



XINMEI LIU

ESSAY

How China’s New Left Embraced the State

China’s leftist intellectuals, once regime critics in the 1990s, have shifted from their socialist origins to support statism and the China model. Where does that leave their thinking now?

DAVID OWNBY — MAY 16, 2024

ECONOMY POLITICS



Last May, in a Beijing coffee shop, a well-known Chinese intellectual complained to me: “There is no left wing in China anymore. Instead, we have people who call themselves ‘leftists’ who in fact are extreme rightists and even flirt with fascism.”

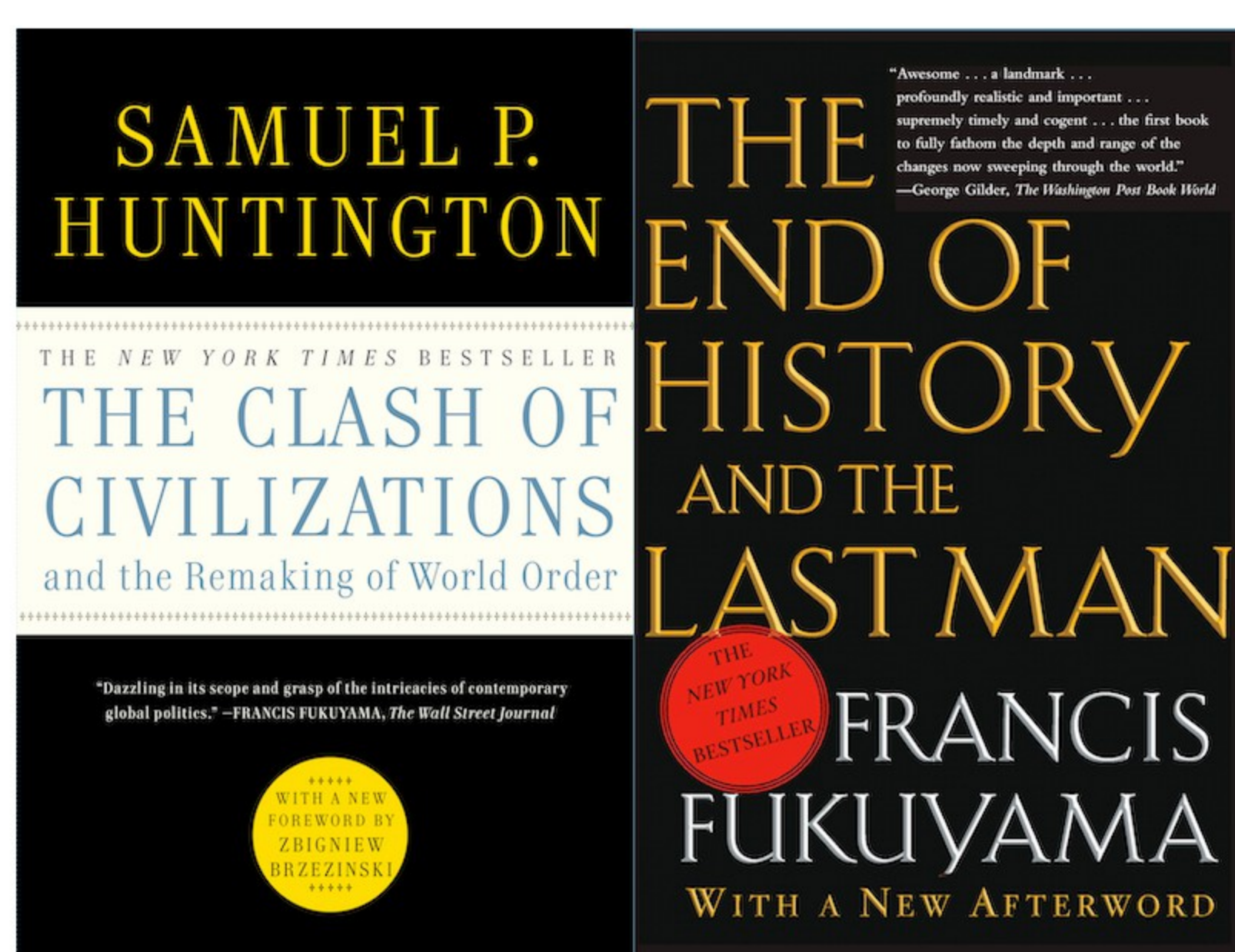
This intellectual (whose name I do not reveal to protect him from possible reprisals) could be described as a Bernie Sanders-type socialist, in an American frame of reference. He also condemned Chinese Liberals — many of whom would be libertarians or conservatives in an American context — as Social Darwinists and Trump supporters, but as a leftist he was more concerned with what was happening at his end of the spectrum.

The root of the problem, by his analysis, was China’s success in surviving the 2008 financial crisis, which led many on the left to believe that Chinese socialism had moved from a “primitive” to an “advanced” stage — terms commonly used internally by the regime. These New Leftists, who had previously been critical of inequality in China’s society and economy, gradually became out-and-out statists, and their position was increasingly mainstream as China itself pivoted left under Xi Jinping. Convinced that China had become the true incarnation of socialism, many of them felt that their task was to explain the superiority of the Chinese system to the world, and to those who doubted it inside China.

Yet whatever “stage of socialism” China might be in, according to Party theorists, much of life in China is devoted to making money, and workers have little power against bosses and platforms. For all of the lip service paid to them, “the People” have few real champions on either China’s left or its right, and are a largely forgotten theme in its intellectual discourse, which has moved on from proletarian rights to state power. At some point over the last decade or two, their previous engagement on behalf of the people became part of Great

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China’s New Left traces its origins to the 1990s, as do the other main intellectual groups in China: the Liberals and the New Confucians. The confluence of a number of historical factors led to the emergence of these groups, which marked a sea change in China’s intellectual life. Mao’s death in 1976 saw the end of China’s revolutionary phase; the 1980s brought a wave of freedom, leading to a rapid embrace of Western ideas (as well as a resurgence of Confucianism and new religious movements such as *qigong*); the June 4 massacre in 1989 dashed hopes that China would become democratic; and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 suggested that China too might fall apart.



The two seminal books of Western intellectual debate in the 1990s that led to a pushback from China’s left

During the 1990s, these new intellectuals evolved in an atmosphere of relative freedom and a sense of impending crisis. Without enjoying freedom of speech in the Western sense, they worked under fewer constraints than their counterparts under Mao had, and were not (usually) spokesmen for the regime, but relatively independent voices seeking to sway public opinion and perhaps government policy. The stakes were high because the events of 1989 had further weakened the fragile legitimacy of the regime, and the eclipse of the Soviet Union meant that someone had to figure out how “reform and

opening” — the beginning of the end for the USSR — was actually going to work in China’s new reality.

The new groups defended genuinely different possibilities. In the West, we tend to conflate liberals with dissidents, but in China they were a diverse group, focused on reform rather than regime change. The economist Liu Junning (刘军宁), for example, represented a large contingent of essentially conservative liberals who embraced markets as the force that would transform China. Western thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek became popular among such Chinese liberals in the 1990s and the 2000s. Ren Jiantao (任剑涛) and others offered full-throated arguments for strong markets and small states, while Qin Hui (秦晖) defended human rights, particularly among the rural population and migrant labor.

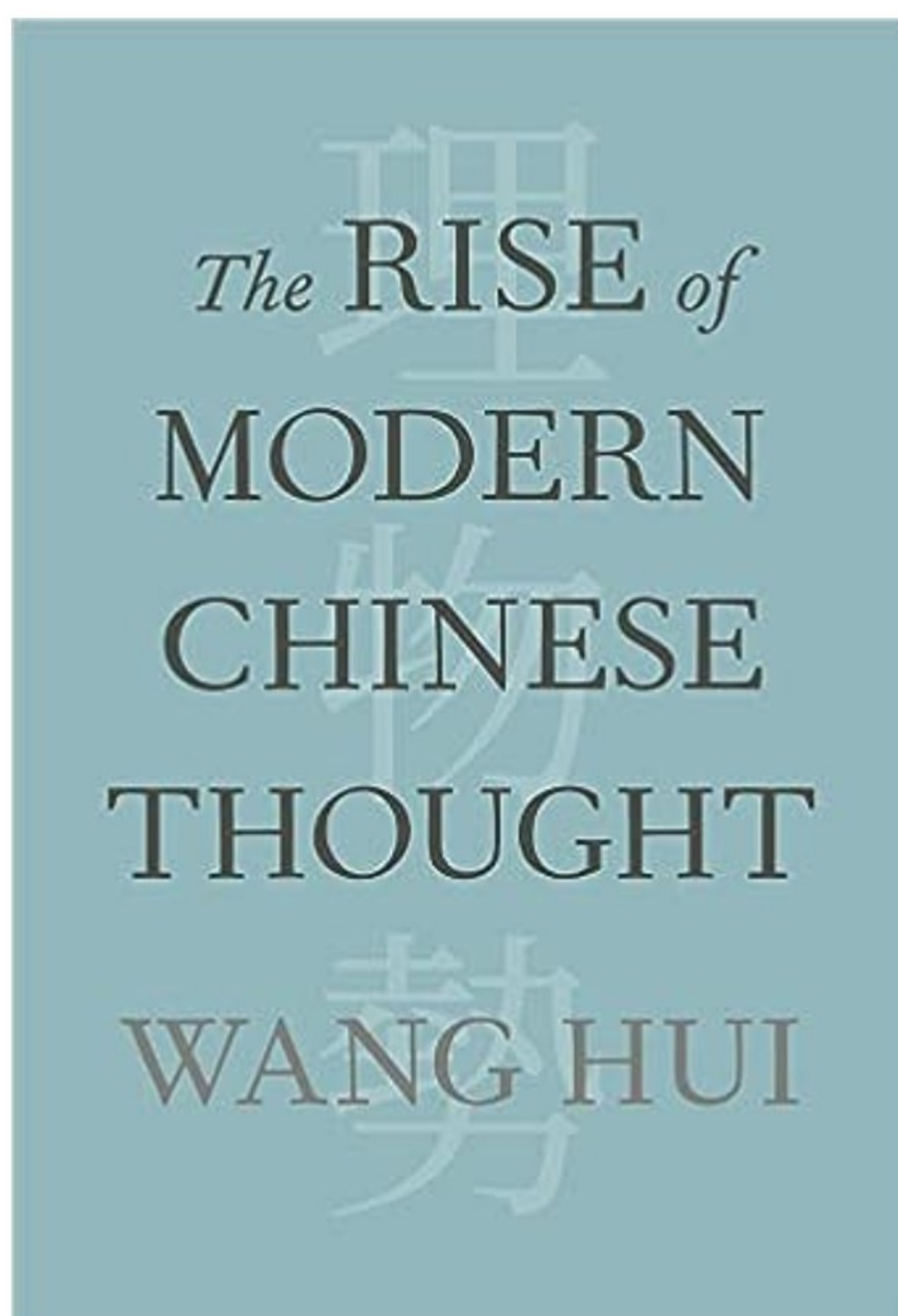
The New Confucians, meanwhile, were focused more on cultural and geopolitical concerns. Surprisingly, one of their major inspirations was Samuel T. Huntington’s 1996 book [*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*](#) (developed from a 1993 [article](#) in *Foreign Affairs*), from which they drew the conclusion that China no longer had a civilization of its own, having spent the 20th century destroying Confucianism. Returning to Confucianism, figures such as Jiang Qing (蒋庆) and Chen Ming (陈明) argued, would answer China’s questions of agency and identity, and also make the nation great again by renewing its culture.

The New Left, in turn, rose up in arms against Francis Fukuyama's 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man* (expanded from his 1989 [article](#) in *The National Interest*), which argued that liberal democracy had triumphed once and for all on the battlefield of ideas. The New Left was determined to salvage socialism, and to redefine it. They sought to recycle some aspects of the Maoist heritage (this is why Liberals called them the “New Left” — the name was originally an insult suggesting they wanted to return to the Cultural Revolution) but renounced others. New Left thinkers combed the socialist past in their search for ideas that might work for China's present, while also embracing post-modernism and other trends from the contemporary West (where many of them did their Ph.Ds.), even if they were fundamentally anti-Western. On a more practical level, they denounced neoliberalism at a critical moment in China's reform era, when the market replaced economic five-year plans.



Cui Zhiyuan (India China Institute)

A typical New Left thinker from this period might be Cui Zhiyuan (崔之元), a political scientist who studied at the University of Chicago and subsequently taught at MIT for some years before returning to China, where he is a professor at Tsinghua University's School of Public Policy and Management. Cui's work showed an eclecticism of thinking and a breadth of Western socialist influences, as the title of a 2011 [article](#) suggests: “Partial Intimations of the Coming Whole: The Chongqing Experiment in Light of the Theories of Henry George, James Meade, and Antonio Gramsci.”



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Wang Hui (汪晖), the most famous member of China's New Left, sought to deconstruct arguments like those of Joseph Levenson, the American Sinologist who insisted (in his 1958 book *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*) that the weight of China's premodern civilization had kept China from becoming a modern nation-state. Wang's pushback ultimately produced a multi-volume [exploration](#) of China's intellectual history from the Song dynasty through to the present, in which he interrogated the narratives imposed on China's past by Western and Japanese historians. At the time, Wang did not produce a counter-narrative (in his view, national narratives are post-facto justifications for ideological power) but China's rise would ultimately suggest one.

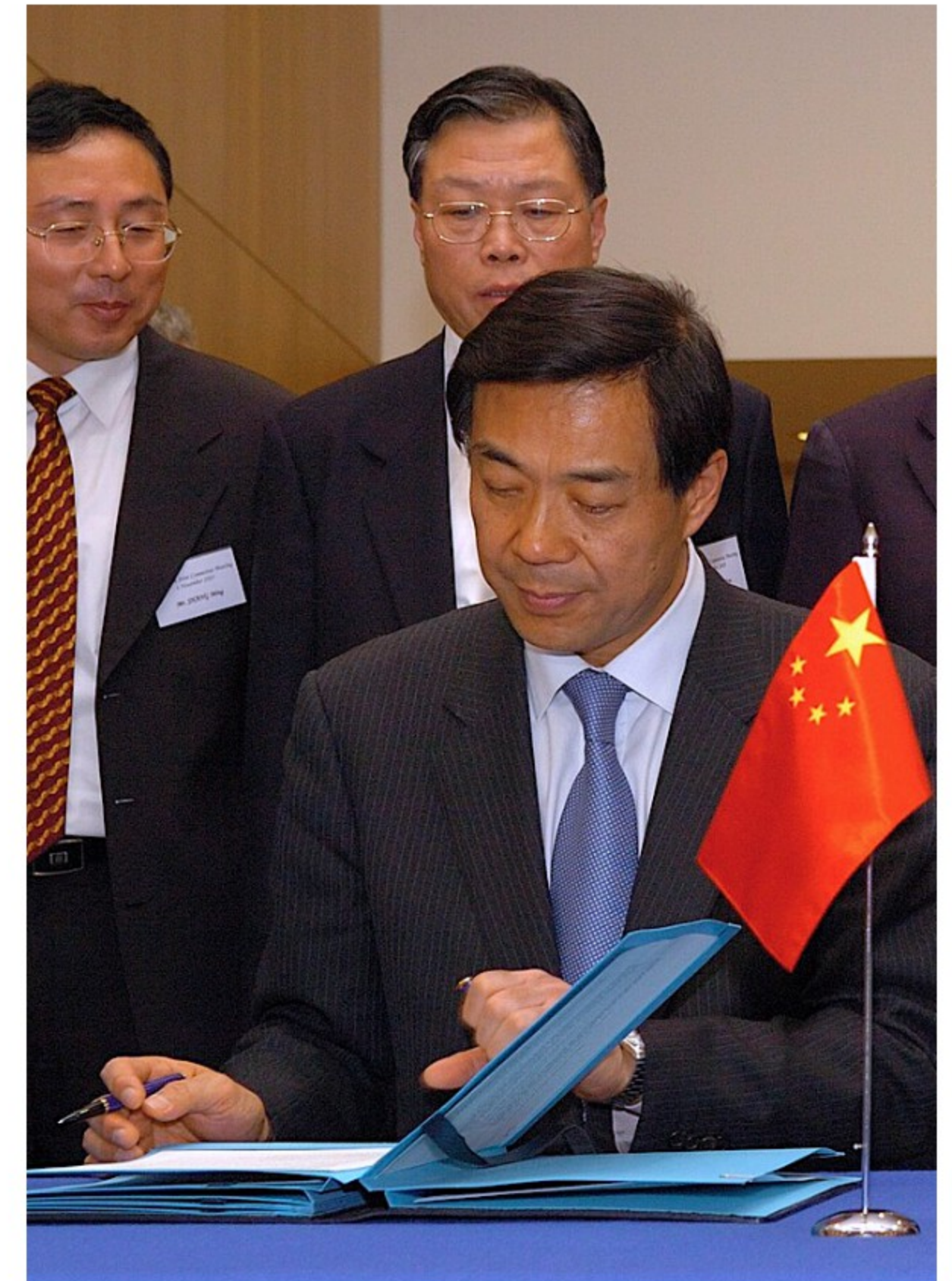
At first, some saw the New Left as armchair philosophers, writing for an erudite few. Yet many New Left thinkers, including Cui and Wang — as well as Gan Yang (甘陽), Wang Shaoguang (王绍光), Hu Angang (胡鞍钢), Yao Yang (姚洋) and others — were also deeply engaged with current events in China. In terms of its overall effects on society, China's market transition of the 1990s was as transformative as the 1949 revolution, upending the basic incentives and opportunity structures of Chinese life. There was much for the New Left to decry as China's embrace of efficiency led to layoffs for some 40 million people, who until that point had enjoyed the stability of being workers in China's now unprofitable state-owned enterprises. Chinese socialism, it seemed, was on the wane and needed rejuvenation.

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One of the biggest developments for New Left thinking as it related to real events in China was what became known as “the Chongqing model” (as mentioned in the title of Cui Zhiyuan’s article). This was a social and political experiment carried out in the western megalopolis of Chongqing, between 2007 and 2013, under the leadership of Bo Xilai (薄熙来), then Chongqing’s Party Secretary. Chongqing is an enormous municipality in western China, roughly the size of Austria with a population of more than 30 million. When Bo was named its head, he built his political brand by implementing initiatives to deal with poverty, inequality, and the crime and corruption it produced. In other words, he diverged in important ways from the neoliberal model practiced in much of the rest of China (such regional experimentation is encouraged in China, up to a point).

To this end, Bo worked from what we might see as the New Left playbook — using government money and debt to invest in affordable housing, infrastructure and public works, as well as granting rural dwellers credits on land allotments to help them move into the city. He also developed projects that were labeled Maoist by his detractors, including the singing of “red” songs meant to mobilize popular support, and airing television shows that trumpeted similar themes.

This project received enthusiastic support from New Left intellectuals; Cui Zhiyuan took a leave from his position at Tsinghua University to move to Chongqing and lend a hand. The Chongqing model had an international impact as well, leading thinkers on the American and European left to argue that Bo Xilai had created a “third way” somewhere between capitalism and socialism, that could be the wave of the future and be applied outside of China as well.



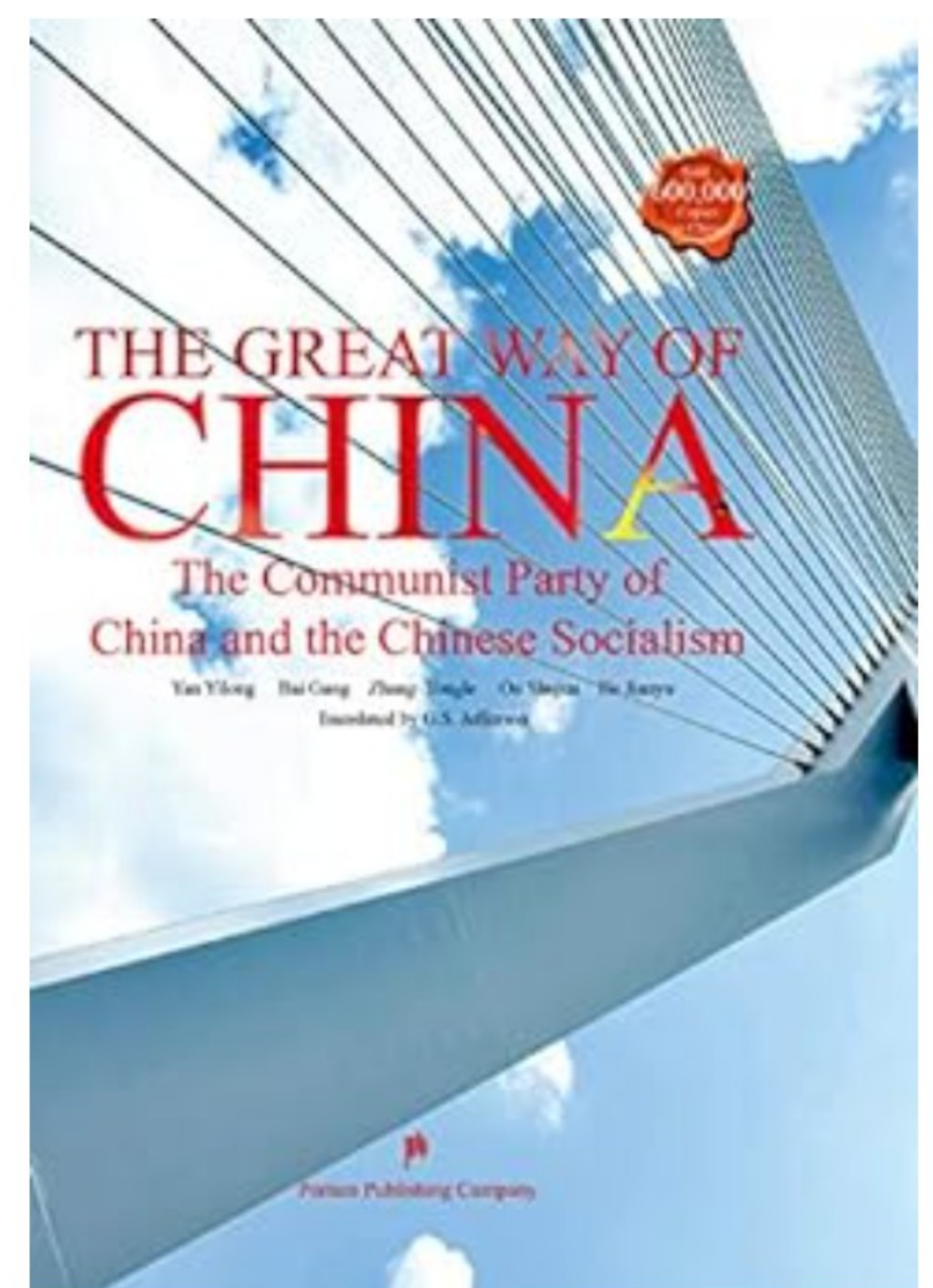
Bo Xilai in 2004, then Chinese Minister for Trade (European Commission)

The Chongqing experiment ended badly for political reasons, with Bo’s very public [downfall](#) in 2012. Clearly an ambitious politician, his opponents in Beijing accused him of corruption and pandering to populism, as well as more dramatic malfeasance (his wife Gu Kailai 谷开来 was eventually accused and convicted of [murdering](#) a British businessman). In any event, the experiment turned into a power struggle. As part of Xi Jinping’s rise to prominence, Bo was dismissed from his post, charged with criminal activities, and sentenced to life in prison.

The Chongqing model and its unhappy fate was one turning point through which the New Left slowly transformed from regime critics to regime supporters. China’s relative success during the 2008 financial crisis was another inflection point, as it convinced many that China’s rise was not only real, but had created a “China model” that might be a gamechanger. As China doubled down on socialism under the leadership of Xi Jinping, it made sense for the New Left, for whom socialism had always been their core value, to fall in line. Xi was against intellectual pluralism, and determined to impose ideological discipline on China’s chattering class. This was also a way for the New Left to win its battles against the liberals and the New Confucians.

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There are many examples of New Left intellectuals' newfound embrace of the state. The political scientist Wang Shaoguang spent the first half of his career as a loyal critic of the regime, promoting “state capacity” in ways that respected China’s socialist engagement. Since China’s rising clout over the last decade, however, he now favorably compares what he calls China’s “responsive democracy” to the failure of Western “representative democracy” (or “electocracy”), and has written two books — one on how China drafts its five-year plans, one on revamping the rural health care system — on how China’s “mass line 2.0” works under Xi Jinping. Another example is Yan Yilong (鄢一龙), a professor at Tsinghua University who publishes books such as *The Great Way of China: The Communist Party of China and Chinese Socialism* that celebrate China’s achievement of socialism, and how it successfully bent capital and capitalism to its own purposes.



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Perhaps the best example is that of Jiang Shigong (強世功). Born in 1967, Jiang was Professor of Law at Peking University for most of his career, but recently moved to Beijing’s Minzu University to serve as Vice-President. Jiang has addressed a wide variety of topics — unwritten constitutions; Hong Kong-China relations; American hegemony; Xi Jinping Thought — but all of his writings are based on two central insights. First, that the universal values espoused by the West are not in fact universal, but rather contingent products of history and expressions of Western self-interest. Second, that the current success of Chinese socialism allows it to challenge those values and assert its own, not only in China but elsewhere in the world.



Jiang Shigong (Weibo)

Jiang is also one of many New Left intellectuals in China to have been [influenced](#) by Carl Schmitt, the early 20th century German critic of liberal constitutionalism commonly referred to as “Hitler’s crown jurist” for his service to the Nazi regime. Schmitt’s thought is complex, but for Jiang it is generally an excuse for playing hard-ball politics, clearly distinguishing friends from enemies in order to arrive at a strategic goal. In this case, the goal is advancing the cause of Chinese socialism, which often means berating its enemies.

In a lengthy scholarly [article](#) titled “The ‘Critical Decade’ in the Sino-American Relationship: The ‘New Roman Empire’ and the ‘New Great Struggle’” (published in September 2020, and translated by me at [Reading the China Dream](#)), Jiang attempts to rewrite the history of Sino-American relations in light of their deterioration under Trump and Biden. Many Chinese felt nostalgic for the post-Cold War period, when warmer Sino-U.S. relations allowed China to become rich and powerful, while affording American culture considerable sway within China. Jiang argues that in fact, China had been led down the garden path, and that Trump’s and Biden’s policies made clear what American aims had been from the outset: to build a new Roman Empire, with China as its subordinate partner. Much of Jiang’s text is a tirade targeting liberals who were seduced by the siren song of American culture and money, accusing them of forgetting where their loyalties lie: the struggle to defend Chinese socialism against American hegemony. Happily, Jiang concludes, Xi Jinping understood the danger and came forth at the right moment, saving socialism for China and for the world.

Although Jiang defends Xi and the Party-state, he is not part of the propaganda apparatus, and his texts are not read as propaganda by other Chinese intellectuals. Propaganda is full of

slogans and, at least for the last few years, highly focused on Xi. Chinese intellectuals are fluent in this language, but rarely use it in their own writing. Jiang Shigong generally eschews the hallmarks of propaganda, but sometimes comes close to the line. An earlier [article](#) of his, “Philosophy and History: Interpreting the ‘Xi Jinping Era’ through Xi’s Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP” (published in January 2018), for example, is instead meant to be a larger intellectual apology for Xi Jinping Thought, and to convince other intellectuals to take it seriously — which suggests that Jiang believes they did not.

“ Jiang describes Xi Jinping as leading a victorious struggle against American hegemony and the forces of capital within China, to return the nation to its socialist heritage. ”

The key issue is regime legitimacy. Ever since the reform era of the 1980s, the Chinese Party-state has attempted to shore up its legitimacy through a combination of material improvements and propaganda efforts. Yet many Chinese believe that what has transformed China over the last four decades are markets, entrepreneurship and globalization. In other words, most Chinese people are patriotic and proud of what China has achieved, but I am not sure how many of them are truly convinced by socialism in a country where money talks so loudly. The same might be said about Xi Jinping and his Thought.

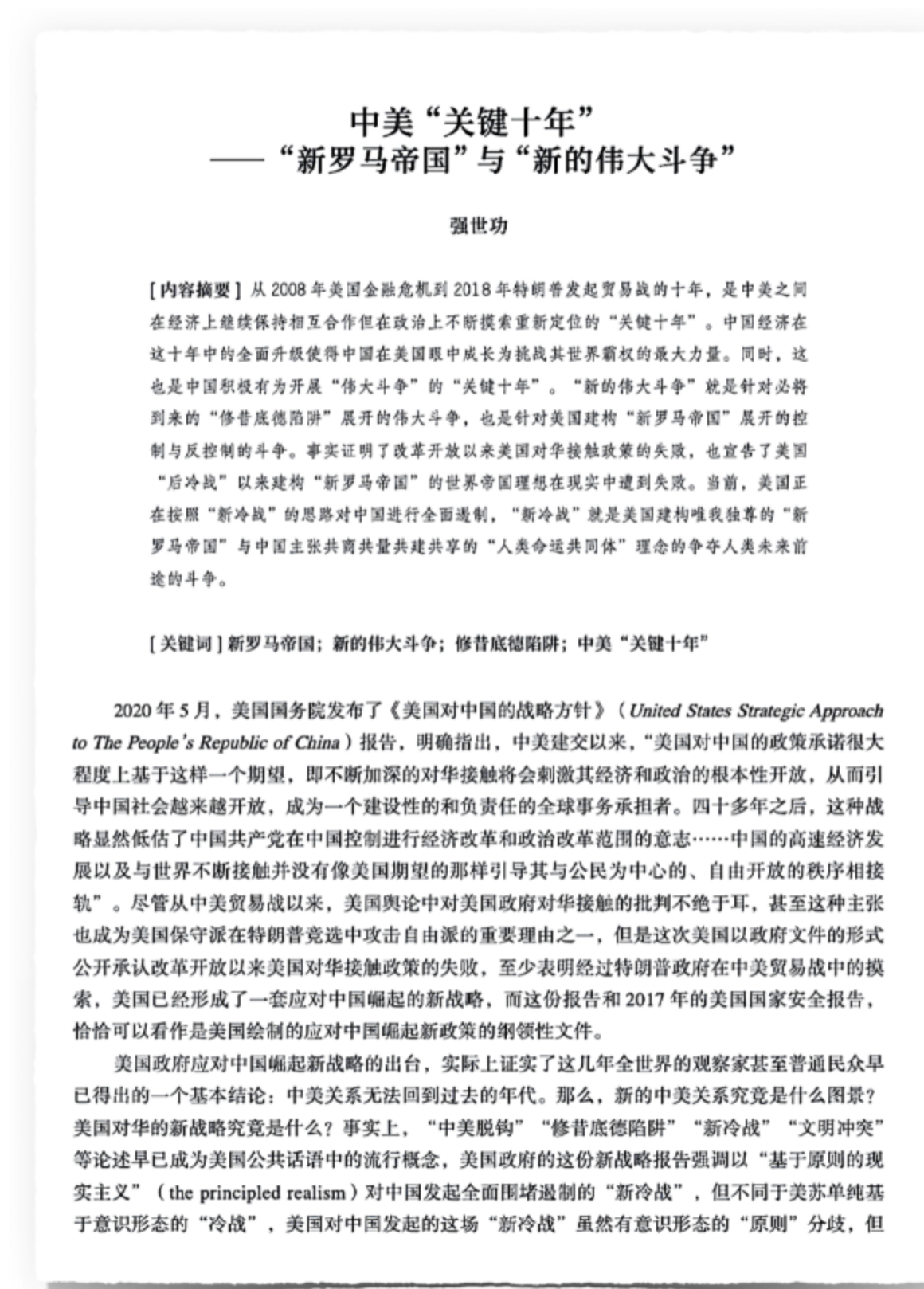
Jiang Shigong’s work counters this by describing how Xi has built a socialist China based on the work of his predecessors. In Jiang’s telling, China stood up under Mao, became rich under Deng, and became powerful under Xi. He describes Xi as leading a victorious struggle against American hegemony and the forces of capital within China, not only to return the nation to its socialist heritage, but to create a new version of socialism. To answer the question of what “socialism” or “communism” means to a China that is now rich and powerful, Jiang writes in the essay “Philosophy and History”:

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When Xi Jinping emphasizes a return to Communist principles, he is not talking about the ‘communist society’ that was of a piece with scientific socialism but is instead using the idea that ‘those who do not forget their original intention will prevail,’ drawn from traditional Chinese culture. In so doing, he removes communism from the specific social setting of the Western empirical scientific tradition, and astutely transforms it into the Learning of the Heart in Chinese traditional philosophy, which in turn elevates communism to a kind of ideal faith or a spiritual belief. For this reason, communism will never again be like it was under Mao Zedong — something that was meant to take on a real social form in the here and now — but is instead the Party’s highest ideal and faith.

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In this rich and powerful China, Jiang implies, there is no need for the workers to unite, because they no longer have any chains and will be cared for by an educated and committed elite. Similarly, Jiang argues that Xi has achieved the age-old goal of “sinicizing Marxism” by building a strong socialist state:



Jiang’s 2020 article on China’s “critical decade” ([Fudan](#))

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‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ is not adding Chinese characteristics to an already defined ‘socialist framework.’ Rather, it uses China’s lived experience to explore and define what, in the final analysis, ‘socialism’ is. For this reason, ‘socialism’ is not ossified dogma, but instead an open concept awaiting exploration and definition. China is not blindly following socialist ideas and institutions produced by the Western experience of socialism, but rather is charting the socialist developmental path on the basis of a greater self-confidence, taking the project of the modernization of socialist construction to its third phase.

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In other words, China now *is* socialism, and doesn’t have to go back to the classic Marxist texts to attempt to sinicize the doctrine. Rather, since China has built the richest and most powerful socialist regime in the history of the world, the rest of the world will naturally learn from the Chinese experience. Jiang knows that China is not perfect, and admits as much, generally in a few sentences toward the end of his essays. But compared to the fallen Soviet Union and flailing Western democracies — particularly the U.S. — he sees China as such a shining success that her problems are mere details.



Jiang Shigong lecturing at Peking University (Hhhderreich)

Jiang and the New Left of today are of course surfing on the crest of China’s rise, imagining that the wave will go on forever — something we all do when times are good. But China’s growth rates are [falling](#), as are its birth rates, while young people worry about their future and women [fulminate](#) against the patriarchy. Zero Covid, and particularly its sudden end, took the wind out of China’s sails. The truculence of U.S. China policy makes some Chinese people mad enough for Jiang’s perspective to make sense to them — at least until they realize that

inequality and class struggle remain domestic issues in a slowing economy.

When that happens, China’s New Left may have to decide whether its allegiance is to socialism or to the Chinese state, which has [shut down](#) Marxist groups on university campuses when they protest too strongly for workers’ rights. In the 1990s and 2000s, early New Leftists like Cui Zhiyuan and Wang Hui were regime critics because they feared that China might follow neoliberalism as the nation emerged from its Maoist past. Yet now that China is stronger, the fact that the nation’s success is based on a relatively neoliberal order is being ignored by the next generation of leftist thinkers, whose vision of socialism at home is also a vision of nationalist pride. Already, the new New Left sounds more than a little smug.

Before I left Beijing last spring, I had a sumptuous dinner with several leftist intellectuals in one of the gorgeous banquet rooms attached to the Old Summer Palace. They drank *baijiu* and talked about Mao’s enduring wisdom. But there was more talk of taxes (how to avoid them) and fine Western wines (how to buy them at a good price). Had there been cigars, I could have imagined myself in any swanky country club in the United States. ■



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