# How Should the U.S. Left Think about China?

September 5, 2019





*Editors' note: This is the second of three articles providing analysis of what's happening now in China – and why.*

[Interview with the author on Democracy Now.]

On the U.S. left, China is treated for the most part as an afterthought, an important but distant country that has little bearing on what's happening in the United States. For most socialists, the Chinese Revolution never held as much fascination as the Russian Revolution. If the Chinese Cultural Revolution inspired some in the New Left to take an interest in China, they were moved more by the revolutionary idealism of Maoism than a detailed analysis of Mao's China. Since then China's capitalist transformation since the 1980s has offered little sign of emancipatory politics.

The new generation of activists in the United States, politicized successively by the anti-globalization movement, Occupy Wall Street and the democratic socialism of Bernie Sanders, has never really had China on its mind. However, at a time of growing conflict between the United States and China, it is an urgent political task for the Left to think seriously about China and U.S.-China relations. This thinking requires a collective and concerted effort to develop critical and progressive perspectives on the nature of China's state and society, its increasingly prominent role and influence in the Asia-Pacific region and globally, and its conflict with the US.

These perspectives should inform how the U.S. left builds solidarity with social movements in China, identifies shared struggles, explores possibilities for collaboration, and helps shape the public understanding of China in the United States. We should have as our goals: deescalating tensions between the U.S. and China; advancing social justice and equality in both countries; and tackling global challenges like climate change through cross-border solidarity and organizing.

In the United States, these efforts must involve building alliances with social movement activists, progressive groups and unions, as well as with the Chinese-American community, Chinese international students, and whenever it is possible, with activists in China. These are immensely challenging tasks, and they necessitate a shift in the broad U.S. left to make such organizing one of

its top priorities so that we can build left internationalism to stop what seems to be an ever intensifying conflict between Beijing and Washington.

**Critical Perspectives on China**

One of the foremost tasks is to develop and clarify our analysis on China and U.S.-China relations from critical and progressive perspectives, something we are woefully behind in doing. The absence of such analysis hampers the left's ability to develop positions on China, and to shape how China is discussed in the United States. While we should not get bogged down in ideological debate about Mao's China, we must start by recognizing that China today is not socialist.

The reason to be clear about this is that if a country is socialist, the left would want to defend its government against capitalist countries. So, is China socialist? If socialism is understood as workers' democracy—the democratic control over work and all of society—then China is not socialist. It is, in fact, an extremely unequal and deeply divided capitalist class society, regardless of the Chinese state's claim to practice "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Moreover, China has transformed itself into a rising world power, exporting capital to developing countries, exploiting their natural resources, and exerting influence over many countries, especially in the Asia-Pacific region.

While few on the Left believe China is socialist, some view it as an authoritarian state so repressive that they would support any democratic state against it. This is a mistaken viewpoint that we must also guard against. Of course, the left should be for democracy and all states that deny basic democratic rights We must avoid falling into the Cold War trap of supporting the "democratic" West against the "totalitarian" China.

As anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the history of the United States knows, the U.S. government has fought against the expansion of democracy both at home and abroad whenever it interfered with its ruler's power and profit. The United States  the rhetoric of human rights and democracy to advance its capitalist and imperialist interests against China, something the U.S. left should not support. Instead it should back popular and progressive movements for liberation and democracy within both countries, rather than taking sides with either state in this growing rivalry.

There is another version of this mistaken state-centric position. Some in the United States argue that supporting the trade war with China will advance the interests of the American working class. There is no evidence, however, that the trade war will benefit workers in either the United States or China. Even worse, siding with the American government's protectionism will weaken the international labor solidarity that is necessary today to fight global capitalism.

**International Solidarity Without Allegiance to Either State**

The key in all this work is establishing an independent position for the U.S. left that does not align it with either state. This can be a challenge. Sometimes we will share the same concerns as those with vastly different politics and aims, for instance, on human rights issues in China. These issues are often manipulated by U.S. conservatives and hawkish liberals alike.

But this fact should not diminish the importance of these issues. Just because others have raised these issues does not mean that the left should refrain taking its own independent stand on them. If anything, the left should be more proactive, for the absence of a left perspective and engagement will have profoundly negative consequences.

Abstaining on such issues, or even worse denying they exist, violates the left's commitment to solidarity with the exploited and oppressed in China and throughout the world. Doing so will discredit the left in the eyes of those impacted. Even worse, in the absence of solidarity from the

Left, conservatives and hawkish liberals will take the opportunity to co-opt oppressed people and their issues.

That's why the left has an obligation to chart a its own perspective and build solidarity with these movements. Such efforts do not mean unthinking support, but critical support precisely because the left has ideas, strategies, and tactics to help liberation struggles avoid traps and succeed in their aims.

Take the recent demonstrations in Hong Kong as an example. A small minority on the U.S. left thinks that because some political parties and activists in Hong Kong are supported by sections of the American government or elements of the Democratic or Republican parties, then the recent massive demonstrations against the Extradition Bill are therefore illegitimate or a conspiracy to promote a so-called "color revolution," that is, a political maneuver by some elite group or bourgeois party.

This conspiratorial view – parroting the Chinese government slander against the Hong Kong protesters – fails embarrassingly to understand the dynamics of social change. Such mass movements cannot be instigated by a few individuals or even political groups from the outside. In particular, we have seen that the protesters today have categorically rejected the more traditional opposition leaders such as the pan-democrats as well as the younger generation of leaders that emerged after the Umbrella Movement.

The protests of tens of thousands of ordinary Hong Kong citizens reflects their frustration with the undemocratic practices of their government exemplified by the government's attempt to push through the Extradition Bill early this year. The protests have evolved into a more generalized movement that intersects with social and class grievances, leading not only to mass demonstrations but also to a general strike. This deserves our solidarity, and failing to show solidarity deeply damages to the ability of the left to forge international bonds and to build a global struggle for socialism.

This does not mean uncritically supporting everything in the movement and ignoring problematic tendencies within it. For instance, we should be critical of those who are xenophobic or outright racists toward immigrants from mainland China and mainland Chinese people more generally, or of those who showed nostalgia for Hong Kong's British colonial past or who expressed a desire for support from the United States. In fact, those forces have already been condemned by others in the movement.

We have to recognize that in any mass movement, a variety of people and organizations, some progressive and others with problematic politics, will be present and bring their different viewpoints to the struggle. This is a fact that does not discredit the movement as a whole when it is an expression of genuine and legitimate concerns of a large part of the population. Our role should be to support the movement, especially its best elements and to criticize others. We should use the same approach toward struggles against oppression, for example, in Xinjiang, Uygher Autonomous Region, and in Tibet.

**Building Solidarity and Forging Shared Struggles**

With these perspectives and methods, the U.S. Left should build solidarity with progressive social movements in China. Workers' strikes, feminist and LGBTQ protests, the environmental movement, and movements for human rights have come a long way in the last twenty years. They have made significant gains but have also suffered from severe repression in recent years.

Understanding these struggles on their own terms is surely necessary. But learning about them is

not enough; the US Left must express solidarity with them and find ways to collaborate with activists and organizations. Organizing and expressing solidarity is a useful way to raise public awareness of these issues and advance internationalism as an alternative to national chauvinism.

Take the labor struggle in China. In the past twenty years, Chinese workers – first state-sector workers before mid-2000s and then rural migrant workers after mid-2000s – organized collective resistance against exploitation, while worker centers and networks of labor activists emerged to support these struggles. On average, thousands of strikes and protests take place in China each year. And, in part because of workers' struggles, rural migrant workers have secured not insignificant improvements in their pay and working conditions.

In the last several years, however, the labor movement in China suffered one of the most sustained assaults by the state in recent history. It started with a coordinated crackdown in late 2015 on a network of worker centers in the southern manufacturing hub of Guangzhou. The government imprisoned three workers and shutdown several organizations. In 2017, three labor activists were detained for conducting undercover investigations into working conditions at factories manufacturing for global brands. In 2018, a unionizing effort by workers and labor activists in Shenzhen sparked a wide crackdown that has led to the detention of more than one hundred labor activists and college student supporters.

Progressives often ask what we can do to provide solidarity to labor activists in China. There are always opportunities to organize petitions, issue statements, and even participate in demonstrations. Doing all these whenever one can is certainly important. But offering solidarity to workers and labor activists both when they are engaged in labor struggle and under repression could be more creative and targeted.

For instance, the solidarity letter organized by tech workers at Microsoft in support of Chinese tech workers' mobilization against lengthy working hours targeted Microsoft, demanding no censorship of the Chinese tech workers' advocacy on GitHub. Another example is the Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations' suspension of exchange programs with Remin University after the university cooperated with the Chinese authorities in disciplining students who supported workers in the Jasic labor activism.

However, we should recognize the limits of such efforts. Because of its growing strength, China has been largely ignored by international solidarity actions. We will have to develop much more powerful networks to have an impact.

One important way to strengthen movements in China is to build struggle here in the U.S. to combat American international aggression and fight for domestic change. Stronger movements in the United States are in the best position to build connections between movements such as labor, feminism and environmental justice, and to collaborate on advocacy efforts on behalf of these shared struggles. This approach moves us beyond one-sided solidarity efforts and could strengthen movements in both countries.

This works well when there are existing movements that are already international. For example, the feminist movement in China is among the more internationalized movements with links to activists elsewhere and attuned to global events such as the #metoo movement. The Chinese feminist activists have also established ties to networks in the United States. However, collaboration will not be automatic but will have to be organized through purposeful engagement.

Another example is Uyghur's struggle against China's internment in camps and restrictions of their religious freedom. While shining light on any American companies profiting from forced labor in the

camps or companies that developed surveillance technology used in the Uyghur province of Xinjiang are no doubt useful, a deeper engagement in shared struggle could be forged on the basis of fighting Islamophobia by groups working on this issue in the United States.

While direct engagement with activists in China is ideal, it has become extremely challenging. Language difficulties aside, it is highly risky for Chinese activists to engage in international collaboration because they face constant surveillance by the Chinese government. This is why it is crucial to work with people already in the United States, such as Chinese social movement activists, American activists and academics who work on China, Chinese-American communities and Chinese international students, to name a few.

**Engaging "China" in the United States**

Beyond developing perspectives and building solidarity, we should think about how we can shape public discussion of China in the United States. The absence of progressive voices has given space for the American government to frame the issues around trade, intellectual property rights, and national security.

To shape how China is discussed in the United States requires informed analyses, public meetings and work with community groups, academics, unions and other progressive organizations. In particular, engaging with American unions around the question of US-China relations is critical but also very challenging because of many unions' acceptance of the myth that Chinese workers are stealing American jobs.

Furthermore, we have yet to develop a strategy to engage with and organize international students from China. They are often ignored, and their voices either caricatured or missing from U.S.-China discussions. They are too often assumed to be supporters of the Chinese government at best, and agents of the Chinese government at worst. And there is often an unstated presupposition that because these students may come from middle class families, they are necessarily conservative in their politics. Such vast generalizations serve more as excuses not to engage than any useful guide to engagement.

The U.S. left should begin engaging with Chinese students on political questions. We should begin meeting without assumptions and with patience. We have to meet them where they are at and not dismiss them for expressing different or even offensive political opinions which are in part the result of lack of space in China for open political discussion. Chinese students like everyone else will have mixed ideas, some radical, others uninformed, and often both of these combined together. They may also be fearful of expressing their opinions in the United States, which should not be mistaken for not having an opinion. But not engaging with them is likely to ensure they are more receptive to nationalistic messages.

The U.S. left should also work to build solidarity with Chinese students and academics in the United States who are now facing increasing restrictions, discrimination and surveillance by the U.S. government. Moreover, U.S. graduate students have a direct interest in working with Chinese graduate students, who make up a significant percentage of those pursuing advanced degrees, in order build graduate student unions. Neglecting such work could lead to the defeat of such organizing efforts.

**More Analysis, More Solidarity and More Organizing**

There are no shortcuts to developing more informed analyses of China, more efforts to build solidarity and more organizing to strengthen social movements in both countries. I have merely

touched upon a few issues in these challenging tasks, much of which need to be worked out by activists engaged in these initiatives. I hope to at least raise these issues so that we can continue these conversations collectively so that China and U.S.-China relations become an integral part of U.S. left’s thinking and strategy.