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Inner Party neo-anarchist critiques of the Leninist Party-state

Introduction

With the crackdown on Democracy Wall, Deng Xiaoping had the “four bigs” removed from the state constitution (the “right to speak out freely, air views fully, hold debates, and write big character posters”) and in their place announced a new line of the four cardinal principles that all subjects were required to uphold, including Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought, socialism, the people’s democratic dictatorship, and leadership of the CCP.¹ For the rest of the 1980s, it fell to inner Party reform intellectuals (whom we will refer to as “Marxist democrats,” to adapt the term of Edward Friedman²) to find ways to pursue the cause of political reform within these harsh limits. Deng Xiaoping and his allies tolerated such intellectuals to the extent that they needed their help against Maoist and Stalinist-influenced colleagues in the ruling state elite resistant to market reforms, something hard to justify within orthodox Marxism. After all, if there is no clear blueprint in the writings of Marx and Engels for Stalinist-style central planning and the command economy, there is nevertheless also a strong antipathy to markets and the “commodification” of the economy. As a result, such reform-minded intellectuals were allowed and encouraged to study market socialist reforms in places such as Hungary and Yugoslavia. While carrying out this role for the Leninist regime, such intellectuals also pushed for their own interests in increased intellectual freedom by borrowing political reform ideas of Marxist democrats in those same regimes.

As with the Democracy Wall activists, at first such inner Party Marxist democrats were also aided by the Deng era call to “seek truth from facts,” sometimes put as to place “practice as the sole criterion of truth,” and the main enemy to be fought as feudal vestiges from the past, not capitalist elements in society.

While there were many different, creative ways that Marxist democrats tried to keep alive calls for political reform and democratization within Marxism, at least two different Marxist routes made possible the continuation of neo-anarchist critiques of the socialist state ruling for itself and not the proletariat: the writings of the early Marx on humanism and alienation and his concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) from his middle period. Each route had advantages and disadvantages for the Chinese Marxist democrats, though, in the end both routes were shut off by the end of the decade as Deng reached a deal with his Stalinist colleagues in the state elite to repress attempts at meaningful political liberalization.

Wang Ruoshui and Alienation of the Socialist State

The first route, returning to the writings of the early Marx on humanism and alienation, had many adherents, termed by some the “Party of Humanism” or the “alienation school” (*yihualun pai*).³ We will focus in this section on by far the leading exponent of that school, the prominent philosopher and deputy editor of the CCP flagship newspaper *Renminribao* (People’s Daily), Wang Ruoshui.⁴

In seminal articles Wang published in the early 1980s,⁵ including many in the popular press, Wang argued, borrowing from the East European debates, that Karl Marx did not eliminate in his later works his sentiments in favor of humanism as a socialist project that he put forward in what is known as his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, not published in the Communist world until 1932. Instead Wang argued that Marx subsumed them in later, more economic materialist language. For Wang, the goal of socialism should still be that of Marx in his early work: not just state ownership of the means of production in the name of the workers but control of workers over their own work. Most especially in this early work, Marx took over the concept of alienation from Hegel and Feuerbach, turning it from Hegel’s alienation from a pure idea and from Feuerbach’s alienation from man’s essential nature or essence into economic alienation of classes from their own labor. Wang did point out that Feuerbach’s idea of humans as creating God in their own image and then becoming a slave to Him had clear echoes in the Cultural Revolution when people were called upon to “think of Chairman Mao in everything, do everything for Chairman Mao, serve Chairman Mao in everything, follow Chairman Mao in everything.”

“Do everything for Chairman Mao”: who would Chairman Mao do everything for? Chairman Mao should have been doing things for the people, everything should have been for the people, this is a basic principle. It turned out in fact that the people did things for the leader, everything was for the leader. . . . Could “follow Chairman Mao in everything” mean anything but an autarchy (*yiyan tang*)? What was it but an inversion of the relations between party, leader and people?⁶

For Wang, this type of alienation was “. . . closely connected with the influence of Chinese feudal mentality.”⁷

Beyond intellectual or spiritual alienation, Wang argued, there was the problem of political alienation. Trying to protect himself from the inevitable attack on him as an anarchist that was bound to be leveled by his orthodox Marxist opponents in the regime, Wang admitted that while the issue of political alienation was first raised by the anarchists and “hence to overcome alienation, one should take anarchism into account,”⁸ Marx and Engels also maintained the concept of political alienation under the old society, when the organs of state, in Engels words, “in pursuance of their own special interests, transformed themselves from the servants of society into the masters of society.”⁹ In his most radical statement, which was at the heart of the reason why the Party-state made him the leading target of the “Campaign against Spiritual Pollution” in 1983, Wang argued that political alienation could still exist after the revolution:

. . . Is there still alienation under socialism? Socialism is supposed to abolish alienation, but has it done so in fact, or does alienation still exist? I think we should admit that practice has proven that alienation still exists. Not only is there intellectual alienation, there is also political and even economic alienation.

. . . when the government turns into an overlord, refusing to accept the people’s control and turning into an alien force, this is alienation, alienation in politics.¹⁰

For Wang, this problem of alienation could only be solved as Engels suggested, by adapting the model of the Paris Commune (though not by violent revolution as for Shengwulian), that is, by having the socialist state institute universal suffrage that would elect officials and have them subject to instant recall and by reducing “special treatment and privilege” of state officials, if not the low salaries that Engels called for.¹¹ Thus Wang stayed within the framework of the one Party-state, even if a reformed one subject to popular checks, and could plausibly claim not to have departed from Deng’s Four Cardinal Principles.

Such a claim did not protect him in the end, as he became the leading target of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign and was purged from his

post at *Renminribao*.¹² At the end of the campaign, Party propaganda chief Hu Qiaomu made a speech to the Central Party School, which was reprinted in the popular press under his byline. This speech contained extensive criticism of the humanism and alienation school in general and a direct attack on Wang Ruoshui's views in particular.¹³ Demonstrating the main point of the previous and current chapters, that claiming the socialist state can come to rule for itself is the main taboo that must not be crossed under Leninist rule, Hu warned toward the end of his speech that those who advocate the theory of alienation, especially those who concluded "that alienation existed everywhere in the political, economic, and ideological spheres of socialism and that its fundamental cause was not in another area, but precisely in the socialist system itself" could (perhaps inadvertently) lead people to favor "abolishing all social political powers, social economic organizations, ideological authority, and centralism and discipline" thus to "openly publiciz[e] anarchism, absolute liberalism, and ultra-egoism."¹⁴

Significantly, Wang refused to make a self-criticism during the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign and never recanted his belief in socialist alienation. As the intensifying campaign threatened to undermine domestic and international confidence in market reforms, Deng first limited what counted as spiritual pollution and then wound down the whole campaign. Thus, Wang managed to survive the 1983 campaign against him, and as reform temporarily returned to the agenda, from 1985 to 1986 republished his main works on humanism and alienation in books of his essays.¹⁵ Supposedly without his approval, his rebuttal to Hu Qiaomu appeared in a Hong Kong periodical where he defended his position that humanism can be found in the later works of Marx and that ideological alienation at least still exists in socialist society.¹⁶

In 1987, after a round of student demonstrations that Party elders blamed on the liberal policies of CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who had been the main protector of Wang Ruoshui and other Marxist democrats, a new campaign against "bourgeois liberalization" was launched, at the end of which Hu was removed from his post and Wang was expelled from the Party.¹⁷ In the late 1980s, as the reformers within the Party were losing out to advocates of increased Party control over intellectuals, Wang published new essays that at first did not repeat his radical critiques but only called for respect of civil rights and the constitution, basing himself firmly within remaining official Party policies that denounced the personality cult of Mao during the Cultural Revolution and that claimed to establish a socialist legal system.¹⁸ However, in another article published in Hong Kong again supposedly without his permission, Wang again answered Hu Qiaomu's 1984 attack on humanism and alienation and raised anew the question of socialist alienation. Wang claimed that his views were firmly in line with former Premier and now General Secretary Zhao Ziyang's report to the Thirteenth National Party Congress where he criticized the outdated

nature of the PRC political system based on “large-scale mass movements” and intensified “mandatory [central] planning.” While Zhao included this criticism of past practices only as part of his call for more market reforms and for only modest political structural reform, Wang took the opportunity to link the issue of personality cults and mass campaigns to alienation under socialism:

Such a political structure cannot prevent personality cult[s]; moreover it can easily engender bureaucratism, autocratic work style, privileges, infringements on the rights of rank and file party members and ordinary people, and other negative phenomena. (I regard all such things as demonstrations of alienation) . . .¹⁹

Thus, despite being expelled from the Party, in articles of the late 1980s Wang became more insistent on his ideas, and even started departing from belief in Leninism,²⁰ though he still called himself a Marxist up until his death from lung cancer in 2002.²¹

David Kelly concludes that although Wang Ruoshui’s perception of the evils left over from the Mao period was similar to that of Li Yizhe and the Democracy Wall extra-Party critics, his own diagnosis and remedy for the problem differed, since he referred only to “bureaucratic privilege and the difficulties of implementing democracy” and not a “new bourgeoisie” (or bureaucratic class) and tried to stay within Deng’s four cardinal principles, at least up to 1988.²² While it may be true that Wang’s solutions to the problem of socialist alienation were largely unspecified or moderate at best, this author would argue that his critical views still lay firmly within a neo-anarchist paradigm of the state, one that sees the tendency of organizations, especially coercive ones with a monopoly of power, to rule for themselves. As such, however moderate in practice were his proposed solutions compared to the Democracy Wall extra-Party activists, Wang broke the taboo of all taboos in a Leninist system with his critique of the socialist state and thus could not be allowed to propagate his views much further after 1987.

The Chinese Asiatic Mode of Production Debate in the Early 1980s

Although less well-known perhaps than alienation and humanism, there is another Marxist concept that contains the seeds of a neo-anarchist paradigm of the state and can be used to call implicitly for democratization, namely the Asiatic Mode of Production (hereafter AMP).²³ The advantage of the AMP over alienation is, first, that the term is initially confined mostly to the historical profession and is not one that obviously lends itself to articles

in the popular press and, second, that if challenged one can always claim to be talking about past states and not the current Leninist regime. The disadvantages of the AMP concept are, first, that it may be so esoteric that it may be hard to spread awareness of the concept beyond a small academic circle and, second, that the concept carries political baggage, both because of its association with the idea of a stagnant or unchanging Asia versus a more dynamic West and because of its use in the 1950s by the Marxist turned fierce anti-Communist Karl Wittfogel, who linked a version of the concept he termed “oriental despotism” specifically to contemporary “totalitarian” dictatorships in Russia and China, as we will see below. Nevertheless, for Marxist democrats willing to try to overcome these disadvantages, the AMP presents a clear challenge to the primary, class paradigm of the state while still keeping within a professed Marxist outlook, which thus makes it possible for intellectuals to bring into doubt whether the socialist state always represents the interests of the proletariat without being accused (right away at least) of having “bourgeois liberal” tendencies.

Tons of ink have been spilled among Marxist and non-Marxists alike all over the world concerning the AMP, somewhat reduced by the fall of Communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe.²⁴ Suffice it to say here that the concept can be found most extensively, though not exclusively, in Marx’s work, the *Grundrisse der Politischen Ökonomie* (Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy), a manuscript he completed in 1857–8 in preparation for writing *Das Kapital*. The *Grundrisse* was not published until 1939–41 in the USSR.²⁵ The AMP appears on one chapter of that work entitled “Precapitalist Economic Formations.”²⁶ To sum up his views on the AMP in that chapter, though a matter of heated debate, in general Marx may have argued that some pre-capitalist societies may not be examples of either primitive communist, slave, or feudal modes of production, but instead examples of a distinct Asiatic mode where first, the centralized despotic state claims to own all land based on combining rent and taxes, second, where it stands over isolated, self-sufficient rural village communities in which production is based on the land mixed with handicraft production, and third, there is cyclical, stagnant development. Marx also seemed to indicate that the state carries out large-scale irrigation and other hydraulic projects and public works projects (whether necessary and real or only taking credit for the work of lower communities) and rules from essentially administrative, rentier cities.²⁷ The political significance of the concept is that if a state can rule for itself rather than private economic classes at one or more times and places in human history, then it could also rule for itself at later points and places, such as in Leninist regimes, especially those that had a past history of “Asiatic” state forms.

Once Soviet intellectuals became aware of Marx’s AMP concept (as well as similar ideas in Engels, Lenin, and other Marxist thinkers), a great debate began in the USSR over whether or not the AMP was a genuine Marxist

concept. Stalin settled the issue by fiat in 1931, denying that Marx ever held to the concept and that all societies must universally pass through the same stages in history, from primitive communist, to slave, feudal, capitalist, socialist, and communist modes of production, thus announcing as Communist dogma what later scholars term the universal unilinear schema of history.²⁸ Nevertheless, the AMP concept was revived in Western and Eastern Europe during the Cold War by Marxist thinkers trying to open up room for limited critical thinking about the Leninist state.²⁹ Just as with the Marxist concepts of humanism and alienation, therefore, the AMP concept became ripe fodder for Chinese thinkers in the early years of the reform era when they were allowed to study diverse strands of European Marxist thought.³⁰

The first main problem such Chinese thinkers had to overcome was the use of the AMP concept by Karl Wittfogel to denounce “totalitarian” systems in the USSR and China. In his magnum opus *Oriental Despotism*, Wittfogel claimed that Communist systems often took root in societies with a “despotic” past based on the need for centralized bureaucracies to organize massive “hydraulic” projects in arid regions.³¹ Even more problematic for Marxist democrats wanting to use the AMP, Wittfogel claimed that Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin all “sinned against science” by first utilizing and then dropping the AMP concept in later works because it seemed too reminiscent of the critique of their anarchist competitors that a Marxist “managerial state” would lead to bureaucratic despotism.³² Ernst Gellner finds that this charge amounts to finding Marx and Engels guilty of being “Stalinists by anticipation” and thus stretches credulity,³³ but Alvin Gouldner agrees with Wittfogel to the extent that the AMP, however limited and incompletely spelled out in the *Grundrisse*, was nevertheless a crucial concept that Marx and Engels may have glossed over due to its nature as (what this author would term) a neo-anarchist anomaly in their primary class paradigm of the state. In the AMP, “far from being dependent on class controlling the dominant means of production, the state itself controls these and other cases are dependent on it.”³⁴ In any event, because of the political sensitivity of the concept, Marxist democrats in all Leninist countries who wanted to revive the concept had to take pains to criticize Wittfogel and show how their use of the concept was different from his.

The second main problem intellectuals faced, in China at least, who wanted to utilize the AMP concept was to show that they did not incorporate earlier views of a “stagnant” or unchanging Asia. As Gellner put it, the AMP

impairs, perhaps destroys, the unity of human history by postulating a sideline of historical development that perhaps leads nowhere and ends in stagnation.³⁵

In trying to refute the basic stagnant nature of the AMP, especially those Chinese thinkers who wanted to utilize the AMP to call for political reform

were heavily influenced by Umberto Melotti's 1974 work *Marx and the Third World*, which was translated into Chinese in the late 1970s.³⁶ For Melotti, the AMP was a unique path of historical development in Marx's essentially multilinear way of thinking, and China was the best example of the AMP, but not a case of "Asiatic stagnation." Melotti did see parallels, however, between China and Russia as "bureaucratic collectivist" societies that existed at a crossroads between revolution and reaction,³⁷ so the Chinese Aziatchicki (to use the Russian term for those using the AMP concept) had to watch their step and deny that they accepted Melotti's conclusion even while they used his ideas to open up room for criticism of the bureaucratic state.

In China in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as we have seen, the official line of the Leninist regime led by Deng Xiaoping was that survivals of feudalism (*fengjian*) were the main obstacle to further development, not capitalist remnants or bourgeois elements in the Party, as the Maoist line had it. In fact the leading Chinese political scientist and member of the democratic camp within the Party, Yan Jiaqi, argued that while "heavy feudal autocratic vestiges" remain in China, "autocracy was not a political phenomenon that belonged solely to feudalism" in world history.³⁸ Some countries, for example, in medieval Western Europe, had a feudal system without centralized dictatorship, while other countries such as "the slave-owning Roman empire and fascist Germany" had centralized dictatorships without being feudal. According to Yan, "no matter the social system" autocracy could exist anywhere and at any time where there was "indivisibility and nontransferability of the supreme state power."³⁹ Thus, Yan made clear that while often a vestige of the past, autocracy could occur even under modern political systems.

It was in this atmosphere of criticism of feudal autocracy that the Chinese AMP debate began in the early 1980s. Chinese thinkers raising the AMP stood on all sides of the issue, from those Stalinist-inspired thinkers who denied the AMP as anything more than one version of primitive communal or slave society, to those on the middle ground who accepted the AMP as a legitimate term for some unique societies that must nevertheless pass through a universal phase of development through capitalism and socialism, to those Marxist democrats who used the term to refer to a special case of Chinese *fengjian* society, one which could not be equated with Western feudalism. For the purpose of this chapter, we will mostly focus on the last group of thinkers, since they are the ones who suggested contemporary relevance for the AMP, even as they denied being anti-socialist.

The leader of what one could term this minority or "opposition" school of thought on the AMP was Wu Dakun, professor of political economy at Chinese People's University in Beijing, who was linked to the Marxist-Leninist Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), led by the Marxist democrat Su Shaozhi. In a seminal article, Wu in a somewhat

cautious fashion attempted to retain a link of the AMP to a unilinear if not universal schema of development by dividing the AMP into two stages, ancient oriental society (thus linked to slavery) and the Asiatic feudal (*fengjian*) system.⁴⁰ Using these divisions, Wu claimed legitimacy for his version of the AMP in the thought of Mao Zedong. Though Mao often referred to China's *fengjian* past, Wu noted, he always emphasized the patriarchal clan authority that led to a Chinese pattern of familial exploitation on top of class exploitation under feudalism.⁴¹

By dividing the AMP into two stages, Wu was also able to deny the characteristic of "stagnation" often ascribed to AMP societies, thus demonstrating his loyalty to the notion of a progressive Chinese revolution and avoiding the danger of the AMP justifying imperialism as a progressive force in Asia. At the same time, Wu pointed out differences between Chinese *fengjian* society and Western European society along lines that incorporated some of the classic characteristics of the AMP. First, in the imperial epoch before the Western impact, China combined private and state land ownership through tax and corvée obligations of the peasant to the state. Second, the state controlled not only land and water resources through hydraulic and other public works projects, but also the most important economic enterprises, such as its monopolies on salt and iron. Such a view leads directly to a picture of a Chinese *fengjian* society containing a much more centralized and authoritarian state than the decentralized political authorities of European feudalism. Third, Wu claimed that land could be bought and sold in the *fengjian* system, thus showing the beginnings of historical development toward capitalism. Fourth, the remnants of primitive communism and slavery survived in *fengjian* society through the patriarchal clan system. Fifth, Chinese cities lacked a bourgeoisie and were dominated by landlords and bureaucrats. Sixth, Chinese *fengjian* society existed in a small peasant economy linking agriculture and handicrafts, with commodity production limited to luxury production for the consumption of bureaucrats and landlords.⁴²

By positing these basic characteristics of Chinese *fengjian* society, Wu was able to use the AMP without implying the stagnation or inherent nonrevolutionary quality of Asian society, an implication for which Stalinist-oriented Party intellectuals severely criticized Melotti and, implicitly, the Chinese reformers.⁴³ Wu could explain that although China had failed to develop capitalism and developed slowly in comparison to the West, Chinese society nevertheless contained the seeds of capitalism before the Western impact. By the same token, Wu denied that China was without grounds for future development and change, including socialist revolution.

Most importantly, Wu used his redefinition of China's *fengjian* society to incorporate the AMP as a way to explain the tension in Chinese history between the central government and the landlords, a situation difficult if not impossible to understand by applying to China in a unilinear way the

category of the feudal mode of production. Throughout imperial Chinese history, small peasants were periodically squeezed to the point of rebellion as taxes increased on both their land and the land of non-official gentry, while the bureaucratic officials' lands became increasingly tax exempt. Yet as Chinese history unfolded, private land ownership increased at the expense of state ownership, a change Wu claimed was in the direction of capitalism. This change in land ownership combined with peasant rebellions and changes in the state tax system demonstrate that Chinese society was far from static or unchanging, directly refuting Wittfogel's analysis.

Wu asked for further study of China's remaining vestiges of the AMP in order to aid in China's modernization. He left mostly unstated, however, what the remaining vestiges of the AMP were, but in light of his application of the AMP to the history of imperial China, Wu clearly had despotic state vestiges in mind. Though he would not spell out the nature of that continuing despotism under socialism, Wu did suggest that the AMP had relevance to "the study of contemporary world economy," but he claimed that that study would be more appropriate to "another subject" which he "would not talk about here."⁴⁴ As the leading exponent of the multilinear view of the AMP, Wu Dakun was perhaps more restrained than other reformers in utilizing the AMP concept to warn of the continuing despotic features of the socialist state.

The boldest example of the "opposition" view of the AMP up to 1985 was an essay in the national journal *Zhongguoshi yanjiu* (Chinese Studies in History) by Hu Zhongda of the University of Inner Mongolia.⁴⁵ Perhaps not coincidentally, this region was hard hit by the extreme state oppression of the Cultural Revolution. Hu specifically criticized the unilinear schema of five modes of production, arguing for the AMP as a separate "social existence." He argued that not only did the AMP diverge from Western European-style feudalism, but that slavery and feudalism themselves were not chronological stages but separate paths out of primitive society. Thus there was no single, universal path of development, but rather many unique paths, though all followed the formula of pre-class to class to classless society.

All pre-capitalist class societies shared the characteristics of simple mechanical development (i.e. iron age hand labor), agriculture as the chief production form combined with family handicraft industry, and land taxation as the major form of oppression. Ancient, feudal, and Asiatic modes were all different forms of "slavery" defined in a larger sense, that is, as methods of direct expropriation of surplus labor by the oppressing class. Although Hu recognized the fact that Engels may have dropped the AMP in later writings and that Lenin at times defined Russia and China as falling under an enlarged definition of "feudalism," he argued that Marxists in the contemporary era did not have to deny the unique qualities of an Asiatic path to development. Hu recognized that Chinese society in the Western and Eastern Zhou Periods (ca. 1100–221 BCE) contained qualities resembling

Western European feudalism and had aspects of a slave system in parts of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Nevertheless, beginning with the Qin and Han dynasties, Hu claimed that China had a different and, for the most part, far more developed system than Western European feudalism. In stressing the unique nature of the Chinese state throughout the imperial era from 221 BCE to 1911 CE, he not only gave a much-needed counterweight to long-standing Marxist orthodoxy on ancient Chinese history, but surpassed many Western Marxist sinologists who often failed to distinguish properly between pre- and post-Qin history.

For Hu the differences between the Chinese imperial period and Western feudalism centered on the existence in China of a large, centralized state standing as the “higher unity” above a system of peasant ownership of land. Landlords did exist at the local level, but the centralized collective ruling power took the place of serfdom per se, presumably through state taxes and corvée labor. China’s self-sufficient agricultural system retained features of the primitive communes through such unique entities as China’s single-surname clan villages. Thus, like Wu Dakun, Hu tried to finesse the point that the conservatives used against the Marxist democrats and that Western sinologists raised against Wittfogel—the private ownership of land in imperial China and the existence of a landlord class—by implying the identity of landlords and patriarchal clan leaders. Hu claimed that in China state interests dominated private class interests. He suggested that clan leaders acted as agents of the state on the local level rather than as independent exploiters. While downplaying the significance of private property more explicitly than Wu, Hu Zhongda was better able to highlight the direct exploitation by a centralized despotic state in imperial China.

In sum, Hu made an extremely creative attempt to examine the destructive autonomy of the socialist state using a neo-anarchist paradigm of the state contained within the Marxist concept of the AMP. In essence, as he explained at a Chinese academic conference on the AMP, Hu argued for the existence of direct state exploitation in imperial China by pointing out that China’s monarchical system allowed for the monopoly of the surplus products and surplus labor by an “autocratic collective ruling class” (*zhuanzhi junzhu weishoude tongzhi jituan he boxue jieji*—literally “ruling clique and exploiting class headed by an autocratic monarch”).⁴⁶ Rather than follow the orthodox Marxist–Leninist theory of the state, that is, the state as protecting and disguising exploitation by a dominant economic class, Hu posited that the Chinese imperial state itself had a dominant position in a collective ruling class of landlords, administrators, and the monarchy. Thus the state did not just protect and disguise exploitation, but rather, exploited its subjects directly.

Despite some vacillations on retaining the label of feudalism, in 1981 Hu accepted the AMP as a useful concept in explaining the real differences between China’s centralized absolutist monarchy and the decentralized

politics of Western feudalism. Hu also vacillated on whether to call this unique oriental variant a “separate social existence” or a separate mode of production; nevertheless in his essay he clearly rejected the unilinear five modes of production schema and expressed the hope for continuing free academic debate on the AMP issue.⁴⁷

By 1982–3, such hopes were repressed by high Party leaders. Unlike the contemporaneous debate over humanism and alienation, the AMP disputes never surfaced in the popular press. The AMP debate was quietly ended by higher echelon leaders such as Hu Qiaomu shortly after an issue of *Zhongguoshi yanjiu* (Studies in Chinese History) was published based on a conference of historians on the AMP.⁴⁸ In the first Stalinist backlash, lasting until late 1984, the Marxist democrat AMP advocates were largely silenced. At the same time, the moderate AMP advocates retreated to a view positing that China had a distinctive variation of feudalism rather than a separate AMP. By 1982–3 the small advantages the mainstream ruling elite obtained by allowing the AMP debate were outweighed by threats to state autonomy other parts of the elite perceived from continuing intellectual debates, and the AMP debate was forcibly ended.

When China’s Marxist democrats found themselves in a position publicly to reassert themselves from 1985 to 1986,⁴⁹ just as the advocates of humanism and alienation under socialism made a brief comeback, the AMP debate likewise briefly resurrected. This brief thaw began in the Chinese historical profession in mid-1985, including new academic articles that analyzed the nature of the centralized bureaucracy of imperial China.⁵⁰

The AMP concept itself reappeared in the first 1986 issue of *Lishi yanjiu*, ending that journal’s Stalinist ideological monopoly. The individual responsible for this breakthrough was none other than Hu Zhongda, the most daring of the AMP advocates from the debates of the early 1980s, who returned with an article criticizing the orthodox five mode view.⁵¹ In this article, Hu did not emphasize the AMP as a distinct mode, but instead, echoing the late 1970s view of certain Soviet Aziatchiki, was able to recognize the non-universality of the full slave mode of production by advocating the existence of a single pre-capitalist stage in all societies with different variants, a view that preserved universality of development while allowing multilinear paths to capitalism and socialism. Though thus still legitimizing the Chinese path to socialism, the Soviet-inspired formula that Hu adopted allowed the AMP to resurface as a despotic remnant of feudalism or as a temporary non-universal variation that could continue to influence succeeding stages, just as elements of slavery and feudalism coexisted in different degrees in pre-capitalist societies and into capitalism. Cautiously, Hu claimed that he based his current opinions on his work of the early 1980s, which would include his Tianjin article.⁵²

By far the most extraordinary reappearance of the AMP was presented by Wang Yizhou in the third 1985 issue of *Makesizhuyi yanjiu* (Marxist Studies)

published by the Party democrat-controlled Institute of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.⁵³ Wang viewed the AMP both as a fundamental tenet that Marx never abandoned and as a real historical entity. Though he viewed the AMP as a survival of primitive communal forms into class society, Wang emphasized development and change within this mode. He explicitly denied the stagnation or backwardness of former AMP societies that underwent socialist revolution. Most importantly, he claimed the “most outstanding features” of the AMP to include:

... the absolute economic control by the state over all members of the society through the ultimate, hereditary state ownership of the basic means of production ... the right of the state to appropriate, transform, and redistribute a large amount of surplus product at will, and the absolute, almost religious, control by the state over thought, as well as the absolute, almost blind loyalty to the state from the masses.⁵⁴

Wang specifically used the term “oriental despotism” to refer to the state under the AMP, though he denied that the AMP was geographically limited to Asia either in actuality or in the thought of Marx. Although he denied the backwardness of former AMP societies now under socialist rule, Wang stressed the impossibility of skipping or leaping stages in the revolutionary process. He also denied that the AMP and Oriental Despotism could be equated with state socialism either in Marx’s eyes or in reality. Yet, in the boldest Chinese statement on the AMP, Wang clearly suggested the continuing legacy of the AMP for countries that passed through such a stage on the route to socialism:

... we are confident that Marx never made his studies of the AMP as a part of his theory of socialism ... [but] we cannot deny the guidance of Marx’s analysis of the AMP toward our understanding of some important phenomena in contemporary socialist society. Quite the contrary, the concept of the AMP is extremely important to our understanding of present reality ... it would not be surprising if the characteristics of the AMP discussed by Marx are present in various degrees in all socialist countries due to the fact that most socialist revolutions occurred in countries with the legacy of oriental despotism.⁵⁵

After this temporary return of the Marxist democrats’ critique of the Leninist Party-state, from December 1986 to 1987, all talk of political reform came to a crashing halt following the student demonstrations at major Chinese universities, as noted above. Once Hu Yaobang, the ultimate protector and patron of the Marxist democrats within the Party, was forced to resign from his post, the arch Stalinist hardliners Deng Liqun and Hu Qiaomu returned to influence in the ideological sphere and in their new campaign against

“bourgeois liberalization” the AMP debate was once again aborted. In 1987–8, however, when the reformer Zhao Ziyang was “kicked upstairs” to replace Hu Yaobang as General Secretary, a new thaw briefly began,⁵⁶ until the 1989 Tiananmen student demonstrations once more led to a crackdown and Zhao was removed from his post.

In 1988, during this last brief thaw, the television series *Heshang* (River Elegy) was allowed to be broadcast on state TV and praised by Zhao. This series made direct reference to China’s “despotic” past based on a centralized bureaucratic state’s control of irrigation and other hydraulic projects. The series made clear that a “despotic centralized power” became “a kind of unchallengeable overlord” that continued to affect Chinese political culture.⁵⁷ In the backlash that followed, the series was heartily condemned by Stalinist leaders and their intellectual followers,⁵⁸ and after the 1989 Tiananmen protests, the series’ creators were ultimately forced into exile.

In April 1989, however, just before Hu Yaobang’s death by heart attack during a Politburo meeting and thus just before the Tiananmen protests began, Hu’s network of critical intellectuals managed to get in some last criticisms of Leninist state autonomy. None other than Wang Yizhou, the leading Marxist democrat on the AMP, at one symposium on the topic of the state ownership system, declared that the root cause of corruption in contemporary society was not market reform, as the Stalinists would have it, but “the state ownership system, and its monopolization of all resources.”⁵⁹ As Wang argued,

... the privileged treatment for those vested beneficiaries does not come from party membership dues, but from the monopoly of the state ownership system.⁶⁰

After Hu’s purge in 1987, intellectuals associated with new General Secretary Zhao Ziyang pushed the idea of “neo-authoritarianism” as the way to ensure the continuation of economic reform, that is, the rule of a strong, enlightened leader and his followers who would use their authority to overcome “old authoritarian” forces within the elite who would obstruct market reforms. Only later, once those old forces were removed, could society gradually move in a democratic direction. In response, members of Hu Yaobang’s old network of intellectuals defended the need for political reform and democratization, in the process noting the tendency of the state to turn despotic if it were not subject to popular checks on its authority.⁶¹ As the playwright Wang Ruowang put it, the would-be reformist Soviet leader Khrushchev (whom Goldman sees as perhaps Wang’s allusion to Gorbachev or even Zhao Ziyang) was an example of “an enlightened authoritarian leader who had not turned into a despot, but had been overthrown by the entrenched party bureaucracy because his reforms threatened their interests.”⁶² In other words, the Marxist democrats feared that any justification for “enlightened

despotism” would in the end only allow the state to gain autonomy and follow its own interests to the point where the old despotism would return. As Gao Gao (the wife of the Party democrat Yan Jiaqi) put it about the supposedly enlightened rule of Mao, which after all led to the depredations of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and Cultural Revolution, “the practice of enlightened rule can be such that it can be enlightened today and tomorrow, but on the day when power and interests are touched enlightenment will all but be squeezed out by autocracy.”⁶³ In light of the crackdown that followed the Tiananmen demonstrations, in which many of the Marxist democrats were silenced for many years or forced into exile, Gao’s words were very prescient, though of course totally unsurprising to anyone holding a true neo-anarchist critique.

Conclusion: Neo-Anarchist Thought in the PRC

These last two chapters have examined the thought of Chinese intellectuals, both within and outside the CCP, who utilized versions of the neo-anarchist paradigm of the state from the Cultural Revolution to the Tiananmen student movement. The main advantage of such approaches is that they resonate very well with the experience of Chinese subjects who face the overwhelming might of despotic state power in nearly every aspect of their daily lives. Whatever the Leninist state might say about the primacy of representing the interests of the proletariat (or “the people” since the CCP rewords the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat to that of the “people’s democratic dictatorship” so as to supposedly include other “progressive” classes), Chinese subjects know all too well that when push comes to shove the state takes care of its own interests first, interests which often come into sharp conflict with those of ordinary people. Even though political thought in the last two decades has been relatively muted on the issue of a new ruling class compared to the relatively liberal period of 1978–89, not to mention the radical moment of 1967–8, and avenues of using neo-anarchist critiques based on anomalies in Marx’s thought have been largely cut off, a few brave dissidents still manage to talk about Chinese autocracy. As the contemporary dissident thinker Liu Xianbin recently argued,

... whether the country is ruled by the family clans or by the party, the rule is, in essence, an autocratic rule, which is antagonistic to the people. It runs counter to the concept of democracy and contravenes the will of the people. Over the past several thousand years, the Chinese people have never become the master of this country ...

... If the rulers are still reluctant to give up the various advantages of the autocratic system, then the people who are the masters of the country should stand up on their own initiative to accomplish this social transformation.⁶⁴

For writing such thoughts, and as part of the recent ongoing broad crackdown on all forms of dissent, Liu was convicted in March 2011 of “inciting subversion of state power,” or as his lawyer says, “slander[ing] the ruling Communist Party and [trying] to end its monopoly on power,” and is currently serving a 10 year prison sentence.⁶⁵

Even if those Chinese thinkers who talked about autocracy under Leninism linked autocracy to China’s imperial past and/or to the pressures of the international economic or political system, their main point, from the Cultural Revolution through the early reform era to contemporary dissidents such as Liu Xianbin, is that once the state gains autonomy, it will not give up power without strong pressure from citizens at the grassroots who are highly aware of an autocratic state ruling for itself. Thus, thinkers who talk about the Chinese state within a neo-anarchist paradigm—whatever their various proposed solutions to the problem and despite their own lack of ability to fully challenge the Leninist state in an open way—nevertheless play a crucial role in opening up room for increased pressure on the state in the future.

Most Chinese subjects, as with people living under all dictatorships, are not in a position to challenge the state directly; nevertheless, they continue to feel the weight of state oppression, even as the state tries to whip up support based on nationalist sentiments. Whether it is the state-enforced poverty and mass violence in the Maoist periods of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, which led to the death and suffering of untold millions of people, or the bureaucratic corruption, environmental degradation, growing inequality, and remaining high levels of police state repression of the reform era, it should be obvious even to socialists that the so-called epiphenomena of the Leninist political superstructure easily overwhelms the economic base and the supposed goal of social and economic equality. Whatever one thinks of as the best way to control this behemoth, it should be clear to most people today, including socialist-inclined intellectuals, that the history of the twentieth century was the history of political domination and oppression in different forms and with different ideological justifications, from liberal to Marxist, a history that is likely to continue to expand in this century. Radical intellectuals and activists around the world who desire genuine human liberation could do well to challenge this expansion of state autonomy by copying the Chinese Marxist democrats of the 1960s to 1980s and adopting more explicit anarchist theories of the state.

Notes

- 1 Deng Xiaoping, "Uphold the Four Cardinal Principles," a speech at the Forum on the Principles for the Party's Theoretical Work, March 30, 1979, in Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works (1975–1982)*: 166–91.
- 2 As we have seen in the previous two chapters, Friedman uses the terms "extra-party" and "[inner] party democrats." See Friedman, "The Societal Obstacle to China's Socialist Transition," 159–71.
- 3 See Ding Wang, *Ming Bao Yuekan*, 217 (January 1984), translated and adapted in David A. Kelly (guest ed.), "Wang Ruoshui: Writings on Humanism, Alienation, and Philosophy," 113–14; and cited by Kelly, "The Emergence of Humanism: Wang Ruoshui and the Critique of Socialist Alienation," 162, 339, n. 12.
- 4 For studies of Wang Ruoshui and the "alienation school" in general see Kelly, "Wang Ruoshui: Writings on Humanism, Alienation, and Philosophy," and "The Emergence of Humanism"; Bill Brugger and David Kelly, *Chinese Marxism in the Post-Mao Era*, 139–69; Merle Goldman *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China: Political Reform in the Deng Xiaoping Era*, 116–32; and Hua Shiping, "Marxist Humanism: Wang Ruoshui," Chapter 6 of Hua, *Scientism and Humanism*, 95–107.
- 5 These would include especially Wang, "Tantan yihua wenti" (Discussing the Problem of Alienation), 8–11, translated in Kelly, "Wang Ruoshui: Writings on Humanism, Alienation, and Philosophy," 25–38 and "Wei rendaozhuyi bianhu" (A Defense of Humanism), translated in Kelly, 71–88.
- 6 Wang, "Tantan yihua wenti," translated in Kelly, 29–30.
- 7 Ibid., 30.
- 8 Ibid., 27–8.
- 9 Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* 1, 438.
- 10 Wang, "Tantan yihua wenti," translated in Kelly, 29, 33.
- 11 Ibid., 33.
- 12 See Thomas B. Gold, "Just in Time!: China Battles Spiritual Pollution on the Eve of 1984," 958; Goldman, 121–32; and Stuart R. Schram, *Ideology and Policy in China since the Third Plenum, 1978–1984*.
- 13 Hu's speech is analyzed in Goldman, 127–8.
- 14 Hu Qiaomu, "Guanyu rendaozhuyi he yihua wenti" (On Problems Concerning Humanism and Alienation), *Renminribao* (People's Daily) (January 27, 1984), reprinted in *Hongqi* (Red Flag), 2 (January 26, 1984), translated in FBIS (February 7, 1984), 31.
- 15 For example, see Wang, *Wei rendaozhuyi bianhu* (A Defense of Humanism).
- 16 Wang, "My Views on Humanism," translated in FBIS (August 10, 1984), W5–W17, cited in Brugger and Kelly, 160.
- 17 See Goldman, 204–37.
- 18 For example, see Wang, "Shuangbai fangzhen he gongmin quanli" (The Double Hundred Policy and Civil Rights), reprinted in *Chengming*, 60–1, translated in FBIS (September 12, 1986): K6–K12, cited in Brugger and Kelly, 1990, 166.

- 19 Wang, "The Personality Cult and Ideological Alienation—Replies and Criticism," *Ching Pao*, Part I, 24–7 and Part II, 40–4, translated in FBIS 88–91 (May 11, 1988), 27.
- 20 Personal conversation of this author with Wang Ruoshui, Madison, WI, April 1989.
- 21 Joseph Chaney and Sophia Woodman, "In Memoriam: Wang Ruoshui: Journalist, Philosopher, Humanist," *China Rights Forum* 1 (2002), online at www.hrchina.org/public/contents/article?revision_id=2044&item_id=2043.
- 22 Kelly, "The Emergence of Humanism," 181.
- 23 Bob Jessop specifically cites the AMP as a case where Marx sometimes treated the state as a "parasitic body standing over society." See Jessop, "Recent Theories of the Capitalist State," in Hall, 83.
- 24 For a review of the AMP concept in the USSR, West and East Europe, and China, see Rapp, "Despotism and Leninist State Autonomy," 110–200, which includes an extensive bibliography of the main sources on the AMP debates in different countries.
- 25 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Politischen Ökonomie* (Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy) (Moscow, 1939–41), translated by Martin Nicholas as *The Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*.
- 26 This chapter of the *Grundrisse* has been published as a separate work in English. See Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*.
- 27 This summary definition of the AMP is partially based on that of Perry Anderson, "[Research Note on] the 'Asiatic Mode of Production,'" in Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolute State*, 483.
- 28 Rapp, "Despotism and Leninist State Autonomy," Chapter 4, 76–100.
- 29 Ibid., Chapter 3, 110–200.
- 30 For a mostly apolitical account of the Chinese AMP debates, see Timothy Brook, *The Asiatic Mode of Production in China*; for a more political analysis, see Rapp, "Despotism and Leninist State Autonomy," 301–97; (guest ed.), "China's Debate on the Asiatic Mode of Production," *Chinese Law and Government*, XXII(2) (Spring 1989), "Editor's Introduction," 3–26, from which this section of the chapter is derived.
- 31 Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*.
- 32 Ibid., 369–412; see also Wittfogel, "The Ruling Bureaucracy of Oriental Despotism: A Phenomenon that Paralyzed Marx."
- 33 Gellner, "Soviets against Wittfogel; Or, The Anthropological Preconditions of Mature Marxism."
- 34 Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory*, 327–8.
- 35 Ibid., 347–8.
- 36 English edition, Melotti, *Marx and the Third World*, the edition which Wu Dakun reports heavily influenced him in beginning his studies of the AMP. See Wu, "On Several Questions in the Study of the AMP," 18, n. 2.
- 37 Melotti, 105–13, 141–51.
- 38 Yan, "Imperial Power' and 'Imperial Position': Two Characteristics of Autocracy," reprinted in Yan, *Quanli yu zhenli* (Power and Truth), 91–6, translated in Yan Jiaqi and *China's Struggle for Democracy*, 15.

- 39 Ibid., 10–11.
- 40 Wu, “The AMP in History as Viewed by Political Economy in Its Broad Sense,” 18–29, translated in Su Shaozhi et al. (eds), *Marxism in China*, 53–77, and in Rapp, “China’s Debate on the Asiatic Mode of Production,” 27–46.
- 41 Ibid., citing Mao, “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan Province,” in Mao, *Selected Works* I, 44, 146.
- 42 Wu, in Su Shaozhi et al., 68–9.
- 43 See for example, Lin Ganquan, “The AMP and Ancient Chinese Society: A Criticism of Umberto Melotti’s Distortion of Chinese history in His ‘Marx and the Third World’,” translated in Rapp, “China’s Debate on the Asiatic Mode of Production,” 47–70.
- 44 Wu, 69–76.
- 45 Hu, “Shilun Yaxiya shengchan fangshi jianpi wuzhong shengchan fanchangshuo” (On the Asiatic Mode of Production with a Criticism of the Theory of Five Modes of Production), translated in Brook, 164–83.
- 46 See Pang Zhuoheng et al., “Summary of the Symposium on the AMP.”
- 47 Hu, in Brook, 173–4.
- 48 See Pang et al.
- 49 See Goldman, 166–203.
- 50 For example, see Wu Shouzhi, “The Essence and Important Function of Centralized State Power in the Feudal Autocratic System of China.”
- 51 Hu, “Further Criticism of the Five Modes of Production Theory,” translated in Rapp, “China’s Debate on the Asiatic Mode of Production,” 71–97.
- 52 Ibid., 94.
- 53 Wang Yizhou, “An Inquiry into Marx’s Concept of the AMP—Critical Comments from a Theoretical Standpoint,” translated in Rapp, “China’s Debate on the Asiatic Mode of Production,” 98–108.
- 54 Ibid., 104.
- 55 Ibid., 107.
- 56 Goldman, 238–55.
- 57 See Su Xiaokang, Wang Luxiang, Richard W. Bodman, and Pin P. Wan, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader’s Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang*, 275.
- 58 See Goldman, 257–60.
- 59 Cited in Ibid., 272–3.
- 60 Quoted in Zhang Weiguo, “Whither the State Ownership System?” translated in FBIS (April 25, 1989), 37, cited in Goldman, 273.
- 61 Goldman, 275–82.
- 62 Ibid., 279, citing Wang, interview with *Jiushi niandai*, translated in JPRS 89033 (April 12, 1989), 4.
- 63 Gao Gao, “Improve the Social Control System Taking the Rule of Law as the Main Body,” translated in JPRS 89088 (August 21, 1989), 10–11, cited in Goldman, 281.
- 64 Liu Xianbin, “Cong ‘renmin dajiazuozhu’ shuoqi” (Commenting on ‘The Position of the People as the Masters of the Country’), translated by United States Open Source Center, 2010.
- 65 See Jacob Andrew, “Chinese Democracy Activist Is Given 10-Year Sentence.”