DIRTY WORK

CHUANG ON CHINA, COMMUNISM, AND SOCIAL CONTAGION

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CHUANG

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Cover photograph by Yang Yongliang

Question: Usually we'd start off by asking you to tell us about yourselves: who you are and how Chuang came together. But, given the necessity for anonymity, maybe we should start off by asking you to describe the factors in China, near and abroad, that brought you all together? What are the social pre-conditions that compelled Chuang into existence?

Chuang: Chuang is both an international project, in the literal sense, and an internationalist one, in the political sense. In both respects, our work expresses the broader reemergence of communist thought after its hundred-year eclipse. As individuals, all of us had been involved in some sort of political organizing prior to the project. Though we can't give too much detail, we can say that we all either speak Chinese and have lived in China for some period of time or were born and raised there. But the Chinese context alone wasn't necessarily what brought us together.

As a collective endeavor, Chuang was very much a child of the "rebirth of history" inaugurated by the insurrections of the early 2010s. These were the years when the character and cadence of struggle began to change quite rapidly, delivering a series of humbling tactical lessons for those organizing on the ground that demanded a more rigorous theoretical appraisal of the forces aligned against us.

To be a bit more specific, we found ourselves thrown together at the confluence of two major currents of struggle: first, the occupations and urban revolts in the high income regions (including the early wave of activism following the 2011 Occupy Central movement in Hong Kong); second, the rise of strikes and riots among migrant workers in mainland China (particularly the Pearl River Delta) in the same period. Not only did we meet one another in the midst of such struggles—often literally on the streets—but we also found a joint interest in understanding the limits on which these uprisings had run aground.

In particular, we hoped to show how struggles in China were not exceptions to the rule, nor were they a signal of a rising "workers movement" in the supposedly classic sense, but could instead be understood as existing within the same historic current as these other uprisings and therefore tended to hit limits that were broadly similar to those confronted elsewhere. This sort of recognition was only possible because of that experiential base spanning struggles in China and beyond.

In fact, if you look at the name Chuang, this attitude is already visible in the character: a horse bursting through a gate. The word means rushing, dashing or charging forward, but can also imply the carving out of a difficult path tempered by battle. We chose the name to emphasize the necessarily incendiary aspect of communism, as well as that hard-fought journey forward, continuing despite disheartening defeats.

The point is that, even though we obviously think theory is essential, communism can't just be academic inquiry or some feel-good activist "solidarity" campaigns. Not everyone can be on the front lines all the time, of course, and there are many ways to support any given uprising. But support is material, not moral, and every real communist is baptized in sweat, blood or tear gas. Whether or not you're weathering police batons, holding illegal study groups with workers, or working your hands to the bone as you wash the seemingly infinite dishes and pick up the mountains of trash at the occupied zone, communism requires not only a joyful "optimism of the will" but also sometimes an uncomfortable, stubborn sort of courage, since the battles are usually losing ones. But wherever you are, if you're a communist you're obligated to fight.

Today, we find that both the communist internationalism of our theory and the practical internationalism of our experience is even more valu-

able in the face of resurgent nationalism worldwide—which is likely to increase as trade conflict intensifies. This spans the explicit nationalism of the far right, the status quo nationalism of the center and the implicit nationalism of many so-called "socialists," whether those trying to win electoral gains in order to implement wide-ranging Keynesian development initiatives from the seat of imperial power, or those whose nationalism takes the shape of cheering on the visiting team in inter-imperial conflicts. As for this latter group, it's absolutely disgusting to see such people applauding the capitalist class of the world's second largest economy in the name of "anti-imperialism" and even going so far as to laud its most repressive aspects. Of course, these people have such limited familiarity with China that they've never been interrogated by state security forces (colloquially, this is called being "asked to tea"), nor seen their friends swept up in waves of repression.

But it's worse than this, because such people don't even shed an ounce of real blood or sweat fighting the imperialist at home, either! Chuang was extremely proud to see that the pamphlet version of our article, *Welcome to the Frontlines*, was consistently among the most popular pieces of literature distributed in the early weeks of the George Floyd uprising in the United States. We know this because some of our members were actually there, fighting block by block as almost every major American city burned. We certainly didn't see the editorial board of *Monthly Review* at our elbows! Even worse: when some of these "socialists" did show up, much later, they were part of the soft counterinsurgency, spreading conspiracies that "white supremacists" had started the riots and helping to dampen the energy by funneling demos into endless marches to symbolic targets like city hall or hours-long speak outs where they dominated the stage, yelling about imperialism through the loudspeaker until everyone went home. This is what many socialists call anti-imperialism.

But we call it cowardice.

In contrast, we have the honor of our members having been interrogated by the police on almost every continent. We take that spectral, haunting aspect of communism very seriously: wherever you are, Chuang is there with you—maybe in the nice comforting sense that the idea of Chuang exists in the heart of every rioter, sure, but there's also not a bad chance that we're, like, literally next to you prying up the paving stones.

The point is that our anti-imperialism is as literal as our internationalism.

Similarly, our Chinese members, our non-Chinese members living in China and our friends organizing in China have to weather the very real repression that so many of these coward socialists cheer on from afar. So, for us, these aren't abstract debates on political economy or "socialist strategy" conducted from a blissful distance. They're matters of our own safety and the safety of our friends. Those cheering on the police arresting organizers in China should be treated in the same way as those cheering on the police arresting rioters in the US, Europe or anywhere else: with ruthless animosity.

Q: Part of Chuang's broader project is to construct a new economic history of China. Posed in a three-part series, "Sorghum & Steel" focused on the period from the founding of the People's Republic until around 1969, arguing that a bricolage sort of "socialist developmental regime" interrupted China's capitalist transition but failed to cohere into a distinct mode of production, ultimately collapsing under the weight of its own class contradictions, coupled with international pressures. "Red Dust" showed how those contradictions were temporarily overcome through a series of impromptu measures that ended up completing China's integration into the "material community of capital," whose law of value became the ultimate authority throughout Chinese society by the end of the 1990s, bringing new contradictions in its wake. With the last piece on the way, why is this new history important? How has your understanding of the importance of it changed over the course of writing this new history?

C: We want to be clear that our project aims neither to defend a supposed "Maoist" past against an allegedly "Dengist" counterrevolution, nor to flatten China's historical trajectory by claiming it was simply capitalist from the beginning. And we see no point in spelling out what should have happened to set the world right —this is often called: "tracing out the 'red thread' in history"—or in constructing our own ideological image of the past as if it were a program for the future.

Rather, we trace the material development of Chinese society in order to entirely avoid the political trap of getting caught up in past ideological battles. We are not here to defend one leftist tradition against another. In

fact, unlike most accounts, our three-part historical series intentionally deemphasizes ideological debates and the role of leaders in this history, including the roles of both Mao and Deng. We are not here to bring the dead back to life or to relive the glories of the past. Even in our historical work, we're entirely oriented toward the present. We follow the material developments of Chinese society to trace out the political openings that may exist today.

It's also important to note that, while global capitalism has obviously influenced events in China, Chinese society has taken a particular path of its own. It's not good enough to simply equate it with the USSR or to claim it was just capitalist so no more needs to be said. The details do matter, as they have shaped China's unique trajectory of development and structure class conflict in the country today.

We think this approach continues to be relevant in the face of recent returns to the "great man" theory of politics, portraying Xi Jinping as some sort of zombie reincarnation of Mao instigating a renewed Cultural Revolution in anti-corruption drives and political crackdowns. In contrast, we emphasize that these continue to be constrained responses to the material contradictions of the present. We live in those contradictions, and we must build from there.

Q: A lot of people in the US think that China's state control and authoritarianism gave them an advantage in controlling the virus in relation to other "democracies." How accurate are these accounts?

C: Our book addresses this in detail, so we won't spend too much time on it here. But, basically, this couldn't be further from the truth. It's wrong in two key respects. First: it's hard to see how the emergence of a global pandemic, that could have been limited to a local epidemic if only authorities had taken seriously the reports from healthcare workers on the ground, can be portrayed as having been "successfully" controlled. It was the on-the-ground failure of the political system and the higher-level public health apparatus in China in the early months of the epidemic that transformed the outbreak into a global pandemic. This was then followed by a similar and even more spectacular failure in the US.

Second: the local containment of the pandemic in China in the

months that followed had as much or more to do with the vast volunteer mobilization of the Chinese population as it did with the official response on the part of the central state. Moreover, this mobilization occurred not because people had faith in the government's response and sought to support it but precisely because people *didn't* trust the government to effectively organize the lockdown. They were often responding to abject failures, such as the fact that healthcare workers who were dependent on public transport had no way to get to work in the middle of the lockdown—so volunteer driver services emerged, and many of these heroic volunteers actually contracted the virus and died.

Overall, this is just another iteration of how people used to say that "at least Mussolini made the trains run on time," as if more authoritarian regimes are, despite their failings, ultimately more efficient. But it's a complete myth: Mussolini didn't make the trains run on time. Whatever advantages an authoritarian political regime has in accelerating capital accumulation—usually only in the short-term—don't actually make it better or more efficient at the sort of administration that helps everyday people. Obviously, China isn't a fascist regime and most of the portrayals of it as "totalitarian" are nothing but socially acceptable forms of orientalism. But the political system certainly has that authoritarian rigidity that most late-developers have adopted to compete with the leading factions of capitalists in the most powerful countries.

And, if anything, this rigidity actually hurt the Chinese response—as when local officials engaged in widespread media suppression early on in the epidemic and were backed up by the central state, all at precisely the time that widespread media attention would have been most helpful. Again, the book covers all of this in quite a bit more detail. We base the argument on the experience of our members who were in China at the time and on interviews with friends across the country, including in Wuhan.

Q: So, ultimately, what does your analysis tell us about the relationship between mutual aid and the state in times of social and ecological crisis?

C: This is something that's a bit hard to address, simply because the meaning of the term "mutual aid" has been changing so rapidly. Today, it seems that the word has lost some of the radical edge it had in the older an-

archist usage, where it both emphasized a general political philosophy rooted in the natural sciences (as in Kropotkin's formulation, which was very popular in China in the early 20th century) and referred to autonomous co-organizing among proletarians as a tactic in long-run political struggles, which was especially important in moments of deep crisis or among the segments of the class at the bottom of the racial hierarchy who are exposed to the worst brutalities of the system and suffer long-term unemployment. This latter sense was particularly salient for thinkers like Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, who categorized mutual aid as one of many tactics in the anarchist "survival program" that could be applied to poor areas across the US—and this is still a meaning that some mutual aid programs invoke today.

On average, however, it seems like mutual aid has been reverting to something like the even older usage it once had among utopian socialists and religious associations in the 19th century, where it effectively just designated a vaguely political form of charity, in which better-off progressives would organize through church groups to support those in need. In the west, this change in meaning can be attributed, at least in part, to the rising prominence of NGO-style organizations that clothe themselves in radical language and consider "civil society" to be a major site of political struggle. These organizations are often even staffed by former anarchists or other fellow-travelers of the defunct anti-globalization left and they represent the unfortunate conclusion of that era for most participants—even while some emerged from that movement on a more radical trajectory. Many of the new "mutual aid" societies set up in the course of the pandemic in the West are essentially a repeat of this experiment at a larger scale, even if they've been more wary of reliance on federal grants and philanthropic donations from the wealthy and are outwardly critical of the "non-profit industrial complex." Frequently, this tension develops into a political struggle within these organizations over the meaning and function of mutual aid.

In the larger sense, this is all obviously an artifact of receding state capacity in Europe and the US. In China, the situation is very different. On the one hand, state capacity is increasing rapidly and there is an active state-building project underway. On the other, the term "mutual aid" lost its anarchistic connotations over a hundred years ago—in fact, it arguably

never had the exact same connotation, since Kropotkin was being read within the context of Chinese political philosophy, where local self-organization and a seemingly anarchistic reliance on informal convention rather than the rule of law were both components of good imperial governance and were not understood as standing in opposition to the state. The socialist developmental regime used similar language, via things like "mutual aid teams" in the countryside. So instead of a "radical" mutual aid geared toward survival, we see a domesticated form of mutual aid that's part and parcel of the ongoing state-building project.

That said, we have little sympathy for the critiques of mutual aid that we heard in parts of the left during the past few years from various people who have underestimated the scale, potential and, most importantly, *necessity* of autonomous action in the face of catastrophic circumstances. This is especially true when these critiques then morph into calls for a more vigorous state response, contrasted with what they call "neoliberal" autonomous organizing.

But the same holds for those who are simply bemoaning the reality that mutual aid organizing has little radical edge and advocate instead for some sort of truly autonomous "international working class movement" that obviously doesn't exist. This sort of critique ignores our basic political reality. Ultimately, all sorts of "mutual aid" are going to happen anyway. The longed-for state response will not materialize, there is no international communist movement that offers any better alternative, and people will go on helping each other all the same. Mutual aid should be seen as part of the terrain on which organizing takes place and communists should participate in those projects, amplifying their antagonistic edge where possible.

At the same time, we do not naively believe that the kinds of disaster communism that sprout up around major crises are in and of themselves a tool for permanently overcoming the current state of things. Mutual aid is not a premonition of communism. It's a meager survival strategy.

There are symmetrical errors here: those who critique mutual aid as nothing more than "neoliberal" charity, and those who praise mutual aid and "autonomy" as if they are the new world in the shell of the old. Both these positions are utterly wrong. Their critiques also tend to talk past each other. The term mutual aid is so broad that it's easy for each party

to cherry-pick an example that makes their case. In contrast, we emphasize that mutual aid is simply a tactical factor in the political struggles that already exist. The current political trajectory seems to suggest that this particular tactic, in all its variations, will persist for some time—even though it will evolve in different directions in different places. There's not really any choice about whether or not you have to engage with it. But it certainly shouldn't be idealized and the goal for communists is ultimately to *overcome* mutual aid, building more expansive forms of political power and preparing for fully social, rather than merely local, reproduction and collective flourishing.

In entering this already-existing terrain, the first step for communists should be to critically distinguish between many different concrete activities that have taken on the name "mutual aid" in particular places. In China, as elsewhere, elements of the local and central state react to breakdowns in their ability to keep up with developing events in a variety of ways, with violent repression playing a role alongside softer elements of counterinsurgency and cooptation. What we want to emphasize is that the relationship between the repressive tools of the state and the mobilization of various volunteer efforts in the early period of the COVID pandemic in China was neither a totalitarian aberration, totally separate from the responses of "western" states, nor a direct mirror of all capitalist disaster response worldwide. In the Chinese context, where state capacity is increasing, what we see as "mutual aid" is just as often the rationalization of local mechanisms of governance. This is particularly true in conditions where the capitalist class leading the state-building effort is explicitly drawing from the Chinese philosophical tradition, which places a special importance on seemingly "informal" mechanisms of statecraft.

Q: And what about globally?

C: In repeated climate disasters worldwide, from hurricane Katrina in the US to responses to the Covid pandemic worldwide, we've seen preexisting or spontaneously organized mutual aid networks function to meet pressing needs that local or national states are unable to. Often, as was the case with mutual aid efforts during the early pandemic period in China, these networks are most effective precisely in the places where the people active

in them do not trust the state to provide for their needs. At the same time, autonomous organization for mutual aid can threaten either the public legitimacy of the state or the role it plays in maintaining property relations, as people make do for themselves and others around them. But this only really happens if mutual aid is accompanied by a sort of antagonistic autonomy. If this is the case, then these efforts might be met with real or threatened repression. At the same time, such projects are rarely antagonistic to the state—at least in the present moment—and this makes them fairly easy to co-opt. While mutual aid networks in the early pandemic period in China were not violently suppressed, they were eventually asked to hand over their roles to the state and they almost universally did so.

This is somewhat similar to events in the wake of disasters elsewhere: Where crises have not completely collapsed the feasibility of the status quo, it has been difficult for mutual aid projects to transform into long-term outposts for political struggle. In Wuhan and other Chinese cities where volunteer organizations were a key part of the early response to the coronavirus outbreak, these groups essentially dissolved after the first few months of crisis. At the same time, we saw the retooling of local groups such as residents' committees for more effective management. In this way, the opening created by mutual aid groups was more or less effectively co-opted, and current propaganda efforts emphasize the role the party-state has played in ridding the country of coronavirus.

Q: Chapter 2 is your translation of an article from a Chinese author involved in labor organizing. You suggest that this project of workers inquiry and proletarian storytelling is one of the most interesting left currents in China today. What is so fruitful about this approach compared to other left projects you've seen in China?

C: As in most countries, China's left tends to limit itself by getting bogged down in old debates from the 20th century, using categories that often don't make sense today (if they ever did), such as whether "peasants" or "workers" should lead the revolution and how "intellectuals" should go about educating one or the other of those imaginary groups. That said, China's left is far more diverse and complex than it appears on the surface. We're hoping to produce a more systematic overview of China's various

left perspectives in the future, but for now readers can consult "A State Adequate to the Task" in issue two of our journal. We'll give a quick overview here:

Most of China's self-identified "leftists" also identify as "Maoists," although even these are now divided between nationalists and internationalists, reformists (who still hope to reform the CCP) and pro-revolutionaries (who want to overthrow it), etc. In addition there are many academics and NGO types with some variety of left-populist or social democratic views, a handful of underground Trotskyists and self-described anarchists, and increasing numbers of young people whose positions are less clearly defined, but who generally express suspicion of traditional leftist dogmas as they develop their own critique of capitalist society, attempting to create new social relations to the extent possible within China's ever stricter political climate—for example, by creating "autonomous spaces" like the one mentioned in "As Soon as There's a Fire, We Run."

The author of "Worker Organizing under the Pandemic" belongs to yet another current that emerged from the wave of student industrialization following the auto sector strikes of 2010 (also examined in issue two of our journal). Whereas most of the university graduates who continued to engage in labor activism after that time either got jobs at NGOs or joined underground Maoist networks, a few instead focused on the in-depth documentation of working-class life and the smaller-scale struggles that occasionally pop up in their workplaces and neighborhoods. We feel an affinity with this current because of its commitment to supporting proletarian self-organization and developing communist theory based on first-hand research that respects less educated workers as they actually exist—as opposed to some of the Maoists' preformulated dogma and attempts to use workers as cannon fodder for their own groups' media stunts (as in the 2018 Jasic Affair, discussed on our blog). We therefore have greater trust in the accuracy of writings from this current, and find them more helpful for grasping new trends in class composition as they emerge.

Q: Towards the end of the piece, titled "Workers Organizing Under the Pandemic", the author critically compares the convergent crises of the COVID pandemic with that of the 2008-2009 period of the Great Recession. What do they show about the conditions of the Chinese econo-

my relative to these two crises? How has the Chinese government and the private sector more broadly used the pandemic conditions to "strengthen the attack on workers' interests?"

C: So, we actually have a response to this particular question from the author of this piece, who is not with us here today [and who is uninvolved with the interview]. They wrote us saying,

> During the pandemic, there were already articles comparing economic conditions between the two crises. I actually chose another point of view in this article, focusing instead on the changes in the things that directly related to workers' lives and work, since these are the causal factors behind their actions.
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> After the initial stage of the pandemic in January to April 2020, many factories dealt with the continued instability of orders by adopting the measure of stopping production and putting workers on leave without paying wages according to the law. After orders resumed, in order to cut costs they hired lots of temporary workers without providing the normally required social insurance payments. Local governments supported and encouraged enterprises' use of "flexible employment" by introducing policies to this effect. Some of these policies were framed as "protecting" the interests of flexible workers by requiring employers to provide some kind of social insurance payments, but in fact they were vague about the key "employment relations" involved in a way that prevented workers from actually exercising their legal rights.
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> As the pandemic stabilized in 2021, many government policies appeared to be leaning more toward workers, but in reality this consisted mainly of forcing a few big private businesses to bleed in order to assuage industrial contradictions and public opinion. At the same time, the state directed more workers into purely legalistic routes for attempting to address grievances in order to avoid more intense forms of labor conflict, fiercely cracking down on workers' self-organized resistance.

Q: The chapter "As Soon as There's a Fire, We Run", offers an interview with a collective that lives at the edges of Wuhan. How does their account

show the conditions of Wuhan through new eyes and why did it feel important to include this interview?

C: Their account differs from those that are now more well-known outside of China, such as Fang Fang's book, partly because it was produced for neither a Western liberal audience nor for mainstream Chinese consumption through the state-controlled media. The interviewees initially created an illustrated zine-style *Wuhan Diary* for a few friends in Japan and other countries who wanted to know what everyday life was like under the lockdown in Wuhan. The authors set out from an anti-authoritarian left perspective critical of capitalism and the state, with a basic understanding that such "natural" disasters are often closely connected to capitalist development, and that the state can't be trusted to save people, often making matters worse while trying to take advantage of the situation for its own ends. (This perspective emerged partly from their own experience with environmental activism in the past.) They also have great respect for the self-help efforts of ordinary people under such circumstances and, in this case, were personally involved in such efforts. So, both their zine and their interview provide details about the mechanics of how such voluntary mutual aid emerged and developed on the ground, as well as how it was eventually taken over, purged of uncontrollable elements and utilized by the state.

At the same time, much of their *Diary* stepped back from any sort of prefabricated agenda to focus on conveying the surreal experience of life under the initial lockdown, when it was completely unclear how things were going to proceed—at first when the state denied the existence of an epidemic and hospitals began to fill up, then after it shut everything down without regard for how people were expected to survive. In that sense, the *Diary* and the authors' recollections in our interview provide an important glimpse into those raw impressions before they had been filtered through subsequent events and narratives. They commented that it was as if they had been suddenly trapped in some apocalyptic film, and that a world-historical event was unfolding before their eyes. So for the most part their narrative is less of a critique than it is a snapshot into the bewildering experience of this event.

Q: The members of this collective you interviewed—you call them W, X, and Z—address how Wuhan has changed over the course of 2020. First, could you describe some of those changing conditions they witnessed in Wuhan; and second, does this interview, and their Diary, reveal anything about the ways the pandemic is shifting the political-economic terrain in China?

C: The interview shows the chaotic development of the state's response to the pandemic, especially through the early days of the pandemic. It's clear from the accounts of W, X and Z that there were many different stages of response from the state, and society at large—times when mutual aid networks grew and operated in spaces where the state did not, and times when local government agencies attempted to route the population's efforts through official channels. Their stories also show the range of emotions and perceptions experienced not only by W, X and Z, but by countless others: shared hope brought on by joining mutual aid networks, anger at an inept government, distrust of pandemic monitoring methods and fear not only of sickness and death, but of how they and their friends and family could continue to make a living and pay the rent.

And while many outside China think only of extreme lockdowns, and images of packed ICUs, the situation on the ground was much more fluid, as the interview shows. For example, the restrictions were generally looser outside of urban centers. Rules and regulations changed by the day, and it often became apparent that government officials were both feckless and clueless in the face of the crisis. Also in contrast to popular narratives, as state control began to consolidate pandemic control measures, the primary nodes of governance were not at the central level in Beijing, or even at the city level, but much more local, cellular levels of governance at the *shequ* (usually translated as "community") level, and involved the smallest branches of social control like the residents committee.

This is part of why we argue that the pandemic response has to initially be placed in the context of a fragmented state and an ongoing state-building project. It confronted overwhelming challenges and ran up against its own limits at every turn, rather than growing into some unipolar and all-consuming authority, as so many assume it has been all along since the 1950s. These limits were why volunteer labor was so important to the con-

tainment of the pandemic.

As for the political-economic terrain, the pandemic didn't really reveal anything that new, it just placed emphasis on the many sources slowing growth in the Chinese economy. During the pandemic, the central state began to focus on building out its local organs of governance—this is the process we detail in the book.

But there's another dimension in which the state-building project has now accelerated within the upper echelons of the economy as well. In fact, this is not new, but instead a resumption of the state-building effort's previous focus, visible in the anti-corruption campaigns of the mid-2010s. After the pandemic, it seems that some of the social anomie and agitation among both highly paid and low-wage service workers has triggered a return to some of these themes from earlier in the Xi administration. But there is one key difference: whereas the anti-corruption campaign of the mid-2010s tended to target the most egregious robber baron capitalists from China's "gilded age" phase of accumulation, doling out extremely severe punishments (including the death penalty), this new campaign has been targeting the tech and service sectors, it's been gentler in its punishment and it has framed itself as a crackdown on these capitalists' excesses, not on the capitalists themselves. Underlying all of this are the same long-run trends that observers have documented to death. Yet these predictable trends—like China's aging crisis and flagging birth rates—are not things that can be easily resolved by better state administration. After decades of the one-child policy, the state turned to a two-child policy in 2016, and now, just a few years later, the crisis has deepened and Beijing has formally adopted a three-child policy earlier this year. But the state only encouraged potential parents with a barrage of propaganda and the offer of a few extra paid vacation days.

Moreover, the law was widely received with disgust and mockery by many Chinese women, who despite being in the world's second largest economy also shoulder one of the world's most unequal divisions of domestic labor, in addition to unequal pay and hard discriminatory ceilings on career advancement. In fact, it seems that one unspoken feature of the Chinese economy after the great recession has been an across-the-board increase in unpaid labor among women, accompanied by particularly aggressive propaganda emphasizing traditional gender roles. This comes af-

ter two decades in which these gender roles and the basic family unit were unsettled by the mass movement of population that accompanied the rise of the export production hubs, dependent on migrant labor.

In the final part of our economic history, which will be released in the third issue of our journal, we emphasize that the gradual slowdown in accumulation (visible in things like the persistently falling rate of profit, lowered growth rates and stagnating private investment) has led to a sort of general social anomie that won't take the form of any sort of so-called workers movement, but is instead better understood as a building crisis of social reproduction. The factory struggles of previous decades were, in fact, the first phase of this social reproduction crisis. They were not the prelude to a rising workers' movement but instead to general social anomie. We're now entering a second phase, where the types of social breakdown first visible among migrant workers have now generalized across the population, resulting in new, amorphous and desperate forms of unrest alongside increasingly aggressive attempts on behalf of the state to reassert order by emphasizing traditional norms.

Q: The focus of the book's final chapter is the "nature of the coming state." The topics covered are expansive, tracing the recent lineage of some key concepts and schools of thought in contemporary Chinese political philosophy while also covering the minute details of how the state has actually been reorganizing itself on the local level. It's a complex argument that should be read in full, but can you maybe give an overview of the main points?

C: As you said, it's a complex piece that's difficult to summarize in any simple terms. At the highest level of abstraction, we can say that the chapter is really our first major intervention explaining what we, following our friend Lao Xie, interviewed in Issue 2 of our journal, have been calling the "state-building project," wherein the Chinese capitalist class, concentrated within the Chinese Communist Party, attempts to build a state "adequate to the task" of ensuring the long-term accumulation of capital and the reproduction of capitalist society as a whole.

That phrase, "adequate to the task," actually belongs to Lao Xie, who likes to compare the process to the building up of the United States gov-

ernment in the 19th and early 20th century. As that comparison suggests, this is a process that first makes use of a gilded age of corruption and unregulated growth and then pivots to crack down on that corruption when its cutthroat nature and speculative tendencies become a hindrance to continuing accumulation in the longer term. This is followed by the formalization of all sorts of legal mechanisms for governance, with emphasis placed on the "rule of law." Like any historical analogy, this oversimplifies things a bit, but it still gets at the central tendency.

In the chapter, we analyze this state-building process from two different angles, using the pandemic as a sort of case study in state capacity. First, we look at the nitty-gritty details of exactly how the state conducted itself in the course of the initial outbreak and its immediate aftermath. So we talk a lot about all the mechanisms used to enforce the lockdown, including formal organs of the state that exist at the local level, such as the residents committees, and the role of other groups that had authority delegated to them, such as apartment complex management, security guards, etc. This also leads us to provide a similar summary of the types of volunteer activities we already mentioned above, because these were central to the successful containment of the outbreak.

Second, we look at the state through a more theoretical lens, asking how this state-building project is theorized within the Chinese-language literature itself. Here, we're partially responding to those extremely chauvinistic and Orientalist theoretical appraisals of China that have been coming from European and Anglophone political philosophers in recent years. But, honestly, those pieces are so ill-informed that they're not worth any direct response, and we don't give them any. Instead, we try to offer some notes toward a more worthwhile engagement with contemporary Chinese political philosophy, which also requires some historical knowledge of mainland East Asia and a familiarity with the ancient roots of Chinese-language philosophy, since these are constant reference points for contemporary Chinese political thinkers.

The chapter is not primarily about philosophical debates. But just since we're on the topic, it's worthwhile to point out one dimension of modern Chinese political philosophy that we didn't have space to address in any detail in the chapter. This is the role of the American Pragmatists, who probably exerted the biggest external influence on the development

of modern Chinese political philosophy, dating to the early 20th century work of the liberal political philosopher Hu-Shih, a student of John Dewey's. Dewey himself lectured in China between 1919 and 1921 and was a huge influence on the New Culture Movement, in which many early communist leaders were involved, including Mao. The work of the Pragmatists was central to the development of philosophy in modern China and there are lots of resources out there for those who are interested.

Ultimately, the importance of talking about Chinese political philosophy in the chapter is that it allows us to reach a much deeper understanding of the nature of the state itself. The basic point is just that there's no reason to expect the capitalist state currently being constructed in China to look exactly like the capitalist states that have been built in the past, even if it must still serve the same core imperatives of accumulation.

Q: In "Social Contagion", you write "the only communism worth the name is one that includes the potential of a fully politicized naturalism." Part of this squares well enough with Marx's own position from the 1844 manuscripts that communism demands a thoroughgoing or consistent humanism that will be a naturalism and a consistent naturalism [that] will be a humanism… While the figure of humanism looms large in this framing, there is still an interesting question here about how these positions fit together. If the global form is ultimately communism, what are the components—the commitments and practices—of this fully politicized naturalism?

C: It is necessary to rethink humanism as a more concrete concept—one that does away with the mystical and essentialist dimensions of so-called "Marxist humanism" but which also retains Marx's own repeated emphasis on communism as an anthropological revolution. This entails a re-centering of humanity as a species in a way that avoids the pitfalls of purely philosophical concepts of "species being." Instead, the focus should be placed on those features that Marx himself took to be central: being human is defined by what people experience and how they conceive of themselves in the social process of production, which is, at its base, the biological and bio-technical interface between humanity as a species and the non-human world. We should also emphasize that this is much more

than an "ecological" reading of Marx, since it entails far more than just interactions with other species and the ecosystems that they co-produce. Marx's own engagement with the natural sciences extended much deeper than this, and he conceived of "humanity" as inherently linked not just to other biological systems but also to all kinds of much more fundamental geo-physical processes. In other words: Marx was literally talking about humanity as a species in the biological sense *and also as more than this*, since humanity also forms a self-conception through its reproduction as a species via production, which again is always an interface with the non-human world. More abstractly, we can say that humanity experiences itself as a species through what Marx called the "living, form-giving fire" of labor.

In his 1844 manuscripts, Marx emphasized the ways that the emergence of private property had produced an incomplete humanism, incapable of addressing the very intensification of the conflict between humanity and nature that this property system had itself induced. In the same years, his emphasis on humanism was accompanied by wide-ranging research into the natural sciences and his first round of research into political economy. In fact, what we think of as the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, which define our image of the humanistic "early Marx," are actually only one half of a larger collection of documents usually referred to as the Paris Notebooks, the bulk of which are not devoted to "philosophical" ruminations on alienation (as the Marxist humanists emphasize) but instead to notes on political economy and the emergence of private property. These are then followed by the London Notebooks in 1850, which include voluminous notes on the writing of natural scientists.

All of this is well-documented by Kohei Saito. Throughout, Marx emphasized that the sort of humanism he was talking about was not a mystical form of species-being but instead the practical unity between the species and the non-human world, arguing that humanism is, fundamentally, naturalism. Similarly, he constantly equated the human as such with what he called elsewhere the "social brain," something like the sum of human knowledge and technical capacity. So Marx was emphasizing a more complete and entirely anti-essentialist form of humanism, which is not a static end but something more like a means for the ultimate construction of communism. Throughout his work, Marx emphasized that

communism would do away with the metabolic rift between the human and non-human worlds that the private property system had widened. In more rudimentary terms, this is expressed as the dissolution of the divide between "human" and "nature" as fully separate spheres, both in concept and in reality.

The same goes for naturalism as well, though: there isn't a neutral, external "nature" that waits for exploration or simply needs "protection" and "preservation" from human intervention. There is instead the natural world, of which humanity is a part and which is clearly illuminated by scientific inquiry, even if the picture that we get is persistently incomplete. Communism not only entails the desecration of anthropocentrism, but also the recognition that there is no pure nature to return to, that all forms of ecological remediation are forms of cooperative construction between the human and the non-human, and that, in the end, the non-human world can (in fact, must) blossom with and through the advance of the human species *as a result of human activity*. These sorts of assertions about placing humanism on a new foundation are inherently political only because the old divide between humanity and nature is seen as apolitical.

Ultimately, for us, the key is not really whether we take a stance of "humanism" or "naturalism," but how the issues at stake can be clearly, coherently and comprehensively conceived and resolved only through the revolutionary destruction of capitalism and its replacement by socialised production. One of the effects of the deeper alienation between human and non-human worlds that attends capitalist production is the increasing prevalence of pandemics. This too is a symptom of the metabolic rift, located at the microbiological level. To simply put what we argue in "Social Contagion," the impact of infectious diseases has been magnified, both globally and locally, through the expansion of the capitalist mode of production. Like all crisis tendencies in capitalism, this exists in productive contradiction with parallel advances in medical sciences, which both produce miraculous cures (for example, antibiotics), and then tend to condition threats to those cures (for example, increasing antibiotic resistance). This stands in absolute contrast to the popular, or liberal, accusation that the emergence of disease is simply about improper hygiene and good public health measures, disregarding the social reasons why these poor public health conditions exist in the first place. Ultimately

pandemics cannot be dealt with as a purely biological issue. As with other manifestations of the metabolic rift, such as ecological destruction, the economic source must be uprooted.

Q: You gave us your account of the coming state form taking shape in China. Conversely, how do you anticipate proletarian and communist struggles in China to evolve in response to this new state form?

C: Who knows? There are just a few things we would emphasize here: First, no matter how expansive the state seems, it is never total. Class conflict continues to exist and will still explode into view in some way or another. Maybe there will be a stretch where that mostly takes the forms of desperation and cultural refusal that we've documented on our blog. But it's equally likely that new tactics shaping a more open and organized antagonism will emerge, and the state will have to address them. Second, the Chinese state has, so far, been very good at absorbing opposition. Usually, this entails a hard crackdown against early, autonomous organizers followed by a cooptation of their demands, rolled out in the form of various new laws, which sound great in principle but rarely ever get implemented. This is, for example, what happened in the early 2010s in the midst of rising strikes and riots among migrant workers—first a series of violent crackdowns, then the passage of various minimum wage and workers' rights laws, most of which were never actually implemented, as well as the creation of yellow unions. Today, the same thing is happening after a wave of organizing among both white-collar and low-wage service workers, with the government officially "banning" intensive work schedules among tech workers, setting all sorts of new regulations on the food delivery industry, and again establishing yellow unions in these newer sectors. If history is any indication, these reforms are unlikely to have a substantial effect in the near future. But it makes for a very good cooptation strategy.

Third, this means that future Chinese communists will need to very quickly learn the value of strict security and underground organizing. There will be little room for error here. It's also more and more imperative that we build international networks capable of providing training and support, especially when past crackdowns have helped to break any potential continuity between generations of organizers, and online

censorship makes accessing overseas resources more and more difficult. Internationalism is both a practical and a political necessity. Finally, the Chinese capitalists who compose the leadership of the party are acutely aware of both the potential for crisis and the need to ensure the long-term persistence of capitalist accumulation. But these two factors are at odds with one another. The state has been responding to the threat of crisis by pouring state credit into stimulus efforts and pumping up various bubble economies. As these interventions have increased, the returns per unit of investment have tended to fall.

Profitability has been dampened, especially in core productive sectors. This has been made up for, in part, by renewed profitability in more speculative sectors like real estate, finance, e-commerce and the tech industry more broadly, but rapid growth in these sectors brings renewed threats of economic crisis, while also creating new political *challengers*, as new factions of capitalists gain more economic power and are thereby able to ascend more quickly through the system of party patronage. This then requires a renewed crackdown, as we're seeing today with tech companies—and this crackdown again depresses profitability. Ultimately, there's no escape from the slow descent. New conflicts will always arise and communists can play a part.

Q: What do you expect from future social movements and how should socialists and communists engage with these movements moving forward?

C: Well, let's first clarify some of the language here: "social movement" is usually the name that rebellions get after they've been slaughtered and professional activists have begun butchering the corpses to sell on the political marketplace. Communists aren't politicians, so we don't really have a role in this process and don't use the same language. If someone starts referring to your political activity as a "social movement," it's usually a signal that the police are right outside, ready to kick down the door unless you let the politicians take over. In other words: start running! But seriously, the primary lesson is maybe that communists need to be wary of those who want to take the incendiary element out of rebellion and strip the antagonism from autonomy. More often than not, many of these people will even call themselves "socialists."

And that raises the deeper point: the state is not a solution. This is where the discourse on "neoliberalism" has become really debilitating, because it poses a false solution where we can just tax the rich more and implement social services better, and that will at least start us on the way to socialism. This is absolutely not the case. But first, let's be clear: there's plenty of leverage for life to be improved *even within the limits of capitalism*. We aren't arguing that you *can't* have any reforms. This is the strawman that people like to drag out whenever you talk about falling profitability, jabbing their fingers at it and yelling that you're just repeating the propaganda of neoclassical economists, who also say that austerity is a necessity. No, the point is that there's some leverage, you can obviously win some reforms—in fact, you can win quite expansive and socialistic reforms even in the midst of impending crisis—but none of this actually stops the slide downward. Instead, it ends up either accelerating it or pausing it for a moment, only for the drop to resume with even greater force. New, deeper crises emerge and the very politicians that you fought so hard to put into office appear culpable. This then creates conditions that stoke the far right, providing them with a path to power because they can harness that popular rage against the failures of the supposedly socialist government.

So clarifying that the state is not your friend is an essential task for communists today, even if the reality is that we're going to see an increasing number of reformist projects arise under the banner of socialism. In many places, communists won't be able to avoid operating within this terrain and engaging in some way with these projects. But the core of any communist organizing needs to be autonomous from the state and not geared toward winning minor reforms or pushing liberals slightly to the left. At the intellectual level, this means having an analytic understanding of how the state is not separate from capitalism, and realizing that "the state doing stuff" is not equivalent to "socialism." That sounds really simple, but it's truly astounding how many people get this wrong, including tons of prominent Marxists—especially with regard to China. Obviously, this is also what people on the right think that socialism is. But we might even argue that "the state doing stuff" is the way that most self-described socialists understand the term today. Maybe this is inevitable, though, since the increasing involvement of the state is a universal trend in capital-

ist development, as the social scale of production increases.

Ultimately, though, there's no easy, one-size-fits-all answer to the questions of what communists should do. It's easy to say what we've just said, emphasizing all the things that you *shouldn't* do. It's much harder to say what ought to be done instead. At the same time, the question of what communists *should* do is not too complicated, it just depends on where you are and what skills you have. The key here is that these are really two different questions addressing entirely different dimensions of the problem: The first, negative question ("what not to do") is a more universal question that produces lessons that are easier because they're essentially long-run strategic guidelines. Answering this question mostly requires more general and abstract knowledge about your goal (communism) and the present conditions that prevent you from obtaining it. So it's very easy to provide armchair answers. The second, positive question ("what is to be done") appears more difficult because it's a concrete question that produces lessons at the short-term, tactical level. That means that it requires a lot more information about the immediate political terrain and how to win small battles, but all in service of remaining committed to that longer-term strategy. Even though answering this question also requires a lot of intellectual reflection, its foundation is practical. You have to go out there and get knocked around, see what works and what doesn't.

Throughout, the goal is to build communist power and have it still be communist in character. Easy to say, very hard to do! Again, there are two common failures here: Those who are more practically inclined tend to realize that they get better short-term results when they sacrifice the communist character of what they're doing. We can think of this as the "dirty hands" error, because these are people who constantly promote their practical activity, how they're really "getting their hands dirty" and working "for the cause," in contrast with all the armchair critics who refuse to "meet real people where they're at." But when you keep wading deeper and deeper into the mud, eventually you get more than your hands dirty. Over time, in order to win short-term victories and grow the numbers of an organization, people in this situation begin to sacrifice more and more of that original communist intent because, when they do this, they see results—they win more campaigns, they get their message out to more people, they are able to organize larger demonstrations, etc. Ul-

timately, these people slowly transform into run-of-the-mill politicians, NGO heads or labor bureaucrats, even if they retain some of their radical language. This is a dangerous error to make, because such people not only fail to build power for communists but, in fact, end up building power for anti-communist forces, helping to stifle and coopt any radical endeavors that arise in the future.

On the other hand, those who are more intellectually inclined see this problem but then respond to it by overcorrecting in the opposite direction. We can think of this one as the "clean hands" error because people in this situation think they can preserve the communist character of what they're doing by sacrificing the whole "building power" part. In these cases, communism is reduced to one of three scenarios:

a) an academic endeavor, where people spend all day viciously debating intricate textual details from Marx, or minor points of history and philosophy, never attempting to link any of these activities to any form of political power on the ground;

b) a parasitic cult of older "true believers," whose main activity is reproducing the cult by pulling in younger people radicalized by recent political events, and then slowly siphoning their energy into endless meetings, until they're either smart enough to finally leave, now disillusioned and traumatized, or dumb enough to stay, in which case they mature into a similar parasite and perpetuate the cycle; or,

c) some sort of small-scale lifestyle project that has entirely given up on direct confrontations with the ruling class in favor of a retreat into personal self-discovery, often stylized using the language of "secession," "self-reliance" or "autonomy," and frequently justified with some vague claim about "proletarian self-activity."

In all cases of this latter error, people still likely engage in some leftover rituals of antagonism with the ruling class as individuals, but not in any organized capacity that's capable of building competency over the long term. Power has been sacrificed to retain purity. Though not as immediately dangerous as the first error, since it doesn't directly bolster anti-communist institutions, this second error might be even more nefarious in the long term because it has been so successful at convincing communists that they can side-step the question of power entirely. It's a very difficult thing to navigate between these errors, especially in historical conditions where

the potential for communism seems so limited.

Given these conditions, it's helpful to start with the most basic requirements for building communist power while remaining communists. One minimum requirement for this is that you be a communist and that you help other people to be communists as well. This sounds stupidly obvious, but it's actually a very hard step, because it's extremely tempting to turn aside and start thinking "actually, I don't see why the state can't just do all this good stuff" if you don't have a good grasp of basic communist ideas. Similarly, we're all familiar with the special kind of melancholy that takes hold when you spend too long in the left, leading people down a path of political inactivity. Let's name it the "bloomer to doomer pipeline." In this case, it's easy to stop being a communist because you're just too sad and pessimistic. Ultimately, people in this position will be drawn toward misanthropy. Maybe they'll move out to the woods or something. But they'll stop really participating in meaningful ways.

And that leads to another minimum requirement: that you participate in and learn from local rebellions. This is another basic thing, but it's always astonishing how many supposed "radicals" run away when the windows start breaking or, even worse, how many don't come out to something because it's not organized by someone in the activist milieu or even denounce it for being violent and therefore "endangering" people. Once a rebellion is underway, you should not trust those who shy away from it or want to make it less violent, more friendly or more appropriately political. There's another important strawman that arises here: we aren't saying that all you should do is go out and riot, or that riots are the only good form of political activity! And we certainly aren't arguing that escalation is always the best tactic in a street confrontation! But these are common responses you'll get if you emphasize that participation in rebellions is a basic requirement for being a communist. Usually it's coming from people who feel guilty for not participating or scared of the very real chaos that emerges from such events. Again: like we said above, participation doesn't need to mean that you're holding the front line against the police. There are many other ways to engage with an active rebellion. But engaging *in some way* is basically a baseline requirement for being a communist. Right now, it's also important to remember that any communist activity takes very small-scale and often local forms. On the one hand, for those who

have a clear sense of what political power entails, this is very disappointing and it's easy to lay too much blame on yourself and your friends for not being "effective" enough. On the other hand, for those who have a more mystical sense of what political power entails, it's common to over-idealize these activities and shower praise on yourself for "doing something" while other people remain apathetic. It's extremely important to avoid this attitude and to remember that even the best "mutual aid" organization or the most robust occupied zone are not microcosms of communism.

Over time the goal is to build better organizing capacity that can operate at larger scales. A lot of that means slow, steady work. In particular, it means a lot of upfront work on education and skill-building. This is something that our collective obviously prioritizes, as we think it's particularly important for communists to have a good understanding of struggles in China and its position in the global power structure. But it is wrong to just think of education in terms of learning complicated political theory. It also means gaining all sorts of practical skills that can be used across the entire range of struggles that exist today or lie on our immediate horizon. Exactly what skills are most relevant brings us back to that question of tactical terrain. Unfortunately, it's not a question that you can answer very accurately in general terms, other than to emphasize the fact that reproductive skills (childcare, teaching, learning good practices for physical and psychological health) tend to be both extremely important and often ignored.

Communism not only entails the desecration of anthropocentrism, but also the recognition that there is no pure nature to return to, that all forms of ecological remediation are forms of cooperative construction between the human and the non-human, and that, in the end, the non-human world must blossom with and through the advance of the human species as a result of human activity.

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