

# Can Xi Jinping's "Chinese Model" Supplant Capitalist Democracies and Why Should Western Socialists Care? - Part 3

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

**SCIENCE WITHOUT FREEDOM OF THOUGHT?**

**MODERNIZATION WITHOUT DEMOCRACY?**

There is no university in China that has freedom of thought or academic independence. Thought control has been one of the critical parts of the Communist Party's governance. Art should serve politics; intellectuals should serve the party. This has always been the rule. It has never been changed, and it will never be changed.

-Professor Peidong Sun, Fudan University[1]

Everyone feels they are in danger. . . How do we make progress, how can we produce innovations in this environment?

-Professor You Shengdong (fired from Xiamen University in 2018 for criticizing Party propaganda slogans)[2]

[W]hile India continued to have famine under British rule right up to independence (the last famine, which I witnessed as a child, was in 1943 four years before independence), they disappear suddenly with the establishment of a multiparty democracy and the free press."

-Amartya Sen[3]

## **I. Who's holding China back?**

If Xi's Chinese-style modernization has shattered the myth that modern-is-Western, then why is his economy still so dependent on Western science and technology?[4] Xi blames it all on the West, complaining that "the U.S. wants to hold China back." No doubt. Since the end of WWII presidents of the world's leading capitalist imperial power from Eisenhower to Trump and Biden have all been concerned to maintain U.S. global hegemony, to hold back, if not roll back, the Soviet Union and China.

But that just begs the question: Instead of imploring the West to lift its sanctions and sell China the advanced technology it needs, why doesn't Xi just tell the West to go to hell and invent his own ultra-high-tech microchips, cutting-edge software and other advanced technologies? After all, the world's leading microchip foundry, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC), is just 100 miles off the coast of the so-called People's Republic, it's 100% Chinese, and it produces 60% of the world's microchips and 90% of the most advanced chips. Why didn't Communist China found TSMC instead of capitalist Taiwan? Or as the New York Times's Li Yuan asks, "Why didn't China invent ChatGPT?[5] Chinese students regularly lead the OECD's global tests for 15 year olds in science, math, and reading.[6] Many of China's scientists have been trained in the West and many have done collaborative research in China with Western scientists for decades. The China Daily brags that "China's sci-tech research achievements are 'overwhelming.'"[7] Here and there, despite their oppressive political environment, despite time wasted in compulsory ideological studies, some Chinese scientists do manage to produce first-rate science.[8] There is no shortage of brilliant Chinese scientists and technicians inside and outside of the PRC. But for the most part, they're only encouraged to "think different" and innovate *outside* of the PRC.

I contend that what's holding China back is not Western containment but Communist Party *self-containment*. As we noted in Part II, China's leaders have been struggling for decades to ignite "indigenous innovation" with little to show for it. As the editor-in-chief of the country's own Science and Technology Daily writes, "China needs to stop fooling itself that it's a world leader in science and technology." [9] The problem is rooted in the nature of the Communist Party, especially its deep suspicion of and hostility to any kind of independent thinking. This goes back to the Party's Stalinization from the late 1920s and its re-construction in the 1930s as a peasant-based party led by the Confucianist-Stalinist totalitarian Mao Zedong.[10]

## II. What explains the PRC's paucity of Nobel Prizes in science?

Anti-intellectualism and corruption have distorted China's schools and universities since the founding of the PRC. Large-scale scientific and academic fraud is rampant throughout China's universities and companies,[11] a situation that has only grown worse since Perry Link's "evening chats" with scientists and professors in the 1980s.[12] In my *China's Engine* book I quoted Link's insightful explanation of why this is due to the nature of the system:

Link explained how corruption in government institutions and academia was unavoidable. His interviewees—professors and other intellectuals—told him that "nothing can get done without it." Corruption is structurally built into Chinese institutions which are all controlled by the Party. Party secretaries still have power, they have the last say in matters of a worker's rank, salary, job description, promotion, as well as other matters such as housing and access to schools. So most people are brought into it whether they intend so or not. What's more, "if a leader is too clean, he loses out." In such an atmosphere, one academic told Link that "keeping good 'relations' with people becomes much more important than doing one's work well." "Only the relations, not the work, count when it comes to promotions and welfare." The director of one of China's provincial academies of science told Link that "fully half the people on her academy's permanent payroll simply should not be there. They were not suited to do their jobs. They had gotten there through 'back door' connections with Party officials in the academy." China's science research, practice, and teaching suffer accordingly.

According to one graduate student: "The leaders want only two things from scientists: technology and face. They want us to build and run machines to make China look 'modern'; they also want some big, glory-producing projects like a proton accelerator, which few countries have . . . What do [high officials] know about physics?" The pressure to please Party officials instead of doing science encourages scientists and engineers to chase after patents to rack up numbers to please the higher-ups, even if these inventions are trivial or even faked. It encourages industrial-scale scientific fraud. Chasing after scientific glory to compete with the US has resulted in China squandering money on useless prestige projects like the world's biggest radio telescope which, lacking scientists of the caliber needed to run it, has been turned into a theme park.

The Communist Party's policies of repressing scientists and other intellectuals is combined with its long-standing "policy of keeping the populace ignorant" (*yumin zhengce*) by dumbing down mass education even as they build dozens of new universities. One historian told Link that:

Our leaders' view is that they know the truth. The purpose of education is to share that truth with the masses, but even education of this sort is not terribly important. What is important is that the masses be properly led. There is no need for people to think for themselves—in fact, independent thought, as they see it, can lead to chaos and trouble.[13]

### Schooling for thinkers or docile tools?

While Xi is driving scientists and tech talent out of the country to the benefit of the West, he's also working to dumb down the minds of those who remain by crushing their creativity and force-feeding indoctrination of students from grade school through college with the tedious mind-numbing

"Thought of Xi Jinping." Since October 2020, classes in Xi Jinping's thoughts have been compulsory in China's universities. In 2021, "Xi Jinping's thoughts on socialism with Chinese characters in a new era" have been mandatory in primary school: New school books "are filled with the president's pithy quotes and pictures of his smiling face." For the youngest children the new textbooks use "golden maxims" from Mr. Xi, as well as vivid stories and emotional experiences to "plant the seeds of love for the party, love for the nation and love for socialism in their little hearts". The education ministry's National Textbook Committee sets out further aims. *"Youngsters should be guided to understand that Mr. Xi is the leader of the whole party and country, it says. They must also resolve to obey and follow the party from their earliest years."* In case a student is tempted to "think different," the new books include warnings about those who fail to fit in. The last chapter of the new textbook for six- to eight-year-olds opens with an injunction to "Button the First Button of Life Correctly" – an admonition Xi frequently uses when speaking to children — to warn them not to end up out of line with their peers, like a misbuttoned coat that will have to be unbuttoned and redone all over again.[14]

At the university level, the cult of Xi is has put "politics in command" once again, to the detriment of education. As an October 2014 headline of the South China Morning Post read: "Studies of Xi Jinping thought or ideology grab lion's share of funding for research." [15] Xi's Party has crushed independent thinking in every field. A Guangdong university professor of media studies recently told the same newspaper that "Regardless what subject is being taught, one needs to establish some links between it and Xi's thoughts. . . Once you spend all your daily energy on these things, you become a different person. You'll be unable to conduct international academic discussions, address trending social topics, or anything a real scholar is supposed to do." [16]

China's Confucian-Stalinist schools and universities treat independent thinking as a dire threat. They abhor it and ruthlessly suppress it.[17] Open criticism or challenge to authority is systematically discouraged. Teachers and students who "dare to think" are regularly fired and expelled, even arrested. Nationalist students are recruited by the party-state to spy on teachers and turn in those who veer from the Party line.[18] In 2018, Beijing University students who initiated an independent study group in *Marxist theory* were arrested and disappeared.[19] In China women are said to "hold up half the sky" but feminists are bullied, arrested, jailed, tortured, and disappeared under Xi.[20] All over Confucian patriarchal East Asia one hears the refrain, "The nail that sticks up gets smacked down." That feudal Confucian enjoinder dovetails perfectly with totalitarian cast of mind of the Stalinist-Maoist political leaders in China, North Korea and Vietnam.[21] What Chinese schools teach is rote memorization of Party approved texts, conformity, collectivity over individuality, and unquestioning obeisance to authority. It is not for students and teachers to second-guess orders and decisions of The Party which infantilizes the entire society.

The Party's deep fear of critical thinking also goes far, in my view, to explain China's otherwise inexplicable paucity of Nobel Prize winners in science despite having the world's largest population, more than 3000 universities and colleges, and all the money the government has poured into science and technological development. Since 1949 eight Nobel Prizes in science have been awarded to Chinese persons but only one from the PRC, the remarkable Tu Youyou for medicine and physiology in 2015.[22] All the rest worked in Taiwan, Hong Kong, the U.S. or the U.K. Taiwanese alone have won four Nobel Prizes in physics and chemistry despite the country's population of just 23 million people, 1/60<sup>th</sup> of the PRC's population, fewer people than live in Beijing or Shanghai.[23]

### **III. No modernization without science; no science without democracy**

**FANG LIZHI: "Only when Chinese intellectuals refuse to cater to power will they be transformed into genuine intellectuals and our country have a chance to modernize."**

The CCP's reversion to hard-line neo-Maoist totalitarianism with all its negative implications for science and innovation is usually attributed to the rise of Xi Jinping. Xi is certainly dragging China back to the Maoist dark ages in many respects. Yet even during the comparatively freer first decade of "reform and opening" 1978-88, liberalization was sharply limited and conspicuous free-thinking intellectuals were severely repressed, some sent to prison or concentration camps. One of those, astrophysicist Fang Lizhi recalled how as a student and then professor in the 1980s, Chinese science was still held back by the "semi-feudal" Communist Party:

Skepticism is an independent starting point in physics. A person who cannot begin in skepticism, or who lacks the ability to raise questions independently, will never master physics. Physics does not ask you to memorize what is known to be true or false; it teaches you how to find truth for yourself, and how to distinguish truth from falsity. . . In our university courses in Marxism, however, the starting point was very different. We were taught that Marxism is the science, indeed, the science of all sciences, yet one of our teachers was fond of saying, "The best we can ever do here is to recapitulate Marx with elegance." Something struck me as strange: science is based in doubt, yet the science of sciences needs only recapitulation? How is that? This was the first little crack in my faith [in Communism].

The first time the little crack appeared in public was on February 27, 1955. The occasion was the first Congress of the Youth League of Peking University. The topic of the Congress was the work and responsibilities of the Youth League, and the mode of discussion borrowed a page from Marxism class: elegant recapitulation. In fact, the Party leaders had already determined all of the leagues plans, and the objective of the speeches was just to inculcate the messages. . . . My first ad-libbing point was that the congress so far had been deadly dull and needed a much livelier atmosphere. Next, I said, that the real question we need to be asking is, 'What kind of people does the youth league want us to become? Simple-minded, rule-following bookworms — or thinkers with independent minds? Should the Youth League's goal be that everyone gets all the right answers in every subject, or that all young people learn to think for themselves, and be distinctive?' . . .

After I finished, some physics students from the class below ours, the sophomores, came up on stage and continued in the same vein, adding fuel to the flames. . . [Soon,] a senior in the physics department came over and said, "You people are in for it." He sympathized with us but warned that our view was "incorrect." He told us about a meeting he had attended in 1951 whose purpose had been to criticize "bourgeois tendencies" among professors. "Independent thinking" had been the main item among the incorrect bourgeois tendencies. . . How could independent thinking really be a mistake? . .

In my later career as an educator, Party officials asked me many times why it is that students stray from Communist ideology when they go to college. Where does the "counterrevolutionary" education come from? They tied themselves in knots, trying to figure out why students who were carefully selected for "good thinking" when they enter universities, turned into "bourgeois intellectuals" once they were there. They took out magnifying glasses to examine every detail of campus life . . . to remove anything that came remotely close to "counterrevolutionary thinking." But it never worked, and can never work, because what they call "counterrevolutionary thinking," is stuck inside science. No course in the physics department is more counterrevolutionary than Physics 1. No one who understands physics can turn around and accept a claim that Marxism

Leninism is special wisdom, that trumps everything else.[24]

### **Fang's political big bang**

In his provocative speech entitled “Democracy, reform, and modernization” delivered to an audience of about three thousand students and faculty at Shanghai’s Tongji University on November 18, 1986 at the height of the Shanghai student democracy protests (the speech so infuriated Deng Xiaoping that he ordered Fang expelled from the Party, for the second time), Fang said

Our goal at present is the thorough modernization of China. . . In the beginning, we were mainly aware of the grave shortcomings in our production of goods, our economy, our science and technology, and that modernization was required in these areas. But now we understand our situation much better. We realize that grave shortcomings exist not only in our “material civilization,” but also in our “spiritual civilization” — our culture, our ethical standards, our political institutions — and that these also require modernization.

The question we must now ask is, what kind of modernization is required? [Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese have been asking] do we want “complete Westernization” or “partial Westernization”? . . . I personally agree with the “complete Westernizers.” What complete Westernization means to me, is complete openness, the removal of restrictions in every sphere. We need to acknowledge that when looked at in its entirety, our culture lags far behind out of the world’s most advanced societies, not in any one specific aspect, but across-the-board. . . Attempting to set our inviolable [Chinese] essence off limits before it is even challenged makes no sense to me.

Why is China so backward? . . . China has been undergoing revolution for a century, but we are still very backward. This is all the more true since Liberation, these decades of socialist revolution, that we all know firsthand as students and workers. Speaking quite dispassionately, I have to judge this era a failure. . . The last thirty-odd years in China have been a failure in virtually every aspect of economic and political life. . .

Our narrow-mindedness is a consequence of feudalism and its associated attitudes. . . We must forsake this narrow framework and open our eyes to the world. We should look with humility at what others have to offer, and what is good we should try to incorporate. Complete openness, allowing the outside world to challenge our way of doing things, is the only way to change our society. . . If we could quit bolting our doors and proclaiming that everything here is wonderful, and instead open our eyes to the richly varied outside world, we would not remain so narrow-minded . . .

Turning from science to politics, Fang continued:

We’ve talked about the need for modernization and reform, so now let’s consider democracy. Our understanding of the concept of democracy is so inadequate that we can barely even discuss it. With our thinking, so hobbled by old dogmas, it is no wonder we don’t achieve democracy in practice. . .

I think that the key to understanding democracy lies first of all, in recognizing the rights of each individual. Democracy is built from the bottom up. Every individual possesses certain rights, or to use what is a very sensitive expression indeed, in China, everyone

has “human rights.” We seldom dare utter the words “human rights”. . . In China, we talk about human rights as if they were something fearful, a terrible scourge. In reality they are commonplace and basic, and everyone ought to acknowledge them. . . Over the last 30 years, it seemed that every one of those good words — liberty, equality, fraternity, democracy, human rights — was labeled bourgeois by our propaganda. What on earth did that leave for us? Did we really oppose all of those things? If anything, we should outdo bourgeois society, and surpass its performance in human rights, not try to deny that human rights exist. Democracy is based on recognizing the rights of every single individual.

In democratic countries, democracy begins with the individual. *I* am the master, and the government is responsible to *me*. Citizens of democracies believe that the people maintain the government paying taxes in return for services — running schools and hospitals, administering the city, providing for the public welfare . . . A government depends on the taxpayers for support and therefore *has to be* responsible to its citizens. But here in China, we think the opposite way. If the government does something commendable, people say “Oh isn’t the government great for providing us with public transportation.” But this is really something it *ought* to be doing in exchange for our tax money . . . You have to be clear about who is supporting whom economically, because setting this straight leads to the kind of thinking that democracy requires. Yet China is so feudalistic that we always expect superiors to give orders to inferiors and follow them. What our “spiritual civilization” lacks above all is the spirit of democracy. . .

In democratic societies, democracy, and science — and most of us here are scientists — run parallel. Democracy is concerned with ideas about humanity, and science is concerned with nature. One of the distinguishing features of universities is the role of knowledge; we do research, we create new knowledge, we apply this knowledge to developing new products, and so forth. In this domain, within the spirit of science and the intellect, we make our own judgments based on our own independent criteria. . . In Western society, universities are independent from the government, in the sense that, even if the money to run the school is provided by the government, the basic decisions—regarding the content of courses, the standards for academic performance, the selection of research topics, the evaluation of results, and so on – are made by the schools themselves on the basis of values endemic to the academic community, and not by the government. . . This is how universities must be. The intellectual realm must be independent and have its own values. This is an essential guarantee of democracy. . .

Unfortunately, things are not this way in China [where since the revolution] our universities were mainly engaged in producing tools, not in educating human beings. Education was not concerned with helping students to become critical thinkers, but with producing docile instruments to be used by others. Chinese intellectuals need to insist on thinking for themselves and using their own judgment, but I’m afraid that even now we have not grasped this lesson. . . If knowledge is subservient to power, it is worthless. . . We must refuse to cater to power. Only when we do this will Chinese intellectuals be transformed into genuine intellectuals and our country have a chance to modernize and attain real democracy. This is my message to you today.[25]

Doing science in China has not improved since Fang's indictments in the 1980s. With ultra nationalist narrow-minded Xi Jinping "bolting our doors and proclaiming that everything here is wonderful" while banning foreign textbooks, papers, magazines and journals, cutting off collaboration with Western scientists, suppressing English instruction, plugging gaps (such as VPNs) in his Great Firewall to keep out "foreign influences," requiring hospitals to prescribe superstitious Chinese folk medicine in place of so-called "Western" medicine to treat Covid, and more, the future of Chinese science remains in doubt.[26] How Xi imagines such policies are going to turn China into an "innovation nation" is beyond me.

### **AMARTYA KUMAR SEN: Democracy has become the default normal form of government**

In his powerful essay "Democracy as a universal value" Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Kumar Sen explains how the notion of human rights - free speech, the free press, freedom to organize, habeas corpus, and so on which were born in the Enlightenment and the English, French, and American revolutions - had by the 20<sup>th</sup> century become universal values, and how democracy, which originated in ancient Greece, had become "the 'normal' form of government to which any nation is entitled - whether in Europe, America, Asia, or Africa. . . by default." [27]

### **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrines Western values as universal values, and expands the list**

Indeed, the Enlightenment ideals of democracy and human rights were enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1948.[28] The Declaration not only affirmed the full suite of inalienable human rights: free speech and expression, the right to vote and universal suffrage, habeas corpus and so on, but added a list of social, cultural and economic rights: the right to marry only with "the free and full consent of both spouses," the freedom to dissolve the marriage at will of either partner, the "right to free choice of employment," to "just and favourable conditions of work ensuring . . . an existence worthy of human dignity, supplemented if necessary by other means of social protection," "equal pay for equal work," the right to form trade unions, the right to "protection against unemployment," the right, "as a member of society," to state-provided social security," the right to "rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay," the right to a "standard of living adequate for health and well-being," the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control," the right to economic assistance and social protection for children "born in or out of wedlock," the right to free public elementary education and affordable technical/professional education. Further, "education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups" and others.

What's more, China is not only a signatory of the UNDHR but played an important role in writing it. Among the nine members of the drafting committee in 1948 chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, was the vice-chair, humanist playwright, musician and diplomat Dr. Peng-Chun Chang (Zhang Penchun), representing the Republic of China (Taiwan). Chang is said to have integrated aspects of Asian thought to make it more truly universal and his contributions have been described as "the backbone of the Declaration." While the CCP has long rejected criticisms of the PRC's human rights records as "based on 'Western' concepts and standards of human rights that are unfairly applied to China, which has a different culture and different traditions from the West," nonetheless, all 192 member states of the United Nations, most with vastly different traditions and cultures from Western democracies, signed their agreement with the UNHHR without reservation. The PRC has publicly reiterated its own endorsement of the UNDHR on numerous occasions even as it continues to grossly violate the fundamental human rights enshrined in the document.[29]



## **Authoritarian governments and socio-economic and ecological disasters**

Beyond the issues of human rights and democracy, Sen also criticizes the argument that dictatorships are better than democracies for promoting rapid economic development. He concedes that while some authoritarian states have recorded faster rates of growth than democratic nations, the examples are too few to generalize. "There is, in fact, no convincing general evidence that authoritarian governments, and the suppression of political and civil rights are really beneficial to economic development" and "if all the comparative studies are viewed together, the hypothesis that there is no clear relation between economic growth, and democracy in either direction remains extremely plausible." [30]

However, he points out that there is ample evidence that authoritarian governments are more prone to cause socio-economic and ecological disasters than democratic governments. He points out that it is "a remarkable fact that, in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press. We cannot find exceptions to this rule, no matter where we look: the recent famine of Ethiopia, Somalia, or other dictatorial regimes; famine in the Soviet Union in the 1930s; China's 1958-61 famine with the Great Leap Forward; or earlier still, the famines of Ireland or India under alien rule." With one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world, China "still recorded the largest famine in world history: Nearly 30 million people died of the famine of 1958-61, while faulty government policies remain uncorrected. . . The policies went uncriticized because there were no opposition parties in parliament, no free press, and no multiparty elections. Indeed, it is precisely this lack of challenge that allowed the deeply defective policies to continue, even though they were killing millions each year. The same can be said about the world's two contemporary famines, occurring right now in North Korea and Sudan."

Conversely, "many countries with similar natural problems, or even worse ones, manage perfectly well, because a responsive government intervenes to help alleviate hunger. . . Even the poorest democratic countries have faced terrible droughts or floods or other natural disasters (such as India in 1973, or Zimbabwe and Botswana in the early 1980s) have been able to feed their people without experiencing a famine." [31]

"Famines are easy to prevent," Sen writes, "if there is a serious effort to do so, and a democratic government, facing elections and criticisms from opposition parties, and independent newspapers, cannot help, but make such an effort. Not surprisingly, while India continued to have famine under British rule right up to independence (the last famine, which I witnessed as a child, was in 1943 four years before independence), they disappear suddenly with the establishment of a multiparty democracy and the free press." [32]

## **WEI JINGSHENG: "Without a Fifth Modernization, democracy, all other modernizations are nothing but lies"**

In 1978, as Deng Xiaoping launched his campaign for the Four Modernizations (agriculture, industry, science and technology), the fearless if near suicidally imprudent Democracy Wall activist, electrician-writer Wei Jinsheng, wrote a sensational "big character poster" entitled "The Fifth Modernization" which he signed with his own name and address, then pasted up on what came to be called "Democracy Wall," a short distance from Zhongnanhai, the Communist Party headquarters in Beijing. Wei denounced the "totalitarian" "social fascist" politics of the CCP not only under Mao but also under Deng Xiaoping. He dismissed the Party's propaganda about the "people's democratic dictatorship" as "empty talk." "People are the masters of history . . . Such words become hollow when people are unable to choose their own destiny by majority will . . . What kind of 'masters' are these? It would be more appropriate to call them docile slaves." Wei argued first that democracy -

elections with right of recall- must be the basis of any credible socialism:

What is democracy? True democracy means placing all power in the hands of the working people. . . It is when people, acting on their own will, have the right to choose representatives to manage affairs on the peoples' behalf, and in accordance with the world and interests of the people. This alone can be called democracy. Furthermore, the people must have the power to replace these representatives at any time in order to keep them from abusing their power to oppress the people. . .

Will the country sink into chaos and anarchy if the people achieve democracy? On the contrary, have not the scandals exposed in the newspapers recently shown that it is precisely due to an absence of democracy, that the dictators, large and small, have caused chaos and anarchy? The maintenance of democratic order is an internal problem that the people themselves must solve. It is not something that privileged overlords need to concern themselves with. . . Those who worry that democracy will lead to anarchy and chaos, are just like those who, following the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, worried that without an emperor, the country would fall into chaos. Their decision was to patiently suffer oppression because they feared that without the weight of oppression, their spines might completely collapse!

To such people, I would like to say, with all due respect: We want to be the masters of our own destiny. We need no gods or emperors, and we don't believe in saviors of any kind. We want to be masters of our universe; we do not want to serve as mere tools of dictators with personal ambitions for carrying out modernization. We want to modernize the lives of the people. Democracy, freedom and happiness for all are our sole objectives in carrying out modernization. Without this "Fifth Modernization," all other modernizations are nothing but a new lie.

Further, he also insisted that democracy is indispensable for rational economic planning, arguing that if the government continued to try to plan the economy from the top-down by fiat "they would only bring more problems":

I firmly believe that production will flourish more when controlled by the people themselves because the workers will be producing for their own benefit. Life will improve because the workers' interests will be the primary goal. Society will be more just because all power will be exercised by the people as a whole through democratic means.[33]

Wei could hardly have foreseen just how irrational CCP-led growth would be under Deng and his successors: out-of-control overproduction of steel, housing, ghost cities, etc., out of control embourgeoisment of the Communist cadre, and out-of-control pollution threatening not just China but life on Earth. For his trouble, Deng locked him up for 14 years (the first time) and brought in capitalist methods of discipline against the workers.[34]

### **CHEN DUXIU: "China vs. the West": What would Chen Duxiu say?**

Chen Duxiu, chief founder of the Chinese Communist Party, gives us a powerful defense of democracy and human rights for their own sake à la Marx and Engels. For the benefit of those on the Western Left who don't know how different his politics were from the Party's totalitarian leaders

since Mao, I want to draw attention to what Chen had to say about Western capitalist democracies, Nazi fascism, and Stalinist totalitarianism because I believe his arguments apply with equal force to the current political-ideological contest between the Putin-Xi Axis of Autocrats and Western capitalist democracies.

Chen's vision was astonishingly prescient and his analysis was fearlessly critical of accepted dogmas about the nature of the Soviet Union and China. Chen was dean of Peking University when he co-founded the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 with professor Li Dazhao and a handful of students, teachers and other intellectuals. It's fair to say that Chen was a democracy absolutist — as am I — and at points he took issue with Lenin and Trotsky on this issue even though he was a professed Trotskyist from 1926. He rejected dictatorship of any sort, revolutionary or counterrevolutionary.[35] Against those who dismissed capitalist democracy as merely bourgeois he vehemently defended its historical gains:

The content of modern democracy is far richer than that of democracy in ancient Greece and Rome, its reach far wider. Because the modern age is the age of bourgeois rule, we call this democracy bourgeois. In reality however this system is not wholly welcome to the bourgeoisie, but is the accomplishment of the tens of millions of common people who over the last five to six hundred years have spilt their blood in struggle. Science, modern democracy, and socialism are the three main inventions, precious beyond measure, of the genius of modern humankind.[36]

To say that proletarian democracy and bourgeois democracy are different is to fail to grasp democracy's basic content (habeas corpus, the open existence of an opposition, freedom of thought and of the press, right to strike and to vote, and so on), which is the same whether it be proletarian or bourgeois.[37]

Chen held no illusions about Western capitalist democracies. In 1932 he was arrested by the British-American imperialist Shanghai Settlement police, extradited to Nanjing and sentenced to 15 years in prison by Chang Kai-shek's Nationalist government. He was only released in 1937 because the Communists and Nationalists formed a united front at the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese war. And yet he still supported capitalist democracies against totalitarians like Hitler and Stalin.

Like Marx, Chen insisted that democracy — workers' power — is the indispensable basis of socialism. There could be no genuine democracy without socialism and no genuine socialism without democracy. In his view bourgeois democracy had many deficiencies but at least it permitted radicals to openly organize for socialist democracy whereas that was impossible under fascism and Stalinism:

Marx and Engels had never experienced the imperialism of Lenin's day, so Lenin was unable to take over the ready-made theories that Marx and Engels developed to deal with the Franco-Prussian War; [similarly] Lenin never experienced Fascism and GPU politics, so we are unable to take over his theories about the last war. In the last world war, whoever lost, Britain or Germany, would have made little difference to human destiny; today [1940], however, if Germany and Russia win, humankind will be cast for at least half a century into an ever greater darkness — only if Britain, France, and America win and preserve the bourgeois democracy will the road be open to popular democracy. . . . Formal and limited democracy aids the struggle for popular democracy; Fascism and GPU politics are a brake on popular democracy.[38]

He agreed with comrades that

Yes, the present world war is a war for world hegemony between two imperialist blocs. Yes, the so-called 'war for democracy and freedom' is a façade. That does not mean, however, that there is not still a certain measure of democracy and freedom in Britain and America. In those two countries opposition parties, trade unions, and strikes are a reality and not a mere promise. . . Hitler's Nazis are out to rule the world with the same barbaric and reactionary methods with which they now rule Germany. . . [T]hey aim . . . to impose everywhere one doctrine, one party, one leader. . . [thus] in the present imperialist world war, to adopt a defeatist line in the democratic countries, a policy of turning the imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war, may sound left-wing but in reality it can only speed the Nazis' victory.[39]

In August 1939 Stalin signed the mutual non-aggression pact with the German Nazis and they divided Poland between them. This confirmed Chen's view that as far as the proletariat was concerned Fascism and Stalinism were equivalent and the overthrow of both was the precondition for humanity's progress toward socialism:

I believe two things. (1) Until this war is concluded . . . there is no possibility of realising the mass democratic revolution. (2) German Nazi's and Russian GPU politics (the Italians and Japanese are mere ancillaries) are the modern inquisition. If humankind is to advance, it must first overthrow this system, which is even more barbarous than the medieval inquisition. Every struggle (including the struggle against imperialism) must take second place to this struggle.[40]

That's why he called upon comrades to side with the bourgeois democracies (despite their contradictions, hypocrisies, and limitations) against both the German Nazi fascists and the Russian Stalinists. After the Nazis invaded in June 1941, Stalin reversed himself and aligned with the "anti-fascist bourgeoisie" of the U.S., Britain and the other allies for the duration of the war.

Chen's words could quite literally have been written yesterday about the West vs. Russia and China. He died in 1942 so we don't know what he would have said about China under Mao. Nevertheless, in Chen's view Stalin's Soviet Union was "no longer socialist." [41] He blamed not just Stalin and not just Lenin, but the suppression of Soviet democracy by the "proletarian dictatorship" the Bolsheviks installed that led to Stalinist bureaucratic rule:

Stalin's crimes are a logical extension of proletarian dictatorship. Are they not also the product of the power that has accrued since October to the secret police, and a whole series of antidemocratic dictatorships that forbid parties, factions, freedom of thought and of the press, and freedom to strike and vote? [all of which were done under Lenin during the civil war, as emergency measures that became permanent]. ... With one Stalin gone, innumerable other Stalins will spring to life in Russia and other countries. In Soviet Russia after October, it was clearly the dictatorship that produced Stalin rather than the other way around.[42]

While Chen defended capitalist democracy it's clear that he was not defending capitalism or imperialism or capitalist governments per se. He was defending democratic values and the hard-won

freedoms and rights that the working classes of the world had won through centuries of struggle within the framework of capitalism and that the fascists and Stalinists were determined to destroy. Losing those would be, as he says, an incalculable setback for humanity and for the global project of democratic socialism.

Were he alive today, I have no doubt that Chen would have passionately supported the Hong Kong democracy struggle, would defend the right of self-determination for the peoples of Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, would support the Taiwanese against the PRC, and would ally with Western democracies against Putin and against the Chinese Communist Party that he himself founded, *wherever and whenever* those governments actively support democratic principles and self-determination.

## Notes:

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[3] Amartya Kumar Sen, "Democracy as a universal value," *Journal of Democracy*, July 1999, 5.

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3239125/chinese-scientist-makes-history-winning-us-top-physics-prize>.

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[10] On Mao's anti-intellectualism, suppression of independent thinking, and synthesis of Confucianism and Stalinism as the guiding ideology of his reconstructed Communist Party in the 1930s, see my "On contradiction: Mao's revolution in theory and practice," part 3, *New Politics*, July 1, 2022, <https://newpol.org/on-contradiction-maos-party-substitutionist-revolution-in-theory-and-practice-part-3/>.

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[13] Smith, *China's Engine*, 145-46.

[14] "Xi Jinping thought for children," *The Economist*, September 2, 2021; Jojie Olsson, "Start of school in China with 'Xi Jinping's thinking' in the curriculum," *Kinamedia*, September 1, 2021, [https://kinamedia-se.translate.google.com/2021/09/01/skolstart-i-kina-med-xi-jinpings-tankande-i-laroplanen/?\\_x\\_tr\\_sl=sv&\\_x\\_tr\\_tl=en&\\_x\\_tr\\_hl=en-US&\\_x\\_tr\\_pto=ajax,elem](https://kinamedia-se.translate.google.com/2021/09/01/skolstart-i-kina-med-xi-jinpings-tankande-i-laroplanen/?_x_tr_sl=sv&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en-US&_x_tr_pto=ajax,elem); Jojie Olsson, "Studies in 'Xi Jinping's thoughts' become compulsory at 37 Chinese universities," *Kinamedia*, October 5, 2020, <https://kinamedia-se.translate.google.com/2020/10/05/studier-i-xi-jinpings-tankar-blir-obligatoriska-vid-37-k>

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[24] *The Most Wanted Man In China* (New York: Henry Holt, 2016), 65-67, 77

[25] *Bringing Down the Great Wall* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 157-175.

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[30] Sen, op cit. 3-4.

[31] Ibid., 4-5.

[32] Ibid. 5.

[33] Wei Jinsheng, *The Courage to Stand Alone* (New York: Viking 1997), 207-210.

[34] Wei was first imprisoned from 1979-1993. Unrepentant after his release, he continued his dissident activities speaking to foreign journalists and so the government locked him up again from 1994-1997, then deported him to the U.S. at the behest of President Clinton.

[35] Chen expounds his views on fascism, Stalinism, and the Soviet Union under Stalin in his last articles and letters, translated with illuminating commentary by Gregor Benton, *Prophets Unarmed* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2015), 697-794.

[36] Ibid, 734.

[37] Ibid, 734.

[38] Ibid, 725-26.

[39] Ibid, 740.

[40] Ibid, 723.

[41] Ibid, 723.

[42] Ibid, 734: On the suppression of soviet democracy, see Sam Farber, *Before Stalin* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990).