CHAPTER FOUR

FROM CHARTING THE REVOLUTION TO CHARTER 2008:
DISCOURSE, LIBERALISM, DE-POLITICIZATION

Daniel F. Vukovich

With a few important exceptions, most work on modern China produced today either ignores the Mao era or demonizes it as a long series of economic disasters, national trauma, and power-obsessed politics—in sum, as the very epitome of totalitarianism, if not oriental despotism. Think for example of Jung Chang’s and Jon Halliday’s *Mao: The Unknown Story*, a book that even the Western China studies establishment (itself a Cold War institution locked into a symbolic battle with the PRC regime) took umbrage with. Or take a somewhat more academic study like Frank Dikotter’s *The Age of Openness: China before Mao*. This makes a similar, if implicit, argument about Maoism and the revolution by presenting the “semi-colonial” era of the middle class (and Chiang Kai-shek) in urban centers like Shanghai as a space of cosmopolitanism, wealth, and freedom—or at least freedom as understood in a Hayekian, Cold War libertarian sense. Beyond even Isaiah Berlin’s insistence on negative liberty as the highest good (“freedom from” as opposed to “freedom to”), this liberalism is directed against a centralized or “strong” state on principle and in regard to anything resembling economic planning let alone so-called ‘social engineering’ or what used to be more usefully called a perceptoral system. China was remarkably “open” before communism, nationalism, and revolution, on its way to becoming generally equivalent to the normative United States/West. The People’s Republic of China still needs to go back and complete this teleology, though without the “Peoples” (or party-state) part.

Far from the comparatively sane, humane, and culturally relativist streak found in other liberalisms, this form of liberalism is meant to define a universal truth about economics, individuals, and politics. In China this takes the form of charges of against so-called statism.¹ Whereas before the later

1990s liberals or pro-reform intellectuals could attack their opponents by calling them “new leftists,” the more recent pejorative for more or less the same crowd (those critical of the reforms in political, economic, and historiographic terms) is “statists.” The problem with this is not that “statists” like Wang Hui or Wang Shaoguang defend the state and its capacity to help people, foster development, or ameliorate capital’s failures and ‘externalities;’ this is indeed what many new leftists argue, and it is eminently social democratic and a basic front against neo-liberalism. So too there is no good reason to be scandalized by the new leftist argument that what China needs is more state, not less. The problem is that for many Chinese liberals and foreign reporters and experts, this is somehow a bad thing, as if social democracy were authoritarian, or worse, incipiently crypto-fascist or ‘Maoist’ (essentially the same thing for many working in this vein). In their opinion the main enemy is the state, or party-state; the hero and solution is the market. A recent *Economist* article on the assassination of Nationalist politician Song Jiaoren in 1913 argued that, had he only lived, then Sun Yat Sen would have stayed a reformist supporter of democratic procedural voting, and the revolutionary trajectory—and Mao—could well have been avoided. China could have followed Taiwan’s path (presumably without the de facto Marshall Plan).

Such texts present themselves as “subversive” exposés when in fact they confirm what many Western, foreign, and diasporic Chinese readers have always believed and wanted to hear: Mao was a monster and the PRC was built on a mountain of human or individual rights abuses. This would confirm the necessity of the post-Cold War occidental turn toward not just free markets but total “liberalization” and “democracy.” The “end of history” argument was re-launched at the end of the Cold War (i.e., of the Soviet bloc), and surprisingly still obtains in political studies of China and the formerly or nominally communist parts of the world. The rationality, ideals, and passion of twentieth-century communism and socialism in Asia often seem a thing of the past; this is especially the case in

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