

Who are the Chinese ‘left’ nationalists?

Sunday 3 January 2021, by [HIOE Brian](#) (Date first published: 13 December 2020).

This Chinese intellectual clique has demonstrated a strong interest in the work of Nazi thinkers

As tension between the US and China rises, many have looked toward historical metaphors to describe the current state of international affairs. One prominent metaphor that has gained momentum is to liken China to Nazi Germany. This has taken a number of forms, including in vulgar slurs such as “Chinazi,” or references to Chinese president Xi Jinping as “Xitler”—a form of guilt by association with Nazism. China’s association with Nazi Germany has been further strengthened by widespread outrage toward the [mass detention camps](#) that the Chinese government operates in Xinjiang, [1] among other efforts to forcibly integrate Uighurs and other indigenous and minority ethnic groups into the Han majority that have been labeled as ethnic cleansing.

At the same time, there has also been increased attention to how some Chinese intellectuals have demonstrated a strong interest in the work of Nazi thinkers, such as the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt. [2] For them, Schmitt’s appeal is rooted in his ideas about anti-individualism, the primacy of the state, and the defense of centralizing state power in the hands of a singular leader figure. Interestingly, these Chinese intellectuals also explicitly hail from a leftist tradition and are part of loose groupings such as the Chinese New Left—I refer to these intellectuals as Chinese left nationalists.

A recent [essay](#) by Chinese art critic and former academic Rong Jian made waves by critiquing one of the most prominent Chinese left nationalists: Wang Hui. Rong compares Wang to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who was a member and supporter of the Nazi Party. According to Rong, Wang’s [advocacy](#) for the importance of charismatic political leadership by 20th century revolutionary figures, such as Lenin and Mao, is also a defense of the growing cult of personality surrounding Xi Jinping—an argument that reminds us of Heidegger’s own adulation of the Führer as a central, mythopoetic figure in his fascist ontology.

Against neoliberalism and democracy

Chinese left nationalists believe in an essentialist difference that separates China from Western nations. The source of this difference has been conceived of in civilizational terms—between “Chinese civilization” and “Western civilization”—or in more modern terms—such as between communism and capitalism. For these thinkers, the nature of this difference lies in a clash between the primacy of the party and the state in the Chinese context, versus the dominance of the free market or unregulated democracy in Western contexts. This is exactly why the Chinese nationalist left have gravitated toward figures like Schmitt, who vouches for a statist conception of the nation. Indeed, Schmitt’s reduction of political activity to a distinction between “friend and enemy” appeals to Chinese nationalists insofar as they continue to envision the current world order in binary terms, one that already existed under the Cold War and is revived today in US-China geopolitics. Cozying up to Schmittian ideas would allow them to enshrine the primacy of the state as sovereign and justify the desire to strengthen borders against outside threats.

In past decades, Chinese left nationalists have drawn from neo-Marxist and post-structuralist approaches from Euro-American left academia, which had positioned China's shift to the free market in the 80s and 90s in alignment with the Western left's analysis of neoliberalism. In this vein, Western theorists such as David Harvey and Naomi Klein tended to see the Chinese New Left as fellow travelers, a kinship we can see from ample citations of Wang Hui in cornerstone critiques of the neoliberal order like Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*. Yet it is also during this period that the Chinese left nationalists' interest in Schmitt blossomed.

Wang has also historically defended the party for implementing ideas that express democratic consensus, despite not actually practicing democracy. One example is his valorization of the "mass line," which was a tactic that Mao used to consult the masses when making policy decisions. He argues that such practices are expressions of democracy in a way that Western models have failed to accomplish. Wang states: "The mass line was the basic strategy of people's war... [I]t was the Party and its mass line under the conditions of people's war that created the self-expression of a class and, thus, a class in the political sense." [3] Wang has also defended the state from claims that it cannot be democratic, arguing: "If a state's political system has a strong capacity to respond to problems, it indicates that the society contains elements of and a potential for democracy. But because our theories on democracy focus so intently on its political form, they have neglected these substantive potentials." [4]

Defending the party-state

It is often said that a responsive state apparatus is not necessarily a democratic one, but is perhaps an efficient one. Authoritarian states with no interest in pretending to be democratic have sometimes justified their rule by claiming to be more efficient than a democratic system would be.

Indeed, parties and states throughout history have claimed to speak for the people, even when they represent specific interest groups. Many have critiqued the contemporary Chinese party-state in exactly this way—as an institution that simply seeks to protect a few powerful, politically influential families descended from the original founders of the party, rather than an institution that belongs to the Chinese people as a whole. As Nietzsche said, "A state, is called the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly lieth it also; and this lie creepeth from its mouth: 'I, the state, am the people.'"

Wang Hui has drawn distinctions between the party and state, arguing that the fact that the party and state were not *completely* identical was a strength of the Chinese system, and that this was lost when the two were increasingly collapsed together during the Deng period. Even still, Wang has sought to rehabilitate both sides of the party-state.

This is nothing short of reductive state apologetics; the state is evaluated in juxtaposition to Western political models, the major shortcoming of which he sees as being the weaker role of the state, as opposed to the comparatively stronger role of the state in the Chinese political system. This defense of the party-state attempts to collapse the distinction between the people, the party, and the state: as encapsulated by his frequent deferral to the mass line, Wang argues that the party-state can be expressive of something like the Rousseauian general will.

Of course, the basic unit of analysis here is the state (or the party-state in the case of China). Unable to engage with the people absent of a state, it follows that Wang would have a negative assessment of the principles of self-determination. In particular, he doesn't consider demands for self-determination seriously absent of a state. It is through this analytical lens that Wang has been broadly opposed to self-determination on China's peripheries as well. He has [argued](#) that an independent Tibetan and Uighur identity would fade away with history under the auspices of the Chinese state. His views on [Hong Kong and Taiwan](#) identity are consistent; according to Wang, the

emergence of these identities is fairly recent, and may crumble just as suddenly as well.

In this light, it may not be surprising that others who are affiliated with Chinese left nationalism, such as Hu Angang, have even directly argued for China to become an ethno-state. In a 2012 [paper](#), Hu wrote: “Any nation’s long-term peace and stability is founded upon building a system with a unified race (a state-race) that strengthens the state-race identity and dilutes ethnic group identity.” Hu’s arguments have since been used to justify efforts to encourage Han intermarriage with Uighurs precisely to dilute ethnic group identity, bringing Wang’s views on identity to its logical conclusion.

‘Revolutionary personality’

Wang’s staunch defense of the party-state has more recently shifted toward apologia for the “revolutionary personality” of Xi Jinping, something that actually proves at odds with his earlier work. Whereas Wang used to rationalize the party-state system by arguing that the use of the mass line was an effective system of democratic decision-making, Wang has been voicing support more recently for singular leader figures whose authority supersedes those of the political parties they lead. He terms this leader figure: the “revolutionary personality.”

In “The Revolutionary Personality and the Philosophy of Victory,” a [recent text](#) written during the COVID-19 pandemic, Wang states: “[P]arty leaders who fulfilled their mission in a mythic way at imminent moments cannot be fully equated with the political party system itself. Lenin, Mao Zedong and other revolutionary leaders often found themselves opposed to this political party and its guiding line, and only achieved hegemony after protracted and sometimes bitter theoretical and political struggles.” Consequently, according to Wang, “against the backdrop of declining worker movements, class-based political parties, and socialist countries, exploring anew the question of the revolutionary personality (and particularly the personality of a revolutionary leader) is not without significance for those hoping to promote the repoliticalization of the contemporary world.” The exceptionalist view of the political leader here seems to overpower his investment in the statist project: “[The] revolutionary personality has a unique power, and can use this huge capacity to push the revolution forward even when social and political conditions are not ripe.”

It may not be surprising then that for Rong Jian, Wang’s “revolutionary personality” reminds him of Heidegger’s view of the Führer. This is where one can draw comparisons between the “revolutionary personality” and other thought-figures in the Messianic vein, such as Hegel’s world-spirit or Nietzsche’s *ubermensch*. But a time in which Xi Jinping has thrown off safeguards intended to prevent the rise of another leader figure with unchecked authority in the mold of a Mao Zedong or a Deng Xiaoping, there is no doubt that Wang has written about the importance of the “revolutionary personality” because of Xi’s political ascendancy. Even if Wang isn’t overtly venerating personality cults, Wang’s appraisal of the importance of the “revolutionary personality” validates Xi’s paramount position.

Expansionism dressed up as internationalism

Wang Hui’s body of work, among others of the Chinese New Left, has made it clear that Chinese left nationalists harbor no aspiration toward building solidarity between non-state actors, but only the desire to win in the Great Power competition between China and the West. This is a parochial view that dangerously dismisses the logic of global capital as a totalizing force that can only be contended with by an internationalist workers’ movement. Instead, Wang sees only the party-state with its charismatic leader figures as the driving agents of history.

According to these Chinese left nationalists, the West represents capitalism, which can only be opposed by Chinese state power. By this logic, socialism in China is yoked solely to state power and

conceived of entirely in terms of the exercise of state power, with scarcely a mention of the classless society following the “withering away of the state” that Marx described. No global post-capitalist future is proposed, except for what is, at the end of the day, a limited vision of Chinese national prosperity termed conveniently as “socialism.”

Such debates on state power and post-capitalist futures are fundamentally old, with many of the issues at stake at present having also been points of contention during the early history of the Soviet Union with the formation of the Third International. However, in the case of the Soviet Union under Stalin, the Third International which had claimed to advance an internationalist socialist project was in reality only deployed to advance the Soviet Union’s national interests. (Rong Jian [notes](#) that Wang sidesteps openly advocating for the revival of Stalinist cults of personality by phrasing his praise of the “revolutionary personality” in terms of Lenin, and not Stalin.)

The analogy of Xi’s China to Stalin’s Soviet Union extends to non-Western imperial projects and present-day formations of imperialism. In the 1930s, the Japanese empire developed the “Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” which promoted cultural and economic unity among East Asian countries. Japanese intellectuals of the time justified it by claiming that this was a world-historical project that would overcome Western modernity, which was thought to have disrupted a reified notion of Japanese “tradition.” An infamous touchstone for Chinese left nationalists is the 1942 [Overcoming Modernity conference](#) in Tokyo, yet they seem to remain willfully ignorant of the uncomfortable parallels between intellectual apologism for Japanese empire and their own political project. [5] As sharp Chinese animosity toward Japan—a central component of contemporary Chinese nationalism—illustrates, other groups hardly found Japanese imperialism to be liberatory. So too is the case for Chinese statist projects disguised as internationalism.

In this sense, the “leftism” of many Chinese left nationalists is in fact rooted in capitalist statism as a fundamental restructuring of the social means of production. As a result, blatantly statist projects, such as the dismissal of self-determination struggles on China’s peripheries, justification for internal colonialism, and defense of China’s geopolitical expansion, get erroneously framed as leftist internationalist initiatives.

By contrast, American imperialism justifies itself as an effort to spread freedom and democracy globally. In this respect, Chinese left nationalists conceive of the contemporary world order in terms reminiscent of the Western alt-right, who similarly view the confrontation between China and America as a clash of civilizations. Thus, the current crisis of global capital has provoked parallel responses between America and China, with a strong focus on reinforcing and policing borders in both contexts. In China, this is clear in the emphasis on policing internal borders such as those of Tibet or Xinjiang, and on securing external borders such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. In America, this takes the form of increasingly virulent anti-immigration rhetoric and violence against minority groups domestically. The clash between America and China is therefore a clash of modern nation-states that share convergent nationalistic behavior as empires, even if nationalists on both sides are ideologically unable to admit to such convergent practices.

The history of the 20th century is filled with the wreckage of imperial projects. Formerly colonized countries or countries disadvantaged by uneven development have embarked on projects of nationalist self-strengthening that culminated in the attempt to displace dominant Western powers. While the project to oppose Western hegemony is a crucial one, many such projects have ended up aspiring to the position of global hegemony historically occupied by the West, rather than breaking free from the cycle of Great Power competition altogether. This is what we see with China at present—and what Chinese left nationalists have vigorously upheld with reliance on far-right programs and fascist ideals. Without contesting these ideas, we can expect this clash of modern empires to proceed similarly to those that preceded it.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Here “Xinjiang” refers to Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR, also known as “Xinjiang,” “Northwest China,” “East Turkestan,” “Uighuria,” “Ghulja,” “Tarbagai,” “Altay,” “Dzungarstan and Altishahr,” and/or “Dzungaria and the Tarim Basin Region,” and which will henceforth be referred to as “Xinjiang”). A highly contested term, the proper name Xinjiang (新疆) was first used by the 18th century emperor Qianlong, and conferred on the XUAR upon Zuo Zongtang’s reoccupation of the region in the late 19th century. In Mandarin Chinese, it means “new territory,” “new border,” or “new frontier.”

[2] See Sebastian Veg, “The Rise of China’s Statist Intellectuals: Law, Sovereignty, and ‘Repoliticization’” in *The China Journal*, Volume 82, Number, July 2019, P. 23-45, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/702687>

[3] Ibid., 140.

[4] Wang Hui, *China’s Twentieth Century: Revolution, Retreat and the Road to Equality*, ed. Saul Thomas, London: Verso Books, P. 160.

[5] See Harry D. Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.