

## BOOK REVIEW

Daniel F. Vukovich,  
*Illiberal China:*

*The Ideological Challenge of the People's Republic of China*  
(Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

*Jay Ke-Schutte, Colorado State University*

Throughout his intellectual project French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) maintained the axiom that the social functions (not functionalisms) that were quintessential in the maintenance of social structures (however dynamic) were best studied at the points of social friction where conventional orders—political, medical, infrastructural—broke down. If we understand Euro-American liberalism and neoliberalism as mutually-constitutive formations of a now-conventionalized global political order—ethical, discursive, and economic—then Chinese illiberalism would seem to represent one such point of political breakdown. Here, Daniel F. Vukovich presents what should be understood as a discursive sociology of contemporary liberal discourse. His book, *Illiberal China: The Ideological Challenge of the People's Republic of China* should not only be required reading for any course attempting to understand Chinese politics as a material-discursive formation within the contemporary world. It should be a required text for any social theory curriculum aiming to genuinely provincialize genealogies of political and philosophical liberalism that continue to view Rousseau, Locke, and Mill as intellectual progenitors of liberal thought; as well as interrupting postwar developmentalism's narrative—via Walt Whitman Rostow (1960 [1960]) and his descendants—of an uninterrupted continuation of liberalism as the ethical underpinning of universal democracy.

At the same time, *Illiberal China* demonstrates the political possibilities of cultural pluralism that the proposition of China in the world entails (Wang 2013). In this sense, without needing to say as much, the manuscript presents a realistic “cultural translation:” one that critically challenges the political monolingualism of liberal discourse as contested by Chinese and Euro-American thinkers who nonetheless share the conceptual formation of liberalism even while they engage its entailed discursive universe from radically different ideological domains. In this sense *Illiberal China* methodologically unsettles a post-structural common sense that has created a pathological avoidance of social interactions, local definitions, and experiences of structure that subjects and publics depend upon even while these formations slip the grip of the Derridean literary analyst, the postmodern ethnographer, or the Foucauldian historian. As a post-structural affectation, so-called cultural intranslatability does not account for the pragmatics of meaning-making across scales that typify humans' materially-transformative species being—where this

transformation includes discursive, translational, and reflexive materialities (Marx 1844 [1844]). To this end, Vukovich demonstrates—particularly in Chapters 2 and 3—how discreet intellectual publics like the New Left movement and the CCP ideologues are fundamentally concerned with liberalism as a point of both contestation and mutual recognition between the political Sinosphere and Western soft power matrix. Here, Vukovich elegantly articulates a dialectical framing of liberalism's nuanced ideological contours in the Chinese political context:

Liberalism as a political worldview, for its own part, is much more than a minor tradition, one highly unlikely to overtake ‘socialism,’ let alone neo-Confucianism or a more vague but real notion of ‘Chinese tradition.’ It is the communist revolution as well as ‘tradition’ that grants the Party-state its legitimacy at an admittedly abstract but still substantial and effective level. The revolution and the Party-state are not under threat by liberalism in the political sense, but may well be endangered by the economic market liberalism or economism of the state. Indeed political liberalism's only future in China, other than waiting for some mystical convergence or implosion of the Party-state, would have to be within the single Party-state system, a la notions of a liberal socialism or Confucian liberalism and so on. But political liberalism as a discourse of rights and new future laws to come is still in play within China, and of course globally, where it forms the general intellectual political culture despite the triumph of clearly reactionary forms of neo- or contemporary liberalism.” (Vukovich 2019, 9)

In Chapter 2, Vukovich recontextualizes the political tensions of Chinese liberalism through a thoughtful exploration and juxtaposition of the liberal-critiques of Yan Yuhai and Wang Hui—two central figures of the still-poorly-understood New Left intellectual movement in China. He does so by casting their ideas within intellectual Maoism's discursive contemporaneity and follows this up with an extensive excavation of liberalism's Chinese intellectual genealogies in Chapter 3. Here, he points to the emergence and denouement of political liberalism during the Maoist era, noting that “[the] ‘case’ of China helps illustrate

a global point: the weakening and degradation of liberalism, the rise of economism and de-politicized politics in place of an actual or socialistic left.” Scaling up to the persistence of this dialectic of liberalism in the seemingly exceptional context of Hong Kong—explored in Chapters 4-6—he is careful to note, almost voicing Carl Schmitt (2007 [1932]), that “this global condition is also in itself co-produced, determined by the fate of Chinese politics during and after the revolution.” (Vukovich 2019, 89)

Chapters 4-6 turn their attention to a key battleground for Sino-Western contestations of liberal thought: Hong Kong. Written prior to the current political crisis in Hong Kong, Vukovich’s book seems to have anticipated many of the political impasses that have emerged during, and in the lead-up to, the Hong Kong protests: Most fundamentally, that there is a serious misrecognition of the political, social, and historical entailments of liberalism in China on the part of numerous factions of Western journalists and academics purporting to be China Experts. Many of these commentators—often attaining brief area studies-sponsored training within privileged academic spaces such as Oxbridge and the Ivy Leagues—found themselves at a loss to speak about, let alone provide an analysis of, obvious contradictions in this social movement. After initially lending unconditional support for Hong Kong protesters, many of these Western experts suddenly balked at the illiberal racism, chauvinism, and misogyny perpetuated through various forms of violence on the part of protestors: often mediated through co-texts of Trumpism, colonial nostalgia, as well as extreme anti-poor and anti-mainland xenophobic discrimination. Various so-called China experts were at a loss explaining the clear, empirically demonstrable, contradictions emerging out of the protests. Beyond anecdotal what-about-isms on every side of the political spectrum, the experts could provide little substance beyond accusations that everyone was suddenly perpetuating “fake news.” By contrast Vukovich’s dialectical account, and historical excavation of a contradictory (il)liberalism in Hong Kong not only demonstrates the persistent dynamics of practice and contradiction at play in this political theater, but also why Hong Kong matters as a discursive space to unsettle Western intuitions about the universality of liberal-illiberal dualism.

Reconciling or at least accounting for the persistence of these political contradictions in Hong Kong, Chapters 4-6 of *Illiberal China* stand in stark contrast against what is quickly becoming a moron-athon of misinformation dominating Western China-Hong Kong commentary and expertise. A reason often provided for this misinformation is that there are too few competent Western analysts and political commentators writing from and within the Chinese academic context. This is fundamentally untrue. There are many. However, their work—like Vukovich’s book—does not cite seemingly-conventional genealogies of Western China studies, nor do they convey convenient ethnographic or policy tropes: be they cultural exceptionalism (perpetuating the inscrutable East) or political universalism (spatial- and techno-fixes like world systems theory or developmentalism). Between these supposedly “publishable” tropes, texts like *Illiberal China* are attempting something like a deep reading of the Chinese political consciousness. They tell

a very different story about the discursive infrastructure being contested in post-socialist and post-Cold War worlds.

### Chapter Summaries

While my review has focused on critical theoretical engagements of *Illiberal China*, I should emphasize that the content chapters of the book skillfully combine historical method, literature analysis, political theory as well as contemporary journalistic critique in supporting Vukovich’s overall intervention.

Chapter 1 is an extensive roadmap of the book as well as an orderly literature review of an, often cacophonous, debate about Chinese liberalism and its Western others.

Chapter 2 is a dialectical history of Chinese (il)liberalism in the shadow of orientalism, Maoism, and post-Cold War globalism. It contextualizes the stakes of contemporary Sino-Western liberalist debates within the politics of history. In doing so, Vukovich articulately explores an uncomfortable, but crucial, tension between the analytical standpoints of New Qing Historians, and thinkers of the Chinese New Left.

Chapter 3 extends the discussion of the previous chapter, emphasizing the ways in which contemporary dialectical negations of illiberal pasts—exploring the foundations of Tiananmen, Deng-ism, and Maoist genealogies of Chinese liberalism—ultimately engender (il)liberalism’s haunting of unimaginable political alternatives in contemporary China.

Chapter 4 explores the ways in which Hong Kong is not only a point of political breakdown in understanding the contradictions of Chinese liberalism, but is also a place where the contradictions within Western liberalism become apparent. As suggested at the outset of the review, this Vukovich’s Durkheimian recourse to points of social/political breakdown as indexing and explicating central concerns, is very much in the spirit of the book’s overall approach.

Chapter 5 similarly undertakes a dialectical analysis of the 2011 Wukan uprising as a political counterpoint to the Hong Kong Umbrella revolution. Here, Vukovich powerfully explores key contrasts of these social movements in relation to an often neglected issue contemporary Euro-American humanistic scholarship on Chinese social movements: property ownership and property relations.

Chapter 6 concludes with a return to the political present that underlines the limits of a Sino-centric liberal discourse with Chinese characteristics, as well as the expediency of such limits, that China’s “resistance to liberalism may, in short, have spared it from becoming fully neo-liberal” (ibid, 226). In this chapter, however, Vukovich also suggests that dialectical contradictions immanent in liberal negations leave the door open to new forms of political hope:

But as Bertolt Brecht once said, in the contradiction lies the hope. There is a fundamental contradiction between the need to retain the centralized, managing

state and achieve that ‘socialism’ or ‘modest prosperity’ for all, on the one hand, and to ‘use’ global capitalism and private capital without being overtaken by them on the other hand. This can in turn be framed as a contradiction between illiberalism and liberalism, and between re-politicization (of the Party-state) and de-politicization. (ibid, 228)

### *Conclusion and Questions*

*Illiberal China* raises and answers many questions around the theorization of liberalism, including the following: “What are the consequences for politics or ‘the political?’ How might we think differently about Chinese politics and political discourses in particular? Can we take post-Mao politics seriously? What are Chinese (or global) politics in a bleak age of (attempted) de-politicization? What if liberalism was the problem, not the solution? In sum, how to interpret Chinese politics and what we think we know?” (Vukovich 2019, viii) Considering breadth of these inquiries, it is obvious that the scale of *Illiberal China* is fairly galactic. For this reason, my review has focused on the ideological stakes of *Illiberal China* as a work of critical theory and genealogy. As such, the book provides an important prelude to establishing a more pluralistic genealogy of political and social theory between Chinese and Euro-American intellectual theaters – one that can generate conversations and terms of debate that are not undermined by political monolingualism, on the one hand, and cultural fetishism masquerading as translational nihilism, on the other. Rather than calling for a provincialization or discursive occlusion of western thought, *Illiberal China* calls for a de-provincialization of Chinese engagement with a shared, yet plural, political domain. Explicating the centrality of the shared-but-plural political, *Illiberal China* thus invites the genuinely postcolonial researcher of post-socialism to take its intellectual project further: “Thinking through politics is too important to leave to the ‘scientists,’ or to the humanists who would replace the political with the ethical and individual.” (Vukovich 2019, viii)

As a junior scholar aiming to take-up such imperatives, I find myself asking the following questions:

1) *Illiberal China* is certainly written in the spirit of immanent critique and in its approach embraces elements of a dialectical materialist method. This is clear in the

ways in which dialectical tensions emerge in your style throughout. Do you feel that readers of dialectical forms of writing are in decline?

- 2) If this is the case, beyond recourse to sympathetic disciplines, are immanent critiques of **political discourse** going to remain possible in academic contexts where readers are no longer able to identify and/or read dialectical texts?
- 3) Your book clearly identifies Chinese political discourse as a challenge to Euro-American postwar political liberalism – as understood in ethical and economic terms. However, one of the points you make is that Chinese liberalism is already contested in China, but on completely different political grounds. Do you think that this liberal pluralism or non-alignments is completely homegrown, or is it also informed by China’s relationship with Third World histories and the decolonization of the Global South?

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## Response

*Daniel F. Vukovich, Hong Kong University*

First, thank you very much for bringing out the dialectical mode in this book and also the connection to Durkheim and the problem/realities of functionalism. And thanks for the generous review and provocative questions, period.

*Illiberal China is certainly written in the spirit of immanent critique and in its approach embraces elements of a dialectical materialist method. This is clear in the ways in which dialectical tensions emerge in your style throughout. Do you feel that readers of dialectical forms of writing are in decline?*

I do think classical social theory and the sociological imagination as Mills put it are sorely missing from area/Asian studies, at least in my observation. And from the humanities for that matter. As for dialectical writing, outside the signal exceptions of say Fred Jameson and Žižek (a vulgar one perhaps but not without his positive moments), these have never been popular. This is so for many reasons (one is that it takes more time to read let alone to write; another is the way that “doing theory” often means applying it like gobs of lumpy paste on top of your prose). But I think there are still readers for it, though perhaps less in China studies since these have been largely immunized from theory and from the questioning of universality and from self-consciousness about method and writing the Other. (I should add that I don’t think dropping a few buzzwords or making up terms here and there, hopefully accurately, counts.) There is also the essentially social science nature of area studies as well—it is far more likely to be empiricist and anti-interpretive than anything else (of course they do not actually escape interpretation, as if facts and archives speak for themselves, but this is a separate story). Likewise for the discipline of history in my view—it has become (remained?) powerfully conventional, just as literary and film studies have retrenched and returned to new forms of formalism and textualism. The conventional, traditional disciplines are not to be sneered at. But inter-disciplinarity has to be part of dialectical analysis, and part of cultural studies for that matter (which is where I would situate my work despite it being centrally concerned with China and the discursive field of China studies). Ah well. In an age of precarious funding and employment, let alone the end of ‘good’ liberalism, it isn’t surprising that this happens. Are theory and method actually taught much? And who wants to push boundaries, analytically or otherwise, in an age of no jobs and corporate managerialism even where there are university jobs? One of the best, if depressing, keywords of recent times has been “precarity.” This is at work even amongst the relatively privileged professoriate. As a group we tend to be deeply conformist to begin with.

*If this is the case, beyond recourse to sympathetic disciplines,*

*are immanent critiques of political discourse going to remain possible in academic contexts where readers are no longer able to identify and/or read dialectical texts?*

Let’s hope so! We need more, not fewer nuanced takes and analyses of the politics of China, of China and the “west,” of Hong Kong, and of the world more generally. But in my view this is more complicated by the fact that we’ve long passed the point where we can make some intellectual ethic or “method” in refusing to take positions, or not actually “risking” critique and strong arguments. Nothing is as un-nuanced and reductive and, dare I say it, as cowardly as refusing to generalize or refusing to take a stand analytically as much as politically. That is what I find reductive and what I take to be a sign of a degraded yet hegemonic “liberalism,” just as this has long been a standard critique of the influence of Derrida and “pomo.”

The only strong position you are allowed, nay encouraged to take is to condemn the contemporary PRC under Xi Jinping (i.e. Chinese politics and the Party-state). (Not that the Maoist era fared much better.) Well that’s fine and even necessary in many cases—I’ve done it myself—but what would a dialectical or immanent critique of Chinese politics be like? Is there any “positive” moment to be mined and thought through? To an extent this *has* happened with Chinese Maoism and the revolution, though even this to me sometimes tastes like weak tea and stops short of analyzing the Chinese / Maoist state very much. This small salvage job in regards to the revolution usually takes the form of a statement like “Mao wasn’t a total monster” or “it was socialist in some good, recognizable ways, or trying to be” or “it was successful in unintentional ways.” This is basically the progressive liberal view from the Cold War. It isn’t wrong, exactly. But when we get to the post-Tiananmen era it gets far trickier to both write and then publish a dialectical take on Chinese politics, or global politics and the conjuncture in relation to the PRC. (It is very tough to sort out and then to get it through reviews and into print. But it worked for me and we don’t need to stop trying).

Taking China seriously mostly means condemning it (at the very least the Party-state, the leaders, the system and its adherents and legitimacy, or in a word the illiberalism or authoritarianism). But is that it? If so, then there isn’t much to do or say anymore. Except maybe mine some archive or throw up facts upon facts. Or find a dissident that you like. Or talk about fractions of the demographic that meet your expectations. What I am trying to point to here is very much an intellectual and scholarly issue, not just (or not even) a political and ethical one. It goes beyond “China model” discussions within the mainland as well (though unlike many foreign scholars I am not offended by this line of inquiry). To what extent can we learn

anything useful or “interesting” or illuminating from the Chinese state or Chinese politics? It seems like we only get nil replies, or negative examples (the total surveillance state, data domination, etc.).

Well, I tried to produce some thoughts and descriptions in another direction— not simply to praise the Party-state and the intellectual political culture of the P.R.C. (and me saying this is a mandatory aside) but mining its refusal of liberalism on the one hand and its entanglement with it (economically) on another. I do think we need to think of non- or anti- liberal futures. Why? Because it is liberalism—not its absence but the thing itself—more than anything else that has brought us here, in what is a nightmare of a global conjuncture in terms of the environment and inequality. Most people tend to blame the state (or “brainwashing” in so many words) instead but this seems to me a very Anglo-American way of looking at things, as is “our” resolute and near-total focus on individual and negative liberties.

So globally we have a degradation of liberalism (and party/political systems and so on), as folks like Mark Blyth have been detailing so brilliantly for years now. But vis-à-vis China we have another bad thing to deal with, which is The Vortex. I mean in terms of “debate” and academic and intellectual politics. In my own experience the real problem comes from academics and intellectuals who fancy themselves on the left or at least as some type of self-professed ‘radical’ liberals or democrats and freedom-lovers. It’s like Twitter and social media have poisoned academic or reasoned discourse. The China field, if I may say so, has always been literally and metaphorically very close to the media sphere and its terms and discourses. This isn’t a bad thing but it behooves us to not reproduce media discourse. I had an interesting experience getting mobbed/cyberattacked on Facebook by some liberal anti-communist or anti-regime type colleagues because I wrote a local newspaper editorial saying we needed to have more, better, and not one-sided conversations about mainland politics and HK-mainland relations, on campuses. Teach the problem, in short. I was called everything from a “shill for the CCP for years now” by Rebecca Karl to “an ideologue currying favor with the new regime” by Shih Shu Mei. I have no idea what new regime she meant but it was probably that of the new HKU president Zhang Xiang, a China-born but American citizen by the way, and one whom some people are convinced is all but a Chinese spy. Which is funny, to goofily Redbait me like that, when I am marginalized within the university—even in my own division—since I’m an outlier who does not write or think like a typical Hongkonger or expat.

Well, other than academics behaving badly like Twitter keyboard warriors, what my anecdote indexes is precisely that vortex. It is easy to get sucked into it and needless to say it has no patience for dialectical or slow thinking. Intense Sinophobia and closing of ranks, which is to say of *their* ranks not of “ours” since there really is no cabal of spies and academics on the CCP payroll either at my employer or elsewhere (outside of the mainland of course, ha!). There are relatively few of us who don’t take it as our imaginary mission to wage a symbolic war against the Party-state and yet who still teach and write about

the P.R.C. and politics and globalization. It can be a nasty scene, especially for people whom are vulnerable in their employment or who dare to push the envelope a little bit in their writing and work. Suffice it to say that hiring and promotion processes here, in a city which fancies itself the paragon of fairness and rule of law and virtuous liberalism, are very much caught up in this vortex and in the old colonial systems. (I have my own stories but I know of several more). Unless you actually worked and lived here you wouldn’t know it is not “Beijing” behind all the bad stuff happening in the territory, but the entrenched Hong Kong power-holders and vested interests— expat or native but very much Hongkongers. Hong Kong *versus* the mainland is not a good way to begin an analysis, or a politics, or a university in this little territory.

As we have seen with the recent Hong Kong protests of 2019 and now with the Covid-19 pandemic and China’s role and place within it, everything turns on a “freedom versus authoritarianism” binary. As well as good old fashioned Sinological-orientalism. It is like Foucault and the capillary and positive/productive notions of power never happened. When you start from here it is virtually impossible to be dialectical or substantive, isn’t it?

This freedom/authoritarianism (or friend/enemy) dyad is hardly new, nor is Sinophobia, anti-communist or anti-regime knowledge production, and so on. But things have changed with the irresistible rise of China and with Xi in particular, and now with the Hong Kong event, the Xinjiang crackdown, with Covid-19 and who knows what next. The vortex is real and it changes the scope and power of this binary/dyad. Of course I am very much speaking from Hong Kong, which is intensely anti-PRC, but I think it is similar elsewhere. You simply can’t take the wrong side of it. What are you, a nationalist or a “shill” or a so-called Tankie? The PRC and Xi are the enemies now—I mean even for the field and certainly for the self-described Western left. You have to condemn them. You have to take Hong Kong’s side (i.e. the nativist or anti-PRC side). You have to support Tsai Ing-Wen. Well I see Xi as a conservative “traditionalist” patriarch; it is fairly obvious isn’t it? The problem is that there is this “great moving right show” as Stuart Hall put it about the 1980s. And in their urge to make sure they are condemning the PRC and Xi just as much as Trumpism (this time, problematic others within the working class I suppose), few analysts have noticed how much more narrow the political-ideological spectrum has continued to become.

So we are now fine with allowing or denying the obvious and abundant racism and nativism within the 2019 protests, the appeals to Trump to save Hong Kong, the anti-immigration politics, the adoption of alt-right symbols like “Pepe the Frog,” and so on. Or these are immediately dismissed as a small minority within the movement and insignificant. How convenient. Wish that it were true, but it plainly, obviously isn’t. Do people think it is some weird China-owned media conspiracy literally broadcasting and publishing this abundant visual and other evidence of reactionary, racialized “democratic” struggle? The very logic of the movement is, or has become, anti-immigrant and xenophobic if not flat out ‘racist’ (albeit within the same ‘race’ of course), as we now see

in the “yellow” boycott of “blue” businesses, the no-Mandarin allowed restaurants, and so on. Huge amounts of atavistic nihilism and self-destructiveness in the “burnism” or Hunger Games fantasy promulgated by, it must be said, young male leaders or ‘intellectuals’ within the movement like Joshua Wong. Discrimination on the basis of origin or imagined ethnicity (or imagined political views) is ok, because you are on the right side of the freedom/authoritarianism dyad. Never mind the fact that we’re talking, in regard to yellow versus blue economies, about which labor-exploiting, fully capitalist business to support on the basis of, at best, some imagined community. Well, “be water” sounds cool until you realize that the water is brown and not fit for drinking. Unless you don’t mind the taste of racism and xenophobia.

The real question is why do (or why did) people within and outside Hong Kong keep denying or ignoring the racist/racialized logic and instead keep promoting/extolling/tweeting the movement when it is clearly dominated by clearly objectionable practices and sentiment. That is not exactly dialectical, to stick to our term of discussion here, and has much to do with the vortex. These bad aspects of the recent movement are not a side show; and they also control the narrative and discourse in that it is what the government and presumably the liaison office are going to respond to now (and are). The ‘movement logic’ that mandates no criticism of such things from within, even by people whom should and do know better (progressive, liberal minded intellectuals) has been a huge mistake and even a gift to the government on both sides of the border. (But historical liberalism has always been rooted in hierarchy and exclusion and duplicity.) What is a side show, as far as I can see, are the more progressive aspects of the protests—e.g. the involvement of a few migrant worker aka foreign domestic helper groups.

None of this is surprising if you know the contexts. What did people expect? People can only take up what is culturally available to them as belief, narrative, knowledge. And Hong Kong is indeed a “failed” state and a state of precarity for many people. So there is a lot of bad affect out there too, getting articulated to xenophobia, Sinophobia, or ‘civics lesson’ style liberalism at best. But what we simply must do is try to account for and *hold on to the complexities of the event and scene in this part of the world and globally*. Whitewashing it does not help any more than moralistically, patriarchally pretending it is merely a few bad apples plus National Endowment for Democracy funds, and elsewhere everything is more or less fine.

In so far as the government can be forced to do something proactively to improve peoples’ livelihood – as a response to the anti-ELAB uproar and ironically as a response to mainland pressures to do so as well -- then this may yet turn out, some years down the line, to have been a good moment in Hong Kong/Chinese/global history. That would be nicely dialectical indeed. But it is just as likely that nothing much will get done due to legislative filibusters and the Basic Law being an anachronism now but one that won’t go away soon.

The other thing is that even if Xi and the Party-state are guilty of everything people imagine them to be, we still need to make

sense of the PRC and of the world with China in it, and we need to do this in more complex and challenging ways than those offered up by the authoritarian/freedom binary and the feel-good game of playing both sides. Condemning both the West and China and occupying a happy shiny pure ‘third’ space. Playing both sides so you always come out on top. I don’t find this either cosmopolitan or ‘internationalist,’ but a cheat. It reminds me of what Edward Said said about “positional superiority” as a heuristic that preserves the dominant discourse and keeps the unfamiliarity and otherness of “the Orient” in the closet. On the other hand, having been in Hong Kong so long perhaps I just like to make things inordinately complicated [laughter].

*Your book clearly identifies Chinese political discourse as a challenge to Euro-American postwar political liberalism – as understood in ethical and economic terms. However, one of the points you make is that Chinese liberalism is already contested in China, but on completely different political grounds. Do you think that this liberal pluralism or non-alignments is completely homegrown, or is it also informed by China’s relationship with Third World histories and the decolonization of the Global South?*

I do think the anti-liberalism or “illiberalism” of China today can be connected to these earlier, communist and radical, alternative worldviews in China and around the former Third World. As a spectre or bit of shady aftermath. Which is to say it was and perhaps still is influenced by those places and those anti-colonial, anti-imperial struggles. Does this inform its superior terms of trade—as compared to the USA or past World Bank, IMF mandates—in its various and massive investment projects abroad? Maybe! I think it may help explain why the PRC is so sensitive to it being criticized as acting imperialistically in its borders/peripheries and in its trade projects in Africa, in the Belt-Road, and so on. Unfortunately it does indeed act that way in some cases—for one example, towards the Philippines in the South Pacific sea. In any case we would do well to invoke its past in these ways more often, that it used to be a point of pride for the PRC *as* the PRC to be non-aligned, pro-Third World, and anti-imperialistic.

If we go back to the 1970s and earlier we can see not only a different, non-degraded form of liberalism (Keynesianism, tolerance of different views or a weaker ‘universality,’ and so on) we see the genesis of the entire “another world is possible” vision that used to subtend the world social forum. I mean, even the good, decent, tolerant, non-economistic liberalism of many decades ago was not seen as all that inspiring or the goal. I mean outside the world of Nehru’s India and Congress Party, which in a way just serves to illustrate the deep connections between liberalism and modern colonialism (and of course Hong Kong was and is another example).

I do think the critique of universalism within China—intellectual circles, official circles, and popular ones—stems in part from this past as well (the struggle against imperialism and eurocentrism or chauvinism), which is to say it stems from the non-Western world or global South. Of course the critique of universalism can and does take many forms in China and

elsewhere, and can end up as nationalism of the left or right, as xenophobia or racism, and so on. This raises a host of issues that won't be resolved here or in this interview space. I would just add that the dialectic of the universal and particular isn't going away and yet we must be ruthless in exposing the exclusions and self-contradictions within universalism (which is to say, of liberal universalism). But again, the P.R.C.'s refusal/critique/disinterest in liberalism (even as it paradoxically embraces liberal or modern economism) is to me of great interest politically and intellectually as we try to understand the current global mess and potential ways forward for we benighted humans.

Clearly a liberal regime and polity—in the contemporary world anyway—would not have done what the PRC did to flatten the curve of Covid-19. It upset Giorgio Agamben, or so I have heard, and many others objected to the “illiberal” quarantining of Wuhan and Hubei. But it stands revealed as the only effective response (at a large state level anyway), so far, and has no doubt turned on saving lives more than saving individual liberties to “do what I want.” Of course it also begins with the unnecessary and unfortunate repression of Li Wenliang (now an official martyr, unsurprisingly, and to speak of dialectics again). It has become clear since I wrote the book that Xi Jinping and the Party have become more intolerant of free speech and dissent, even as it has acted with relative restraint in Hong Kong. This is to be criticized, as always, and yet it does not exhaust the potentialities and dare we say it the dialectical and “guerilla” method of the state. Perhaps if the Party-state does not in theory need to initially repress a Li Wenliang in order to tackle the virus and mobilize the state's capacities and people, we could also say that the liberal critics do not need to condemn the latter, good “statist” governance, in order to make its criticisms of the former, more reactionary illiberalism.

Would that it were so easy. But dialectics do not work so tidily and we probably have to deal with the “dumb” repression and the “dumb” libertarian bent as being of whole cloth in their own systems and contexts. There is much more to explore about what Chinese politics might offer us to learn or rethink, be they contentious politics or mainstream or somewhere in between, than I have done in this book, which is meant to stimulate debate and re-orientation, but also as a cleansing operation, so to speak. Liberalism has to be interrogated and situated historically, and this shouldn't even need saying. It is also in my view what has led us here, and therefore needs to be left behind as a discourse and whole set of assumptions. This book was also a place for me to work out some things, which is what books always are before they are let loose into the world and become their own, and others' things.