

THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

The Political Philosophy of Ci Jiwei

IN HIS 1989–92 lecture series *On the State* Pierre Bourdieu, following Durkheim, proposed a provisional definition of the state as the basis for ‘both the logical and the moral conformity of the social world’. By ‘logical conformity’, Bourdieu meant that the agents of the social world would share the same categories of perception, the same construction of reality; by ‘moral conformity’, their agreement on certain core values. Taking his distance from classical state theory, such as that of Hobbes or Locke—in which the state, occupying a quasi-godlike viewpoint, oversees all and serves the common good—as also from Marxian traditions, from Gramsci to Althusser and beyond, which focus on the function of the state as an apparatus for maintaining public order in the interests of the ruling bloc, Bourdieu emphasized instead the need to grasp the ‘organizational magic’ of the state as a principle of consciousness—its monopoly of legitimate *symbolic* as well as physical violence. The social theorist therefore needed to be particularly on guard against Durkheimian ‘pre-notions’ or received ideas, against ‘thinking the state with state thinking’. A first step was to conceive the state as what Bourdieu called ‘an almost unthinkable object’.¹

If there is one thinker who has met Bourdieu’s challenge to ‘think the state’ without succumbing to ‘state thinking’, it is the Chinese political philosopher Ci Jiwei. Recently retired from the philosophy department of the University of Hong Kong, Ci has devoted most of the past three decades to analysing the nature and evolution of China’s state and society since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. Three of his

four books—*Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution* (1994), *Moral China in the Age of Reform* (2014) and *Democracy in China* (2019)—amount to a loose trilogy aiming to clarify the ‘logic’ of the Chinese experience and to track the evolution of the CCP regime since Mao. The collapse of Maoist utopianism and the liberalization of the economy after 1978 have left Chinese society in a ‘fundamentally unsettled’ condition, Ci argues.² Each book in the trilogy addresses a different symptom of this situation: existential or social-psychological malaise in *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, the undermining of moral subjectivity in *Moral China* and the looming crisis of political legitimacy in *Democracy in China*. In different ways, they are all concerned with how the Chinese party-state might accommodate itself, for its own and the nation’s good, to citizens’ need to act freely and to understand themselves as free, while at the same time preserving its own stability and that of the country at large.³

On a superficial reading, Ci’s concern with democracy and the state might seem to situate him in the company of conventional liberals, while his emphasis on the Party’s role might appear to class him with loyal defenders of the CCP. Such interpretations would miss both the originality of his political philosophy and the radical-popular character of his proposals, which in his most recent book are frankly democratic socialist. Ci occupies an unusual insider-outsider position, in both East and West: professionally established in the PRC, yet situated on its rimland, with only a small section of his *oeuvre* published in Chinese; deeply informed by Western traditions of critical political philosophy, including Marxist ones, as well as Chinese approaches, yet not in or of the West. What follows will trace the development of Ci’s thought against the backdrop of the PRC’s evolution, drawing out some of its key political-philosophical themes and considering some of the objections raised

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989–1992*, Patrick Champagne et al., eds, tr. David Fernbach, Cambridge 2014, pp. 3–4, 106–7. While these lecture notes were edited and published a decade after his death, Bourdieu’s 1993 ‘Esprits d’État: genèse et structure du champ bureaucratique’ remains his major study of the state. It should be added that Ci himself nowhere systematically links his own reflections on the state to Bourdieu’s, though he has made mention of Bourdieu’s work: he refers to *The Logic of Practice* in *The Two Faces of Justice*, Cambridge MA 2006, p. 145, and to Bourdieu’s notion of ‘symbolic capital’ in the essay ‘A Gloss on *Chongjian*’, published in the catalogue of the group show *Reconstruction* at Karma International Zurich, 2021, curated by Aita Sulser and Johannes Hoerning.

² Ci Jiwei, *Democracy in China: The Coming Crisis*, Cambridge MA 2019, p. 195.

³ Ci, *Democracy in China*, p. 227.

by his critics, with the aim of contributing to an overall evaluation of a strikingly original body of work.

I. DIAGNOSIS

Ci was born in 1955 in Beijing, where his parents were scientists at Peking University. Two years old at the onset of the anti-rightist campaign, eleven at the start of the Cultural Revolution and twenty-three when Deng Xiaoping initiated the Reform Era, he had his fair share of personal experiences, good and bad, of China's turbulent twentieth century. Living on campus exposed Ci to the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, and he has written memorably, in general terms, of the experience of that epoch.⁴ His education was disrupted by extended periods of physical labour in the countryside and immersion in peasant life; once it resumed, it was at first scarcely indicative of his personal choices, since training was still subject to a high degree of political administration. This was partly true even when Ci spent time in London (1978–9) and Edinburgh (1979–83) as a state-sponsored, indeed state-managed, student. In London, Ci studied English intensively and experienced daily life, culture and politics in a foreign country for the first time. In Edinburgh, his landlord was a primary-school teacher who happened to be a Marxist; on his shelves, Ci encountered Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* and Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*. He also came to know the writings of Russell, Freud and Weber, the philosophy of Hume, Wittgenstein and Popper, the moral philosophy of Adam Smith and R. M. Hare, the linguistics of Chomsky and M. A. K. Halliday, the fiction of George Eliot, Henry James and Iris Murdoch, and the literary criticism of Auerbach and Leavis. This wide reading would leave its mark on his reflections on Chinese society and politics.

Ci left China on a visit to the US in April 1989—he would spend 1990–91 as a fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center—and thus by coincidence,

⁴ As Ci would recall of the GPCR: 'Fear of being wrong is equivalent to fear of punishment, for every political wrong brings punishment in the form of persecution. And by the same token the urge to be right derives from the same motive, as the urge to mete out rather than to receive punishment. To be right is to have the right to persecute. Small wonder that one remembers certain political dogmas as one remembers laws prohibiting theft and murder': *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism*, Stanford 1994, p. 89.

like many Chinese scholars and students abroad, he found himself in the vast shadow cast by the events of 4 June, watching from afar. *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution* was conceived, as Ci recalls in the book's introduction, 'amid the sadness, anger and sense of futility in the wake of the suppression of the democracy movement'. Drafted at Stanford and then at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina (1991–92), it was a way to come to terms with the events, and in particular with what had happened (or failed to happen) in their aftermath. Ci explains, in a rather personal tone that is rare in his work, 'As the nation's mood went from shock to despair and then, remarkably soon, from despair to business as usual, I sensed, in a way I had never quite done before, something profoundly wrong with the Chinese spirit, something whose nature and cause had to be sought at the deepest level of the Chinese experience.' His objective was at once one 'of understanding myself and of illuminating, with my very limited powers, an entire epoch'.⁵

Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution can be read as a kind of genealogy of this spiritual malaise, set in a deeper comparative and historical framework which allows contrasts between the abandonment of Maoist ideology and the earlier discarding of Confucianism. It is also an attempt, as Ci puts it, to chart 'the path traversed by Chinese consciousness' from the optimistic founding of the PRC in 1949 and the exalted asceticism under Mao to the still-reverberating consequences of the demise of that 'utopian experiment'. As Ci writes: 'Utopian consciousness, once aroused, had a momentum that would not rest content until its original basis, the crisis of the body, was overcome, until its hopes were either fulfilled or dashed.' The dashing of those hopes resulted in a devastating loss of meaning and of belief in the future—that 'most precious mental possession'—and ushered in a pervasive spirit of nihilism. The acquisitive individualism encouraged by China's spectacular rise was a way of numbing or burying this experience of meaninglessness—not merely meaning's absence, but the anguish of its disappearance. Ci reads the psychological crisis of the Reform Era—the demise of communist utopianism as mass psychological reality—in terms of a crisis of spirit (*jingshen weiji*) or of belief (*xinyang weiji*). Consumerist pleasure-seeking was a technique of oblivion: a way for a 'spiritually exhausted people' to endure nihilism, 'without raising it to the level of conscious reflection'.⁶

⁵ Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, pp. 2, 20–23.

⁶ Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, pp. 2, 207, 169, 226, 11, 6. Bafflingly, as Ci puts it, the upshot of domestic tyranny after June 4 was 'mental colonization by a foreign ideology [consumerism]': p. 89.

Ci is concerned here with Chinese culture in the broadest sense: structures of experience and meaning; moral systems; the changing common sense of what China is, in itself and relative to the rest of the world. With the shock of the 1839–42 Opium War, he notes, a culture that had, for 2,000 years, been entirely sure of itself—its impregnable sovereignty, acknowledged superiority to neighbouring states and relative isolation from the rest of the world underpinning its ‘centre mentality’—was obliged to come to terms with the military and technological paramountcy of an industrial Western power. China’s response to this profound cultural crisis was to repurpose an ancient metaphysical distinction between being and doing as a national strategy: *zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong*—‘Chinese learning as essence (*ti*), Western learning as technique (*yong*)’. The *ti-yong* formula relegated the humiliating need to adopt foreign technologies to the realm of cultural insignificance. Yet the need for such distinctions signalled that the integrity of Chinese culture had already been undermined, Ci argues; it could no longer evolve on its own terms, at its own pace, and so could no longer be the China it had always been; but nor could it be quite like the West. Maoism resolved the disjunction: after 1949, Beijing regained complete sovereignty over the mainland for the first time since the 1840s; the PRC acquired a new cosmopolitan identity at the forefront of history, continuous with what Mao described as the ‘good part’ of Chinese tradition and as culturally distinctive as it had ever been. The exhaustion of Maoist utopianism brought new uncertainty about the relation of *ti* and *yong*, however; the only faith capable of replacing it would be patriotism, Ci suggested, though that would be a poor substitute except under conditions of war.

Following a structure at once loose and intricate—a hallmark of Ci’s works—the book’s six chapters do not comprise a continuous account, though they are approximately chronological. Instead, each tracks the evolving relations and logical connections among Ci’s key terms—utopianism, hedonism, nihilism—along with several other subsidiary concepts, including asceticism, collectivism, altruism and liberalism, which serve to nuance and embroider the general historical movement he traces from utopianism to hedonism via nihilism. Despite its ascetic aspect, Maoist utopianism contained a ‘sublimated’ hedonism—its promise of well-being for all in a communist future was hedonism postponed. Once that future failed to materialize, the utopian energies that had been stoked by it were instead channelled into market hedonism. Yet an element of utopianism was ‘preserved in nihilism’, which bears the marks of utopianism’s ‘exacting standards’—its heightened

consciousness and accentuated future—precisely in the depths of its disappointment and despair.⁷

Reciprocal corruptions

As he was formulating the ideas that made up *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, it became clear to Ci that he would not be able to publish them in China. Instead of seeking an alternative publisher in Taiwan, however, he decided to wait until things changed on the mainland. That day has yet to arrive, and it may be that it has receded further than ever. At no point, however, has Ci been moved to exchange his perspective on the present for what Walter Benjamin called the ‘comfortable view of the past’. In 1997 he took up a position teaching political philosophy at the University of Hong Kong. His second book, *The Two Faces of Justice*, was published in China in 2001 and appeared in English in 2006. Unlike his other works, in which theoretical reflections are explicitly situated in an analysis of Chinese society and politics, *The Two Faces of Justice* is a more abstract inquiry into what Ci terms ‘the logic of the socialization of justice’, and its contemporary applications are more implicit. Nonetheless, by clarifying the social conditions under which people are willing to behave justly—the state-mediated, psychological mechanisms through which justice is ‘socialized’—the book touches on many of the core concerns of the China trilogy, including the human need for a sense of agency and autonomy, the state’s role in enforcing conformity and maintaining social stability, and the circumstances under which these break down.⁸

When justice is successfully socialized, people come to think of their disposition to follow moral norms as unconditional. For Ci, this self-understanding is a form of misrecognition, since the willingness to behave justly is in fact intrinsically conditional, because it is a ‘socially

⁷ Arif Dirlik’s short review of *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution* for the *American Historical Review*, while sympathetic to the work’s ‘controlled anger’, signally misconstrued Ci’s trenchant psychological diagnosis as ‘blaming the victims’. He would surely have revised this judgement had he been able to see the future course of Ci’s work. Arif Dirlik, ‘Jiwei Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism*’, *American Historical Review*, April 1996, pp. 540–41.

⁸ As an early footnote reveals, Ci’s interest in the ‘contagious nature of injustice’ had its roots in his observations of the breakdown of social obligation and reciprocity in post-Mao China, where ‘the phenomenon is sometimes quite striking’: Jiwei Ci, *The Two Faces of Justice*, Cambridge MA and London 2006, p. 1.

achieved virtue'. Rather than arising from independently grounded principles or natural instinct, as philosophers from Hume to MacIntyre have argued, the individual readiness to comply with moral norms is dependent on other members of the relevant group behaving likewise—in Ci's terms, 'the *reciprocal* satisfaction of interests'.⁹ This is the sense in which justice is two-faced. The state is the only agent capable of enforcing the 'reciprocity condition'; its institutions of punishment (and forgiveness) are means by which it both maintains its status as the sovereign guardian of justice and ameliorates its own failure whenever people violate moral norms—whenever those norms lose their unconditional appearance, leading people to become disinclined to follow them. Law-breaking or corruption is thus a sign that the condition of reciprocity has broken down, which in turn is an indication of the weakening authority of the state.¹⁰

Ci's next book, written in the early 2010s, examined the moral wasteland produced by twenty years of breakneck economic growth. *Moral China in the Age of Reform* does not focus simply on official corruption but on a more far-reaching dissolution of the ties of social reciprocity, under which 'everyday norms of coexistence and cooperation' are breached on a massive scale, such that 'it is no longer remotely alarmist to speak of the corruption of an entire people'. Ci is typically sparing with empirical detail, but he offers such concrete examples as 'unsafe food (infant formula and so-called gutter oil among the most prominent examples), medicine, water and traffic, not to mention coal mines.'¹¹ This generalized corruption, even if it is a common condition throughout the industrial-capitalist world, can be understood in part as an outcome of disillusion with utopian promises that demanded too much and delivered too little. But Ci also sees the stunted development of moral subjectivity as the result of a mismatch between the official 'value-infrastructure' of Chinese life and the changed socioeconomic reality on the ground. The consumer freedoms that China's proto-bourgeois subjects have enjoyed since the 1990s have not been consecrated at the level of moral culture,

⁹ Ci, *The Two Faces of Justice*, pp. 7, 6, 232, 5.

¹⁰ Ci, *The Two Faces of Justice*, pp. 5–6, 36.

¹¹ Jiwei Ci, *Moral China in the Age of Reform*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 21, 168, 15. *Moral China* combines and revises early publications by Ci in various journals. The assessment of China as undergoing a moral crisis, a foreseeable development of what he called a 'psychological crisis' in *Dialectic* (p. 100), dates back to 2008: 'The Moral Crisis in Post-Mao China: Prolegomenon to a Philosophical Analysis', *Diogenes*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2009.

where *de facto* economic and other freedoms are not ‘raised to the level of a society-defining value’.¹²

Ci understands freedom not as an individual right but as a paradigm providing for the human need for agency, while also securing social order. Prior to the Reform Era, moral conformity in China—the social production of ‘moral willingness’—depended not on freedom but on an alternative paradigm: identification with moral exemplars and loyalty to the leader. This loyalty was absolute, encompassing and conflating politics and morality in such a way that freedom was not a felt necessity. ‘The old belief in communism’, Ci writes, ‘was able to reduce morality to political loyalty and happily dispense with any independently based moral agency.’ Collective, future-oriented communist values ‘left no place (and arguably little need) for individual liberties’.¹³ Yet this conflation of morality and politics under the Maoist state was intrinsically precarious: moral authority was liable to be undermined once the political project that had legitimized it gave way. As Ci had observed in *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, while Marxism had served the needs of ameliorating the country’s backwardness, it did not provide a new system of moral rules or statecraft. By subsuming morality into politics, the Maoist state was instead continuing the old logic of the Confucian tradition, under which political and intellectual legitimacy were made to go ‘hand in hand’.¹⁴ The post-Mao CCP, by contrast, ever surer of its globally measurable success rate, ceased to rely on overburdening moral demands—demands, moreover, which it knew often stood in the way of market expansion. In a rapidly rising China, the political riddle at Zhongnanhai was no longer how to use one’s power to serve a higher morality, but how to make morality work for one’s power.

Following Deng’s reforms, Ci writes, the logic of the ‘individualization of everyday life’ demanded the formation of an alternative, Western-style ‘superego-centred morality’. But the perdurance of the PRC’s undemocratic political structures kept the individual superego weak, ‘denied the room to become a robust moral force’—and Ci adds: ‘That room is freedom’.¹⁵ China’s incomplete

¹² Ci, *Moral China*, pp. 159, 210, 175, 45. The book’s initial working title was *China’s Lurch to Freedom*.

¹³ Ci, *Moral China*, pp. 48–49, 23, 55, 207.

¹⁴ Ci, *Dialectic*, pp. 132, 93.

¹⁵ Ci, *Moral China*, pp. 55, 3, 121.

transition between moral paradigms—from agency-through-identification to agency-through-freedom—accompanied its as-yet-incomplete transition from a dynastic state (Legalist-Confucian, then Maoist) to a juridical one. The absence of a successor moral paradigm results not only in corruption but in a kind of intellectual incoherence. Ci discusses the Party's efforts to navigate this situation through the conceptual apparatus of sublimation, desublimation and resublimation, concepts trialled in *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*. 'Partial resublimation' is his term for the stopgap manoeuvres that aim to avert or disguise the contradictions of the communist twilight: the attempt to revive discourses which 'bear little relation to a *habitus*, a concrete way of life'; moral-political imperatives like 'serve the people', which were only meaningful when embedded 'in an ascetic, anti-consumerist form of life'. Invoking them in its absence produced not conformity but cynicism among Chinese citizens, who were liable to see the empty manoeuvring of official language as merely 'going through certain linguistic motions'.¹⁶

Completing the transition to a new paradigm of moral agency requires not a revival of moribund discourse but a real 'revolution in values'. *Moral China* is an exercise in imagining the substance of this revolution. The 21st-century state has ceded responsibility for the livelihood of its citizens, meaning that Chinese people today have to fend for themselves as individuals and are 'left to their own devices'. This has been accompanied by a levelling of values, now almost solely centred on the mundane concerns of prosperity, enjoyment and security. Ci describes this as 'populism with respect to values'—a populism that is 'substantive', because 'thoroughgoing', but lacking any credible procedures for registering and affirming popular preferences. This 'desublimation' of values—from collective future to individual prosperity—has in turn given rise to a novel idea of 'equality of agency' (quite compatible with wide quantitative inequalities in income), of a partially negative kind: equality among 'atomistic individuals who are at once (potential) bourgeois subjects and subject to the alienating, competitive capitalist order'. Indeed, the widespread resentment at corruption is itself evidence of the hold of 'qualitative equality, of people as equal agents and choosers' in the Chinese social imaginary. Mass resentment represents a transformation of subjectivity: people take themselves to be entitled to a certain respect.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ci, *Moral China*, pp. 30, 77.

¹⁷ Ci, *Moral China*, pp. 205, 161, 206–7, 112, 162–3.

The official refusal to ‘valorize’ the new system of values prevents the emergent bourgeoisified subject from becoming itself. Yet for Ci, the route out of this unsatisfactory limbo does not run through unqualified emulation of the Western model. Both freedom and democracy are, in Ci’s thought, ‘contested concepts’—spaces of experiment rather than finished artefacts to be imported wholesale from the West. Indeed Western iterations of freedom can be a species of false consciousness: an official value which helps to enforce conformity by enabling people to overrate the extent of their own autonomy—‘concealing relations of domination’ and the degree to which peoples’ lives are in fact externally determined. Liberal political regimes are good at creating the (real) conditions under which freedom and agency are plausible illusions. The hallmark of a liberal society, Ci writes, is the ‘seamless conjunction’ of ‘the experience of freedom’ and the ‘practice of conformity’.¹⁸

In *Moral China*’s sweeping philosophical coda—speculative reflections on human nature and modernity—Ci identifies nihilism as the key to grasping ‘the spirit and dynamic of the modern world as a whole’, arguing that what nihilism means above all is the demise of ‘the good’, as ‘fit to guide and limit human conduct’. If freedom has eclipsed ‘the good’ in many Western democracies, the challenge and opportunity for China, where Ci argues ‘the good’ has historically enjoyed particular primacy, is to develop ‘a bracing dialectic between liberty and the good’: to affirm freedom but also to shape it, ‘bringing it into positive alignment with some shared and unifying conception of the good’. China in his view has a unique chance to pioneer practices of freedom and democracy that improve upon the flawed ones available in the West, especially in protecting citizens against the injustices wrought by the unfettered market. For better or worse, the individualistic manner in which Chinese citizens now live their lives must be institutionalized: for better, if interpreted as

¹⁸ Ci, *Moral China*, p. 49. In Ci’s thought, the ambiguity of freedom in some ways recalls the Janus-face of justice: just as the state, through the social institution of justice, allows people to misrecognize their conditional motivations as unconditional imperatives, so the public notion of freedom is an interpretation of behaviour that allows people to think of themselves as free agents when in fact they are dominated and determined. There is thus the paradox that the full-throated espousal of freedom is often accompanied by widespread ideological conformity; ‘freedom’ becomes an effective means, in modern conditions, of reconciling the individual need for agency with the need for social order.

a first, necessary step toward democratic politics; for worse, if used as justification for market despotism without social protections.¹⁹

Programme for the Party?

If *The Two Faces of Justice* was a ‘philosophical intervention’ and *Moral China* ‘an act of intellectual and civic intervention’, Ci’s most recent work, *Democracy in China*, is a pointedly political one. ‘An exercise in democratic theory embedded in a discussion of China’, the book’s core arguments were conceived in the aftermath of Hong Kong’s 2014 Umbrella protests and developed in a series of lectures Ci delivered at Harvard in late 2015. By the time it was published, the 2019 Hong Kong protests against Beijing’s Extradition Bill were underway and tensions between Beijing and Washington were mounting under Trump’s trade tariffs. As Ci’s most concretely political book, *Democracy in China* caps a trend one can discern across the trilogy: the books have become worldlier in theme and more interventionist in orientation; in addition to Marx and Nietzsche, thinkers like Tocqueville, Polanyi, Habermas and Althusser have come to the fore.²⁰

Ci furnishes a punctilious demolition of the notion that Chinese citizens neither need nor desire democracy—an illusion reinforced by the ‘officially imposed moratorium’ on the topic, but also bolstered by Western commentators, in what Ci characterizes as a species of ‘new (political) orientalism’. He takes aim at Daniel Bell’s argument that the CCP can draw its legitimacy from its impressive economic performance alone. Ci distinguishes between such ‘performance legitimacy’ and the ‘right to rule’ itself—the mandate to perform in the first place. In his theoretical schema, performance can only enhance legitimacy if there is some prior legitimacy to enhance. During the Confucian period, the mandate to rule was said to derive from heaven. Under communism, that cosmology was replaced by a ‘teleological’ legitimacy. This kind of legitimacy was prefigured in the CCP’s founding in 1921 and the defeat of the Japanese invasion, lasting from the communist revolution of 1949

¹⁹ Ci, *Moral China*, pp. 222, 219. It should be noted that giving priority to ‘the good’ does not entail endorsing any particular good, whether Confucian, communist or liberal capitalist.

²⁰ Ci, *Democracy in China*, pp. 31, 1; henceforward, DC.

through the Mao era and beyond. Bell's apolitical account fails to register that the CCP's right to rule remains inextricably tied to its revolutionary past, Ci argues. Yet this residual legitimacy is close to exhaustion: Xi Jinping represents the last credible link to the communist story and its glorious beginnings; with his eventual passing, the Party will need to find a new ideological principle, fit for the wealthier, more individualistic society over which it now rules.²¹

Ci thus urges the CCP leadership to consider the prudential case for democracy, *à la* Tocqueville, as the best way to ensure the resilience and durability of its rule. Marx himself, he notes, was 'unquestionably a democratic thinker, seeking to move beyond the bourgeois democratic revolution rather than merely opposing it.' The prudential case does not depend on normative appeals nor on Aristotelian definitions of the 'best' regime. The only goods at stake in the prudential case are regime legitimacy (Weber) or hegemony (Gramsci), and the resultant stability they ensure. It does not need to provide 'genuine democracy, whatever that may mean' but only a 'plausible and sustainable semblance' of it, defined as what is 'more or less consonant with China's present social conditions.' Though Ci is no Habermasian, there is a notable overlap here with Habermas's propositions about democracy as a form of legitimation rather than an *a priori* set of institutions. In *Democracy in China*, any system that has an accepted mechanism for registering popular consent—and thus bestowing general moral approval on a regime—may be considered democratic.²²

²¹ DC, pp. 4, 6, 7–8, 55–58, 18–19. See also Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton 2015. Branko Milanović also argues that the CCP's claim to rule is legitimated only by performance—or rather, by the state's out-performing its rivals across the Pacific: 'delivering, year in year out, more goods and services than its liberal counterpart': *Capitalism, Alone: The Future of the System that Rules the World*, Cambridge MA 2019, pp. 91–96, 209.

²² DC, pp. 8, 13, 145, 134. Habermas has described democracy as a question of 'finding arrangements which can ground the presumption that the basic institutions of the society and the basic political decisions would meet with the unforced agreement of all those involved, if they could participate, as free and equal, in discursive will-formation. Democratization cannot mean an *a priori* preference for a specific type of organization, for example, for so-called direct democracy . . . Democracies are distinguished from other systems of domination by a rational principle of legitimation and not by types of organization marked out *a priori*.' See Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, tr. Thomas McCarthy, Boston 1976, p. 186.

Ci's appeal to the CCP leadership's rational self-interest rests on the perceived resilience of mature democratic regimes—the best solution to the Party's dilemma of self-perpetuation. Borrowing his terms from the political philosopher Jean Hampton, he argues that these regimes' stability resides in their multiple, progressively deeper levels of consent. Citizens may be disgruntled with a government's legislative performance—the primary level—yet still affirm the legitimacy of the electoral party system, the secondary level; even if they are dissatisfied with the existing parties, they may still have faith in the system at its tertiary level, that of the overall constitution or basic law. And below this again, democracies are sustained at the deepest level by a 'politico-cultural faith in democratic rule of law as an alternative to violent conflict'. This is what gives these regimes their durability—however unpopular their rulers or flawed their electoral systems. As Ci writes,

The advantage afforded by such *depth of structure* becomes very striking indeed if we compare this model with its Chinese counterpart . . . in the Chinese case the main and, given the fast-disappearing revolutionary legitimacy, potentially sole locus for endorsement consent (or lack thereof) is available at the primary level, that of the making of laws and policies and their implementation. That is why performance legitimacy is such a life-and-death matter.²³

The real risk to the regime, *Democracy in China* argues, comes not from organized opposition forces, which are not allowed to exist, nor from powerful interest groups, most of whom are beneficiaries of the existing system and would 'face an uncertain future if things were to change'. The threat comes instead from the unstoppable tendencies within Chinese society towards what Ci describes, borrowing from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, as 'equality of conditions'. This refers not to 'quantitative' equality but to the dissolution of traditional authority relations. The patriarchal family system, with its deeply engrained Confucian principles of filial piety and subordination of the mother and children to the authority of the father, began to crumble under the egalitarianism of the Mao era and eroded further with the pragmatism and small-family policies of Deng. Today, Ci argues, the family is no longer a training ground for obedience to authority, as the striking contrast in filial disposition between the 1950s and 1990s cohorts shows. And although the hierarchy of the urban-rural divide has persisted into the Reform Era,

²³ DC, pp. 139–141.

it has lost all moral legitimacy. A similar dissolution of authority has taken place in the public sphere of everyday life. With the privatization of much of the economy, Chinese society has undergone a ‘levelling’ to the lowest common denominator of middle-class happiness—the ‘populism with respect to values’ discussed in *Moral China*. People pursue ‘apolitical’ goals of prosperity and security, in ‘a spirit of personal independence’, taking their own counsel instead of deferring to those above. But while the CCP has provided a high degree of ‘material satisfaction’—rapid growth, rising living standards, geopolitical clout—it has failed to offer a forum for agency, ‘the sense of being citizens with a credible role in shaping the life and destiny of the political community.’ This is the glaring exception to the levelling of ‘fixed hierarchies.’²⁴

Ci recognizes that the ‘equality of conditions’ which Tocqueville detected in 1830s America is today defined by powerful capitalist inequalities. While China’s ‘so-called socialist market economy’ is not purely capitalist, it has been characterized throughout the Reform Era by ‘high tolerance for inequality and environmental degradation.’²⁵ *Democracy in China* therefore supplements Tocqueville’s diagnosis with Polanyi’s insight—that mass (social) democracy has historically served to provide some protection against the ravages of capitalism’s ‘satanic mills’, albeit (to take the English case) only after the proletariat had been tamed by the Hungry Forties and triaged to produce a stratum of ‘respectable’ skilled workers who could lead the rest. Even if—Ci here follows Wolfgang Streeck’s analysis in *Buying Time* (2014)—the West has seen a shift to less democratic, more oligarchic forms of policy-making in the neoliberal era (the rise of non-accountable central banks, the IMF, the European Commission), residual protections persist.²⁶ With the Reform Era, the CCP leadership has had the task of protecting Chinese society thrust upon it; yet its economic agenda makes it both less able and less motivated to carry this out. While the Party is in a more

²⁴ DC, pp. 127–8, 161, 110, 8. See also Ci Jiwei, ‘*Democracy in China: Reply to My Critics*’, *Dao*, 2022, p. 473.

²⁵ Ci describes China as ‘having become as capitalist as it can be, short of relinquishing its self-understanding as a socialist market economy’: DC, p. 181.

²⁶ DC, pp. 175, 162. Ci notes that the Polanyian idea of (social) democracy as a countervailing protection against capitalism is, unfortunately, almost completely absent in China, where ‘a one-sided understanding of democracy’ as granting autonomy to the market and limiting the power of the state prevails. If it were cast in Polanyian terms, building on the constant calls in China for better and more equitable health-care, education and so forth, democracy might have greater purchase: DC, p. 185.

advantageous position vis-à-vis the forces of big capital than its Western counterparts—no ‘Wall Street, Silicon Valley and military-industrial complex to contend with’, as yet—it faces the more insidious risk of corrupt official- and crony-capitalism growing within its own ranks, as Xi’s anti-corruption campaign acknowledged.²⁷

This combination—a levelled social landscape, topped by a recalcitrant political structure, with little protection against capitalism’s ills and no formal outlet for the sense of agency that accrues in everyday life—makes for systemic instability that risks becoming ‘ungovernable’. In this perspective, the only option for the CCP, short of maintaining an unsustainably high performance or resorting to the dead-end of intensifying repression, will be to widen and enshrine legal and intellectual freedoms, extending eventually to political ones. As a principled realist, Ci maintains that sweeping the Party aside is not an option: the CCP remains the only ‘mature’ political force in China and it clearly retains sufficient unity and cohesion to ‘keep potentially fatal factionalism at bay and to maintain the deterrence effect of June 4 against any similar uprising.’²⁸ Given the balance of forces, any direct confrontation would be doomed to defeat. Democratization, in Ci’s ‘realistic utopia’, would be spearheaded by a judicious CCP. The ground would first need to be prepared by social-justice reforms to alleviate economic inequality, which ‘with its divisiveness and unceasing production of resentment, is clearly inimical to any reasonably healthy democratic development’.²⁹

City in revolt

Ci’s warnings about the need for realism in dealing with the CCP are most pointed—and poignant—when it comes to the fate of Hong Kong, where he has taught successive generations of students since the 1990s. Ci offered a trenchant diagnosis of Occupy Central, the Hong Kong democracy movement of 2014–15, whose driving passion, he argued, was not so much the desire for a representative political system *per se* but rather a longstanding identity of ‘apartness and superiority’ with regard to China. Born in part from the city’s century-long evolution as a British colony, the contrast was heightened by Hong Kong’s relative affluence and cosmopolitanism during the Cold War years, when Mao’s China was

²⁷ DC, pp. 182, 165, 186.

²⁸ DC, p. 42.

²⁹ DC, pp. 208, 274.

'red and poor'. Yet this identity—based on 'a hierarchically and largely antagonistically conceived apartness from China'—was fragile and could only be maintained without stridency when Hong Kong's superiority was implicitly acknowledged by Beijing, as in the years after the city's return to the PRC's sovereignty in 1997, when 'China was busy becoming more like Hong Kong.' China's rise posed a problem for Hong Kong's sense of superior apartness, as the mainland population grew 'ever more capitalist, consumerist and fun-loving', even if—beyond the first-tier cities and the ranks of the well-to-do—it was 'less well-trained in middle-class sophistication and orderliness' than Hong Kongers claimed to be. For younger generations in Hong Kong, 'China is not cool', Ci notes; Beijing had yet to turn its 'hard power' into the capacity to win admiration and allegiance.³⁰

The desire for apartness from China gave the Occupy Central movement the moral fervour and emotional cohesion of a national-liberation struggle, Ci argues; but this all-consuming defence of Hong Kong identity also crowded out other concerns, including social justice. Unlike its American namesake, Occupy Wall Street, the Hong Kong movement never targeted capitalism or called for Polanyi-style democracy with social protections; it hoped to ally with local tycoons against Beijing. Yet Ci is convinced that the movement's energy stemmed in part from pent-up frustration at the city's 'scandalous level of inequality' and the worsening prospects for its youth, in step with the advanced-capitalist world. Ci urged the students to rethink the substance of Hong Kong's apartness—to redefine it as less zero-sum, less hostile, more composed. A 'belligerent insistence on radical apartness' would be bound to provoke an overreaction from China. It was plain that Beijing would never allow the city to secede after its internationally recognized return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the fruit of a hundred-year wait. What the protesters called 'genuine democracy'—electing an anti-Beijing Chief Executive—was never on the cards. Hong Kong needed a political leadership that was neither a vassal of Beijing nor implacably opposed to it, with the integrity to disagree where necessary, within the bounds of the Basic Law. But Beijing also needed to listen to Hong Kong. 'Excessive self-righteousness' on both sides would only reinforce the vicious circle—driving Hong Kong's struggle to truly explosive proportions, or tempting Beijing to crush its desire for apartness by stamping out the

³⁰ DC, pp. 338–9, 334–5.

very basis for it, eliminating all that was different about Hong Kong. For four years before the final crackdown in 2020, Ci pleaded with the students to rewrite Kant's motto for the Enlightenment—not, 'Think freely, but obey', but 'Think freely, but exercise political restraint.'³¹

Yet if *Democracy in China's* tactical prescriptions emphasized restraint, its diagnosis of the regime pulled no punches. Although the CCP showed no signs of abandoning its talk of socialism, its track record in recent decades was rather that of 'a massive apparatus for private appropriation', not just by corruption but through the perfectly legal entitlements enjoyed by higher officials and their families, allowing them to live 'as a species apart':

What are [the Party's] socialist credentials anyway, other than its organizational continuity with Mao's CCP? Is there indeed still a communist party to speak of, given the inextricable links of the higher levels of its personnel and their relatives to the most powerful domestic capital and capitalists, and given the way it has been treating working people in terms of welfare provision, factor income distribution and protection against the worst ravages of capitalist exploitation?³²

Nevertheless, it could not be concluded that the Party leadership was incapable of steering China onto another course, if its own legitimacy might be stabilized and strengthened in the process. In Ci's periodization, Jiang Zemin's rule in the 1990s had left an ambiguous legacy of 'political liberalization and moral anarchy', in almost equal measure. Under his successor Hu Jintao, the central political leadership (as distinct from state capacity) was at its weakest ever, 'neither loved nor feared', despite the return of repression in Hu's last years. Xi's leadership was definitely more feared, not least inside the Party, though more loved by some as well, at least in the earlier phases of his rule. (While the anti-corruption campaign had positive effects for a number of years, the reintroduction of the 'mass line' has never had much credibility.) Xi

³¹ DC, pp. 340–I, 357, 355, 350, 362, 359, 368. An earlier version of the argument in *Democracy in China's* chapter on Hong Kong was presented at a graduate conference at the University of Hong Kong in March 2016, under the title, 'Democracy in Hong Kong'. The talk was well attended by students active in the democracy movement, but many were left disappointed by Ci's call for political restraint and for advancing change instead at the social and cultural level, captured in what he called 'a democratic way of doing things'.

³² DC, pp. 299–300.

had shown that it was still possible for an authoritative central leadership 'to turn Party and country in a new direction, good or bad'. Xi's choices could be crucial, Ci writes. Yet, 'Objectively speaking, Xi is an extraordinary leader and his is an extraordinary era'—extraordinary in the sense that contradictions which would normally produce 'an irresistible momentum towards fundamental change' were being effectively kept in check. However, there was no reason to believe that he would be followed by an equally extraordinary successor; things were likely to resume a more ordinary course in post-Xi China.³³

The final section of *Democracy in China* turns to the international situation. On the world stage, Ci notes, China's rise appears lopsided: its economic growth and geopolitical clout have not been matched by a corresponding expansion in international legitimacy and respect. In part this is because the 'global political value space' as currently constituted makes democracy, however defined—Ci points elsewhere to the good standing of the *de facto* one-party system in Japan—a central condition for international legitimacy. China's geopolitical headaches largely spring from this 'lopsidedness', he argues, not least when it comes to 'domestic issues in which foreign powers happen to take a special political or geopolitical interest': intractable separatist tendencies in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan have a direct relation to the Chinese state's perceived lack of legitimacy, 'allowing the internal separatists and their external supporters and sympathizers to take the high moral ground'—and thereby 'subtly weakening' whatever sovereignty claims the state has against separatist challenges.³⁴

Yet it would be wrong—indeed, undemocratic—for China to democratize purely at the behest of outside powers. A country's citizens remain the best judges of which political system is most 'fitting'. The external pressure is due in part to the 'political-system hostility' of liberal-democratic states, combining residual Cold War values with normative prescriptions, in a policy of regime change that poses a lethal threat to the CCP—counterproductively, for it warrants a permanent state of emergency and more repressive policies. Deploring such political-system hostility towards China as 'misguided' and 'unbecoming', Ci argues that

³³ DC, pp. 280–81, 300–301, 376.

³⁴ DC, pp. 311–13.

the most salutary and potent means of spurring the PRC's passage to democracy is not moralizing exhortation but 'positive example'. For the genuine egalitarian and democrat, Ci writes, maintaining the conditions for democracy within capitalism must involve a ceaseless struggle: there is no room for the complacent 'other-directed righteousness' that fuels political-system hostility. Democratic mechanisms may degenerate into 'little more than an ideological cover' for a distinctively capitalist form of imperium-dominium. 'It would be a double travesty if such an eviscerated democracy, instead of working to refill itself with democratic substance, turns around to channel what remains of its moral energy into political-system hostility against competitors who happen to be non-democratic.'³⁵

Ci concludes on a note of trepidation. The Chinese leadership is understandably absorbed in the economic and international challenges of the moment, making statesmanlike foresight a luxury. It will be 'prohibitively difficult' for the CCP to give up its habit of taking no one's counsel but its own. How likely is Xi to be willing and able to prepare the way for greater popular agency, before he leaves the political stage? Yet Ci cannot but hope that this will prove wrong. If China's rise can continue without a paralysing crisis, the temptation to move towards democracy for the sake of international legitimacy and to stabilize the system could grow stronger. On the other hand, if a more powerful China is confronted with democracy's further decline, especially—through wars, imperial overreach, a new Gilded Age—in America itself, then all bets would be off.³⁶

2. CONSIDERATIONS

By any measure, Ci's is a remarkable body of work, with few contemporary comparators, East or West—although, in their different ways, both Habermas and Bourdieu might come to mind. Within China, somewhat younger scholars such as Liu Qing (b. 1963), who teaches politics at ECNU, Shanghai, or Yao Yang (b. 1964), a political economist at Peking University, have covered some of the same ground, though neither is as

³⁵ DC, pp. 323, 315-7, 331-2, 324-5.

³⁶ DC, pp. 377-9.

philosophically minded nor as politically outspoken as Ci.³⁷ At the same time, Ci's profile remains relatively low in China; his Baidu page—an equivalent to Wikipedia—is largely in English, and he does not have an entry on Aisixiang, the website that republishes a great deal of work by PRC scholars. His books have been discussed in Anglophone scholarly journals and *Democracy in China* was the subject of a critical symposium in *Dao*, the Hong Kong-based international journal of comparative philosophy, in July 2022. Yet this may be the first attempt at a critical appreciation of his oeuvre as a whole.

Intellectually, the approach and style that Ci has honed since the 1990s represent a distinctive synthesis of tendencies and sources. Just as he is even-handed in his political criticisms of both East and West, he appears equally fluent in each tradition of political philosophy, on which he draws freely and eclectically to guide his reflections. His thought-world is perhaps most formed by Western philosophy, in particular its Continental strain: Nietzsche and Marx especially—the presiding influences on *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution* and the only philosophers to whom Ci devoted entire courses during his teaching career—but also, though more sporadically, Spinoza and Norbert Elias, as well as Freud, Schopenhauer, Adorno and Tocqueville, among others.³⁸ In forging a 'philosopher's way of approaching history', Ci is sparing with empirical description: he is concerned with uncovering the logical conditions and structures of the Chinese experience, not documenting or explaining concrete historical developments (which are more 'often implied than presented in detail', as he has acknowledged).³⁹

Conjugating cool reflection with deeply felt moral principles, interpretive abstraction with lived experience, Ci's lucid books, at once 'free and

³⁷ See for example Liu Qing, 'Liberalism in Contemporary China: Potential and Predicaments', tr. Matthew Galway and Lu Ha, 2013; and Yao Yang, 'The Dilemma of China's Democratization', tr. David Ownby, 2013 [2009]: both available online at *Reading the China Dream*; I'm grateful to David Ownby for indicating the relevance of these scholars' concerns to those of Ci Jiwei.

³⁸ Ci later added a course on Habermas, examining the complex relations between his thinking and that of Marx and Nietzsche. In *The Two Faces of Justice*, noting that he draws 'extensively on Western intellectual discourse', Ci writes that although he does not see himself as belonging to a 'particular school of philosophizing', he thinks that his way of thinking as a whole is more informed by Continental philosophy than by the analytic tradition, on which he also draws.

³⁹ Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, p. 17.

precise', have a striking internal coherence and integrity, as though each must be accepted on its own terms, wholesale—aspiring to a form of intuitive recognition as much as rational persuasion.⁴⁰ At the same time, as a self-described 'principled realist', Ci combines analytic clarity and pragmatism with reformist urgency. His writing, though philosophical and abstracted, is conceived as an attempt to intervene in, as well as to interpret, the situation he diagnoses. Yet his prescriptions, he insists, are circumscribed by what is necessary, 'prudent' and possible given local conditions.

Modes of agency

How should we begin to characterize Ci's thematics? One concept that offers a guiding thread through his thinking is that of agency. The theme played a substantial role in *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, albeit there mostly in the shape of the will to power, forced to express itself 'in the will to nothingness', setting 'a paradisiac future of communism, rationally known to be beyond human reach, above a present doomed forever to be imperfect.'⁴¹ Ci developed the concept further in a 2013 paper theorizing poverty.⁴² Human agency then became the explicit organizing concept of *Moral China*, making this book a pivotal point in the evolving framework of the trilogy. As we have seen, he here differentiated agency-through-identification from agency-through-freedom, identified with the incomplete transition from the dynastic to juridical state. What distinguishes these modes of agency, and the respective moral cultures that facilitate them? First, the degree to which the moral culture permits citizens to form an independent relationship to 'the good'—to think for themselves, rather than follow a moral exemplar (sage rulers, Mao, Xi)—or, as Ci would put it in *Democracy in China*, their capacity to act on the basis of individual responsibility. The normative core of Ci's view, if one

⁴⁰ 'Free and precise' are the terms Ci uses in *Moral China* to describe his freewheeling use of Freud: 'I find his way of thinking and some of his ideas suggestive in a way that allows me to be free and precise at the same time—free with regard to Freud as a source of insights and precise in formulating my own hypotheses'. The passage is striking for Ci's claim that it is immaterial to the validity of his hypotheses whether Freud's ideas are correct or not, whether his own understanding of them is accurate or not, and whether his uses of those ideas are 'appropriate' or not: p. 109.

⁴¹ Ci, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*, p. 195.

⁴² Ci, 'Agency and Other Stakes of Poverty', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 21, 2013.

could call it that, resides in his conviction that the superiority of a properly juridical state to a dynastic one, and therefore of the citizen to the subject, is to be found, first and foremost, in improved forms of agency.⁴³

Ci understands freedom as the room for manoeuvre required for the meaningful exercise of human agency under modern conditions. If the two categories, agency and freedom, have something transhistorical about them, Ci emphasizes that we are speaking about modern times and modern freedoms (quoting Benjamin Constant). This turns freedom from a metaphysical principle into a sociohistorical one: a condition required by agents in modern capitalist societies. It also leaves the content of freedom and agency open, which matters for Ci's purposes. The question of freedom appears as the central motivating thought in *Democracy in China*, from which the subsequent prudential argument for democracy can be taken to derive. Indeed, the argument for democracy may almost appear secondary—as a logical upshot of the question of freedom. Why else would Ci quote at length Spinoza's argument for freedom of thought as a natural property of human beings in a footnote to the discussion of freedom in the chapter on 'democratic preparation'? In this context, freedom matters, first and foremost, as an essential condition for the new moral subjectivity required by changed social conditions, and is necessary too for the robust civil society that would be capable of providing an independent source of social and political stability.

Here again, Bourdieu's enigmatic pointers for thinking against the grain of the state may illuminate Ci's singular perspective. *Moral China's* meditations upon freedom and equality—and the pervasive predispositions towards them that Ci sees in contemporary Chinese society, at least with regard to opportunity, non-discrimination and political rights—seem to have carried him closer to Tocqueville, for whom freedom and equality represent a dialectic value pair (*people are free because they are equal, and equal because they are free*). In Bourdieu's terms, theorizing freedom in the way Ci does is neither 'state thinking' nor 'thought produced by society', since the *de facto* freedoms everyone is in principle encouraged to enjoy as members of the 'moderately prosperous' (*xiaokang*) society are not understood in terms of freedom as a value. In other words, the concepts of freedom and equality—concepts which CCP discourse acknowledges,

⁴³ For all their shared concern with the state, it is their very different conceptions of human agency that set Ci and Bourdieu apart.

at least at face value, as ‘core values of socialism’—may afford Ci a larger space for theorizing than could be found in the shadow of liberal justice. It is this possibility that informs Ci’s repeated focus on what he calls, in a chapter title of *Moral China*, ‘Freedom’s Unfinished Task’.

Justice, too, for Ci, requires the reciprocity of popular agency—‘the socialization of justice’—even as the state remains ‘its sovereign guardian’. Xi Jinping’s ongoing anti-corruption campaign might be a case in point here: while it indicates a real determination to correct decades of state failure in safeguarding even the semblance of reciprocity, it also reveals China’s arduous road ahead in (re)socializing a sense of justice, for which a degree of trust in the state is a structural requirement. The successful management of justice for its citizens is one criterion of the juridical state’s legitimacy, a measure of its capacity to maintain lasting social cohesion. Where it fails to inspire people’s willingness to follow norms, a moral crisis is set in motion. At the onset of such a crisis, intellectual incoherence also emerges as a concomitant symptom. What the state does, what it says it does, and how it inspires people to think and act, tend to fall into disarray.

As one moves from *Dialectic* to *Moral China* to *Democracy in China*, the overcoming of the crisis of the body, not through utopia but through the market, comes at the price of moral subjectivity, with the lack of an effective new ideological order.⁴⁴ In Ci’s view, this has produced an asymmetry between the state’s capacity to rule by force and its inability to lead through moral approval. What makes the Chinese state an ‘almost unthinkable’ object today, therefore, is not simply that it circumscribes the terms with which we can think it—that would be a sign of its successful universalism—but rather that the terms the state continues to use have become floating signifiers without clear objects of identity. At stake here is what Bourdieu would call ‘doxic comprehension’—the ability to take the state for granted, to grasp it as a natural thing.

When China commentators talk of ‘nominal’ Marxism or a ‘nominally’ Communist Party, they suggest that the name has survived the death of

⁴⁴ It is notable that there are no direct references to Confucianism, capitalism or liberalism in the Party’s most recent ‘historical resolution’, entitled *Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century*, released to mark the CCP’s centenary in October 2021. This document is the third of its kind, following Mao’s in 1945 and Deng’s in 1981–82.

its meaning and that the Party bears only a terminological semblance to its founding principles. Ci, for his part, does not take the CCP to task in terms of how *communist* it really is. He, too, accepts the ‘nominal’ reality of its name, yet it is precisely its name that confers real and singular power, underwriting its title to rule. Why else would all the Party’s grand political goals be framed in temporal reference to the revolution—1921, 1949, 2021, 2049? And why else cast even the management of the pandemic in terms of Mao’s concept of people’s war (*renmin zhanzheng*), dating back to 1927? As a political and moral resource, the term is designed as a reminder of the CCP’s historic claim to legitimacy through exceptional victorious struggle. To be sure, the Party has taken the phrase out of its old context, without having to worry that any Chinese speaker would interpret the invocation of *renmin zhanzheng* as a call for class war. Yet it is symptomatic that phraseologies float around at will, with people in official contexts ‘going through linguistic motions’. This lack of intellectual coherence stymies the state’s grand ambition of establishing a universality equal in coherence to that of its adversary across the Pacific. What stands in the way can be captured in the Confucian principle of *zhengming* or ‘rectification of names’, according to which anything real and lasting in the political sphere can only be accomplished once names and language are in accord with truth.⁴⁵

Xi and after

Critics of *Democracy in China* largely converge in charging Ci with excessive optimism about the plausibility of the CCP undertaking reforms that would grant the populace greater political freedom and agency—especially of a kind that might bring an end to its rule.⁴⁶ In his reply to critics, published in *Dao*, Ci reiterated the point that he does not claim that democratization led by an enlightened CCP is likely; what he claims is that the Chinese state will face the prospect of ‘either democratiza-

⁴⁵ Ci invokes the principle of *zhengming* in DC, pp. 108 and 390, n. 10.

⁴⁶ See Joseph Chan, ‘Is Democracy Coming to Knock on China’s Door? Reply to Jiwei Ci’s *Democracy in China*’, *Dao*, July 2022; Sungmoon Kim, ‘Tocqueville between America and China and Democracy’, *Dao*, July 2022; Ci’s reply to both, ‘Democracy in China: Reply to My Critics’, *Dao*, July 2022; Biao Teng, ‘Is China Ready for Democracy?’, *Law & Liberty*, 22 September 2020; Yu-Wen Chen, ‘An Unconventional but Prudent Proposal for China’s Democratization’, *European Political Sciences*, vol. 20, June 2022; Chi Kwok, ‘(Un)realistic Utopia: Rethinking Political Legitimacy, Democracy and Resistance in China’, *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 20, 2021.

tion or crisis'. For Ci, as we have seen, mounting repression cannot be a long-term solution; on the contrary, it merely indicates the growing scale of discontent that needs to be repressed. Ci has addressed these points repeatedly and none of his critics has so far managed to explain why heightened repression is necessary in the first place, or why asking to live without it is not an unreasonable demand. His reviewers may cite the vastly enhanced high-tech capacities of the Chinese state, from its omniscient social-credit system to its DNA collection, biometric tags and facial-recognition programmes; but Ci would not disagree with them about the scope of its 'deterrence effect'.⁴⁷

Indeed, the CCP may have switched, as Eric Hobsbawm observed of communist states more generally, from an epoch powered by the 'engine of revolution' to one driven by the 'engine of conservation'.⁴⁸ Xi Jinping's invocation of the China Dream (*zhongguo meng*), whose substance is 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', may be read as just such a conservation exercise. It is not a dream informed by any socialist conception of 'the good' nor any Marxian project of emancipation. In the terminology of Yang Guangbin, a political scientist and Marxism expert close to the regime, the Chinese party-state has moved from 'seeking change' (*qiubian*) to 'seeking order' (*qiuzhi*).⁴⁹ This paradigm shift to *zhi*, or order, is twofold: a return to the 2,000-year-old civilizational history of China which shows that the Chinese are, according to Yang, 'inherently governance-minded', with the government 'putting the people first' (*renmin zhishang*), a principle derived from the tradition of the Legalist-Confucian state. Yang calls this arrangement 'Confucian outside and Legalist inside', arguing that it is deeply rooted in the Chinese 'cultural gene'. The historical weight of *zhi* is captured in the term *zhizhi* or, as Yang translates it elsewhere, 'making the country politically stable and peaceful'.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ DC, p. 42.

⁴⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century: 1914–1991*, London 1995, p. 368.

⁴⁹ In English, see Yang Guangbin, 'The Paradigm Shift of Political Science from Being "Change-oriented" to "Governance-oriented": A Perspective on History of Political Science', *Chinese Political Science Review*, no. 6, 2021, pp. 506–45; the original article was published in Chinese in 2018. Yang Guangbin is a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Dean of the School of International Studies at Renmin University of China and Chief Expert of the CPC's Marxist Project.

⁵⁰ See the interview summary by Li Chun, 'Yang Guangbin: Why Is Modernization of State Governance Never Equal to Westernization?', *ECNS Wire*, 6 December 2021.

The CCP continues to sell itself, not as the vanguard in the global struggle against capitalism, but as the true representative—the ‘real heroes’, in Mao’s phrase—of the masses, whose interests entirely converge with its own. In 2021, on the occasion of the Party’s centenary, Xi Jinping himself asserted its representational superiority, on the grounds that it had ‘no special interests of its own’—‘it has never represented any individual interest group, power group or privileged stratum.’⁵¹ Whether that is true or not is an empirical matter; but that it needed to be claimed goes to the heart of things, for in the absence of elections some other credible basis for representation has to be found. For some theorists, the solution lies in the Maoist tradition of the ‘mass line’ (*qunzhong luxian*)—consulting the masses, interpreting their will, implementing policies in their interests.⁵² Yet as the political philosopher Lin Chun put it, Xi’s recent attempt to resurrect the concept ‘sounded hollow’—this was a different Party to Mao’s, and the alienation of officials from ‘the masses’ was an everyday experience: ‘families of the “red aristocracy” and the new elites have enriched themselves at an unprecedented speed and scale by devouring state resources and colluding with private (domestic and foreign) capital.’⁵³

‘Fairness’ as a fix?

Critics of Ci’s realist hope-against-hope for the self-reform of the state also need to deal with his argument that China’s new ‘equality of conditions’, brought about by Maoist egalitarianism and Dengist economic liberalization, will lead to pressure for political liberalization—a view shared by many policymakers in the West, between roughly 1992 and 2012, although they would deny Mao any credit. A standard criticism is that ‘equality of conditions’ is belied by China’s soaring *inequality* of incomes; but, as we have seen, Ci’s case allows for this. A more serious objection might be that, Xi’s denials notwithstanding, the CCP has

⁵¹ In English, see ‘Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Speech on the CCP’s 100th Anniversary’, *Nikkei Asia*, 1 July 2021.

⁵² The CCP’s official position on representation has for the past twenty years been summed up in the concept of the Three Represents. Proponents of a revived ‘mass line’ include Daniel Bell and Wang Pei, *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World*, Princeton 2020; Tongdong Bai, *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case*, Princeton 2020.

⁵³ Lin Chun, ‘Mass Line’, in Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, eds, *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*, London and New York 2019, p. 125.

acquired proto-class interests that would prevent it from conceding the Polanyian social protections against the market that Ci's 'preparations for democracy' require. Conceptually, Ci's work allows for such a pushback by the CCP. His prudential argument for democracy on the basis of social 'fittingness' draws upon the mechanism of the spillover effect that Jon Elster had detected in Tocqueville.⁵⁴ This posits that a pattern of behaviour in one sphere of life may be expected to spill over into others; here, consumer freedoms rippling into the political sphere. But the state may also attempt to block the spillover by using what Elster called the compensation effect. For Ci, as we have seen, an example would be what happened in the wake of 4 June 1989, when the Chinese state satisfied the hedonistic demands underlying the democracy movement with ever-increasing abundance, sufficient to block the political aspirations of the time. Linked to the strategy of hedonistic compensation—for Ci, always a strategy of buying time—is Elster's 'crowding-out effect', which diverts energies devoted to one end towards another; in Ci's adaptation, desire for democracy was diverted into desire for more money (the underlying Nietzschean idea is that people's energy is as flexible as it is limited).

The proliferation of the term 'fairness' (*gongping*), which has permeated both official parlance and everyday speech in recent years, might thus be read as a last discursive resort—an attempt to buy time by promoting a value which, while it does not make any direct demand, can function as a close enough proxy for one to delay the spillover effect. In Xi Jinping's *The Governance of China*, a much-reissued collection of his speeches, 'fairness' appears no fewer than eighty times.⁵⁵ The importance of the idea, unthinkable and unnecessary under Mao, is an index of the ideological outlook of the contemporary CCP. Neither a traditional value nor a foundational Marxist-Leninist principle, fairness became the perfect normative fit for the party-state and for a society subject to free-market laws. Free-market fairness, its advocates must be aware, is never really fair, just as the market is never really free. But the useful amorphousness of the term appears to satisfy the political needs of the moment.

⁵⁴ Jon Elster, *Alexis de Tocqueville, the First Social Scientist*, Cambridge 2009, esp. Chapter One; the notion of a neofunctionalist spillover mechanism had been discussed by Ernst Haas in *The Uniting of Europe* (1958).

⁵⁵ While it should be noted that 'democracy', 'equality' and 'freedom' also appear dozens of times in Xi's *Governance of China* and in official CCP discourse, these terms that also appear in Marx, whereas 'fairness' does not.

The rise of fairness goes hand in hand with the promotion of ‘common prosperity’ (*gongtong fuyu*), whose positive meaning has been left carefully vague. Beijing’s policy advisers have made clear that ‘common prosperity’ is not about building an egalitarian or welfare state, nor ‘robbing the rich to help the poor’; the point is rather to bake ‘a bigger and better cake’.⁵⁶ Yet the quasi-Rawlsian emphasis on fairness may eventually prove both a blessing and a curse. While ‘fairness’ can assign positive value to competitive inequalities—if they can be shown to be ‘fair’, which they almost always can—it might also open a Pandora’s box of struggles for real equality. China’s fast-growing private sector now accounts for almost 90 per cent of urban employment (up from 18 per cent in the mid-1990s), while the gig-economy is projected to double its current work force of 200 million—a quarter of China’s entire labour force—to 400 million workers by 2036. How the regime governs this informal sphere of the labouring masses, mostly made up of migrant workers who enjoy neither fairness nor freedom, could prove its Achilles heel.

Ci’s prudential case for democratic reform is motivated by his sense that the coming crisis will be contained only at unbearable cost. His (slender) hope that the Party will understand that such reform is in its own interest must wrestle with the reality that the CCP still enjoys an impregnable monopoly of physical violence. Ci’s case builds on the sobering lessons learned from China’s last serious push for democracy in 1989, when students, workers and intellectuals failed in their efforts to orient protest and rhetoric towards any unified political outcome. By contrast, the intransigent elderly elite, with its hold over the military, united under Chen Yun’s slogan: ‘We the veteran comrades must step forward boldly’—‘we must never make concessions.’⁵⁷

That the Party once possessed democratic senses of its own is evident from its history. China’s pre-war tradition of democratic discourse, from which the CCP’s own founding members had once emerged as the radicals prizing revolution over reform, has no lack of resources in the writings of Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, Zhang Dongsun, Zhang Junmai and others. The urgency of Ci’s arguments for reform, palpable on every page of his books, is not, however, a reliable measure of the degree

⁵⁶ ‘China’s Common Prosperity Boon to World’, *Xinhua News*, 21 December 2021.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Merle Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China: Political Reform in the Deng Xiaoping Era*, Cambridge 1994, p. 327.

to which the Party may actually be willing to change itself.⁵⁸ Failing that, China's democratic imaginary has been transformed from a head without a body, a century ago, to a body—the moderately prosperous society—without a head. How well, how soon and in what way the pressure for democracy may yet give rise to a decisive phase of regime transformation remains a matter of political speculation. Ci places the burden of responsibility for change primarily on the shoulders of the ruling elite; he thereby also directs the discussion away from apolitical moral righteousness toward hard questions of political possibility under China's current conditions.

Beginning in *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution* and continuing with *Moral China*, Ci diagnosed a psychological-moral crisis with identifiable roots in social mismanagement and political misjudgement, understood as the historical movement from utopianism to nihilism and hedonism. With *Democracy in China*, Ci has come to think China's crisis from the other side, perhaps manifesting the kind of deterministic prognosis, or *Zwangsprognose*, that Koselleck identified in French revolutionary philosophies of history, beginning with the Abbé de Raynal.⁵⁹ To the degree that there is an air of determinism in Ci's late thought, it is not one of moralizing utopianism, the dangers and failures of which had been laid bare in *Dialectic*, but one of political consonance and the logic of human agency, pulling Chinese society in the direction of freedom and equality. But to what end, one might ask, given that these proclaimed values have more often than not turned out to be disguises for their very opposite? Ci's answer must be: for a better totality. This new totality would add public-political design to what has already come about at the level of ordinary life. It would therefore achieve much greater ideological potency than the current situation has to offer, or can be expected to offer, if China's route—real and imaginary—to a superior political arrangement is blocked by design, by misadventure, or by another disastrous combination of the two.

⁵⁸ An old political wisdom from John Dunn, *The Politics of Socialism: An Essay in Political Theory*, Cambridge 1984, p. 21.

⁵⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise, Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*, Frankfurt 1976, pp. 146–7.