' flirtation with the Japanese Empire to more recent Asian American leftists' defense of the PRC, the U.S. left has consistently failed to look beyond problematic forms of nationalism in its political imaginary. With the climate crisis and the ever-deepening global exploitation of poor and marginalized people, socialists have no time to place their faith in states, the genocidal U.S. empire or the Han-chauvinistic superpower alike.

But there's so much we can do. Looking beyond repressive regimes and their narratives, one can find countless popular local and transnational instances of struggle and dialogue that the Left can and should help support.

- Students at Columbia University and in Sydney have recently organized dialogues connecting hundreds of Mainland and Hong Kong students who look to theorize solutions beyond the U.S.-China binary.
- The Wages for Housework campaign connects domestic workers across states and finds echoes in China's orbit, with Hong Kong Chinese housewives and Southeast Asian migrant workers raising class-based demands in the Hong Kong protest movement.
- A never-before-seen upsurge of unionization is sweeping across different sectors of the Hong Kong economy, an effort seen as a means to counter the establishment.

As the PRC continues to expand its markets and challenge U.S. hegemony, these forms of solidarity with the Chinese working-class will be pivotal to our organizing here. As U.S. consumers, we continue to benefit from the exploitation of Asian workers, a condition enabled by the collusion of U.S. business interests and the governments of China, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and etc. We must stand with those materially disenfranchised and their struggles in non-Western countries.

The PRC regime legitimates its authority by paternalistically identifying its citizens with the state and drawing from a long history of Han chauvinism and denial of minority rights. The regime's persistent attempts to cover up these efforts, advertising its own supposed 'respect' for select Uyghurs and other minorities while exploiting and oppressing the majority of these people, employ the same liberal strategy of representation as the United States.

In reality, "yellow peril" narratives are weaponized by both the United States and the PRC for their own purposes, and a portion of the Western Left is falling directly into this trap. We must remain vigilant against legitimate instances of racist narratives in the left, like Clive Hamilton, whose 2018 book *Silent Invasion* sees Chinese influence as triggering "the erosion of Australian sovereignty." But we must also see how East Asians, especially Chinese people, have many more complex forms of agency than simple identification with their states.

The progressive and left Asian American diaspora has a key role to play in holding these perspectives accountable. As migration becomes a central condition of disenfranchised workers in China and Southeast Asia, over 67 billion dollars in remittances from displaced overseas Asian workers, from sex workers to domestic workers, continue to flow back into China's economy. In today's globalized economy, it has long since been clear that the working class has no borders, and thus centering the mass exploitation of workers in China's orbit is a key issue not only for the Asian diaspora but for socialists around the world.

Promise Li

P.S.

- Democratic Socialists of America, JANUARY 20, 2020:
<https://www.dsausa.org/democratic-left/no-to-chinese-authoritarianism-no-to-yellow-peril/>
- Promise Li is a founding member of Lausan Collective, which is dedicated to amplifying and helping to build left-wing and anti-capitalist struggles in and transnational solidarity for Hong Kong. He was also a tenant organizer in Los Angeles Chinatown with Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, and participates in socialist organizations such as Solidarity and DSA.

Footnotes

- [1] <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/08/chinas-war-on-poverty-could-hurt-the-poor-most/>
- [2] <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>
- [3] ESSF (article 51883), [Good and Bad Muslims in Xinjiang — How the Uyghurs Became Muslims](#).
- [4] ESSF (article 51889), [Sub-Saharan Africa: The China Factor and South African SEZs](#).
- [5] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-olympics-beijing-housing/beijing-to-evict-1-5-million-for-olympics-group-idUSPEK12263220070605>
- [6] ESSF (article 51890), [Sierra Madre Kaliwa Dam: Filipino natives forced out of their ancestral lands by Chinese capital](#).