

FORUM: HISTORY AND THE PRESENT

# Always Already and Never Yet: Does China Even Have a Present?

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## Abstract

*This essay traces how China's changing presents have been represented in Anglo-American discourse and in China studies from the Cold War to today. It shows how, in popular opinion but also in academia, that discourse has displayed a stubborn tendency to explain—or rather explain away—China's presents, configuring them strictly in relation to pasts that can never be overcome and futures that are either never realized or always dangerously looming. This ideological framing has its roots in Cold War anticommunism, which was foundational to China studies in the US, but lingers on to this day, as China's coevalness is continuously denied.*

In this world it is not possible to be disgusted by “today” and turn to the “past” or the dream of the “future,” thereby wasting the efforts of the “present.” Nor is it possible to be pleased with “today” without making any effort in the “present” to look at the developments of the “future.” Merits and guilt are created by “today” and can never be eliminated. The principal task of human life is to create virtue for posterity, to follow the process of reality in order that the eternal “ego” will be able to benefit from it, expand and diffuse itself into infinity, because, quite definitely, “the universe is the ego and the ego is the universe.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1918, Li Dazhao, one of the leading intellectuals of the New Culture movement and soon to be one of the earliest supporters of Bolshevism (China’s “first Marxist”), dedicated a philosophically rich essay (“Today”) to the problem of the present. “Today,” he wrote, was at the same time the most precious thing in the world, and yet the easiest to lose, as “time, even if cherished and considered precious, cannot abide long among humans.”<sup>2</sup> Li was writing at a moment of evident national crisis but also of intellectual and political promise: the Republic founded in 1912 looked like an empty shell, as regional military strongmen vied for political dominance, yet the revitalizing protests of the May Fourth movement were just a few months

<sup>1</sup>Li Dazhao, “Jin” (15 April 1918), in *Li Dazhao Quanji* (Complete Works of Li Dazhao), 4 vols. (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe 2006), 2: 194. Translation by Claudia Pozzana, in Pozzana, “Spring, Temporality, and History in Li Dazhao,” *positions* 3/2 (1995), 183–305, at 297.

<sup>2</sup>Pozzana, “Spring, Temporality, and History in Li Dazhao,” 295.

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away. In that context, Li was part of a group of intellectuals who were trying to rethink the position of “China” within not only a new global articulation of power but also the temporality imposed by colonialism. It was not just the question of finding a place for China in world geography but also of reimagining a present in which the historical past of China could be rescued or remade to open new perspectives for the future of the nation and the individual. In “Today,” Li, who was, as Maurice Meisner noted, “primarily concerned with the problem of encouraging human activity—that is, political activity—in order to solve the immediate problems of China,”<sup>3</sup> argued for a new relationship between past and future, and predicated an approach focused on the present as the site where the future is shaped. He disparaged those who romanticized a past that never was, those who got lost in vacuous dreams about the future, and those who were satisfied with their comfortable present and did nothing. What he proposed instead was taking the present, “today,” as the specific site where subjective creative decisions could be made about the past, but especially about the future. “The present,” he wrote, “is life, force, action and creation.” Today, every today, could and should be a moment of discontinuity in which the flux of time is interrupted and redirected by purposeful actions: “we are the ones who open new roads, who stand on the locomotive of time, who are its engine, who push it forward in its path,” he noted in a later essay.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned, Li was writing at the time when, in the intellectual configurations shaped by colonialism, China’s past (its “tradition”) seemed to have relegated it outside the “normal” temporality of capitalism. The issue, however, was how to prevent the past, which should be understood historically, from binding the potentialities of the present, thus allowing for “a distinct vision of political temporality that opened out onto a future time fully subjected to human inventiveness.”<sup>5</sup> Eventually, Li found a solution for this conundrum in his own understanding of Marxism, through which he distinguished a future determined by political decisions (in the present) and a past understood through the materialist method of history. Li Dazhao was one of the first (and definitely one of the most sophisticated) Chinese thinkers to single out and tackle the problem of “the present.” In the following decades, this problem resurfaced continuously, even if few identified it with as much clarity as Li had. Today, given the centrality of the People’s Republic of China in the global discourse, its looming presence as the future largest world economy, and the profound integration of China’s market and industry into the “just-in-time” circuits of production and distribution, there should be no doubt that China’s present inhabits the same global temporality as the rest of the world. Yet, in both Western discourse and the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) own projection, China’s present, as well as its relations with past, future, and history, remains very problematic. So much so that, at times, China seems to have no present at all.

### Cold War tropes

One of the goals of this forum is to analyze the promises and risks of “using history to understand the present,” something for which there seems to be an increasingly pressing need in this era of seemingly global right-wing ascendance; however, this

<sup>3</sup>Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-Chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 50.

<sup>4</sup>Li Dazhao, “Shi” (Time) (1 Dec. 1923), in *Li Dazhao Quanji*, 4: 352.

<sup>5</sup>Pozzana, “Spring, Temporality, and History in Li Dazhao,” 301.

impulse, while very much understandable, appears to violate one of the Anglo-American history profession's cardinal injunctions, that against "presentism," or "the illicit projection of present values onto the past."<sup>6</sup> Yet, to a historian of twentieth-century China, that injunction sounds hollow, because, when it comes to how "contemporary China" has been constructed in the Anglo-American world—including in the historical profession—concerns about "presentism" do not seem to have played a major role. Indeed, sometimes they have played no role at all. Rather, since the inception of China studies at the beginning of the Cold War era, the Anglo-American discourse, in popular opinion but also in academia, has displayed a stubborn tendency to explain—or rather explain away—China's changing presents, configuring them strictly in relation to pasts that can never be overcome and futures that are either never realized or always dangerously looming. This did not happen by accident and was not simply the legacy of centuries of orientalism. Rather, China's present had to be negated, because it was a revolutionary present, and negating that present meant denying the political significance and the very existence of the Chinese (Maoist) revolution. Even today, decades after that revolution's end, when even the CCP has abandoned it (except perhaps in name), China's present still seems to be haunted and overdetermined by that revolutionary past, so that the present must be obscured in the service of once again negating the past revolution, a sacrifice to an ahistorical exorcism.

Antirevolutionary politics were foundational for the study of contemporary China. China's emergence as a subject of sustained attention in US academia was largely a product of the Cold War necessity of "knowing your enemy," and centers for China studies were created around the country through state funding funneled via the Ford Foundation.<sup>7</sup> This coincided almost perfectly with the beginning of Joseph McCarthy's "red purges," whose first victims were, not by chance, those considered to be responsible for the "loss of China," including the prominent scholar Owen Lattimore and his Institute of Pacific Relations. Lattimore's academic career in the US was cut short, he eventually moved to the UK, and the IPR was disbanded.<sup>8</sup> An entire generation of China scholars was thus tamed into submission and compliance, at the very moment when the field was being reshaped and expanded. Even those who did not support US policies in Asia learned the usefulness of silence and self-censorship. The specter of McCarthyism loomed large over China studies, limiting the questions scholars asked and answered, leading them to willfully ignore the connection between the theories they espoused and "American Cold War policies of dominance and dependency."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, China studies, like the social sciences in general, came to be largely informed by the paradigms of modernization theory, which defined any form of development that did not coincide with the capitalist/liberal/

<sup>6</sup>Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Beyond the End of History," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 Aug. 2020, at [www.chronicle.com/article/beyond-the-end-of-history?cid2=gen\\_login\\_refresh&cid=gen\\_sign\\_in](https://www.chronicle.com/article/beyond-the-end-of-history?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in).

<sup>7</sup>Columbia University CCAS, "The American Asian Studies Establishment," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3/3–4 (1971), 92–103.

<sup>8</sup>Robert P. Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the "Loss" of China* (Berkeley, CA, 1992).

<sup>9</sup>David H. Price, *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists* (Durham, NC, 2004), 33.

American one to be pathological and irrational.<sup>10</sup> Under that framework, the economic and political choices of Maoist China could only appear as absolutely illogical, and the spread of that model outside Chinese borders should thus be forcefully prevented. In that context, the task that befell China scholars was to articulate analyses that denied any coherent sense to Maoism and the Maoist revolutionary project and that constructed it as, at best, a temporary and dangerous deviation from the historically correct path of modernization. The communist present was repeatedly described as an effect, and often a repetition, of China's long past, of a traditional culture whose burden could never be fully discarded. In this view, Mao Zedong, far from proposing some novel model of revolution, was just another emperor, reasserting a centralized state after decades of turmoil and fulfilling the psychological needs of the Chinese people, who supposedly longed to subject themselves to charismatic authority.<sup>11</sup> China's foreign policy could be reframed as nothing more than a refurbished version of the imperial "tribute system," in which "culture" and an inflated sense of greatness blinded the Chinese to any rational understanding of international realities.<sup>12</sup> Anglophone scholarship attributed the victory of the communist revolution to burgeoning nationalism among peasants, thus displacing any class-based explanation and reducing Maoism to pure rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> Presentism, when it came to Maoist China, was the rule: the present could only be understood as mimicry of the past, and as such there was nothing specifically present about it.<sup>14</sup> This orientalist Cold War approach framed the field of China studies writ large, despite attempts to resist it and subvert it, especially in the long 1960s.<sup>15</sup>

### The end of history

By the 1980s and 1990s, the collapse of socialist states led to the declaration that we were nearing "the end of history," when the world will converge into a single liberal capitalist globality, and China figured prominently in that triumph.<sup>16</sup> After his rise to power in 1978, Deng Xiaoping had introduced pro-market and pro-capitalist reforms, opened the country to foreign investment, and decisively separated the post-Mao era from the revolutionary experience of the previous decades, in both official ideology and government practice. The depiction of China in the Anglo-American discourse shifted accordingly. Now, in that discourse, the economic reforms signaled that China had "reentered" the global temporality (of

<sup>10</sup>Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, MD, 2004).

<sup>11</sup>Richard H. Solomon, *Mao's Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture* (Berkeley, 1971).

<sup>12</sup>John K. Fairbank was the main proponent of this interpretation. John K. Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," in Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA, 1968), 1–19. See also his speech at Harvard, with Edwin Reischauer, on "East Asia and Our Future" (1967), at <https://vimeo.com/50776144>.

<sup>13</sup>Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China 1937–1945* (Stanford, 1962).

<sup>14</sup>As much as the Chinese present was described as overdetermined by the historical past, the PRC was not considered to be a subject for academic historians; it was, until relatively recently, the terrain of social and political scientists.

<sup>15</sup>Fabio Lanza, *The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism, and Asian Studies* (Durham, NC, 2017).

<sup>16</sup>Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992).

capitalism) and was once again moving along the “normal” historical path. Historians, still largely excluded from the post-1949 period dominated by political scientists, focused their investigation on the late Qing and Republican eras, concentrating on finding the threads of a still elusive “Chinese modernity.”

Yet the present remained a problem. Even if reinserted in the “normal” global chronology, China’s present was still not really coeval with that of the capitalist world, as it was trapped in a potentially endless process of becoming “like us” (modern, capitalist, liberal, democratic, etc.), or, in Daniel Vukovich’s apt formulation, of “becoming sameness.”<sup>17</sup> It was a process whose completion could only be ascertained and confirmed from the outside, from the perspective of those for whom the end of history had already arrived.<sup>18</sup> The West remained the measure of modernity. This was, in itself, nothing new: as Dipesh Chakrabarty has highlighted, in orientalist discourse Asia is the realm of the “not yet,” always catching up, always failing to do so.<sup>19</sup> This discourse was internalized by some Chinese intellectuals, who, as Alexander Day has brilliantly showed, identified in the figure of “the peasant” both the specificity of the Chinese historical trajectory and “the sign of China’s difference and backwardness.”<sup>20</sup> In the post-Mao era, “the peasant,” formerly the protagonist of the Chinese communist revolution, turned into the symbol of what prevented China’s present to exist coevally with the West. In both Anglo-American and Chinese liberal discourses, then, China’s present lost any substance, absorbed by a past (communist and “traditional”) from which it could not separate itself and a future always already postponed.

## A New Cold War

The financial crisis of 2008 fully revealed that history had not ended and that triumphant capitalism had ushered in a time not of democratic consensus but of increasing tribalization, massive inequalities, and recurring disasters. The global reaction to these events, in which we are still very much enmeshed, has taken the form of a rise in ethno-nationalism and right-wing populisms, often accompanied by the adoption of illiberal and restrictive policies (especially towards outsiders). In this context, the “illiberal turn” under Xi Jinping seems to be in tune with the global situation (Modi, Trump, Orbán, etc.). In the current crisis of capitalism, which affects the stability even of the “West” (i.e. Euro-America), China has been singled out as a the perfect foil on which to concentrate attention and blame; from Trump to Biden, a Washington consensus seems to have emerged that depicts the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as

<sup>17</sup>Daniel F. Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the PRC* (New York and London, 2011), 1.

<sup>18</sup>As achieved sameness is continuously postponed, in 2020, China scholar Geremie Barmé can still state, without an ounce of irony, that “China continues its titanic, two-century-long quest on the path to modernity.” Cover blurb to Jie Li, *Utopian Ruins: A Memorial Museum of the Mao Era* (Durham, NC, 2020).

<sup>19</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2007).

<sup>20</sup>Alexander F. Day, *The Peasant in Postsocialist China: History, Politics, and Capitalism* (Cambridge and New York, 2013), 54.

a dangerous authoritarian model, alternative to liberal democracy, a strategic adversary, and finally a potential enemy in what has already been dubbed “the New Cold War.”<sup>21</sup> While the posturing and the rhetoric deployed here are obviously very dangerous, one would expect that now, at last, China’s present would be fully recognized; what could be more present than an enemy, a “clear and present danger”?

Yet I would argue that is not the case. As during the “old” Cold War, in this New Cold War discourse China is depicted as having once again exited the normal temporality of liberal capitalism and having embraced an “alternative path” to modernization. Far from “becoming like us,” “becoming sameness,” Xi’s China has fully embraced alterity; it exists on a different timeline, incompatible with “ours.” And in that context, China’s present must once again be explained (away) as an anomaly, a pathology, a replica/mimicry/product of its past—and/or the presage of an even worse future. Coevalness is once again denied.

Let’s take one example among many. The 4 May 2013 issue of *The Economist* featured a cover with a picture of a smiling Xi Jinping holding a champagne flute and a party horn; Xi’s head, however, had been photoshopped on top of the body of the Qing Dynasty’s Qianlong Emperor, his resplendent robes recognizable from a famous imperial portrait. The issue was titled, *Let’s Party Like It’s 1793*, a reference to the notorious diplomatic mission led by Britain’s Lord Macartney, whose requests for better trading conditions and residential embassies Qianlong firmly rejected.<sup>22</sup> Why 1793? In older (Cold War) historiography, the failure of the Macartney mission stood as the glaring example of China’s self-obsession with its own perceived greatness, of the cultural blinders that prevented Qianlong (and the Qing Dynasty in general) from understanding diplomatic relations outside the “tributary system” model, in which China had occupied the central position in a network of vassal states.<sup>23</sup> Qianlong’s haughty refusal of the British offerings that were intended to showcase the latter’s emerging modernity was the last instance in which China had the power to say no; a few decades later British ships would return with opium and guns. The feature article in that issue of *The Economist*, titled “Xi Jinping and the China Dream,” connected the fading greatness of 1793 and the following “century of humiliation” to the nationalism and authoritarianism

<sup>21</sup>Aaron L. Friedberg, “An Answer to Aggression: How to Push Back against Beijing,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept.–Oct. 2020, at [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-08-11/ccp-answer-aggression?fbclid=IwAR13zfeA8OjkeCoilMV9Z2efmnj\\_Q2dbfByofU888Q8eDHnGN21R7mmYIFM](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-08-11/ccp-answer-aggression?fbclid=IwAR13zfeA8OjkeCoilMV9Z2efmnj_Q2dbfByofU888Q8eDHnGN21R7mmYIFM); Alan Dupont, “The US–China Cold War Has Already Started,” *The Diplomat*, 8 July 2020, at [https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/the-us-china-cold-war-has-already-started/?fbclid=IwAR0jin\\_z42tnwTJ-vj6zZt3edsysaATfHrmDBteckW-8NkbbKR6aq3R1uGY](https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/the-us-china-cold-war-has-already-started/?fbclid=IwAR0jin_z42tnwTJ-vj6zZt3edsysaATfHrmDBteckW-8NkbbKR6aq3R1uGY); Jeffrey A. Bader, “Avoiding a New Cold War between the US and China,” *Brookings*, 17 Aug. 2020, at [www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/17/avoiding-a-new-cold-war-between-the-us-and-china/?fbclid=IwAR0aWE79WMR\\_9iKV/s6PsZLVEPlaExBeAOLIJTZOGwLYx3Xoygo7KIWt1v8I](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/17/avoiding-a-new-cold-war-between-the-us-and-china/?fbclid=IwAR0aWE79WMR_9iKV/s6PsZLVEPlaExBeAOLIJTZOGwLYx3Xoygo7KIWt1v8I). On the dangers and the pitfalls of the “New Cold War” rhetoric see Rebecca Karl and Fabio Lanza, eds., *A New Cold War?, episteme* 5/1 (2021), at <https://positionspolitics.org/episteme-5/>.

<sup>22</sup>This is particularly rich coming from *The Economist*, which has been the most influential and unabashed champion of liberalism (and colonialism) since 1843. See Alexander Zevin, *Liberalism at Large: The World According to the Economist* (New York, 2019).

<sup>23</sup>See Fairbank, “A Preliminary Framework.”

of Xi's "China dream," which *The Economist* suggests is an attempt to restore that lost greatness.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, China can only dream in imperial ways.<sup>25</sup>

A very similar image of Xi/Qianlong, this time sitting on top of an intricate network of roads and ports, graces the cover of a new book published by Harvard University Press, *One Belt One Road: Chinese Power Meets the World*, an analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI or OBOR), a massive Chinese investment project, sending capital, prestige, and resources overseas by building ports, roads, railroads, and so on. The author, Eyck Freymann, argues that "these infrastructure projects are a sideshow. OBOR is primarily a campaign to restore an ancient model in which foreign emissaries paid tribute to the Chinese emperor, offering gifts in exchange for political patronage. Xi sees himself as a sort of modern-day emperor, determined to restore China's past greatness."<sup>26</sup> The resilience of the tributary system/Qianlong trope is quite surprising given that there has been a fair amount of historical work in the last decade, which has convincingly dismantled the old interpretation of the Macartney embassy and has instead shown how Qianlong's decisions were that of a pragmatic ruler, capable of compromise, and very much aware of England's rising military power.<sup>27</sup> This new interpretation has been featured in the *American Historical Review*, and versions designed for public audiences have also circulated.<sup>28</sup> There is therefore no reason and no excuse for supposedly well-informed journalists, let alone scholars with China expertise, to peddle the old Macartney story and recycle it for today's use. So why this persistence? Intellectual laziness and bias are probably at play, but there is also a more profound reason. This is, in the end, a way (the usual, well-practiced way) to deny China's coevalness, to dilute and displace its present. Because recognizing China's present would mean first and foremost accepting that China is not an anomaly in the global capitalist system, that it belongs to it as an integral part, a crucial player, and not as an overachieving yet always failing candidate, almost but never yet there. Recognizing China as coeval would also mean fully and finally recognizing that the capitalist system in which we live is not naturally geared towards democracy and human rights and that what happens in China today might more likely be connected to that global system (and therefore might be very similar or germane to what happens here, to "us") rather than to a Confucian or Maoist past. That would also mean, implicitly, recognizing a political existence to the revolutionary (and prerevolutionary) past: because if China's present is not just another instance in an ahistorical repetition of emperors and

<sup>24</sup>"Xi Jinping and the China Dream," *The Economist* 407/8834 (2013), at [www.economist.com/leaders/2013/05/04/xi-jinping-and-the-chinese-dream](http://www.economist.com/leaders/2013/05/04/xi-jinping-and-the-chinese-dream). The article and the cover were not well received by the Chinese authorities, who blocked access to *The Economist* site.

<sup>25</sup>On 21 October 2010, Xi had appeared on the cover of *The Economist* with the title "The New Emperor."

<sup>26</sup>Eyck Freymann, *One Belt One Road: Chinese Power Meets the World* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), at [www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674247956](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674247956).

<sup>27</sup>James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC, 1995); Henrietta Harrison, "The Qianlong Emperor's Letter to George III and the Early Twentieth-Century Origins of Ideas about Traditional China's Foreign Relations," *American Historical Review* 122/3 (2017), 680–701.

<sup>28</sup>James Carter, "Lord Macartney, China, and the convenient lies of history," *SupChina*, 9 Sept. 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/09/09/lord-macartney-china-and-the-convenient-lies-of-history>.

autocrats, then China's past, even the recent past, becomes history, with its ruptures, discontinuities, contingencies, and singularities. And Maoism can retrieve the status of a political event, a finished one, a failed one, but a political event nonetheless.

What I have outlined here are some general and obdurate tendencies in the scholarship and public discourse on China. "China studies" remains, overall, quite conservative and quite anti-PRC, still defined by its Cold War inception. But in recent years, at least since the late 1990s and early 2000s, there has been a concerted effort by a small number of historians to reclaim "contemporary China" (both the Mao and the post-Mao eras), and, under the label of "the new PRC history," they have produced and continue to produce several excellent works, which purposefully recognize China's changing presents and set them in historical and comparative contexts. That approach and those new historical insights, however, are not yet reflected in more general scholarship or in the stubbornly rigid public intellectual and political discourse on China. Rather, in the "New Cold War" configuration, China's present is still diluted and denied by subsuming it under its past, as has been the case for decades. But now its present is further eclipsed by projecting it into a future. And this is not the future of sameness, a promised and perpetually denied "becoming like us," but one in which China is pioneering elements of a technological dystopia which could soon be inhabited by all. In this new narrative, China is (or rather soon will be) what we are all at risk of becoming, and if we are not careful, its present will be *the* future, our future. This is a future often described as a societal panopticon, where mobile apps, face recognition software, and AI structure a system of control that penetrates all the way down to each individual decision.<sup>29</sup> It is true that in China apps such as Wechat and Alipay are integrated into almost every single aspect of daily life, making it almost impossible to do anything in an urban context without them. The pandemic has shown that these very same apps can be used for tracing individuals and controlling their movements. Yet the perspective from "the West" tends to exaggerate the singularity of the Chinese case, often ignoring the level of control and digital intrusion to which Americans and Europeans are subject, by corporations and by the state. The science fiction television series *Black Mirror* aired an episode ("Nosedive") in which people could rate each other and everything depended on one's ratings—clearly a dystopian projection of China's emergent social credit system.

### Between history and the dream

Finally, the Anglo-American discourse on China both echoes and misinterprets the CCP's own discourse, which, especially under Xi Jinping, has rearranged the connections between past, present, and future. Xi has articulated a layered and at times seemingly contradictory view of the past, which combines and expands on ideas of his predecessors. China is described as still engaged in the long process of

<sup>29</sup>Ross Andersen, "The Panopticon Is Already Here," *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2020, at [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/china-ai-surveillance/614197](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/china-ai-surveillance/614197). Jessica Batke and Mareike Ohlberg, "State of Surveillance," *ChinaFile*, 30 Oct. 2020, [www.chinafile.com/state-surveillance-china](http://www.chinafile.com/state-surveillance-china). A much more complex analysis of China's surveillance system (in the case of Xinjiang) is offered in Darren Byler, *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City* (Durham, NC, 2022).



modernization and “rejuvenation” (*fixing*), designed to move past the century of humiliation and hardship at the hands of colonial powers. This is a vision of modern history that was shared by Mao (and others). But, unlike Mao, who saw 1949 as a crucial revolutionary break in the unfolding of history, Xi connects this recent past seamlessly to a longer narrative:<sup>30</sup> today’s China is the inheritor and promoter of “fine traditional Chinese culture,” the current embodiment of “5,000 years of civilization.”<sup>31</sup> For Xi, traditional ideas and values, such as Confucianism, run through China’s history and are crucial to building its future, but so are the values of a different and more recent tradition, a Marxism that is at once global and Chinese (Maoist), which the CCP also considers an essential “guide to action.”<sup>32</sup> And according to Marxist principles, Xi sees today’s China as still being in “the primary stage of socialism,” a temporary phase that has lasted since at least 1956 and whose end date is not specified.<sup>33</sup> China’s present, then, varies according to the different past temporality to which it is connected. Yet all these pasts can be rallied to summon the promise of a future that is relatively undefined yet constantly in sight, the so-called China Dream. For many CCP thinkers, this rearticulation of pasts and future sets China on a different historical path, which is in theory alternative to (if still intertwined with) global capitalism, and especially its US-style liberal variant. This other path is characterized as specific to China, and that specificity therefore separates China’s present from the world’s temporality. In Xi’s own words,

To realize the Chinese Dream, we must take our own path, which is the path of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. It is not an easy path. We are able to embark on this path thanks to the great endeavors of reform and opening up made in the past 30 years and more, the continuous quest made in the 60-plus years of the PRC, a thorough review of the evolution of the Chinese nation in its 170-plus years of modern history, and carrying forward the 5,000-plus years of Chinese civilization. This path is deeply rooted in history and broadly based on China’s present realities. The Chinese nation has extraordinary capabilities, with which it has built the great Chinese civilization and with which we can expand and stay on the development path suited to China’s national conditions. The people of all ethnic groups in China should have full confidence in the theory, path and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and steadfastly forge ahead along the correct Chinese path.<sup>34</sup>

This “modernization theory with Chinese characteristics” should not be dismissed as vacuous propaganda. It is, rather, ideological praxis that aims to inform actual practices (in governance and daily experience) and to reinforce a specific

<sup>30</sup>Rana Mitter, “Presentism and China’s Changing Wartime Past,” *Past and Present* 234 (Feb. 2017), 263–74, at 264.

<sup>31</sup>Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing, 2014), 285, available at [www.bannedthought.net/China/Individuals/XiJinping/XiJinping-TheGovernanceOfChina.pdf](http://www.bannedthought.net/China/Individuals/XiJinping/XiJinping-TheGovernanceOfChina.pdf).

<sup>32</sup>Tony Saich, “What Does General Secretary Xi Jinping Dream About?,” Ash Center occasional papers, at [https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/what\\_does\\_xi\\_jinping\\_dream\\_about.pdf](https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/what_does_xi_jinping_dream_about.pdf).

<sup>33</sup>John Garrick and Yan Chang Bennett, “Xi Jinping Thought,” *China Perspectives* 2018/1–2, at <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/7872>.

<sup>34</sup>Xi, *The Governance of China*, 60–61.

understanding of China's present. And, perhaps more than in other countries, because of the mad-pace development of the last few decades, China does indeed appear split between two temporalities, between future and past, for example in expanding urban areas, where "urban villages" populated by rural migrants sit close to gleaming skyscrapers and "futuristic" buildings. Of course, the two do not really inhabit separate temporalities, as the work of migrant laborers provides essential services to city residents (even those in the gleaming towers), but the discourse of Chinese modernization makes migrants the embodiment of the backward past and an obstacle to the achievement of the dreamlike future. That very discourse was deployed to justify the recent eviction of thousands of migrant workers, labeled "low-end population" (低端人口 *diduan renkou*), from the capital city, Beijing.<sup>35</sup>

### What is to be done?

The Anglo-American discourse on China's present is and has always been problematic, and it has fostered over the decades a view modern Chinese history and of China's future that to this day informs public discourse, at all levels. Some historians of the PRC have worked hard to reclaim the historicity of specific experience, to complicate historical analogies, to highlight the singularity of the present and its many pasts. Yet this present, the present of the New Cold War, makes our task even more difficult as a particularly pernicious and dangerous discourse about China becomes once again dominant. So what can Anglo-American (Western) historians of China do?

First of all, I think we should start by explicitly insisting on China's coevalness, today as in the past. As it was for Jacques Rancière, equality must be a point of departure, not an end to be attained.<sup>36</sup> The assumption of coevalness in global presents should be a necessary component of any credible analysis—for modern Chinese history, that means the present coevalness of capitalism and the past coevalness of revolution. This might seem an obvious point, but given the long history of blinders, biases, and presuppositions that has shaped and still shapes our view of China, it is clear that we still need to engage in a continuous critique of our own historical and intellectual production. We must remain vigilant about the ways the fields of Chinese history and China studies were and are constituted, and we must remain keenly aware of what kind of politics contemporary discourses about the past allow in both China and "the West."

Second, and perhaps more importantly, it is crucial for us to reconsider the relationship between our coeval present and the historical past of revolution. Writing the history of contemporary China presents specific and more formidable issues, because that history is determined and defined by categories and ideas that are at once central to the existence of the People's Republic of China and remnants of revolutionary political discourse (worker, peasant, class) that have been emptied of their political meaning, even as they are haunted by their political histories. The

<sup>35</sup>"Adding Insult to Injury: Beijing's Evictions and the Discourse of 'Low-End Population'," *Chuang*, 9 Jan. 2018, at <http://chuangcn.org/2018/01/low-end-population>.

<sup>36</sup>Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, 1991); Charles Bingham and Gert J. J. Biesta, with Jacques Rancière, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation* (London and New York, 2010).

erasure of those categories and their removal from the center of politics both was a consequence of the exhaustion that followed the revolutionary era, in which Maoism was such a crucial component and, however, also allowed the current ideology of neoliberal capitalism to emerge (almost) unchallenged. Maoism, as China's past, is integral to China's present, which is our global present. And thus, following Li Dazhao, maybe historically understanding that revolutionary past will guide us through the crisis of the present, not to dream a future, but to make it.

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