

Opinion – The Chinese ‘New Left’ as Statist Apologists

Written by Chris Man-kong Li

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CHRIS MAN-KONG LI, SEP 9 2020

In April, on the occasion of commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Lenin's birth, the leading Chinese ‘New Left’ scholar Wang Hui published an essay to praise what he sees as Lenin's great ‘revolutionary personality’ (a useful translation can be found in the website Reading the China Dream, with introductions situating the contexts). Rong Jian, a liberal independent scholar, produced two pieces criticizing Wang, claiming that Wang's essay signifies Wang's ‘Heidegger Moment’ to rationalize an authoritarian regime. Rong's pieces were soon censored, despite their rather abstract and scholarly tones. All the while Wang's essay stands in the Chinese internet behind the Great Firewall. This is a microcosm of how the Chinese ‘New Left’ turned into statist apologists for the Chinese Communist Party.

It is not true that Wang's essay is uncritical to the existing Chinese Communist regime. Amidst its praise of the so-called ‘People's War’ strategy adopted by the Beijing government in fighting COVID-19, Wang did underscore the ‘the bad habits of bureaucratism and formalism’ that at times appeared in the ‘state system’, which led to many mistakes in the early phase of the fight against the pandemic. Yet, citing widely from Machiavelli and Gramsci to Lu Xun and Mao Zedong, he argued that a revolutionary leader like Lenin is the cure: Wang praised Lenin's character to ‘oppose his own party and its guiding line... only to achieve hegemony after protracted and sometimes bitter theoretical and political struggles’.

According to Wang, the truly qualified revolutionary leader impersonates ‘the people’, making people's voice heard within the party by theoretical debates and political struggles, and thus sets the party's path straight and ‘remakes’ the party. The revolutionary leader's endurance to stick to their own judgement in the face of setbacks, or even disastrous failures, is where their greatness lies. Wang argued that they can have such extraordinary endurance because they know they are correct all along: they have the extraordinary ability to discover the weakest link of Imperialism (‘the highest stage of capitalism’, as Lenin had it) by its revolutionary agency, even when they are in a seriously disadvantaged political position. These form the core of what he termed ‘the philosophy of victory’ in the truly revolutionary leader. Wang concluded that rekindling such a ‘revolutionary personality’ should be the task of the Left today, and it is the real contemporary relevance of Lenin.

Wang was cautious to qualify that the leader need not be a single person, and that ‘democracy’, that is, the allowance of ‘public and frank debates’, *within the party*, is a crucial condition for a revolutionary leader to emerge. Yet, as one of Rong's pieces rightly noted, what Wang did not mention is how bloody and cruel those ‘theoretical and political struggles’ within the parties in the history of 20th century international communist movements were. Not to mention the enormous human costs paid for the revolutionary leaders' endurance and ‘philosophy of victory’ in, for example, the Great Leap Forward. And, after all, in today's China, who can really have the agency to be a revolutionary leader in Wang's sense? Wang did not seem to be unhappy with the lack of freedom of political association in China. Implied, then, of course, are the leaders of the existing Chinese Communist Party, if not the ultimate leader General Secretary Xi himself. Rong thus accused Wang as selling his theory for authoritarian use, just like what Heidegger did in Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

What Rong did not cover in his pieces was the broader intellectual context of Wang's theorizing. This context is indeed the key to understanding the place of the Chinese ‘New Left’ in the self-understanding of the political leaders in Beijing. The key ideas at work here are the theory of imperialism and the imagination of Imperial China. The

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Chinese ‘New Left’, with Wang being the leading light, invoke the latter to legitimize today’s China as a candidate to challenge the imperialism of the U.S.. It is where the party-state intellectuals pick up the line.

Early in 2007, in the article ‘The Politics of Imagining Asia’ (an ungated English translation can be found [here](#)), Wang argued that the imperial system of the ancient China is unfairly derogated as ‘Oriental despotism’ from the perspective of the nation-state system as the political structure of capitalism. The Imperial Tributary System was praised by Wang as a distinctive form of trade-cum-political-culture of ancient Asia, which allegedly respected cultural diversity yet maintained some unity in political order. Wang considered such system as an important historical legacy for Asia, as opposed to the ‘*global empire* with the U.S. as its center and global organizations such as the World Bank, the WTO, and the IMF as its mechanism’. The idea of an ‘empire’ employed by Wang here is very much in line with the political thought of the Left on imperialism, old (Lenin) and new.

The same framework was later used to interpret the cultural dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative, which Wang praised as ‘remaking the civilization’, in a lecture (yet to be translated in English) he gave in Xinjiang in 2015. In his 2007 article, Wang also invoked the notion of ‘guerrilla or “partisan” or “irregular warfare”’ (citing, alarmingly, Carl Schmitt), or the ‘People’s War’, as used by Mao as a distinctive strategy to follow Lenin’s anti-imperialistic footsteps, thus pointed to a way for Asian peoples to break the chain of the Western empire. Indeed, his ‘Revolutionary Personality’ essay nearly repeated verbatim what he argued about Lenin and Mao in one section of the 2007 article. Wang is consistent throughout his intellectual career.

The statist orientation of Wang’s theorizing can only become obvious if we note that exactly this ‘the Imperial (China) vs. the Empire (of the U.S.)’ framework was used by Jiang Shigong, a legal scholar with Beijing government background, to theorize China contesting the U.S.-led world order (English translation). The empire that U.S. leads is in decline, Jiang argued, and that the heritage of Imperial China, which as one of the ‘regional civilizational empires’ that conquered others but ‘sought civilizational development, creating “unity” and “peace” within the region’, can and should be retrieved. He concluded that ‘[t]he civilization that is able to provide genuine solutions to the three great problems facing world empire 1.0 will also provide the blueprint for world empire 2.0.’

Again, for Jiang, this framework is not new. In his 2010 book on Hong Kong, he already interpreted the idea of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ as a modern incarnation of the ancient Imperial Chinese Tributary System. Jiang wrote the book when he was a researcher in the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in Hong Kong from 2003 to 2007. He was also allegedly the drafter of Beijing’s White Paper on One Country, Two Systems in 2014, the grand plan for a tighter political control on Hong Kong. Its authoritarian approach triggered the Umbrella Movement in the city. Recently, Jiang also wrote an article (English Translation) celebrating Xi Jinping’s rule as contributing the gem of the Chinese ancient philosophy to modern civilization.

Jiang and Wang are not alone. Gan Yang, another leading ‘New Left’ intellectual, also argued in an earlier celebrated lecture (English translation) that Mao’s and Deng Xiaoping’s ruling philosophies were really continuations of ancient Imperial Chinese thoughts. Such allegation can also be found in Jiang’s book on Hong Kong. Gan was famous recently in China for his effort, as an educator, to rebuild elite education, championing the study of Chinese classics. Now we can see how Wang Hui’s theorizing is indeed embedded in a broader intellectual project. It is to see today’s China, led by the Party, through the lens of ancient Imperial Chinese political thoughts, so that its status as a rival to the U.S. imperialism can be legitimized by a vision of China-led world order.

To retrieve ancient intellectual resources for contemporary thinking could be an admirable project. Some of the analyses made by the Chinese ‘New Left’ of the crisis of the U.S.-led world order, along the lines of the political theories of the left, indeed make sense. Yet, it is alarming that the agency to change to be called for is the party-state, which Wang himself admitted as much in the English preface of his book *The End of the Revolution* (see especially xxx to xxxii). We should especially be alerted when this is accompanied by the expansionist overtones in the ‘New Left’ intellectuals’ retrieval of the ancient Chinese thoughts. The Tributary System, after all, was premised on the political subordination of other peoples to Imperial China.

In their theorizing, the Chinese ‘New Left’ intellectuals conveniently downplayed or ignored many people’s loss of

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personal freedom and political liberties, past and present. Intentional or not, these could serve to whitewash past and present state oppressions, if not to outrightly justify authoritarianism. To this extent, the Chinese ‘New Left’ thoughts are turned to intellectual weapons of state apologists. Wang’s essay can stand uncensored within the Great Firewall for a reason. For all its uses of academic languages of the radical left, it helps in the end to legitimize the party-state, along a line of political thought that the party leaders are comfortable with.

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