Crossroads: China’s Future Under Debate: 
An Interview with Fengzhen Wang 
and Shaobo Xie 

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The interview took place electronically in July-August 2008. The project arose, somewhat ironically, during a conversation in Shanghai’s “new town,” a now highly commercialized entertainment zone located a block from the building where the CPC was founded in 1921. 

The Interview 

Foley: For nearly three decades now the “socialist market economy” has been the centerpiece of the Chinese government policy for building “socialism with
special Chinese characteristics." Supporters of this policy argue that it enables the development of China's economy. Critics contend that it will result (or has already resulted) in the institution of full-blown capitalism in China. What view do you take of this debate?

Xie: Let me begin by speaking to the semantic ambiguity of the terms "socialist market economy" and "socialism with special Chinese characteristics." The uncertainty surrounding these terms generates much space for debate on the Chinese economic reform, both in China and overseas. "Socialist market economy" points to a hybrid economy, and "socialism with special Chinese characteristics" implicitly means two social systems apparently opposed to each other. It is synonymous with capitalism with special Chinese characteristics, and this is how the Dengist formula as practiced in China threatens to break down the boundary between capitalism and socialism. What defines China's economic reform is its ambiguity; China's economic reform is blazing a new trail of development, an alternative to the hegemonic capitalism of the west. In other words, what is happening in China does not neatly fit any known category of social development.

This theoretical ambiguity, however, does not preclude a much less ambiguous empirical reality. What goes under the name of "socialist market economy" or "socialism with unique Chinese characteristics" casts doubt on the argument that China's economy today exists "without the chaos and structured class inequalities of the capitalist market system." China's phenomenal advance in economic development is creating a yawning gap between poor and rich, country and city, throwing the country into confusion and chaos at different levels of social life. The past 15 years or so have witnessed unprecedented rates of unemployment, disintegration of medical care and social welfare, institution of market economy at the cost of equality and social justice, emergence of an indigenous capitalist class, and a corrupt officialdom colluding with national and transnational capitalists. The nationwide redistribution of public property once again pushes workers and peasants to the margins of society. Urban space in China is being quickly modernized at the cost of the peasantry, which is politically the most deprived and economically the most exploited sector of the population. The whole country today is dominated by the logic of capital, the desire for profit, and the commodified structure of consciousness. It is difficult not to conclude that
egalitarian social relations as established in Mao's time are gone and that China is not far away from full-blown capitalism. The past 15 years or so have witnessed waves of resistance in the form of strikes and protests, both spontaneous and organized, against outright privatization and against official corruption. The best-known examples are the strikes by the Daqing oilfield workers and the Liaoyang metal factory workers, which involved thousands of participants and lasted for many days. There has been a 30% rise in strikes and protests in China in recent years. The number rose from 10,000 reported cases with 700,000 participants in 1993 to 60,000 with three million participants in 2003.

Wang: I think that both supporters and critics of the reforms take one-sided views. We cannot deny the rapid economic development in China in the past three decades; neither can we deny the inequalities that have emerged. The supporters believe the most urgent thing for China is economic development, following Deng Xiaoping's famous remark: "Black cat or white cat, the good one catches the rat." They think the market system is a good way to develop the Chinese economy, no matter whether the market is socialist or capitalist. The critics believe the market system follows the rule of commodity exchange, no matter whether it is socialist or capitalist — and therefore that the market implies exploitation and is in contradiction with the goal of communism. Indeed, the market has produced capitalists — an exploiting class — and has resulted in a widening gap between rich and poor.

When China undertook the open policy, people became aware of the material differences between China and the West. When I first went to the United States in 1982, I was shocked at seeing so many cars running like a stream in the street. I exclaimed: "When can China be developed like this?" That was the general feeling of many people at that moment; and thus economic development became a focus. Then the government adopted the policy of the "socialist market economy." It is called the "socialist market economy" because it is not simply a free market economy; the government can control the market. But as it further developed, the "socialist market economy" began to show its capitalist nature step by step. The function of the government also began to shift, from controlling to serving the market.
Since the 1990s, private companies and factories, as well as state companies and factories that underwent privatization, began to run their business according to the capitalist model. In some places, such as the Pearl River Triangle Zone, there even appeared some sweatshops, which recall those of the early stages of capitalism in the west, where workers work for 14 hours or even 16 hours per day. In seeking efficiency and profit, the owners or managers, following the capitalist market system, lay off the relatively old or unskilled workers, and recruit young people from the countryside. This has resulted in a large number of unemployed (or the so-called laid-off) workers.

The socialist market economy has an inner contradiction. On the one hand, it does advance the development of the Chinese economy; on the other, it creates exploitation and class conflict. However, I think it is still an experimental system in China. It is not yet exactly the same free market system as in the West, for the government still has the ability to interfere and even control the market. What I hope is that the Chinese people will invent a new system that can overcome the present contradictions — though this seems difficult for the moment.

What are the relationships among social classes in present-day China? What has happened to China’s income distribution since the reforms? How does the configuration of classes in China relate to the CCP’s stated goal of producing a “harmonious society”?

Xie: What defines the relationships among social classes in present-day China is no longer equality, unity, and harmony, but confrontation, domination, and antagonism. In a short span of 30 years, the unequal socioeconomic strata eradicated by the Maoist revolution have come back fully reinstalled. At the top are capitalist entrepreneurs and Party bureaucrats who have formed a kind of special alliance, whereas at the bottom exists the lumpenproletariat composed of nongmingong (migrant workers from rural areas), and all kinds of uninsured, insecure, underpaid wage workers. Mass incidents, such as strikes, are significant indicators of increasingly intensified social contradictions. It is worth noting that strikes and demonstrations — as social sites and forms of agency — are not as common and easily activated in China as in Western countries, due to internal pressures of a millennium-old Confucian society and to the CCP’s omnipresent strict surveillance system. Their actual outbreak signals much
more agonistic, deep-seated and oppositional discontent and resistance to the ongoing system than in Western countries.

The CCP's stated conception of a "harmonious society" is a multiple signifier. It points to a universally perceived reality of contemporary China that is in sharp contradistinction to a harmonious society; it betrays both the CCP's acute sense of the emerging and potential crisis of a market economy and its pragmatic but genuine recourse to the Confucian value of social harmony; it is a political gesture intended to offset seething resentment and social disillusionment and to contain social instability. The slogan of a harmonious society and an actually existing chaotic, deeply conflicted society are two sides of the same coin. The fact that many capitalists have joined the CCP signals the lost political militancy of that Party against capitalism and its legitimation of exploitation. It also signals the CCP's strategy of mobilizing the whole nation's energy towards an economic renaissance.

Since the inauguration of the Dengist economic reform, there have been radical changes in the CCP's ideology. One is that the intellectuals (in the broadest Gramscian sense of the word that refers to teachers, technicians, engineers, journalists, doctors, etc.) have been categorized by Deng Xiaoping and his followers as part of the working class and knowledge has been categorized as part of the means of production. The other is the officially encouraged esteem for, instead of animosity towards, capital and capitalists. "Economic renaissance" in this context not only refers to the Dengist theory of an all-round economic development, but implicitly carries a negative assessment of the Maoist Cultural Revolution as "a dark age of havoc" which is believed to have brought the Chinese nothing but a sustained suspension or freezing of socialist economic construction. What goes along with the conception of an economic renaissance as such is the negation of Maoist cultural politics and class struggle. This is the historical and discursive context in which capitalists are welcomed to join the CCP.

Wang: In China there are three major social strata: the working class, the middle class, and the capitalist class. The working class includes the peasants, many of whom are working in cities. The middle class consists of white collar workers and professionals, such as professors, doctors, lawyers, etc. The conflicts take place mainly between the working class and the capitalists. The working classes still have an
inherited and traditional faith in the CCP and the CCP-led government as their judge, even though capitalists bribe government officials and some officials collude with capitalists. So, in many of the “mass incidents,” people demonstrate against unfair treatment and then apply to the government, or to a CCP committee, for a solution of their problems. Some of the mass incidents expose class conflicts between workers and capitalists; some express the people’s desire to protect their interests. Usually the government interferes and solves the disputes; sometimes force is used, but rarely. To me, the mass incidents suggest that the political consciousness of the people has been raised; they are making their voices heard by the CCP leaders, who may in turn have to adapt their policies. The mass incidents constitute a force that will contribute to social improvement.

True, some capitalists have joined the CCP, but I don’t think there are many. People have different opinions about this development. Some think it is against the principles of the Communist Manifesto; some think it is a strategy for the CCP to manage the capitalists; still others think that good capitalists represent a progressive productive force at the present stage. My view is that if the number of capitalists is small — say, one percent — their joining the CCP may be a strategy for managing them. Should more and more capitalists join the CCP, however, this would change the nature of the CCP. I hope this does not happen.

Discussions of both globalization and domestic development in China often focus on the notion of “modernity.” Western capitalism has provided both a positive and a negative model, and “alternative modernities” are proposed. Has the Chinese government projected a distinctly Chinese path to modernity, perhaps as justification of increasing inequality? To what extent is there a real debate going on about “alternative modernities”?

Xie: There are indeed different ideas and discourses of modernity in China. The 20th century is for the Chinese a long, persistent search for modernity. China had no desire or even need for modernity until the mid-19th century; the anguished Chinese pursuit of modernity began with the unhappy consciousness of the threatening presence of a technologically and militarily superior west. The Chinese have since always lived with a burning sense of urgency about modernization and a sense of precariousness about their survival in the mod-
ern world. Modernity is a relational concept. It has assumed different contents at different moments in recent Chinese history as in other parts of the world, and has been used to serve genuine utopias, to create a nationalist or communist culture, and to rejuvenate what is perceived as an enfeebled and degenerated collective subjectivity. With late Qing Dynasty reformists, modernity primarily refers to a parliamentary government headed by a monarch, a wealthy nation, a strong army, and highly developed science and technology. In the May Fourth movement of 1919, modernity first of all pointed to a relentless cultural break with tradition and to imported modes of social relationship, representation, linguistic activity and cultural production. Science and democracy were upheld as a passport to a rejuvenated China. At the time of the Maoist communists and their followers, modernity designated a historical process of creating the new man and blazing a trail of passage into the future that radically challenged the capitalist modernity of the west and the revisionist modernity of the Soviet socialist bloc. For the Chinese today, however, modernity means the capitalist mode of production, western consumerism and individualism, and self-centered life building.

In every phase of Chinese modernity there are two points of reference, China's own past and its western Other, and any insightful understanding of the Chinese search for modernity has to situate this search in China's relationship with a certain version of the west as conceived by the Chinese, as well as in the context of capitalist imperialism or globalization encroaching upon the non-western world. There has been no end of debate among the Chinese over how to modernize without having to give up their own centuries-old cultural traditions and social legacies. There have been genuine debates over how to enjoy the benefits of western modernity while avoiding its disastrous effects.

With the Chinese government, modernity is at once a collective project, a national goal, and a "state of exception" — to borrow a term from Giorgio Agamben — that is used as an ideological justification of increasing inequality in China. To pursue modernity, to catch up with the west, to build a society in which everyone is well provided for, certain changes have to be made, and certain policies have to be adopted, no matter how much they may negatively affect certain sectors of the population. In other words, all this is inevitable and there is no alternative. This coincides with the neoliberal turn in Britain
and the United States. However, the present Chinese leadership is making efforts to redress the most egregious wrongs of the 1990s' radical economic reform. The current leaders are apparently paying more attention to the interests of the peasants, even as China's modernization continues to rest largely upon the exploitation of agrarian labor.

Wang: I think we should look at the situation dialectically. The proposals are good in themselves, though it is not an easy job to fulfill them. To solve those problems, China needs more money and an expanded labor force. In order to get the money and to create the job positions, China must develop its production, which means it needs to create rapid growth and productivity. Yet it also needs to keep social stability. In fact, some of the social conditions creating unrest have been improved. For instance, health care covers more people, pensions and social security have been increased, migrant workers' rights are better protected than before, nine-year compulsory education is better implemented in rural areas, all children get textbooks free of charge in western China, there is no more taxation on agriculture — all these changes contribute to improved conditions, even if all problems have hardly been solved. There is still a long way to go.

Chinese officials routinely express the desire for China's increasing participation — and impending dominance — in the global economy to be peaceful. Yet in its quest for energy and raw materials, as well as markets, China has penetrated many parts of the world, including Latin America and Africa, where other industrialized nations seek the same things. Is there a long-run, if not immediate, danger of a global war over access to these resources, a war in which China would of necessity be involved?

Wang: This question seems to be based on the discourse of Western media. The Chinese media representation is very different. I think we should know more about what China is doing in these parts of the world — do some serious fieldwork — before making our own judgments. I understand there are disputes in the West about whether China's rise constitutes a threat or an opportunity. We need to wonder: To whom is there a threat or an opportunity?

The danger of war is always there; the past is full of wars. We need to ask: What were the reasons for the wars that occurred when China
was backward, a victim? Do those reasons pertain now? India and some other countries are after all also developing quickly; why should China be involved in a global war over access to raw materials and resources, more than any other country? America and European countries have been competing over energy and raw materials for a long time; why don’t you mention the danger of war among them?

The danger of war comes from the modern capitalist system. So long as the capitalist system exists, the danger will not disappear. If China adopts the road of capitalism, perhaps it will be involved in the possible future war you mentioned. It all depends on the social system.

*Periodically the CCP urges its members to engage in the study of Marxist–Leninist theory. What features of Marx and Lenin are focused upon in China today? Are they studied in their totality or selectively? How does the encouragement of the study of Marxism dovetail with the renewed emphasis on Confucianism and Taoism as guides to ethics and politics?*

*Xie: The CCP’s periodic insistence on the study of Marxist–Leninist theory is certainly selective and reductive. Actually, if the abolition of private property, the elimination of the exploitation of one part of society by the other, and social equality are cardinal principles of Marxist–Leninist theory, then it is no exaggeration to say that the CCP has either revised or abandoned Marxist–Leninist theory. Upholding Marxism–Leninism–Mao–Zedong thought is no longer a political belief, but a politico-ideological strategy, a practical need, for it serves to legitimate the CCP’s rule in “socialist” China. Single-minded belief in Marxism–Leninism is gone with Mao and his generation and what prevails outside and inside the CCP is a practice of pragmatism and bricolage which, instead of stubbornly holding on to established principles, is always ready to change and adapt itself to new situations. In this perspective, the CCP’s recent emphasis on Confucianism and Taoism is an attempt to deal with the moral and ethical crisis threatening Chinese society today. The CCP over the past two decades has resorted eclectically to capitalism, socialism, Confucianism, Taoism, Marxism, liberalism, authoritarianism, etc., as a means of coping with various situations.*

*Wang: Confucianism and Taoism have a long history in China; their influence has been deposited in people’s consciousness — and*
unconsciousness — in various ways at various times. It all depends on how we interpret and apply them. If we do this dogmatically, the bad feudalist elements will contaminate people's thinking. But if we can draw on the good elements in Confucianism and Taoism and combine them with Marxism, this may make it easier for the broad masses of people to understand Marxism.

For instance, Confucianism stresses collectivity and Taoism emphasizes the unity of man and nature. These values are not incompatible with Marxism. Mao Zedong set a good example about how to integrate theory and practice. In the 1920s, it was hard to explain surplus value and exploitation to the peasants. Mao summarized his understanding of Marxism when he raised the slogan, "Down with the landlords and distribute their land." But he also invoked various sayings from Confucian tradition, such as "food is heaven for man" and "water can carry a boat but may also overturn it." Through this appeal to what they already knew, the peasants were soon mobilized to join the revolution.

I'd like to get some personal/anecdotal comments from you based upon your own experiences. Both of you grew up in the 1950s–1960s. What differences (or continuities) do you discern in the ways ordinary people live their lives, day to day, between then and now? You have both traveled extensively in China. What changes have you witnessed?

Xie: There are pronounced differences between Maoist and post-Mao China with regard to the ways ordinary people live their daily lives. In the Maoist years, there was a planned economy, a state-controlled market, and a household register system — that is, a whole set of policies and institutions designed to sustain an egalitarian society in which people had low incomes but also were guaranteed job security. People divided their daily hours between their work units and homes; they were bonded to their geographical location and other people by a prevailing sense of stability, permanence, and simplicity. There was not much space for privacy, mobility, and individualism; people's lives, and their expectations, were structured, decided, and controlled by the state.

Collectivity, monotony, and uniformity, consequently, were defining features of Chinese life in those years. Carrying baskets to the market for daily needs, lining up for a serving of food in the canteen,
taking a walk in the evening, sitting in a sports ground, gym, or auditorium for an evening movie show at weekends — people performed these routinized acts in unison. As six days’ work was followed by one day off, there was lots to do at home such as cleaning, laundry, and other little errands, so there was little time left for other things. Traveling, except for those involved in business trips, was an unaffordable luxury for the average Chinese; tourism was unheard of. People lived close to one another without privacy or secrets; there was a flattened-out panoptic surveillance over every family or individual.

This is not to say, however, that life was boring or tedious then, or that people were not happy. No one is entitled to judge another’s life from outside. In those years, people had many ways to enjoy themselves and each other. There were various activities organized by workers’ unions, such as sports, games, picnics, singing and dance performances, New Year’s or National Day’s celebrations, evening parties, and chess contests. There were closer interpersonal and inter-familial communications and relationships.

Today, things are radically changed. One change is in spatial relations. Many people in urban China today live in gated communities, which brings them privacy and social estrangement at the same time. More residential and private space is enjoyed by the average urban person or family, and there is much more spatial mobility. People travel more and can choose where to work and live, for there is no more household register system to restrict people to minimal spatial or geographical mobility. Even within the borders of their shared limited space, family members in the same household can do different things simultaneously without disturbing each other, such as watching TV, cyber-surfing or reading on the internet, playing computer games, and talking over the phone. Indeed, telephone, computer, and television at once enlarge and shrink people’s space of life. You watch movies, participate in meetings, do business, conduct research, socialize, tour around, and shop for daily goods without having to leave your house; the refrigerator makes it unnecessary for people to get up early in the morning for the market on a daily basis. The two-day weekend offers people much more time for enjoying life that has no connection with their work units.

As many people no longer live close to where they work, they spend lots of time commuting. There is thus much less family time and less communication in the family, despite the extended weekend.
In a sense the definition of home has changed; the average home is occupied by people who no longer have time to spend with families and are less dependent on their homes for a sense of who they are.

Wang: The most drastic change in ordinary people’s lives seems to me to be political. In the 1950s and 1960s, people took themselves to be the masters of their country; they worked devotedly for the country without much thought for themselves. Materially they lived a poor life, but spiritually they were rich. They had strong belief in socialism and communism, really trusting the CCP as their mother. They were proud to serve others and praise collectivism, regarding individualism as selfish. But now these trends have been almost completely reversed; people think mainly about themselves and their own benefit, falling prey to commodification or becoming the slaves of capital.

Although people lived a poor life in the 1950s and 1960s, they did not feel any life-pressures. They enjoyed free education, from primary school through university, as well as full health care; housing was allocated on the basis of need rather than status. If a family had more members, it would get a larger apartment. The rent was very low compared with the present. Now people in cities have a better material life in general, but most of them face heavy pressures in relation to health care, education, and housing. Many have to struggle to pay their mortgages and are nicknamed “slaves of housing.” If a white-collar worker has a family member who is seriously sick, he may become poor overnight. For people in the cities, psychological problems are increasing rapidly; the differences between past and present are stark.

As for the life of peasants in the countryside, this varies according to area. In the more developed areas, such as the Pearl River Triangle Zone (Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Zhuhai) and the Yangtze River Triangle Zone (Shanghai-Hangzhou-Suzhou), most of the peasants have left agricultural work; they have become workers in factories or have gone into business. Some are rich, and many have built modern three-storied houses. In most areas of mid-China, though, daily life has not changed much. In parts of west and northwest China, the changes are minimal, and many people still live miserably, inhabiting old caves and lacking money to send their kids to school. In a sense, China can be said to have its own “third world” in the countryside. In some remote areas or mountain villages, people don’t even have enough to eat, not to mention decent clothes.
In the west, Mao Zedong continues to be demonized, as evidenced in Chang and Halliday's recent (and popular) Mao: The Untold Story. What kind of assessment of Mao is going on in China these days? Also, while it remains officially prohibited to discuss the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), is this historical phase undergoing (re)assessment of any kind? If so, what is being said, and how might this relate to assessments of China's current direction?

Xie: Mao will continue to be demonized in the west and to be regarded by certain sectors of the Chinese population in both positive and negative ways. The reassessment of Mao and the Cultural Revolution remains an officially forbidden topic, mainly for two reasons. First, many of those affected by the Cultural Revolution are still living and are in power. Second, the reassessment of Mao will involve reassessment of many of the CPC events and the CPC leaders, including Deng Xiaoping himself. The GPCR is also undergoing a quiet and unofficial (re)assessment in contemporary China. Mao's images and old revolutionary songs are encountered everywhere in China. Reassessment of Mao and the Cultural Revolution implicitly involves a reassessment of what is happening today.

The significance of the GPCR remains to be explored, which requires that the study of the Cultural Revolution move beyond its established parameters. There were two cultural revolutions in 20th-century China: the May Fourth Cultural Revolution of 1919 and the Cultural Revolution of 1966. Scholars as well as ordinary people usually approve of the former and denigrate the latter, failing to see the connection and continuity between the two. Actually the standard-bearers of both revolutions believed in cultural revolution as a sure path to a rejuvenated or reinvented China; both prioritized culture as the determining domain of social life; and both gestured towards breaking with the past. The difference between Mao and the May Fourth Movement is that Mao believed in the idea of permanent revolution or revolution within revolution. He declared the need to continue revolution under the proletarian dictatorship (as Mao himself said, to make a cultural revolution is to make a revolution in the depths of the soul).

Wang: Mao continues to be demonized in the west because the west does not want to see China continue along the path of Mao's socialism.
But in China it is certainly different. All over China, Mao Zedong is still regarded as a great leader, even for those who dislike him, and Mao Zedong Thought is viewed as a great theory. Officially, the CCP states that Mao's record contains 70% merits and 30% demerits; the CCP continues to profess that his thought furnishes an official guide to the Party, even though some members may disagree in their inner hearts. As for the people, most workers and peasants, particularly those over 50 years old, have a nostalgic feeling for Mao, and often use Mao's time as a yardstick to measure the present, saying that this or that is not as good as in Mao's time. Many of the youngsters, however, especially those who were born in or after the 1980s, don't know Mao much and do not talk much about Mao, with the exception of some university students in the field of humanities.

Reassessments of Mao in relation to the Great Cultural Revolution are going on quietly. Some say that although Mao was a great leader, his decision to launch the GPCR was a serious mistake, as millions of people suffered a great deal, and tens of thousands may have died in the chaotic violence. But others argue that these occurrences should not be attributed to Mao himself. Mao initiated the GPCR because he wanted to keep to the socialist road when it was in danger. He stated clearly that the aim of the GPCR was, "Down with the capitalist roaders," and he issued the instruction "to fight in a cultural way, not with violence." The so-called catastrophic effect was not Mao's purpose, but resulted from the resistance by the "capitalist roaders." If you look at the emergence of capitalism, you have to admit that Mao's view was far-sighted. In light of the uneven development in present-day China, those who support Mao's historical role even argue for Mao's policy of letting young students go to the remote mountain areas and live there. Should those students not return to the cities, the cultural level in those areas would be much different from the present, since development would be facilitated by the presence of more educated people.

I believe Mao will be revalued in the future, and his legacy will be restudied. Indeed, the present reformation of the health care system can be regarded as an example of current policies drawing on Mao's legacy.

A final question. What in your view are the principal tasks facing leftists in China today? How much are radical intellectuals in touch with insurgent
peasants and workers? How much — if at all — are class struggles in China linked or coordinated? What are the forces in Chinese society that hold the greatest promise for the future development of an egalitarian social order — that is, real communism?

Wang: To this question, I can only give a brief response. I believe that in every society, the true force lies in the broad masses of people. The principal task of anyone who wants to realize communism is first of all to raise the people’s consciousness about communism.

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