Discovering China

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For decades, China was there in the distance. Transforming itself many times over, even as the rest of the world was transforming itself, as I too was transforming myself, it radiated a myriad of meanings over the decades.

As a child, "Red China" loomed as a mysterious, yet threatening, spectre. We were made to fear that communists might arrive in our bedrooms and demand that we denounce our religion, our parents and our country. At the same time, we were made to sympathize with their children, because when we balked at our porridge or spinach, we were told that children in China would love to have it. We wished that they could have it.

They grew and so did we. We now saw them as Red Guards demanding to reshape the world in a way that harmonized with our new left dreams. We saw them standing up to their elders, examining the foundations of knowledge, pushing at the boundaries of the social order, just as we were doing. There was also a dimension of going from the cities into the countryside, bridging the gap between urban and rural life, even between mental and manual labor, that also appealed to our sensibility. Then it seemed to turn into a story of terror, of honest intellectuals being denounced, books being burned and scores being settled. This stopped us in our tracks, especially those of us who were aspiring intellectuals. What was happening? It was so far away. Nobody I knew had ever been to China. I could not believe the mainstream media, but what was the alternative narrative? I didn't believe that those who were waving little red books and shouting about running dogs and paper tigers knew any better than I did. I read Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China*[1] and William Hinton's *Fanshen*[2].

So many dramatic events unfolded. China was finally accepted into the UN. Nixon went to China. There was even an opera about it. Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong died. The Gang of Four were put on trial and the cultural revolution was over. Deng Xiaoping announced a new path called reform and opening up. Meanwhile, I had gone from new left to old left and belonged to a communist party on the Soviet side of the Sino-Soviet split. When I went to Moscow and attended a lecture on China, Fydor Burlatsky said "I'll tell you a secret. Not everything is clear. Not everything is settled". I wondered. So many questions and the answers so far out of reach.

In 1989, as I came and went from Eastern Europe, the world seemed to turn upside down. Every news broadcast showed crowds on the streets demanding everything from a reform of socialism to a transition to capitalism. I saw what was happening in China as part of this same historical tide. In Eastern Europe, those wanting to take a capitalist road got their way. Oligarchs rode high in a frenzy of expropriation, while masses plunged into depths of dispossession and despair.

In China, it was a different story, but what was the story? A picture began to emerge of international capitalism moving in, national capitalism building up, often with dubious dealings in the interface between capital and party-state. Agriculture was decollectivized. State-owned enterprises were made to compete with private businesses without any of their obligations to provide housing, education or healthcare. Some managers became owners and asset-stripped the businesses they had managed. So much that had been so laboriously created was being dissipated and destroyed. At the same time, there was stunning development. Underdeveloped areas became modern cities. Masses were lifted out of poverty. Standards of living soared.

There was more coming and going from China. Chinese students began to appear in my classes. Chinese scholars turned up at academic conferences and other international events. I probed them and learned what I could from them. There were more articles and books about China appearing, coming at China from many points of view. Many were hostile, even war-mongering, with titles such as *Countering China's Great Game* and *When China Attacks*. The mass media were increasingly full of stories about China featuring daily slanders "China is working to take down freedom all across the world" and "Red alert: War risk exposed." Stories about China's economic success did filter through, especially as international capital came to depend on its success. At the same time, there were contradictory stories declaring China's economy was slowing down, in crisis, even about to crash.

There was much scandal-mongering, especially around trials of corrupt party officials. Sometimes I was at a loss about how to interpret such stories, especially when it came to Bo Xilai. I had been buoyed up by news about the Chongqing experiment, led by provincial party secretary Bo Xilai, a movement to revitalize revolutionary traditions, to "praise red and attack black". It involved singing red songs and reading red books, cracking down on crime and corruption, turning away from market liberalization to a redistributive program of support for state-owned enterprises and investment in public housing, health and environment. Then came news of the downfall of Bo Xilai, denunciation of the Chongqing model as reversion to the cultural revolution, along with salacious details of the deputy-mayor fleeing to the US consulate, the murder of a British businessman, the arrest of Bo Xilai's wife for the murder and then the arrest and imprisonment of Bo Xilai. I read so much detail about it, but still struggled to make sense of it. There was obviously some sort of power struggle underneath all the lurid details of the story, but I did not find the western media any more reliable on this than in their analysis of all the other stories about China.

Of course, there were also left journals and book publishers putting forth other perspectives on China, ones I have found far more plausible. *Monthly Review* and Monthly Review Press have been particularly good at putting forward credible accounts of China. Books such *as The Unknown Cultural Revolution* by Han Dongping[3], *From Commune to Capitalism* by Xu Zhun[4], *The Battle for China's Past* by Gao Mobo[5] and *The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World Economy* by Li Minqi[6] have clarified many matters for me. Yet even Marxist texts have taken quite different lines, exemplified most strikingly in the difference between two authors I know. Lin Chun's *Revolution and Counter-revolution in China*[7] takes a highly critical approach, going from a positive account of the revolutionary period to a negative assessment of reform period up to today, seeing it as a radical break from the values of the revolution, whereas Carlos Martinez's *The East is Still Red*[8], upholds the CPC position of essential continuity from the revolution through the reform until now, often quoting Deng Xiaoping as favourably as Mao Zedong or Xi Jinping. I have found both of these books and their authors credible and helpful in working out my own position.

I knew an increasing number of academics going to China. There were multiplying institutional links, as well as conference attendances. There were also western academics teaching there. I received e-mail from Chinese academics indicating that my work was known there and requests to write for journals published there. I waited to be invited to come without doing anything to make it happen. Finally, it did happen. My first invitations were to a conference that was then postponed and then to another at a time I couldn't attend. Then came a request to come to teach at Peking University, which I duly did. From the time of the first invitation, I knew that I would be going and embarked on an intensive study of China. I read many books and articles on politics, economics, history and culture as well as novels, including detective stories.

I also watched many Chinese films and television drama series, where I learned much that I could not learn from books, details about the texture of everyday life and the transformations in that realm over the decades. I stumbled upon this rich resource nearly by accident. I had been reading the novel In *the Name of the People* by Zhou Meisen[9], dealing with the anti-corruption drive initiated by Xi Jinping, and did a search to find out more about the book and author. To my surprise, I found a link to a television series based on it and it came alive for me in new dimensions. It was about political morality and power struggles surrounding the anti-corruption campaign. Inspired by Balzac, the author was critical of modern novels

which had lowered the threshold and did not require reach for an overall grasp of things. He aspired to a panoramic reflection of a society in an era of rapid change with characters voicing the sensibility of various strata experiencing this change. Particularly interesting were scenes of party members caught up in the web of corruption, whether as investigators or culprits, interrogating themselves and each other about how they had lost their way.

Television drama has been a big part of the popular culture of my times and I have watched much of it from an early age. I have also written articles and books about it, bringing Marxism to bear on it by excavating underlying world views in cultural narratives. So it was natural that I should welcome the possibility to learn what China was producing in this area and to bring this analytical approach to it. Much of what is produced, which is very popular, is not to my taste. On Red Note, people are constantly requesting and receiving recommendations. Two constantly mentioned favorites are *Empresses in the Palace* and *Love between the Fairy and the Devil*. There are many dramas centring on dynastic intrigues, fantasy plots with divinities, demons, prophecies, potions and magical powers, as well as frothy romances and sc-fi time travel. I give these a miss from the east as I do in the west. However, there are many others to my taste, embracing murder mysteries, family sagas, historical docudramas and scenarios of contemporary life in domestic and workplace settings.

The historical drama *Age of Awakening* was another favorite constantly mentioned in Red Note and also among my Chinese students. I found myself constantly referring to it in my lectures and conversations. It charts the new culture movement to the May 4th movement to the foundation of the Communist Party of China, showing the transformation of the main characters from liberalism to anarchism to communism. It shows the young Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in the process of becoming Marxists under the influence of their mentors Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, who were only one step ahead of them in this process. Much of the action took place at Peking University, where I was going to teach. Other ones such as *The Founding of a Party, The Founding of a Republic* and *The Pioneer* were also riveting, making the history I was studying so much more vivid. Another was *Diplomatic Situation*, dealing with foreign policy in the early decades of the PRC, fascinating in many ways, but lacking credibility in its portrayal of foreign leaders, especially in its characterization of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger as only dreamy Sinophiles with no imperial ideology or blood on their hands.

Some series traced the fate of a family, village or small group of characters over decades, showing how the big historical shifts played out in the everyday details of their lives. *A Lifelong Journey*, *The Bond* and *Like a Flowing River* follow the transition from the cultural revolution to the reform and opening up and the dramatic rise in standard of living that followed. *Minning Town* opens with a remote village still primitive and poor in the 1990s, where the population was moved to the Gobi desert where they built new homes, farms, industrial enterprises and indeed a whole new and modern town. *When Mountain Flowers Bloom* recreates the struggle to bring rural girls, who were dropping out of school to be forcibly married, back into the education system. All of these show many setbacks and hardships, even injustices, encountered along the way, but convey convincingly the excruciatingly hard work that built the China we see today. Indeed, this is an outstanding feature of these dramas, setting them apart from the western ones I have been watching my whole life, that is, that they focus on production and not just on consumption. I have rarely got a sense of how wealth is actually produced and the role of labor in shaping society from western drama.

Although these stories tend to be favorable to the role of capital, both foreign and domestic, they are by no means uncritical. While some, such as *Like a Flowing River* and *All is Well*, depict rich Chinese entrepreneurs as having earned their wealth, others, such as *Burning*, a murder mystery, featuring two intertwined families over decades, who end up on both sides of the law, exposes how one big business was built on murder, fraud and exploitation. *In the Name of the People* and *The Long Night* show how private companies expropriated wealth built up in public enterprises and extended it through collusion with corrupt police and public officials. *Sunrise on the River* focuses on the tensions between industrial development and environmental protection. They often feature protests at living and working conditions.

All of these dramas reveal much about class positioning, generational sensibility, gender roles, family obligations, cultural traditions, political policies, economic forces. They do so with complex, interesting, sometimes quirky, characters, who draw the audience into caring about their fates. There are also various nuances about customs, attitudes, body language and forms of address, which would be taken for granted by the home audience, which stood out for me as a foreigner. Traditional stereotypes about gender persist and even characters who are educated professionals and party members tend to make routine generalizations about masculinity and femininity that would be challenged in the west. Such characters also sometimes make surprising references to an afterlife.

In the history of Chinese fiction during the lifetime of the PRC, there have been many changes, as well as differences in perception of these changes. During the Maoist period, much of the world regarded it as a beast of burden of party propaganda, while anything banned in China became the baseline for what was esteemed in the west. During the Dengist period, there was a flourishing of new and experimental genres and a literary wild west. These days most writers write neither to party decree nor foreign expectations. There are many online novels with narratives structured like computer games with a geeky hierarchy of levels, treasures, and magic, displaying a striking lack of character development and

moral maturity.[10] Xi Jinping, who has shown an acute awareness of the role of the cultural dimension, has urged artists not to be carried away by the tide of market forces.

Much of contemporary Chinese fiction, whether in novels or drama, articulates the dislocation caused by drastic changes in government policy, as experienced at ground level: how privatization had broken down traditional communities, created a vast floating population, undermined identities based on workers and peasants being masters of society building socialism and suddenly feeling cast adrift. Characters wonder how to tell the difference between capitalism and socialism anymore. They ask if corruption is a consequence of economic development or it is human nature that selfishness is hard to contain. Others take no notice. In all 46 episodes of *All is Well*, exploring gender, generational and sibling tensions, there is only family and capital. Never a mention of party, government or socialism.

Gathering my thoughts from my whole lifetime of thinking and reading about China, I set off for Beijing, intending to use the opportunity to pursue the questions that had been crystallizing in my mind. In what sense is China capitalist and/or socialist? How strong is sincere belief in Marxism? How does this shape various academic disciplines in the universites? How does it impact on the whole range of social institutions and everyday life? These were the big questions, but I had many more. I came both to teach and to learn.

I arrived after a long, sleepless and crowded flight feeling like a zombie, but determined to deal with the jet lag as best I could and hit the ground running. Students met at the airport and helped me in so many ways in coming days. My university residence was Zhongguanyuan Global Village, a complex where foreign professors and students live. There was a lovely welcome dinner with teachers and students that was sometimes more like a seminar with one question after another asking me to pronounce on major issues: “Professor, what do you think were the reasons for the fall of the Soviet Union?”, “Professor, how do you explain the rise of the far right?”.

The campus of Peking University has many classrooms and facilities like any modern university, but also distinctive oriental features like buildings with upturned eaves, pagodas, pavilions, towers, gardens, lakes, towers and bridges. It could be so peaceful when sitting by a lake at sunset, but terrifying when lost in the dark with hundreds of motorbikes coming at me from all directions. There are many reminders of the revolutionary past and the role played by this university in all the big movements of its time. On my first day, I made a point of visiting the grave of Edgar Snow and statue of Li Dazhao. I often thought of Li Dazhao, who was the first to lecture on Marxism at this university and I felt honored to be among the many who followed in his footsteps in doing that.

I was based in the School of Marxism, a unit with approximately 60 professors, 300 postgraduates and 80 undergraduates. There are also visiting professors from abroad teaching whole courses or giving single lectures. There are sections on basic principles of Marxism, history of Marxism, Chinese Marxism, Marxism abroad, political education, Chinese history, political economy, scientific socialism, party building. There are Schools of Marxism in most Chinese universities, although PKU is perhaps the preeminent one, given such tasks as assembling a documentary centre for Marxist research and hosting the World Congress of Marxism (called Davos for Marxists). I’ll be speaking at the next congress. Xi Jinping did his PhD in Marxism at Tsinghua University, specializing political education, and has been a strong promoter of these schools. I also lectured at the School of Marxism in Renmin University.

I designed my lectures to be the best match between what I had to offer and what gaps might exist. Each lecture dealt with a theme such as modernity, science, culture, history of philosophy, philosophy of history, totality, class and identity politics. I began each lecture with a set of questions, outlined the thought of classical thinkers, such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Bukharin, and developed further by Mao, Lukacs, Gramsci, Bernal and others. I highlighted points of controversy and positions taken in key debates. I left time at the end to provoke them to take positions. Some Chinese undergraduates were shy about speaking up and unaccustomed to debates in classes, but foreign students and Chinese postgraduates had no hesitation. The classes were very lively. Each week the numbers grew and there were many more attending than were taking the course for credit.

I spent a lot of time talking with students, asking about their backgrounds, hopes for the future, reasons for choosing advanced study of Marxism and for joining the party. Most teachers and students in the school are party members or aspiring members. I asked about the procedure for joining the party, which takes place over several years, when they participate in various activities and study groups and write reports. At a ceremony, two sponsors for each candidate speak about them, the candidate then reads their statement about why they want to join party, then there is a vote, and finally they take an oath to “work hard, fight for communism throughout my life, be ready at all times to sacrifice my all for the party and the people”. These students, I believe, mean this sincerely.

However, there are more than a hundred million members of the CPC and there is a real question of how many are communists devoted to sacrifice their all for communism. There are many who do so for the reasons some people everywhere join a party in power. To hold positions in government it is regarded as necessary. In schools and universities,

there is a high degree of party membership, even among those who do not employ Marxism in their teaching and research even some who articulate positions running counter to Marxism. This is particularly the case in fields such as economics, where neo-liberalism is strong, even dominant in some places. In China, as in the USSR and elsewhere, I met members of communist parties who were not communists. I also met serious Marxists who were not party members, in part because of the presence and power of those who were not.

I was honoured to be invited by the party branch of the School of Marxism to participate in a day of labor and discussion on a farm. We harvested sweet potatoes, prepared and ate food, walked around the farm and finally had a party meeting, much of it about the tasks ahead in light of the 3rd plenum of the 20th central committee. They spoke about deepening reform, about ensuring it goes in socialist direction, about criticisms from abroad from both right and left. The party secretary used the analogy of riding a bicycle, moving forward but keeping balance. I was asked to speak at it. I spoke of my experiences of the USSR and of how important is for China not to go the way of the USSR. The CPC has studied closely the history of the USSR in all of its phases. Finally, I got a big clap for insisting that Marxists could never retire.

I explored the local neighborhood, the Haidian area of Beijing, where I found an outdoor gym, where I worked out regularly and met locals. On the first day, there was only one man there. He was walking around in circles singing with a touching beauty and composure. Other days there were people practicing tai chi or dancing, either alone or in groups. When I ventured further, I was often accompanied by students, who helped me navigate the transport system and interesting sites of the city, such as the hutongs (traditional housing), parks and museums.

The museums were curated with real flair, bringing various people, events and movements to life in a most creative way. The party museum, opened in 2021 to mark the centenary of the party, was monumental as was fitting to the monumental history it commemorated. Among the most memorable exhibitions were reconstructions that evoked the long march in a most visceral manner and the gallows on which Li Dazhao was hung. Shortly after that, I attended an opera on the last days and death of Li Dazhao. It was very theatrical with striking lighting, dancing, singing and speaking. There were too many lyrics about the glories of youth, but strong affirmations of Marxism and the seriousness of his political convictions. Groups constituting commenting choruses represented students, toiling masses, police, executioners. *The Internationale* sung at the end. In museums and elsewhere, I was impressed with how Chen Duxiu was honored as one of the very first Marxists in China, professor in the university, founder of the party and its first general secretary, even though he was later expelled by the party and became a leader of the Trotskyist movement. In the USSR, he would have been erased from the history, as were Bukharin, Zinoviev, Trotsky, etc.

In these museums, particularly those devoted the university, the state and the party, I wrestled with the historiographical issues that were vexing me, most notably a tendency to downplay the achievements of the Maoist period, to give an unbalanced account of the cultural revolution, to put forward no account, no analysis, of developments such as Tiananmen Square 1989 and the Chongqing model, to articulate an uncritical position on the reform period.

The line on the cultural revolution was basically that an ultra-left faction came to ascendancy, chaos ensued, education was disrupted, books burned, cultural artifacts destroyed, ministries and embassies attacked, innocent people suffered until the party moved to rebalance the country and ensure future progress. There is truth in this, but there is more to the story. Others argue that it was a mass mobilization aimed at accelerating the advance to socialism, allowing radical democratic participation and bringing great advances in agricultural and industrial production as well as rural health and education. They go on to contend that the policies of the period that followed dismantled collectivised structures, incentivised capitalist enterprises, brought deterioration of rural health and education, led to massive migration, disempowered both rural migrant and urban workers. Gone were the cradle-to-grave social systems that provided employment, housing, health, education and old-age security, as the government mandated the marketization of these functions.[11] I met one person who lived through the cultural revolution, while admitting its excesses, still saw it as workers claiming their place as masters of history, and believing that what came after was a betrayal of the revolution. Another person remembered their pride in singing the revolutionary songs of their youth and the pledge they made as pioneers that the precious lives of those who made the revolution not be wasted. For Lin Chun, the cultural revolution was "doubly tragic. Not only did it miss the target while discrediting itself, it also brought about exactly what it meant to prevent".[12]

Many of those who rose up during the cultural revolution watched what was happening during the reform and wondered what the country was becoming as the economics and indeed the whole culture of capitalism took hold. Although the party argued it was still on a path to socialism, many had misgivings. Many of these rose up again in a series of protests in the late 1980s. This is the most contentious period in the historiography of the PRC. The primary problem is that there is a dominant narrative in the wider world about Tiananmen Square in 1989 as well as a credible counter-narrative, but official China tends to blank the whole thing. I stood in Tiananmen Square and asked the students accompanying me what were their thoughts on what had happened there. They said that they did not study it, that there was nothing on the Chinese internet about it and they were reticent to look on the wider internet, because they wouldn't know what to believe. I expressed my view that this event loomed so large in the

world's narrative about China and that it was important to develop criteria for assessing contending claims on this and many matters. I pursued this in other discussions. Some believed that party members couldn't discuss it, whereas others, including party members, did discuss it.

The dominant view in the wider world is that students and others were turning against the whole system and the state came in with guns and tanks and massacred peaceful protestors in Tiananmen Square. There is a counter-narrative from various sources, including foreign journalists and diplomats who were on the scene, claiming that no massacre happened in the square, that the tank man walked away, that the protestors attacked and killed police and soldiers in the surrounding streets, that there was fighting in which several hundred died, that there was CIA and MI6 involvement.[13] When I watched from afar in 1989, I saw these events within a wave of such events in Eastern Europe, where I was much closer to the action. As I see it now, those protesting in China and elsewhere embraced a whole spectrum, from those who wanted a better form of socialism to those wanting to abandon socialism. In China, it encompassed both those who worried that the country was taking a capitalist road and those who wanted it to speed up along a capitalist road. While what happened in China was tragic, what happened in Eastern Europe was far more so. China did open the gates more fully to capitalism, but kept open a path to socialism.

There has been a tendency in much of the world to believe that China was socialist and poor and then capitalist and rich. However, both the party and its left critics make the point that the advances made by China in the latter period could not have been achieved without the foundations laid during the earlier period. The problem was what was China becoming. Both in China and abroad, people ask if China is capitalist or socialist. When I am asked, I answer that it is both. I think that China is engaging in a massive world historical experiment in a new relationship between capitalism and socialism, somehow using capitalism to build socialism. Aspects of this dynamic have already existed, for example, in the USSR during the NEP and again during perestroika, but the scale of it in China is unique. I take solace is the role of the state in controlling the commanding heights of production and investment and in ownership of land, but worry about the extent and power of capital in exploiting labor and undermining socialist values. I am also impressed by the enhanced regulation of capitalism and renewal of emphasis on Marxism under Xi Jinping.

China does not claim to have achieved anything more than a primary stage of socialism and to be on a protracted path to a more advanced form of socialism. Despite all that was achieved from 1949 to 1976, I understand why a new direction was necessary and why reform and opening up has brought industrial investment, scientific and technological advance, poverty reduction, international interaction. However, I question whether it was necessary to decollectivize agriculture, to privatize state-owned enterprises, to commodify housing, health care, education and other social public provisions.

There is a complex and dynamic interplay of capitalist and socialist elements, where the lines of battle are often clouded over in a discourse about reform and modernization that obscures the tension between capitalism and socialism. There are many conferences, seminars, articles, and books about the "Chinese path to modernization" where much of this discourse is interesting, but often repetitive and evasive, displacing discourse about capitalism and socialism and failing to clarify how this impressive and supercharged modernization is going to develop into advanced socialism. The intermediate goal is common prosperity, a desirable goal, but one many countries would claim is their goal, even if their governments are beholden to national and international forces that undermine it, whereas China is more genuinely committed to achieving it. However, it does not address the issue of just distribution, of how much of what is collectively produced can be privately appropriated. It falls far short of "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs".

There are people in China grappling honestly and intelligently with these issues. The intellectual atmosphere in China is far freer than many people believe. The boundaries of discourse are fuzzy and fluid. In every encounter, I was testing the parameters. There were people with whom I could say anything and be confident that every question would met with a knowledgeable and unconstrained answer. Others were more reserved and/or less informed. It is much like this everywhere, including a tendency to self-censor when the territory of transgression is not clearly mapped. The global good news story of Deepseek was spoiled for me by the number of times it rolled out impressive answers, which quickly disappeared to be replaced by "Sorry, that's beyond my current scope. Let's talk about something else." One of my preoccupations while preparing to come to China was how to navigate the Great Firewall of China even to get into my university e-mail. I understand the well-justified vigilance against subversion, because there are powerful forces plotting to bring China down. An American student I met there implied that some of his compatriots learning Chinese were probably spooks. The CIA, MI6 and other security services would exploit any possibility of fomenting a color revolution in China.

There are many foreigners in China engaged in many activities. I met quite a few and they expressed varying views, including some very hostile. A visiting professor accosted me at breakfast day after day to air all his liberal arguments against Marxism. Others were making their lives in China, some devoting themselves to explaining China to the rest of the world and the rest of the world to China. Ben Norton, whom I had been following on social media already, I found especially impressive in this way, focusing on geopolitical economics. There for a much longer time was Fred Engst, a

professor of economics, who was born in China and spent much of his life there. His father Erwin Engst and his mother Joan Hinton worked in China from 1940s. His uncle William Hinton was the author of *Fanshen, Shenfan* and *The Great Reversal*. Fred, along with his uncle and parents, supported the revolution and opposed the reform that followed. My conversations with him gave me a lot to consider.

Those born later grew up with the "scar literature" perspective emphasizing the negative impacts of the revolutionary period. In high school and university, Xu Zhun was taught that collectivization was a failure and decollectivization was necessary to advance. He accepted this until he later read Mao Zedong and William Hinton and spoke to those in his own rural area who had lived through collectivization and decollectivization and came to the opposite view. His book *From Commune to Capitalism* is subtitled *How China's peasants lost collective farming and gained urban poverty*, showing how decollectivization disempowered and impoverished rural populations, while providing the basis for further privatization and capitalist transition.[14] Moving between east and west, he is another person skilled at explaining China to the rest of the world and vice versa. He is part of a Marxist revival in China. Although many Chinese people were in thrall to the capitalist world, Xu Zhun contends that the actual experience of capitalism has opened their eyes and made them look again to socialism. We spent hours walking around the campus of Peking University, where was once a student, discussing many dimensions of the current conjuncture. I found him particularly open, knowledgeable and insightful, not only about politics and economics but also about culture.

Another person, also an economics graduate of both Peking University and University of Massachusetts, who changed his mind, is Li Minqi. He was an active advocate of neo-liberalism and capitalist transition and arrested in 1990. During his time in prison, he read Mao Zedong and other Marxist works and became a serious Marxist and opponent of neo-liberalism and capitalist transition. He makes a strong argument that the global rise of China will erode the foundations of capital accumulation and hasten the demise of capitalist system and that the only way to avoid the collapse of civilization itself will be a transition to a socialist world system.[15] Perhaps Marco Rubio had a premonition of this when he said "We thought that capitalism would change China…now we realize that capitalism didn't change China. China changed capitalism".

While many in China sought to go the way of America with neoliberal economics, Hollywoodesque culture and individualist lifestyles, others hit back, not only those who remembered the revolutionary years, but those who had missed them. A book called *China Can Say No*[16] became a best seller and a number of other *Say No* sequels followed. Websites such as Utopia and Red China have hit back against westernization and sought to revive revolutionary traditions. The Marxist revival is energized from above as well as below. The party and state during the presidency of Xi Jinping, while emphasizing continuity with the reform period, has moved to regulate capital, purge corruption, criticize historical nihilism, and promote Marxism. It has done so not only in supporting Marxist courses, conferences and texts, but in supporting credible cultural productions, such as the drama I have been watching. *Age of Awakening*, for example, had enormous impact. After an episode showing the sons of Chen Duxiu going to the gallows, thousands of youths flocked to their graves. While this revival has official sanction, much of it is a genuine movement from below. I see evidence of it every day as I scroll on Red Note with many serious discussions and clever cartoons and memes illustrating the difference between capitalism and socialism. I see it in my classes as well.

Others are not so sure. In Chinese novels, I find expressions of a sense of disorientation, a lack of grounding, a crisis of meaning, similar to what I find in contemporary novels generally. In China, there is a specific tone to this, registering the disarray caused by social changes that were not only about policy but about meaning and values. For example, characters in Zhang Yueran's *Cocoon* accounting for the trajectories of their lives: "The times were changing so quickly, one false step and you'd find yourself no longer on solid ground, plummeting into the abyss. Going with the flow was actually very difficult…I have no worldview. I'm just getting through life one day at a time… It wasn't as simple as unhappiness. His whole body reeked of decay. Something had died—his passion, faith, fighting spirit. Irreversibly gone".[17] A new book by Xu Jilin argues that the younger generation is individualistic, disconnected from red culture, disinterested in grand narratives, living only for their own well-being, yet their lives are characterized by profound emptiness and ennui.[18] Lin Chun observes that there has been a fracturing of social tissue, leading to social dissonance, alienation, identity crisis and moral decay.[19] This is manifested in an upsurge in superstition, royalism, consumerism, individualism, involution, confusion, gaming and gambling addiction, depression, suicide. In the last lecture of my course, I mentioned that I was writing something about the crisis of meaning under capitalism, which students wanted to pursue during and after class, insisting that the symptoms I was identifying were present in China too. One student from another Beijing University I was asking about her life said sadly to me "There is no atmosphere of socialism".

Socialist values are still strong. Even the expressions of disorientation and disappointment reveal a desire for socialism. If China were to go the way of the USSR, it would be a disaster, not only for China, but for the world. The US is in decline, whereas China is surging forward. Capitalism itself is in protracted decline, wreaking chaos, confusion and destruction on a massive scale. China stands before the world as a society surging forward. Capitalism is decadent yet still dominant,

displaying every day ever more virulent symptoms of civilizational disintegration. In China, the atmosphere is different. There is a sense of an alternative and of forward movement.

China has achieved what is perhaps the most spectacular modernization in the history of the world in timespan and scale, accomplishing and surpassing in decades what took centuries elsewhere. Despite some missteps, misfortunes, even tragedies, it has developed productive forces in agriculture, industry, technology, science and culture. It has raised millions from poverty to prosperity. It has integrated into the global system, both for better and worse. It manufactures much of what rest of world consumes. It leads the world in green energy and other scientific and technological advances necessary for global survival. It is a force for peace in a mad world where the drums of war are beating more dangerously than ever. Because of this, I see China as the hope of the world.

I have entitled this article “discovering China”. I realize I am no Marco Polo and I am far from an expert on China, unlike other MR authors on China. I didn’t even get to many of the magnificent tourist attractions or come back with photos of dazzling cityscapes, bullet trains or terracotta warriors , but I have engaged with matters of world historical importance for all of us in my probes into China, hoping that it would be useful to share what I have learned from my reading, viewing, listening, traveling, and teaching with others who have not had such opportunities. I am returning to teach again and to learn more, aspiring to be a voice of clarity to counter the confusion and hostility generated in the new cold war against China.

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[1] Edgar Snow *Red Star Over China* New York: Random House, 1938
[2] William Hinton *Fanshen* New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966
[3] Han Dongping *The Unknown Cultural Revolution* New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000
[4] Xu Zhun *From Commune to Capitalism* New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018
[5] Gao Mobo *The Battle for China’s Past* London: Pluto Press, 2008
[6] Li Minqi *The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World Economy* New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008
[7] Lin Chun *Revolution and Counterrevolution in China* London: Verso Books, 2021
[8] Carlos Martinez *The East is Still Red* London: Praxis Press, 2023
[9] Zhou Meisen *In the Name of the People* London: ACA Publishing, 2021
[10] Megan Walsh *The Subplot: What China is Reading and Why It Matters* New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2022
[11] This picture emerges from books by Xu Zhun, Han Dongping, Lin Chun and Gao Mobo cited above as well as many other sources I have read such as *Mao Zedong and China in the Twentieth-Century World: A Concise History* by Rebecca Karl Durham: Duke University Press, 2010
[12] Lin Chun, op cit, p 115
[13] Qiao Collective Tiananmen Protest Reading List Tiananmen Protests Reading List — Qiao Collective
[14] Xu Zhun, op cit
[15] Li Minqi, op cit
[16] Song Qiang, Zhang Zangzang, Qiao Bian, Tang Zhengyu, Gu Qingsheng *China Can Say No* Beijing: China Times Publishing Company, 1996
[17] Zhang Yueran *Cocoon* New York: World Editions, 2022, p 8,23,163
[18] Xu Jilin *Waves of the Past and Future*, summarized on Sinification blog Xu Jilin on Sexuality, Boredom and Political Apathy Among China’s Youth (Part 1)
[19] Lin Chun, op cit, p 273