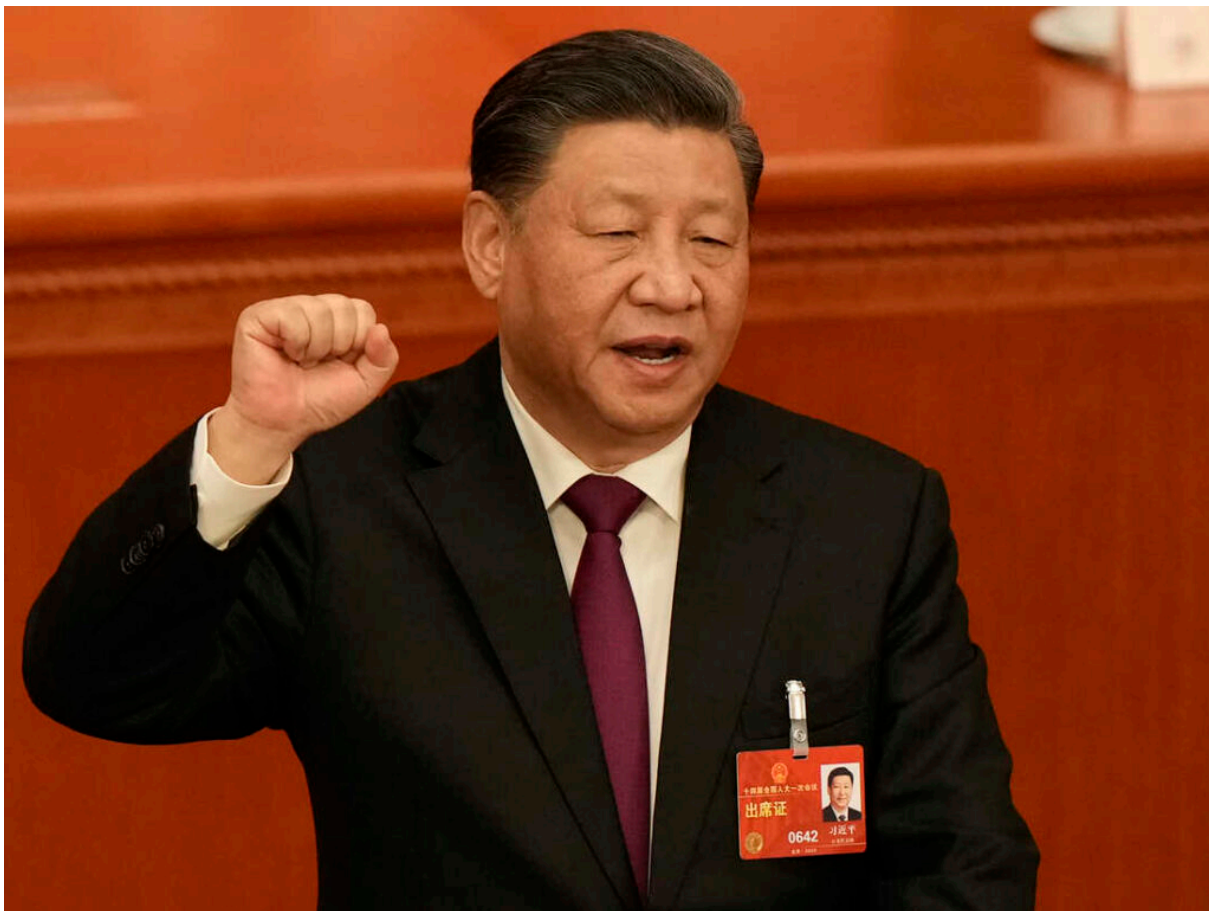


# Can Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Model” Supplant Capitalist Democracies and Why Should Western Socialists Care? - Part 1

November 21, 2023



Chinese President Xi Jinping takes his oath after he is unanimously elected as President during a session of China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, Friday, March 10, 2023. AP with permission.

**This is part 1 of a four-part series. [Part 2](#) [Part 3](#) [Part 4](#)**

*China will never modernize until Mr. Confucius is replaced by Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy — Chen Duxiu, 1915[1]*

*Why should a good society fear that people are going to run away?  
If you're so good, people will be trying to get in, not out.* — Fang Lizhi, Chinese scientist,  
1986[2]

*We don't want to be slaves!  
We want freedom!  
We want rights!  
We want democracy!  
We don't want dictators, we want to vote!*

— Chants by anti-Covid lockdown protestors, Beijing, November 2022[3]

## **THE “RISE OF CHINA AND DECLINE OF THE WEST” NARRATIVE**

American democracy, once the model for the world, is now widely seen as all but broken. No matter how many people get shot each year (deaths from gunshots in the U.S. hit a record 48,830 in 2021 including nearly twice-daily mass shootings, 690 in 2021, another record), the majority of Americans would rather see this continue than ban guns.[4] Gun violence, racism, immigration, inequality, abortion, Trump's attacks on democracy - on all these issues the public is split, often bitterly. A hundred sixty years after General Lee surrendered at Appomattox we're still fighting the Civil War. The slaveocracy lost the war but has won the battle for the hearts and minds of the 30-40% of Americans who vote for racist white-supremacist Republicans.[5] Christian fascist anti-feminists (roughly a third of registered voters)[6] carry forward the medieval war against women to control their bodies. The nation whose Stature of Liberty in New York harbor once welcomed immigrants by the millions now builds walls to keep them out; even Biden builds the wall. The American government that led the allied democracies against fascism in World War II, today leads the world in gross hypocrisy backing self-determination for Ukrainians but not for Palestinians, berating Chinese Communist totalitarians but backing Islamic fascist Saudi Arabian princes and dictators around the world. President Biden fought to secure funding for renewable energy but then caved to the fossil fuel lobby and sabotaged his own initiative by approving new drilling and fracking for oil and gas. The deepest systemic divide, of course, and the one that exacerbates all the rest is capital against labor. Faced with such intractable divisions, Congress is paralyzed and can't find consensus on any of the huge problems we face. And not only America. Russians have repeatedly elected the wannabe Tsar Vlad the Impaler Putin. Italy recently elected the leader of a neo-fascist party. France could soon elect another. And so on. Not for nothing Noam Chomsky dubs these “Really Existing Capitalist Democracies”— RECD for short.

Compounding the sorry state of Western democracy is the parallel decline of America's economy with all its consequences: deindustrialization, the collapse of union industrial jobs, the fading American Dream, spreading poverty and homelessness, epidemic drug abuse, rising suicides and falling lifespans. As American companies offshored their industries since 1980, China industrialized and now bids to overtake the United States. Example: since 2008 China has built an entire network of 42,000 kilometers of high-speed trains crisscrossing the country while in the U.S., local battles over property rights and budgets have prevented California from completing the nation's first line from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Since 2008, China has also built entire subway systems under dozens of cities while New York has yet to complete its 8.5 mile-long 2nd Avenue subway, begun half a century ago in 1972.[7] China is also building the green technology of the future. It has built more solar power farms and windmills than the rest of the world combined. Chinese companies dominate the global market for solar panels, wind turbines, telecom base stations (Huawei), electric vehicles

(BYD and others), and EV batteries (CATL), among many other products. Chinese auto exports now exceed those of Japan, dominate Southeast Asia, and “China’s electric vehicles threaten to leave Europe in the dust” according to the Financial Times.[8]

China’s rise illustrates the formidable power of the Communist party-state’s systemic advantage, namely, its ability to strategically organize and manage the state-owned economy while simultaneously coercing large private tech companies into aligning their profit-making goals with the nationalist goals of the party-state in a kind of “whole nation” technological mass mobilization that’s central to Xi’s vision of “Chinese-style modernization” (*Zhongguo shi xiandaihua*).[9] Favored private companies including electric vehicle and EV battery manufacturers whose businesses align with CP goals to dominate high technology industries, enjoy comprehensive holistic state planning and financial backing. Beijing helped those companies build deeply integrated vertical supply chains for electric car parts aiming to corner the global market in batteries and cars well before the rest of the world, while China’s coerced non-union labor keeps production costs well below Western rivals. Autoworkers in big cities like Shanghai earn about \$30,000 a year in pay and benefits. By contrast, in Ford’s U.S. plants workers earn an average of \$110,000 a year in pay and benefits (and the UAW just won a contract to increase this by 25%).[10] Beijing has also incentivized consumers to go electric, creating demand alongside supply. Without this kind of coordinated state-backing and “whole-economy” approach it’s difficult to see how U.S. and E.U. auto companies will be able to compete against Chinese cars once those begin flooding into the West.

America’s declining power and influence on the world stage reflects those weaknesses. Biden’s and the EU’s porous sanctions and drip-feed of bows and arrows to Ukraine are failing to deter Putin while his sanctions and denial of cutting-edge technology are failing to force Xi Jinping to lift repression at home or hold back the Chinese economy, or even lessen Western dependence upon China.[11] Indeed, U.S. pressure has only stoked CCP intransigence and determination. Putin and Xi think they’re winning — and they might be right. Xi thinks the United States is in irreversible decline and so he’s seizing the moment to claim global leadership for its own vision of China’s party-state led “superior civilization” as a new model for the world.

Given these trends, before I try to make a case that democracy – not our wretched RECD but a radical eco-socialist democracy – is still the only hope for people and planet, first I want to interrogate Xi’s claims for his alternative, what he calls “Chinese-style modernization” and “Chinese-style civilization.”

## **I. “Chinese-Style Modernization” – Model for the World?**

In what China’s press hailed as a landmark speech on February 7<sup>th</sup> three days after the Chinese spy balloon was shot down over the South Carolina and in the aftermath of his Covid “double disasters” (the disaster of locking the country down for three years instead of importing vaccines that worked from the West, followed by his chaotic opening up with no preparation resulting in the deaths of an estimated 1-1.6 million Chinese),[12] China’s Communist Party general secretary Xi Jinping ramped up the Party’s ideological war against the West. Building on his triumphalist thesis that the “the East is rising and the West is declining” Xi issued a manifesto for the “Chinese model” that dismisses universal values as racist neo-imperialism and says Western elites are imposing their own version of freedom and democracy on people who want security and stability instead. He says Western democracies are headed for the dustbin of history while Communist China is destined to and *deserves to* become the leader of a New World Order and model for developing countries because China’s system is morally, economically, and politically superior to the Western capitalist democracies. China, he says, has created “an entirely new form of civilization” combining state-led industrialization with “common prosperity for all people” and “whole-people democracy”[13] while also transitioning to an “ecological civilization.” In his speech Mr. Xi advanced four central

propositions about the nature of what he calls “Chinese-style modernization”[14]

1. **China’s experience has debunked the myth that modernization = Westernization.**

Chinese modernization is a socialist modernization led by the Chinese Communist Party, not a capitalist modernization . . . [It] has abandoned the multi-party system . . . and the old path of capital-centered Western modernization. . . Chinese modernization is . . . not a modernization of dependence on others . . . [It] is neither a simple application of the template envisioned by the classic Marxist writers, nor a reprint of the socialist practice of other countries, nor a copy of foreign modernization, but . . . always insists on independence, self-reliance and self-improvement [and] on putting the fate of our development and progress firmly in its own hands. . . Chinese modernization is comprehensive, systematic, coordinated, lasting, and superior (*youyuexing*). . . [made possible by] major innovations in the theory and practice of world modernization.

2. **[W]e have completed in decades the industrialization process that had taken developed Western countries hundreds of years.**

[We] have created a miracle of rapid economic development and long-term social stability . . . The success of Chinese modernization, which accounts for one-fifth of the world’s population . . . is an unprecedented feat in human history, breaking the monopoly of the Western model that has dominated the world since modern times, and shattering the Western myth that modernization can only be achieved by following the capitalist modernization model, which will definitely . . . reshape the pattern of world modernization. . .

3. **Chinese modernization is a modernization of common prosperity for all people, not [just] for a few.**

Western modernization is a modernization dominated by capital and profit, the impoverishment of the proletariat and the division between rich and poor have filled the whole society . . . In sharp contrast, . . . [w]e insist on making the realization of people’s aspiration for a better life the starting and ending points of modernization, focusing on maintaining and promoting social justice, on promoting common prosperity for all people, and on resolutely preventing polarization. . . [and] the problem of absolute poverty has been solved, . . . creating a miracle in the history of human poverty reduction.

4. **Chinese-style modernization is a modernization in which man and nature live in harmony, not a modernization dominated by anthropocentrism.**

Nature is the basic condition for human survival and development. Man and nature are a community of life. Endlessly asking for nature or even destroying it is bound to be retaliated by nature. [It] is not possible to build a modernized country by taking the old path of the United States and Europe, and that there are not enough Earths for Chinese people to consume. The old way, to consume resources, to pollute the environment, cannot be sustained! Respecting nature, conforming to nature, and protecting nature are the inherent requirements of building a socialist modern country . . . Therefore, [we] plan development from the perspective of harmonious coexistence between man and nature. . . [and] insist on sustainable development.

## II. China’s impressive accomplishments

China’s people are justifiably proud of their hard-won economic development. At the outset of Deng Xiaoping’s Market Reform and Opening in 1978, China was a poor, stagnant, and isolated semi-agrarian “socialism-in-poverty” with a per capita income just two-thirds that of India (\$156 vs. \$206). In the four decades from 1978 to 2018, China’s annual GDP growth averaged 9.5 percent, a pace described by the World Bank as “the fastest sustained expansion by a major economy in history.” The drivers of that growth were mainly two: First, Deng’s decollectivization of agriculture gave China’s farmers the freedom to organize farm production on their own, and to produce over-plan and sideline crops (vegetables, fruit, fish, chickens and pigs, etc.) for market. He also permitted local governments to establish market-oriented “township and village enterprises” (TVEs), and, crucially,

relaxed controls over mobility permitting farmers to give up farming altogether or let their children migrate to the towns and cities to find non-farm employment (though even today they're still tethered to their place of birth for access to schools, health care, etc. See the discussion of *hukou* below). In the first decade of reform, the gross value of farm output more than doubled and TVE output grew 14-fold. In result, by the mid-1980s China could end its "shortage economy," discontinue rationing of meat and other foods, clothes and other basic consumer goods, and China's farmers achieved a modest prosperity, for a time. By 1991 rural industries accounted for a third of the country's industrial output and earned 20 percent of foreign exchange.[15]

Second, Deng established an archipelago of coastal Special Economic Zones (SEZs) where foreign investors and companies imported modern technology, knowhow, and capital to combine with ultra-cheap Chinese labor in export-oriented joint ventures with Chinese State-owned Enterprises (SOEs). The government built the ports, roads, rails, telecom and other infrastructure and imposed rigorous police control of the growing ex-farm migrant labor force. The foreign-invested industrial zones began with manufacturing cheap toys, clothes, shoes, toasters, hand tools, textiles and so on, produced by remorseless exploitation of labor, including child labor, forced overtime, police state strikebreaking, and suppression of all efforts at unionization. By the 1990s and 2000s, as foreign investment poured into the SEZs, they moved up to producing machine tools, vehicles, high-end electronic goods, aircraft parts, etc. and China became the "workshop of the world." SEZ industrial production became the main engine of China's rise and supplied virtually all new technology. By 2011 the SEZs accounted for 22% of China's GDP, 46% of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), 60% of exports, and generated tens of millions of jobs.[16]

Those engines of economic growth and exports enabled hundreds of millions of Chinese *to lift themselves out of poverty*, to extend life expectancy to 76 from 65 in 1980, to create an urban middle class roughly equal in size to the entire population of the United States, to renovate and modernize its cities and build much of the most impressive infrastructure seen anywhere in the world.[17] By the mid-2010s, China had become an industrial juggernaut producing 50% of the world's major industrial goods. By 2022 China's per capita income was nearly 6 times that of India's (\$12,720 vs. \$2,389) and China had become a solid upper-middle income country, just shy of the World Bank's definition of a high-income country.[18] Today China is the world's second-largest economy, largest manufacturer, largest merchandise trader, and largest holder of foreign exchange reserves. In short, China's industrialization and economic modernization must count as one of the most impressive feats in economic history. Oh, and Chinese parents don't worry that their children will get shot at school.

### **III. CCP "feudal-fascist" political rule stunts the country's modernization**

Yet this article contends that notwithstanding those achievements, the Confucian-Stalinist Chinese Communist Party has severely stunted China's modernization in order to maintain the power, privilege and surplus extraction system of the Stalinist bureaucratic collectivist (or what Chinese leftists have called a "feudal-fascist" or "social-fascist") ruling class.[19] Modernization is not reducible to industrialization nor even to raising living standards though those are obviously essential.[20] Nor is it compatible with feudal-fascist police-state rule. In this essay I argue with Chen Duxiu, the co-founder and first secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party (till he was expelled from the Party in 1929 by Stalin) and Chinese physicist Fang Zhili (exiled by Deng Xiaoping in 1989 for supporting the democracy movement) that China will never become a truly modern, let alone a socialist society, let alone model for the world, without "science and democracy."

"What modernization means to me," Fang observed in 1986 "is complete openness, the removal of restrictions in every sphere." [21] Those restrictions could not be removed, in Fang's view, without securing human rights and democracy: "In China we talk about human rights as if they were

something fearful, a terrible scourge. . . Over the last thirty years it seemed that every one of these good words – liberty, equality, fraternity, democracy, human rights – was labeled bourgeois by our propaganda. What on earth did that leave for us? If anything we should outdo bourgeois society and surpass its performance in human rights, not try to deny that human rights exist.”[22]

From the 15<sup>th</sup> century on, European Renaissance, Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment modernizing thinkers struggled to overcome the socio-political, economic and cultural restraints of the old feudal social order and Catholic religious obscurantism and intolerance. The motor of modernization was the struggle to win the “rights of man” and “rights of women”: personal freedom, free agency, freedom to think, to challenge authorities, to write and create. Without the achievement of political democracy to guarantee those freedoms and rights there could have been no scientific advancement, no capitalist Industrial Revolution, and no modernization.

China’s own brilliant if short-lived May 4<sup>th</sup> era enlightenment movement was similarly born in struggle against the shackles of the old quasi-feudal agrarian regime, the absolutist monarchy, and the totalitarian cultural restraints on individual freedom of feudal-patriarchal Confucianism.[23] In the Confucianism social order there was no conception of individual rights, only obligations: the obligation of the son, daughter, and wife to the father/husband, the obligation of younger sons to subordinate themselves to older brothers, the obligation of the family to the state, and the obligation of all to worship the emperor. Every Chinese was required perform ritual rites in the home and at temples to reaffirm their fidelity to these obligations, to venerate their ancestors, and to praise the emperor du jour.[24] In the early twentieth century, New Culture movement essayist and social critic Lu Xun scathingly attacked patriarchy, emperor worship and the whole stifling hierarchy of fixed roles and obligations and called for “complete Westernization.” Feminist Ding Ling wrote and fought for the emancipation of women. Philosopher Hu Shi promoted the scientific method, pragmatism, skepticism, liberalism and democracy. In 1918, Peking University dean Chen Duxiu, the leading enlightenment intellectual and future chief founder of the Communist Party, wrote in *New Youth*, the journal he founded in 1915, that “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” were the only two gentlemen who could “save China from the political, moral, academic, and intellectual darkness in which it finds itself.”[25] Even the 26-year old Mao Zedong, rebelling against his own Confucian father, caustically attacked the hypocrisy and constraints of the patriarchal family, passionately giving voice to the bitter lives and sorrows of students, women, and workers: “We are students. . . the professors lock us up like prisoners [and] forcibly impregnate our minds with a lot of stinking corpse-like dead writings full of classical allusions.” “We are women . . . also human beings, so why won’t they let us participate in social intercourse, in politics? . . . All day long they talk about something called being ‘a worthy mother and a good wife.’ What is this but teaching us to prostitute ourselves indefinitely to the same man?” “‘Temples to virtuous women’ are scattered all over the place, but where are the ‘pagodas to chaste men’?” And so on.[26]

Xi’s “new type civilization” is the opposite of all this. Instead of enlightenment, emancipation, freedom, critical thinking, science and democracy, Xi’s Chinese-style modernization shrouds political, moral, academic and intellectual life in suffocating darkness, thought control, universal repression and mental imprisonment behind his Great Firewall. Xi offers few specifics about what his new model civilization will look like.[27] But he’s crystal clear about what it won’t look like.

### **The “7 don’t speaks”**

Shortly after he took office in November 2012 the Central Committee issued its infamous jeremiad Document 9 that warned against “seven political perils” that threatened CCP rule:[28]

1. Promoting Western Constitutional Democracy: an attempt to undermine the current leadership and the socialism with Chinese characteristics system of governance.

2. Promoting “universal values” in an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party’s leadership.
3. Promoting civil society in an attempt to dismantle the ruling party’s social foundation.
4. Promoting Neoliberalism, attempting to change China’s Basic Economic System.
5. Promoting the West’s idea of journalism, challenging China’s principle that the media and publishing system should be subject to Party discipline.
6. Promoting historical nihilism, trying to undermine the history of the CCP and of New China.
7. Questioning Reform and Opening and the socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

The document foretold the Xi’s “new era” of permanent crackdown: mass arrests and imprisonment of human rights lawyers, suppression of independent media, banning of foreign textbooks, suppression of the teaching of English in schools and smartphone apps, firings and arrests of academics, arrests and indefinite imprisonment of Marxist and Maoist students, trade unionists, environmentalists, the “Feminist Five,” and independent thinkers that began in 2013 and continues to this day.

In February 2016 Xi ordered news media run by the Communist Party to strictly follow the Party’s leadership and focus on “positive reporting”:

All news media run by the Party must work to speak for the Party’s will and its positions and protect the Party’s authority and unity. They should enhance their awareness to align their ideology, political thinking and deeds to those of the CPC Central Committee and help fashion the Party’s theories and policies into conscious action by the general public while providing spiritual enrichment to the people.[29]

The next year he expressed his conception of pervasive control in sixteen characters: “*Government, military, society, schools, north, south, east, west—the Party leads them all.*” And again, “*The Party must control all tasks.*”[30]

With critical thinking outlawed, “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era” was inscribed in the Party’s constitution in 2017 and all party members were instructed to diligently study it. In 2018, the Party’s so-called “term limits” were abolished, freeing Xi to rule for life.

In July 2021, the Central Committee launched a campaign to spread Xi’s thought throughout society to enhance the people’s “sense of political, ideological, theoretical and emotional identification” with Xi’s ideology.[31] In the fall, “Xi Jinping Thought “student readers” were prescribed for all primary and secondary schools and universities introduced courses in it.[32] Companies were ordered to “combine ideological and political work with daily production, operation, management and human resources development” so employees can “resolve ideological doubts, quell spiritual worries, quench cultural thirst and relieve psychological pressure,” according to the Ministry of Education.[33]

On March 3<sup>rd</sup> this year the government announced that henceforth in law schools, professors teaching foreign law will have to “submit their course syllabuses for approval” to certify that “Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era this course places a focus on every aspect of students’ moral education.”[34] Bloomberg reports that even bankers are now compelled to spend as much as a third of their workdays in study sessions pouring over the often-arcane phrasings of Xi Jinping, reading as many as four of his books a month.[35] The

New York Times' Li Yuan spoke with dozens of professionals who, fed up with the CCP, have emigrated, mostly to Europe and the US. One, formerly an engineer at a state-owned defense tech company said he found that "after the constitutional amendment [abolishing term limits for Xi Jinping], he and his colleagues spend more time participating in study sessions than working, forcing everyone to work overtime." Another, who worked in artificial intelligence at Baidu and Alibaba, two of China's big tech companies, said he decided to leave China after the government abolished term limits: "I will not go back until it becomes democratic and people can live without fear." [36]

Xi dispenses "truth" from above like a medieval pope to be memorized and chanted as from a Catholic liturgy while venerating "our fine traditional culture stretching back to antiquity [and] the wisdom of Chinese civilization" [37] (viz. the same "Four Olds": old feudal customs, culture, habits, and ideas that Mao trenchantly attacked). He has all but erased civil society, crushed independent thought, partyized private businesses and religions, eliminated non-party organizations, and blurred China's history in a fog of national amnesia. So tight is the Party's grip on the minds of ordinary Chinese these days that as Beijing-born and bred writer Mengyin Lin writes, many Chinese have virtually "lost their ability to think and speak anything at all beyond partyspeak," citing her own mother whom she says "no longer possessed a private language." [38] This is the Party that bids to lead the world?

In **Part 2** of this essay, I deconstruct Mr. Xi's bogus history of China's rise and the alleged superiority of the "Chinese model." In **Part 3** I introduce the conceptions of democratic modernization advanced by China's leading dissident intellectuals, Chen Duxiu, Fang Zhili and Wei Jingshen together with those of the eminent Indian philosopher Amartya Sen. In **Part 4** I conclude with an argument for democratic ecosocialism as the only viable alternative to the Communist Party's drive to socio-political and ecological collapse.

#### **Notres:**

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[2] Fang Lizhi, *Bringing Down the Great Wall* (New York: Norton, 1990), 160.

[3] Nectar Gan and Selina Wang, "At the heart of China's protests against zero-Covid, young people cry for freedom," *CNN*, November 28, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/28/china/china-protests-covid-political-freedom-intl-hnk-mic>.

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[13] Xinhua, "China: democracy that works," December 4, 2021, [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/04/c\\_1310351231.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/04/c_1310351231.htm).

[14] As of this writing, the full text of his February 7<sup>th</sup> talk has not been released. Here I quote verbatim excerpts from Xi's talk entitled "Chinese-style modernization presents a new modernization model" as reported by Wu Zhicheng, Vice President and Professor, Institute of International Strategic Studies, Central Party School (National Academy of Administration), in *China Diplomacy*, February 14, 2023, [http://cn.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2023-02/14content\\_85105140.shtml](http://cn.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2023-02/14content_85105140.shtml) (my translations), and from Xinlu Liang, "Xi Jinping hails China modernization miracle as path for developing countries." *South China Morning Post*, February 8, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/vnv5skkb>.

[15] Deng's market reforms boosted farm output to an extent. But as the government has refused to privatize farmland, because its higher priorities are to limit migration to the cities and utilize land as it sees fit (to clear it for roads, rails, ports, factories, new cities, etc.), farm consolidation, investment, and mechanization have all been discouraged with the result that farming remains a low-productivity, low-profit sector. On this see my "Chinese road to capitalism," *New Left Review* (May-June 1993), 63 and 86. For a concise overview of China's post-1978 industrialization see Yi Wen, "China's rapid rise: from backward agrarian society to industrial powerhouse in just 35 years," Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, June 16, 2016, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/regional-economist/april-2016/chinas-rapid-rise-from-backwa>

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