



4.

Plague Illuminates the Great Unity of All Under Heaven: On the Coming State

Introduction: In the Shadows

Plague literature is rarely about the plague. It is, instead, a drama simultaneously social and microbial. As existential ruminations condense in isolation and seep outward, these tributaries slowly sculpt the terrain of a popular culture now faced with a type of catastrophe that can no longer be denied out of convenience. The exemplars of the genre see in the plague a more monstrous return of class conflict, scorning its long denial. In these cases—for example Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death” or Bruno Jasiński’s *I Burn Paris*,¹ which, in a chilling echo of the present, envisions an insurrection occurring in the midst of a plague in 1920s France—the drama mobilizes the plague as a form of class warfare

1. See: Benjamin Noys, “Microbial Communism,” *Mute Magazine*, Sept. 24, 2013. *I Burn Paris* is less well-known in the anglophone world but was once among the best-selling books of communist fiction—so popular that it succeeded in getting its author expelled from Poland and the book banned.

severed from political agency altogether, since political agency has failed it. Instead, the conflict is transposed onto the more fundamental substratum of biology where it becomes less concerned with the ethics and consequence of revolutionary bloodletting. In such fantasies class is not overturned, but unbound in a great, uninhibited violence unleashed by the unknowing hand of the plague itself, a barely veiled metaphor of overspilling vengeance. The genre is nihilist and apocalyptic, but also preternaturally political—as if those desperate, hopeful, wrathful slogans scrawled across Hong Kong in 2019 just months before the pandemic had levered themselves out of the concrete and crawled into the blood: “if we burn, you burn with us,” “I’d rather be ashes than dust.”

But the more common cultural current is conservative, defined by a recognition of the catastrophe without the ability to delineate its cause. At its most reactionary, this manifests as a pure substitution: tens of thousands of people for whom politics is nothing but endless paranoia deny the existence of the virus outright, seeing in it nothing but an excuse for the overreach of the state. Others take an equally reactionary but opposite position. They vigorously amplify the myths that states craft for themselves by pointing to the relative success of various East Asian governments in containing the outbreak (and conveniently ignoring their failures that facilitated it).² Whether rallying around the state or rallying against it, these are a concise expression of an almost universal approach to the question of the plague, ranging from the party propagandist, to the paranoid anti-masker, and from there all the way up to the ivy-league philosopher. The thematic core is this: the plague is not the plague but is instead simply one face of the totalizing state. The state here acts as a sort of final threshold of ideology. This is the limit-point beyond which one has no other option but to gaze upon contours of the beast we call capitalism. At this threshold, the rule is to speak of the plague without speaking of its origins, to speak of society without speaking of the social and to speak of the pandemic as a purely administrative matter conducted by those at the helm of the state. In short, the most common way that the pandemic is spoken of today is not to discuss it at all and to discuss the state in its place.

2. This is true not only for China but also South Korea, for example.

The shadow of the state is dark and cloaks all that lies beneath. What should be a deeper lesson in the microbiological and macroecological devastation that necessarily accompanies production for the sake of never-ending accumulation is thereby disguised as a stereotypical drama of the “man versus society” archetype, as taught in high school English departments and here retaining all the depth of a teenager’s essay on Orwell. The cliché is played out not only in news media but also in what is the most representative form of the genre today: the plague diary, serialized over social media. These diaries first began to appear in Wuhan in the midst of the Chinese lockdown. They circulated on the grey market of not-yet-banned Weibo and WeChat posts, where they were discussed between friends and (sometimes) archived outside the reach of the censors. Once banned domestically, they began to recirculate outside the country, often in translation. The best of these were simply personal records, detailing the surreal, existential experience of life under lockdown, but the most widely distributed have been those that emphasize the melodramatic conflict between individual expression and the authoritarian state. The latter produce consumable clichés that direct public ire away from the social and economic system governing our everyday lives and instead toward the politically proper focal point: a government simultaneously too near and too distant.

The most famous and familiar narrative of the recent plague literature, then, is certainly *Wuhan Diary*, a collection of social media entries penned by the award-winning author Fang Fang during the lockdown in Hubei.³ Since it was written by an already well-known celebrity with millions of Weibo followers, it quickly garnered the attention of the foreign press. Meanwhile, given its generic liberal undertones and lack of any real political position aside from constantly bemoaning media censorship and decrying the government’s opaque, deadly mismanagement of the early stages of the outbreak, it matched the ideological predilections of the foreign publishing industry. The account was therefore translated into English and German at breakneck speed and released by

3. Fang Fang is the penname of the fiction author Wang Fang. She was the recipient of the Lu Xun Literary Prize in 2010, one of the country’s most prestigious awards for novelists. Though better known in Chinese, several of her major works have been translated into English. None, however, have seen the same success as the rapid translation of *Wuhan Diary* in 2020.

major publishers via Amazon in both languages a mere two weeks after the final installment of the Chinese version was published (on April 8th, the day that the lockdown ended). This is the *Wuhan Diary* most visible to the outside world, firmly planted in a naïve liberalism stretching from the first entry in January to the preface written for its translation in April, where the author offers nothing more than the clichéd kumbaya solution of the fleece-wearing intelligentsia: “The only way we can conquer this virus is for all members of humankind to work together.”⁴

In fact, this sentence is Fang Fang’s hedge against the realization that her work had been actively mobilized by those seeking political gain through the attribution of the pandemic to the mismanagement of the Chinese state. But the virus was not caused, as she claims, by the “arrogance” of “humankind.”⁵ Moreover, the deployment of her diary in ongoing geopolitical conflicts was hardly incidental. In her very first entries from late January, she characterizes the outbreak in the language of American conservatism:

When the world of officialdom skips over the natural process of competition, it leads to disaster; empty talk about political correctness without seeking truth from facts also leads to disaster; prohibiting people from speaking the truth and the media from reporting the truth leads to disaster; and now we are tasting the fruits of these disasters, one by one.⁶

Similar statements are sprinkled throughout *Wuhan Diary*. The supposed political neutrality and well-meaning invocations of the shared lesson that the virus has taught to humankind disguise a fundamentally conservative logic where competition is “natural” and authoritarian censorship in the name of politics is the real cause of the disaster, rather

4. Fang Fang, “Introduction: The Virus is the Common Enemy of Humankind, Section V,” *Wuhan Diary*, New York: Harper Collins, 2020.

5. Ibid.

6. The quote is from the entry of Jan. 26, 2020. It needs to be noted here that “political correctness” (政治正确) in Chinese denotes the practice of aligning one’s public statements and policies with the current language used in the government’s official media pronouncements. The book’s English translator, however, does not make this clear, purposefully conflating the conservative use of the term in English with this more specific usage in Chinese.

than the pandemic’s actual origin in profit-driven factory farms and widespread ecological destruction.⁷

When confronted with the reality of such a catastrophe, critics who hold to the fundamental inalienability of capitalism will always turn their attention instead to the state, which is, after all, the supposed nexus of representation for “the public.” And this elision is the real point of interest in today’s plague literature: Why does the state play this substitutionist role at every level of inquiry? In other words, why do people end up talking about the state when they set out to talk about the plague?

In these accounts, the totalizing state and its pervasive, panoptic power seems to be the prime mover in a paranoid conspiracy that flips Hobbes’s *Leviathan* on its head. This sort of sovereignty has no material origin. In this conception, the state becomes little more than an ancient, amorphous specter haunting humankind. This is the state’s own myth of itself, the final reification disguising the fact that the state today cannot be understood separate from its functions under capitalism—just as, historically, states are inseparable from questions of class and production. Capitalist imperatives are the foundation of the state and conflicts arise from the fact that disjointed processes of state building and state decay exist side by side within a single global economy. This material conception of the state requires an understanding of it in its specificity—that is, in relation to civilization as a whole and to particular modes of production—rather than as some exaggerated, paranoid Leviathan haunting humanity from the moment the first grains were cast into the soil. Here, otherwise incidental factors of history, geography and culture can be adapted into integral elements of statecraft, so long as they can be mobilized to effectively serve fundamental capitalist imperatives.

The pandemic cannot be primarily explained through the behavior of the state. At the same time, the response to the outbreak has illuminated both the state-building process underway in China and the general decay of public institutions in the United States and Europe. Neither of these processes can be understood as distinct from one another, since

7. Rob Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of COVID-19*, NYU Press, 2020. This general argument is made in “Social Contagion” above.

each is shaped by the same industrial conflict between different factions of capitalists who have divergent interests defined by their investment in competing trade blocs. This does, however, raise deeper questions about the nature of the state under capitalism and its attendant concepts. Included here are the questions of how much the institutional structure of the Chinese state necessarily needs to emulate its Western counterparts to fulfill its capitalist imperatives and, symmetrically, how much latitude it has to develop in a different direction. This latter point is especially relevant, given that the last two decades have seen influential intellectuals and high-level political leadership both intentionally and openly place more and more emphasis on a different logic of statecraft rooted in a different genealogy, even while they contribute to the construction of a state that fundamentally serves capitalist imperatives. In this regard, the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition exerts an evident influence (especially via its living interlocutors) on the potential shape of the state currently being constructed—even if this state absolutely cannot be reduced to its cultural features nor understood in a purely or even primarily cultural fashion.⁸ In other words, the key questions are: how much must the Chinese state resemble the capitalist states that have preceded it, how much latitude is there for adaptive experimentation and what intellectual environment might provide the resources for such adaptation?

Answering these questions requires a concrete analysis of the mechanics on the ground—how power is actually developed and deployed—rather than a purely discursive approach detailing how the state speaks of itself and articulates its power to the populace. These pragmatic features are what we emphasize below. At the same time, the deployment of power does not occur in a vacuum. We might echo a truism here and say that the mode of production (mostly, but not exclusively,

8. Throughout, we refer to a “Chinese” philosophical and literary tradition. This is not to imply that a “Chinese” state or even a single coherent “Chinese” civilization has actually existed in East Asia for millennia—this claim is relatively recent and is largely a product of the 20th-century nation-building project. Instead, the reference is to the fact that Chinese characters were the universal writing system across the region, allowing for authors speaking mutually unintelligible spoken languages to have their ideas rendered in a mutually intelligible fashion. This enabled the growth of a single Chinese-language canon of literature, history and philosophy to form which would be a shared reference across dynasties.

its ruling class) makes its own states, but it does not make them as it pleases. Instead, it crafts them under circumstances given and transmitted from the past, with materials salvaged from the contingencies of culture and geography. These materials are assembled within a given intellectual context, through which they are made available to those with the power to shape wide-ranging transformations in governance.⁹ Today, this intellectual context is global, but not homogenous. Similarly, the globalization of European practices of statecraft—and the influence thereby exerted by capitalist imperatives on their evolution—has been an incidental outcome attending imperialism and colonization, not a logical necessity. Given the different material challenges faced by capitalism today and a different intellectual genealogy from which to draw, there is every reason to expect that the state currently being constructed in China will, in certain respects, be without precedent *even while its fundamental function remains the same*.

In what follows, then, we begin by exploring previously invisible intricacies of state construction illuminated by the sudden catastrophe: how the party mobilized its local organs of authority in response to the pandemic and how this mobilization was itself insufficient, demonstrating a persistent incapacity that could only be overcome through the participation of millions of volunteers. All these mechanisms—identified through a series of original interviews, in our own personal experiences and via secondary accounts of the quarantine—compose the actual deployment of power on the part of the state.¹⁰ They are, therefore, the

9. The process from here is experimental and evolutionary: reforms in governance are piloted in certain areas (often developing as a makeshift response to some local problem) and only extended elsewhere if and when they prove functional in maintaining the baseline conditions of accumulation or in overcoming limits to continuing growth. Even then, there is no guarantee that any given adaptation will be taken up elsewhere, since selection between multiple equally adequate options then depends on numerous contingencies.

10. The primary material collected from interviews and personal experience is almost all urban, though it was supplemented by secondary information about rural areas. It covers experiences in Wuhan itself and in several other major cities of China (all large and most coastal) and includes roughly equal representation between Chinese and foreign respondents—with a disproportionate number from Wuhan. This means that any biases in the sample population will skew in the opposite direction of our fundamental thesis that the response was haphazard and displayed a deep incapacity on the part of the state: containment was conducted most thoroughly in Wuhan and Beijing, more strictly in major cities and most severely for foreigners and those from Wuhan. Had more respondents from rural areas and small cities been included, it's likely that the inconsistencies

material from which we can theorize the progress and character of the state-building project in China today. We will first explore the history of experimental reforms that led to the current distribution of power at the local level and illustrate the role of all the major institutions mobilized in response to the pandemic. After this, we systematically anatomize the various forms of volunteer self-organization that were the real means by which the outbreak was contained. This is followed by an overview of the policies implemented in the lockdown and their deeply fragmented nature, mirroring the fragmentation of the state more generally. Overall, it becomes apparent that the supposed success of the Chinese government in containing the virus was really evidence of a deeper weakness. In conclusion, we offer a few speculations on the likely future direction of the state-building project at the local level. Throughout, we periodically return to more theoretical concerns about the nature of the state under capitalism, the characteristic institutional structures that have prevailed in the region historically, and the philosophy of statecraft that informs those in power today.

Ships in a Storm

The first stage is marked by a sudden divergence in the flow of information. Rumors originating in medical circles had begun to circulate about some new sort of flu. The official response was that these rumors were overblown—specifically, that there was a virus, but it wasn't a SARS variant, and it wasn't transmitted from human to human—but locals began to suspect evidence to the contrary as the Huanan Seafood Market was shut down and Wuhan's hospitals began to feel the influx. Those who knew better (specifically doctors and other workers in the medical sector) began to share warnings to friends and family, as a quiet run on PPE began. Stores began to empty of masks, gloves and hand sanitizer long before the lockdown. Of course, behind the scenes there was a multilateral struggle occurring within the state itself. Local officials denied everything, and local police admonished doctor Li Wenliang and other early whistleblowers. At the same time that the local state was

and inefficiencies of the containment effort would have only been further emphasized.

cracking down on “rumor mongers,” the central authorities had been alerted by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention that a new, unidentified flu (suspected to be SARS) was spreading in the city. Beijing sent experts to Wuhan as early as January 1, 2020, and a coronavirus was identified as the cause on January 8. Rather than attempting to cover up the outbreak to the rest of the world (as had occurred during the SARS epidemic), the central state assisted the release of the virus's genetic sequence in record time and didn't make any attempt to officially deny the early foreign reporting on the epidemic. It did, however, condone and support local officials' early attempts to constrain the spread of information in Wuhan and Hubei more generally. Thus, a strange situation emerged in which many in Wuhan often got the most authoritative news of the virus not from local health officials but instead from relatives and acquaintances elsewhere in China or even from overseas. Before the lockdown of any physical space came an ominous sequestration of information, signaling the fragmented command structure of the state.

In many ways, this was a textbook example of state incapacity. Even while the core epidemiological infrastructure operated with relative efficiency in identifying the virus, tracing its geographic origins and rolling out widespread testing in record time, the social infrastructure of pandemic control ran up against the fissured nature of the Chinese state. The central government appears to have continued to defer administrative responsibilities to the municipal and provincial governments in the normal fashion throughout most of January, despite its own scientists identifying a new coronavirus circulating in the city early in the month. Following standard practice, it initially backed up the pronouncements of its local administrators by repeating these positions in the official national media outlets. In Hubei, officials constrained local information at precisely the time that public access to such information would have done the most to prevent further infection. Then, something appears to have shifted toward the end of January. The speed of the shutdown and the fact that so few expected it seems to hint that some protocol was triggered at the central level. As our respondents remark in Chapter three, the lockdown announcement was released at 2 AM on the 23rd of January, with no one allowed to leave after 10 AM on the same day—apparently, however, on-ramps were already being closed as early as

January 22, albeit with no formal notice of the fact. Later, the CCP had to reverse prior positions and exonerate whistleblowers who had originally been admonished by the local authorities, such as Dr. Li Wenliang (who had since died from the disease), with authorities even offering a “solemn apology” to his relatives. Throughout the early response to the pandemic, the fragmentation of information itself reflected the deeper fragmentation within the actual mechanisms of the state.

With the experience of the first SARS outbreak in mind, the central authorities clearly had at least a rough playbook for how to deal with an epidemic that had such a clear geographic center. Despite the shock and fear in Wuhan itself, the fact that a single point of origin was so quickly identified was ultimately a blessing for the management of the pandemic: it ensured that, so long as thorough attention was paid to Wuhan and Hubei (as well as anyone who had recently travelled there), the quarantine as a whole wouldn’t fail, even if its implementation elsewhere was inconsistent. Similarly, it was a serendipitous fact that the outbreak occurred prior to the Chinese New Year and its massive movement of population. Due to the upcoming holiday, most people had already prepared for normal shop closures by stocking up on food, and most companies had already planned to close for the week. The sudden Wuhan lockdown represented the central state’s clear realization that these two bits of luck were quickly running out. The spread outward from Hubei was well underway, and New Year travel threatened to accelerate it beyond all hope of containment. Though it’s still unclear exactly what command mechanisms were mobilized, the lockdown appears to mark the point at which the central government unequivocally stepped in. This not only ensured that the lockdown would be enforced in Wuhan—first and foremost through travel restrictions in and out of the city, which were implemented ahead of anything else, and second through various forms of internal restrictions on commerce and movement within the city—but also that the example would communicate the sort of policies expected of lower-level officials elsewhere, since the state had no capacity to ensure consistent application in the countryside.

This was the first-ever quarantine of this scale in human history. The conduct of the quarantine certainly gives some insights into the nature of the state’s response to the pandemics caused by the very economic system that it cultivates. But the function of such lockdowns is

not to preserve health for its own sake. Instead, the state treats health as an ancillary necessity for maintaining a competent laboring population and preventing insurrection. In this regard, the Chinese state (which has long practiced its ability to effectively operate from a position of weakness while slowly building capacity) proved much more capable of taking decisive action in favor of the long-term interests of the economy, even if this meant sacrificing short-term profits. This contrasts markedly with the United States, where a long hemorrhaging of state capacity coincided with the poor luck of a particularly inept administration to produce the opposite outcome: the sacrifice of the population for the short-term gain of the economy. Ironically, this divergence has now proven the American state to have been the less effective administrator of that economy’s baseline conditions, since its short-game strategy has been worse for accumulation in the long run. In the immediate moment, however, all these larger questions were relegated to the backdrop. Instead, those trapped in the lockdown were faced with a more existential condition, suddenly isolated in a flash-frozen world stalked by some invisible threat.

At first everything took on a surreal dimension. Our interviewees offer nervous laughter describing those initial weeks of lockdown in Wuhan and elsewhere. Non-Chinese respondents illustrate interactions with a bureaucracy simultaneously banal and baroque. At times, the experience is laughably harmless in its inefficiency. In others, it might entail a half-month nightmare of shuttling back and forth between makeshift hospitals in a dystopia of Kafkaesque clichés. One of our friends describes it well in Chapter three: “at first people were just surprised and everything seemed absurd.” The same friends write of those absurd first weeks in quarantine in their own “Wuhan Diary,” printed as a sort of DIY comic book.¹¹ In contrast to Fang Fang’s more famous version, the comic doesn’t gravitate toward mundane questions of corruption and censorship but instead shows a far more intimate portrayal of the lockdown’s living absurdity. Throughout, the authors use the metaphor of being stranded at sea, each apartment or housing complex its own ship

11. The diary was printed as a comic strip in Chinese in various outlets and in both Chinese and English by a left-wing newsletter put together by the Black Book Assembly in Hong Kong.

stuck in the eye of the storm:

From the ship I look out of a small window, and through its yellowing glass and the layers of fog, there are people waving flags trying to tell us something [...] Many friends also send messages to us (in a bottle) along the tidal waves, asking us what our situation is.

These messages to and from distant friends and family are invariably mundane—stories about the health of the family dog and pictures of the meals prepared in lockdown—but somehow this fact makes them more valuable, each presented with the care of an archeologist unearthing spare records of lives otherwise scoured from history.

One of the first, most salient effects of the lockdown was the way in which this isolation engendered an alien experience of mundane surroundings and one's own body—not quite dissociation so much as an unmooring from the many minor rituals that compose the everyday practice of embodiment. In this absurd, atomized inversion of the mass strike, the same suspension of quotidian economic life was realized but also severed from its automatically communal dimension. At first, the inverted strike manifested as a series of surreal encounters with various commodities populating the narrative. As the denials dissipated and lockdown began, news poured in of highway checkpoints and rolling closures of all shops and pharmacies, which led to hundreds of thousands rushing to evacuate and a complete shortage of PPE. The temperature dropped and the battery on one of the authors' iPhones began to expand, causing the phone to “swell up like a real apple.” At the more general level, commodity circulation itself exhibited an equally indeterminate logic. Simply obtaining cooking gas became an eerie bureaucratic hurdle where even the local authorities half-jokingly assured everyone waiting out in the cold that, in the worst case, they could all just loot the delivery truck. Local markets began going to the different neighborhoods, inverting the active and passive roles in the economic relationship as commodities exuded the specter of the animate. In these early stages of wintry isolation, surrealism seeped into every facet of consciousness. One author saw “a video of a wild pig fleeing on the Second Ring Road” and ruminated on an abandoned idea “for a novel where all of

humanity would enter a 100 year-long sleep mode and nature would slowly recover.” Meanwhile, other ships passed silently in the night. The storm expanded beyond the wall of fog.

The Floating State

Over time, the surreal strike was forced to turn to practical questions. These took two forms, with some overlap: First were **questions of basic survival**—dealt with largely within the reproductive sphere of the household and within the village and community/neighborhood (社区—*shequ*). The latter two locales have parallel formal and informal reproductive infrastructures, however, since they include both the sum of households that compose the locality as well as specific base-level government agencies with affiliated local-level state and party organs. Often, informal cooperation between households fused with formal initiatives led by the central state as delegated to these organs. Similar issues were confronted in the workplace. Labor organizing was limited during the lockdown and muted in its immediate aftermath. But several months after the reopening, the strain placed on logistics workers finally culminated in a series of strikes.

Second were **questions relating to the pandemic itself**. These were dealt with through various makeshift organizations which sometimes overlapped with local governmental agencies (by staffing government initiatives with volunteers, for instance) and sometimes did not. In general, these forms of self-organization can be characterized as far exceeding the capacity of the state in many places, by both outperforming the state in provision of essential medical resources and simply in their ability to mobilize more labor than the state alone was capable of.

From afar, one could lump all the above together under the label of “mutual aid” and thereby equate these examples with what seem to be similar grassroots efforts in other countries. While this equation is wrong on multiple levels, it nonetheless hints at the essential role played by volunteer work (志愿者工作) and mutual aid (互助) in the successful effort to contain the pandemic.¹² By the same measure, though,

12. In general, “volunteer work” or “mutual aid” were the terms used to describe these activities at the colloquial level within China. It's essential to realize, however, that the

it also illustrates how seemingly grassroots volunteer efforts have long been integral to Chinese statecraft and remain fundamental to the current state-building process. Mass mobilization distributed through lengthy, intertwined relational networks ultimately linking back to the formal bureaucracy has always played an important role in both the political philosophy of the region and in the way that power has traditionally been deployed. This also means that “civil society,” “direct democracy” and “autonomy” are already subsumed within the more general practice of governance—often in a highly formalized fashion, with terms like democracy and autonomy written into law, despite not existing in any recognizable form in everyday life—and thus, these concepts are poor registers for understanding challenges to the state. Similarly, the presumption that mutual aid work is politically empowering for those involved may not carry the same implications if this empowerment not only fails to oppose the state but, in fact, keeps it afloat. The pandemic demonstrated that categorizations dependent on a clear divide between the formal realm of government and the informal realm of governance may not accurately capture the real anatomy of the state.

In order to understand the present state-building effort and the nature of its relation to local mutual aid initiatives, some general historical context is necessary. Though the socialist developmental regime is the immediate historical precursor from which mechanisms of government were inherited, here we emphasize the nature of the state in the dynastic era, because it is precisely the “long” history of statecraft that is being actively revived in Chinese political philosophy today, taking on increasingly overt expression in official pronouncements and in the design of new administrative mechanisms. That said, *any influence exerted on the present by ancient political philosophy is nonetheless subordinate to the state’s fundamental functions under capitalism*. There is a thin line between recognizing the true influence of Chinese political philosophy’s discursive universe (or any other contingent, cultural-linguistic

term for mutual aid does not imply any separation from or opposition to the state as it does in English. In fact, it often implies the opposite due to its incorporation in the political terminology of the developmental regime (as in rural “mutual aid teams”). The term “self-organization” (自组织) began to be used later—largely by left-liberal political thinkers, though sometimes also by more radical leftists in worker organizing circles—in order to class such activities together in a way that implied greater independence from the state.

features of society) in this subordinate role and overemphasizing it such that the Chinese state becomes a sort of neo-Confucian Leviathan that overdetermines all other forms of social organization, just as spectral and mythic as its European counterpart.

This is an increasingly important distinction to make as such portrayals are today becoming only more common—promoted both by conservative philosophers and media pundits outside of China (where they’re fused with an inherent anti-communism) and by the Chinese state’s own invocation of itself as the inheritor of “five thousand years of civilization.”¹³ The CCP’s bi-monthly theory periodical *Qiushi* (求是), circulated among high-level party officials, has in recent years elevated the position of “traditional culture” to the same level as “revolutionary” culture and that of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” following Xi Jinping’s own frequent invocations of the CCP’s civilizational mission.¹⁴ A more telling example can be found in the aftermath of the state’s crackdown on Maoist student groups involved in the 2018 Jasic Affair.¹⁵ This crackdown saw Beijing University’s Marxist Society not only dismantled (alongside counterparts at Renmin and Nanjing Universities) but also reconstituted by the university’s administration in early 2019. New student leaders committed to upholding “Xi Jinping Thought” were appointed. The first lecturer invited to the reconstituted society was not a Marxist in any sense. Instead, it was Yang Lihua, a Confucian scholar, who delivered a speech “about how to be a virtuous person based on his reading of... a twelfth century Confucian text,” followed by Sun Xiguo, executive dean of the School of Marxism, who lectured on the potential interpretive synthesis between Confucianism and “Marxism-Xi Jinping Thought.”¹⁶ Though it’s an exaggeration to portray

13. Alison Kaufman, “China’s Discourse of ‘Civilization’: Visions of Past, Present and Future,” *ASAN Forum*, Feb. 19, 2018. Kaufman outlines the many permutations of this phrase in Chinese political discourse.

14. 求是 [Qiu Shi], “What Kind of Cultural Self-Confidence Should We Uphold?” [我们应该坚定什么样的文化自信], *QStheory*, June 20, 2019.

15. “Seeing through Muddied Waters, Part 1: Jasic, Strikes & Unions,” *Chuang Blog*, June 10, 2019; “Seeing through Muddied Waters, Part 2: An Interview on Jasic & Maoist Labor Activism,” *Chuang Blog*, July 2, 2019.

16. Some of the most earnest interpretations of contemporary right-wing Chinese philosophy come from equally right-wing “neo-traditionalist” scholars writing for an anglophone audience. Many of these individuals are today associated with “governance studies,” but trace their roots to the remnants of various waves of accelerationism and bear

these facts as a wholehearted embrace of traditionalism, they do demonstrate a real revival of interest in the terms of classical political philosophy within the academy. Moreover, classical philosophy's mobilization as part of a larger political crackdown also shows that such thought has some patronage among major leaders. But it's important to keep in mind here that this revival of interest, tended by high-level patronage, is also a reinvention of the basic terms of Chinese philosophy through conversation with its Greco-German counterpart. Many of the thinkers drawing on these concepts are, at the same time, Chinese scholars whose careers have been built on interpreting the work of prominent European philosophers or introducing the terminology of Western schools of management and public policy into the Chinese intellectual sphere.¹⁷ This has meant that the revival of classical debates on Chinese statecraft has occurred through the translation of European political philosophy for a Chinese audience—a process in which the premiere interlocutors

some relation to both neo-traditionalists like Aleksandr Dugin and the late-accelerationist “neoreaction/NRx” trend affiliated with thinkers such as Nick Land. Their conservatism inherently biases these sources. They tend to emphasize traditionalist elements in contemporary Chinese philosophy above either liberal or so-called socialist thinkers. This, however, is a useful corrective since the trend has been precisely the opposite in previous decades. It is also precisely because of their conservatism that they are able to identify intricate differences between various conservative thinkers. Here and throughout, we will therefore refer periodically to such sources, but with a warning to the reader about their bias. One of the most significant sources promoting neo-traditional Chinese thinkers has been *Palladium*, a rightwing outlet dedicated to “Governance Futurism.” The story about the Marxist Society is told here: T.H. Jiang and Shaun O'Dwyer, “The Universal Ambitions of China's Illiberal Confucian Scholars,” *Palladium*, Sep. 26, 2019.

17. The final section of this article returns to this issue, but a brief list of such thinkers includes: Jiang Shigong, the premier translator and interpreter of Carl Schmitt; Deng Xiaomang and Mou Zongsan, both prominent interpreters of Kant; and various members of both more authoritarian and more liberal factions of the New Left such as Gan Yang, Wang Shaoguang, Wang Hui and Cui Zhiyuan, who all teach at various public policy and management schools and act as important interlocutors between the Chinese academy and Western political science. Gan Yang was particularly important to the introduction of Western political philosophy to China (himself influenced by Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Herbert Marcuse and in particular Leo Strauss), and leading an effort to reorganize the liberal arts curriculum at Sun Yat-sen University to emphasize both ancient European and Chinese thought. He is also interesting as a case study in the life cycle of Chinese intellectuals of that era: first a liberal, then gravitating toward the New Left and finally settling around a vaguely socialist traditionalism. See: Shi Anshu, François Lachapelle and Matthew Galway, “The recasting of Chinese socialism: The Chinese New Left since 2000,” *China Information*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2018, pp. 139–159.

then offer their own distinct political philosophy as a contrast with both European and Chinese precedent. The final section of this article will go into more detail on these currents, providing notes toward a deeper philosophical critique. Here, however, we begin by scaling the distinctly capitalist state in China today against the longer history of the state as such in mainland East Asia.

A useful starting point is the fact that, although used here, the term “governance” is in many ways an inadequate descriptor. On the one hand, this is because the divide between the formal rule (统治) of a government (政府) and broader notions of habitual or informal governance (治理 / 管制) or governmentality (治理性 / 治理术) is a relatively recent import derived from the influence of Western political philosophers. It rose to prominence early in the transition to capitalism and tended to be used most readily by liberals arguing that such a divide *ought to be* developed within the political system. They ascribed the absence of such a divide to the totalizing nature of the developmental regime's political project, but some influential scholars of the era pointed out that this mismatch had deeper roots. The pioneering sociologist and anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (费孝通)—whose work spanned almost the entirety of modern Chinese history and established the basic terms on which social sciences would be founded during and after the developmental regime—famously argued that kinship and the nexus of social relationships around it were integral to understanding the concentric structure of authority in the region. This was because political power existed as a two-track system split between local customary authorities and the central government's distant bureaucracy (itself intercut with informal, reciprocal social obligations). These two levels (and the informality that constituted them to different degrees) were interlinked in what he called *chaxugeju* (差序格局), or the “differential mode of association.” This term's implication is essentially that one chain of social authority does not prevail in all contexts. Fei contrasts it with what he calls the “organizational mode of association” (团体格局) that forms the basis of European states, predicated on the aggregation of individuals into organizations with clear boundaries between who lies inside that organization and who lies beyond it. In contrast, the *chaxugeju* conceptualizes webs of social relations and social influence extending out from the individual, with these concentric networks thereby shaping and

intercutting one another. Since this mode of association formed the basis of both local customary authority and that of the bureaucracy, the politics of mainland East Asia tended not to cultivate clear divides between public and private spheres and, therefore, between “government” as the formal deployment of authority and “governance” as an informal or habitual practice of power.¹⁸

Fei’s work was influenced by Chinese scholarship and by the paragon of twentieth century European social science. He also led the effort to reconstruct social science in the 1980s by coordinating visits by scholars from the US, who helped to train a new generation of social scientists during the transition period. The work of foreign scholars studying China from the outside shaped Fei’s own presumptions. In many respects, he clearly exaggerates certain aspects of Chinese society, sometimes by overgeneralizing an almost metaphysical East-West divide which would, if argued by a Western scholar, have long ago been dismissed for its orientalism. Regardless, Fei’s influence on the social sciences and the perception of “traditional” Chinese social structures was foundational. Many of today’s intellectuals passed through a Chinese academy reconstituted in line with these presumptions, which have thereby shaped contemporary political philosophy’s basic perception of tradition. At the same time, later research has borne out most of Fei’s fundamental observations and restated them in less essentializing terms. The *chaxugeju* as described by Fei means that the dynastic state was neither a civil sovereignty representing the interests of the populace nor an absolutist sovereignty in the style of some early-modern European monarchies.¹⁹ Instead, the state was defined by a sort of

18. Fei Xiaotong, Chapter 4, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*. University of California Press, 1992.

19. Absolutism refers to both the historical dimensions of the absolute monarchies in Europe (epitomized by Louis XIV, but also including Catherine the Great and other “Enlightened” monarchs) and the school of theorists who influenced and promoted them (such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean Domat). Colloquially, it is often claimed that various dynastic states of mainland East Asia are prototypical examples of “absolutism.” However, this is a remnant of Late Renaissance and Early Enlightenment European political thought within which China acted as a sort of magic mirror onto which thinkers could project their own fears and hopes. No serious historian or political philosopher today claims that these dynastic states were “absolutist” in the strict sense of the term, except for possibly the late Qing dynasty as it attempted to reform itself along European lines.

universal or civilizational sovereignty rooted in a moral cosmology.²⁰ The bureaucracy’s rule was neither the representative government of citizens nor absolute rule over administered Cartesian subjects. Instead, it had a cosmological-moral authority over all “under heaven” (*tianxia*—天下) upheld by the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tianming*—天命).

Though it is easy to mystify and exaggerate the role played by *tianxia* and *tianming* in the political systems of the dynastic states, we cannot ignore these essential terms for understanding the character of those states’ obligations and the ways in which their material dominance was justified in a particular discourse of legitimacy. Power was defined concentrically by proximity to the imperial court, in terms of geography and nearness to integral state functions, such as waterworks projects, road-building and military activity. It therefore took the shape of a relational network of interlinked authority and social obligation wherein the formal state power of the bureaucracy emerged from and gave way to more local obligations and customary forms of authority. Horizontal, relational linkages were fundamental here. We might argue, with only the slightest bit of irony, that dynastic states were composed of a thousand plateaus: Formal, vertical command was only enabled through an overlapping of myriad, less formal, horizontal networks interpenetrated by the bureaucracy—where kinship ties, for instance, remained a central and widely acknowledged factor in all forms of appointment, despite the system being technically meritocratic—and which tended to grow in prominence the further one went from the central activities of the imperial state. But even the furthest, least formal deployment of authority at the local level, or in various tributary states, were conceived of as still being included in this civilizational conception of sovereignty. Similarly, rebellions were expressed within the same calculus as rulership itself and thus the potentially oppositional forms of authority that arose under this system of indirect government were ultimately rendered into the same logic of civilizational sovereignty.

In part, this calculus took the form of the Mandate of Heaven, which was seen to be an active practice of power gained through just and able governance. It was not an earnest religious proclamation of the

20. See: Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmo-technics*, Urbanomic, 2016.

emperor's absolute power nor simply a smokescreen for the material fact of class exploitation—though certainly this was part of it. Instead, it was seen to be an active practice of power gained through just and able governance. Thus, the Mandate could be forfeited by those who had once held it if their government failed to be just or lost its capacity for administration. Similarly, it could be gained by those—even of common or non-Han (夷) origins—who rebelled against or invaded an unjust state, so long as they then ruled in a just and capable fashion, perpetuating the core civilizational practices of the preceding polity.²¹ In the most material sense, the Mandate was a highly mystified recognition of the fact that general disorder due to poor administration would cause rebellion. It was also an acknowledgement that challenges to the throne were strongest when they portrayed themselves as serving the common people rather than the imperial core. Even if claimed in an entirely cynical fashion, the Mandate nonetheless exerted its burden. While, in practice, the Mandate was usually taken for granted by the winner in a rebellion or any other power struggle, and not all winners then demonstrated just and able governance, it nonetheless offered any potential competitors a good and justifiable cause to rebel against the ruler.²² The exact historical details of the Mandate and the *tianxia* concept of sovereignty are less important than the form they have taken within contemporary political philosophy and the state's own discourse.

The civilizational sovereignty of *tianxia* proved functional, in part, because it was a method for projecting power beyond the proportions of the central state itself—an ideal notion of sovereignty for an imperial court that was small and poor relative to the size of the population it administered. Similar strategies have remained relevant to recent Chinese history. The government today appears monolithic: built around an administrative system that extends down to the most local level, while also shadowed and reinforced at every level by the CCP.

21. Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China*. See also: Jiang Yonglin, *The Mandate of Heaven and the Great Ming Code*, University of Washington Press, 2011.

22. One example is the case of Hong Chengchou (洪承畴), a Ming general who defected to the invading Manchurian forces that would ultimately gain victory and establish the Qing Dynasty, within which he became one of the most influential politicians. After the conquest, Hong then played an important role in deescalating tensions between the Manchu rulers and the Han populace—justified in terms of upholding the Mandate for the new dynasty.

However, the reality is that China has long suffered from an inherited condition in which lower-level governmental agencies exhibit strong autonomy from the central government, even if they are also ultimately beholden to it.²³ On the one hand, this autonomy has been a necessity for a government with a budgetary base that even today ranks behind that of the United States, despite having a population five times larger. At the same time, this autonomy has long been an inherent, functional feature of states in mainland East Asia. The bureaucracy always floated atop a *de facto* local autonomy and was defined by a multi-tiered, dependent horizontalism. The form that this autonomy took under the various dynastic states was the everyday independence of the local gentry and those below them in almost all matters save taxation, participation in large public works projects, the administration of the national exam requisite for entry into the bureaucracy and wartime contributions of men and material. These local gentry held dual status as local leaders and state-endorsed scholars, at least after the Tang dynasty, but the central state had the most *de facto* control and oversight over the officials highest in its hierarchy and those geographically closest to the imperial court. Only the core territory where the court was located was directly apportioned to the central government. The bureaucracy's power spread outward from this core, geographic and figurative, in a concentric fashion, with authority delegated to major officials closer to the court and minor officials further from it.

In such conditions, the state is best imagined as a sort of structure that floats over the populace without ever sinking fully into it, like the *fuqiao* (浮桥), pontoon bridges first invented in the Zhou dynasty as one of the government's early public works projects. In this metaphor, the local gentry play an essential role as the individual pontoons beneath the bridge. These are the only portions of the structure that actually come into contact with the populace, even partially sinking into it. Atop these pontoons float the upper echelons of the bureaucratic state, culminating in the imperial court itself, a sort of superstructure atop a superstructure. The court has no regular, direct contact with the

23. Chuang, "Sorghum & Steel," *Chuang Journal*, Issue 1: Dead Generations, 2016. Here, in the first part of our economic history of modern China, we review how this condition arose and the form it took during the developmental regime.

common people outside of a few highly formalized conventions for petitioning the government, facilitated at every level by lower officials. Similarly, the separation goes both ways, allowing for local resistance and mobilization in the face of imperial overreach. In this structure, if one or two pontoons sink it's no huge loss, creating at most some momentary instability while they are replaced. Local mobilization that escalates into rebellions of the gentry or the population underneath them are easily quashed without much threat to the floating superstructure or its functionality. When widespread failures or rebellions, though, would rupture many of those local links all at once, the dynastic state would fragment—the bridge sundered into separate segments afloat their separate ways, or even sunk outright into populist revolt. “The water can carry the boat and also capsize it” (水能載舟，亦能覆舟), said Xunzi during the Warring States period.²⁴ The sentiment was an integral part of ancient statecraft, conditioned by necessity. But it also took on an intentional character beyond this necessity. Its ethical dimensions and the details of its operation were a long-standing topic of Chinese political philosophy, statecraft being only one specialization within a much larger relational ontology.

Autonomy and Bureaucracy

The heritage of the floating state did not simply disappear under the socialist developmental regime. Instead, the revolutionary government attempted to build a new sort of state inspired in part by that of the Soviet Union and in many ways emulating the ideal of certain schools of ancient Chinese philosophy.²⁵ In this new type of state, the formal

24. In this proverb, repeated in various forms by later thinkers, the water represents the populace and the boat the ruler.

25. See: Li Yu-ning (Ed.), *Shang Yang's Reforms and State Control in China*, Sharpe, 1977. And: Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*, UC California Press, 1993. Namely Legalism and Mohism, but also making use of numerous Daoist concepts of good statecraft. The connection here was in some ways explicit, with the anti-Confucian campaign during the Cultural Revolution periodically accompanied by explicit endorsements of major Legalist thinkers and with Mao himself giving Legalists more regular and favorable citation in his own works than other schools of thought. In fact, the earliest piece of his recorded writing is an effusive high school essay on the Legalist Shang Yang. In other ways, the connection was simply implicit in the ways that European anarchist and communist thought was translated and received.

bureaucratic apparatus would sink its roots into the populace and directly derive its strength from “The People.” This actualized the universal character of the state’s civilizational sovereignty both through the nearness and permeability of the new bureaucracy, as well as the politics of mass mobilization. Rather than a floating bridge, the new state was supposed to be something more akin to a mangrove forest—still relational with its upper echelons elevated above the populace but now also dependent on an intricate root system that sinks down into the water, tracing out a simultaneously formal and informal base among the masses. Old forms of informality, like the role of lineage groups in village politics, were suppressed here. But new forms of informality, such as kinship ties that defined inclusion in autarkic production units or the way that family history ascribed social position decades after the revolution, penetrated more directly into the bureaucracy at the smallest scale, as the sheer number of local officials proliferated, and exerted a direct influence on the bureaucracy at the largest scale, since the stormy, mass mobilizational dimension of the new politics could periodically break, uproot and even invert entire portions of this bureaucratic structure. This was, at least, how the new state was envisioned in theory.²⁶ In reality, the bureaucracy of the socialist developmental regime was deeply disjointed. The dynastic regime’s floating bridge had been broken up into a thousand balkanized plateaus jostling one another and was not repaired nor ever truly rooted in the populace. The roots that it did begin to develop were frequently broken off by the many storms of the era, and the collapse of the developmental regime would see them retract almost entirely.

The beginning of the reform era saw not only the collapse of the developmental regime’s particular political ideal of the universalized state, but also the gradual retraction of the bureaucracy’s newly formed local organs of government. This retreat of the state was experienced first and most markedly in the countryside, where it was shrouded in language of local “autonomy” or “self-government” (自治). It was also paired with the parcellation of village land into family-controlled units, which could now sell excess agricultural production in resurgent rural markets. Questions of exactly how labor would be deployed and how production

26. Chuang, “Sorghum & Steel,” 2016.

would be organized were also gradually devolved to localities and, from there, to individual rural enterprises or family units. This was real “autonomy” in that rural areas were no longer expected to emulate generic “models,” as set out by distant planning authorities, or to participate in mass-mobilization campaigns beyond the normal workday. So long as they met their tax obligations, such areas were now ostensibly allowed enormous room for experimentation. But this experimentation occurred within *de facto* bounds set by the rollback of state resources. As the local planning mechanisms of collectivization were disassembled, no other mechanisms for coordination existed aside from the long suppressed organizing principles of kinship and the market. Since marketization was gradually being encouraged by the central authorities, the flourishing of rural trade was made the focal point of this history. But beneath this, the era also saw a massive revival of lineage groups (家族), which invoked a traditionalist and communitarian heritage in order to coordinate village activities through patriarchal, extended family structures but did so in the context of widespread marketization.

This process was codified at the administrative level as the implementation of “village autonomy” accompanied by local “democracy,” including the election of members to the village committee.²⁷ In reality, this “democracy” ultimately amounted to direct control by those with more power in the village—usually some combination of well-connected officials, representatives from the largest lineage groups and emergent local capitalists who often already belonged to one of the former two groups, but gradually developed distinct interests. In this way “autonomy,” now explicitly rendered as local self-government, came to be seen as an important component of reforming the structure of the Chinese state itself. While some saw in this a return to older practices, in which the central state ceded territory to a new generation of local gentry, the reality was that this was an administrative expedient that allowed the state to concentrate its resources elsewhere. Autonomy was never imagined to be in opposition to the state, something signaled by its codification in law. This is precisely why theorists who took the claim of

27. This process began in the 1980s and was first formalized in the Organic Law of Village Committees (村民委员会组织法), implemented in a trial form in 1987, where it had already been preceded by the *de facto* extension of such practices in numerous villages, and then adopted nationwide in 1998.

village “democracy” seriously were so baffled when no one seemed to care that village elections were most often deeply undemocratic. These theorists therefore portrayed the promise of local autonomy as perpetually unfulfilled and in need of further reforms to ensure its reality.²⁸ But its reality was already evident on the ground. Local elites were developing corrupt self-government. This served two necessary functions: to buffer higher authorities from popular opposition, since they could always step in to punish the most extreme cases of local overreach, and to begin to shape a coherent network of capitalists who were also capable administrators, thereby forming the skeleton of the future state that is only today in the early stages of being formalized.

In the urban sphere, the same process of administrative reform took the *shequ* (now linked to popular translations of Western texts discussing “community governance”) as its focal point. Attention to both village- and *shequ*-level reforms occurred through the rehabilitation of the social sciences in the mid-1980s and the use of *shequ* as a distinct concept describing a unit of governance was very quickly adapted from sociology into a more formal usage deployed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs to describe the smallest territorial units of urban government. As the myriad social services that were provided to urbanites by their industrial work unit declined, these *shequ*-level organs were (at least in theory) supposed to take on many of these abandoned welfare functions, now rebranded as “community services” (社区服务). The result, however, was even more immaterial than the “democracy” of village elections. Almost no resources were reapportioned to serve this purpose, and devolution of social services to the community level was therefore nothing more than a well-meaning theoretical recognition of declining welfare and increasing market dependence. Behind the scenes, however, these seemingly insubstantial administrative reforms had created new paths by which the state could sink its roots into the population. After the urban rebellion of 1989, the CCP began to use these organs as the basis for a renewed party-building effort. The Ministry of Civil Affairs was tasked with formalizing and regulating the rollout of *shequ*-level

28. This was the case with numerous Chinese liberals, the populist factions of the Chinese New Left and among foreign scholars of China. The June 2000 Special Issue of *The China Quarterly* (No. 162): “Elections and Democracy in Greater China” is an example of one collection of this material.

organizations in all cities across the country. This also included the centralization of oversight in the organ of the residents committee (居委会), discussed in more detail below.²⁹

None of these were “neoliberal” reforms where the state permanently gave way to the market.³⁰ As we’ve documented elsewhere, the disassembly of the planning apparatus inherited from the developmental regime was accompanied by both privatization and the exaptation of vestigial state mechanisms for new purposes.³¹ We thus see again that market and state are neither separate nor opposed in a capitalist society. This is a basic, irreducible component of the communist critique of the present world. Over these decades of transition to capitalism, then, the Chinese state was not being replaced by market mechanisms, but rather being reformatted to tend to them. In fact, the particular characteristics of the contemporary Chinese bureaucratic system are an especially sound illustration of this more general theory of the state, since in China every bureaucrat³² is also a capitalist, as are almost all members of the party who have ascended above its lowest rungs. Some Chinese capitalists certainly lie “outside the system” (体制外), having neither governmental connections nor party membership. But these tend to be smaller-scale capitalists who, aside from a few minor skirmishes, have

29. See: David Bray, “Building ‘Community’: New Strategies of Governance in Urban China,” *Economy and Society*, 35(4), 2006. pp. 530–549. These early transformations have been well documented in both Chinese and English language academic literature.

30. In fact, this has not been a real characteristic of “neoliberal” reforms in any country. The entire postwar period has been marked instead by the growing prominence of the state at the global scale and its interpenetration with the economy’s uppermost echelons. This growth has been obscured in a “neoliberal” discourse about privatization, emphasizing the mythic separation between market and state and claiming unrivalled efficiency on behalf of the market. The term was briefly useful as a descriptor for this discourse. It has since been muddied to such an extent that it is at best useless and at worst damaging in its implication that the root problem is “neoliberalism” rather than capitalism itself.

31. See: Chuang, “Red Dust,” *Chuang Journal*, Issue 2: Frontiers, 2019.

32. In Chinese, the term “bureaucrat” in both its critical (官僚) and official (官员) variants refers exclusively to higher-level officials within a given ministry, party branch or government office. In English, “bureaucrat” is often assumed to refer to or at least include individuals who are minor government functionaries. But in Chinese, the latter are referred to as “civil servants” (公务员) not bureaucrats. Generally, anyone at or above the “section chief” (科长) position in a state ministry or local government office is a bureaucrat, and anyone below is a civil servant. Thus, the idea that “all bureaucrats are capitalists” in China should not be translated as: “all state employees are capitalists” but instead as: “all upper level state officials are capitalists.”

been unable to pose any real challenge to the much larger and better organized elites “inside the system” (体制内). Even those capitalists who might appear to be “outside the system” due to their entrepreneurial rise through the private sector, such as Jack Ma and his Ant Group, almost always ultimately become party members subject not only to internal party discipline but also to the many conventions of “the system” as such. Among these capitalists, opposition to conventions can be punished formally, as when Ant Group’s IPO application was rejected at the highest levels of the Xi government, or informally through a cascading collapse of the relational networks that provide easy access to financing, prevent legal challenge and ensure continued contact with key markets.

In other words, the Chinese state is the direct administration of society by the organized capitalist class. It is tasked with the general reproduction of existing society and acts as a mechanism for the resolution of intra-class conflicts between capitalists. This is true of all states, of course, but elsewhere there is at least an illusion of separation, attended by a specific fraction of the population who are tasked with the dirty business of roleplaying representative government, even while they still serve the direct interests of their real capitalist patrons.³³ In China there is no such separation. The state apparatus that the capitalist class tends through both direct appointment in governmental positions and indirect oversight in party positions is devoted to the maintenance of the baseline conditions for capitalist accumulation. This is the sole function of the Chinese state, as of any capitalist state, though this prime directive includes a wide variety of ancillary obligations. The most important of these is the resolution of conflicts between capitalists, which takes place almost entirely “inside the system” and, specifically, within the auspices of the single party into which all major capitalists are organized. But other ancillary obligations include the responsibility of attending to social reproduction at the macro-scale by keeping fundamental

33. These people are called “politicians” and, despite both the appearance to the contrary and the many characteristic brutalities of the Chinese system, the almost complete elimination of this occupation should be seen as a great historical advance—even if they were ultimately replaced by capitalists with imperial seals. In the end, the absence of true politicians (as mediators between classes) will prove to be an immense advantage in the moment of insurrection, since it will be harder for this demographic to step in and repress popular unrest by claiming to “represent” the rebelling populace.

infrastructure, such as roads, utilities, food systems, operating efficiently and in an orderly, regulated fashion, ensuring a relatively healthy and well-educated workforce and preventing social instability through the dual weapons of policing and social services. It is among these ancillary functions that we find the state's responsibility for pandemic control. Similar to the management of other extreme externalities produced by capitalist production—like widespread environmental devastation or the destruction of the labor force itself through overwork, child labor, widespread malnutrition—the containment of the plagues unleashed by capitalist production's microbiological metabolic rift requires something like a state power to step in against the short-term economic interests of individual capitalists who just want their businesses to keep operating in order to preserve the long-term interests of the capitalists as a class.

The current state-building project was in some ways inaugurated under Jiang Zemin's administration (1989–2002), which oversaw simultaneous “community building” and “party building” projects at the local level. Similarly, the Hu-Wen years (2002–2012) saw an attempt to reconsolidate the higher echelons of the state and create an apparatus for it to intervene into the financial and industrial systems with greater efficiency. All of this cleared the path for the more intensive process of state building underway today. The Xi administration, which has taken state building to be among its primary responsibilities, inherited a bureaucracy limited in scope and resources, with control rights separated among different levels of government and intercut with the private interests of the bureaucrat capitalists who staffed it. On the one hand, this was a necessary sacrifice, which has enabled local policy to be implemented, albeit with an extreme degree of flexibility. On the other, it was an advantage, since it enabled a degree of integration between the capitalist class and the state infrastructure not possible in other conditions. Essentially, this meant that the system worked as follows:

the central government sets up goals and targets in specific areas and then subcontracts to the intermediate government, which has the right of incentive provision and actual organization of implementation, while the central government maintains the right of periodic inspection to review and evaluate the outcomes. Since the superior authority could cast arbitrary

power to its subordinates despite the official rules and legal-rational logic of bureaucracy, Chinese bureaucrats tend to develop informal personal relationships with their superiors to seek protection and promotion while at the same time focusing more on passively avoiding misbehavior. The state thus employs a campaign-style governance to overcome setbacks and failures of the routine power of bureaucracy, which always requires intensive mobilization of resources and attention, therefore campaigns are always partial, selective and temporary.³⁴

Though this system might seem riven with inefficiencies, it has proved capable of stretching state resources while also maintaining, and in fact strengthening, the integral core of the bureaucracy and the party's unchallenged control over it. This fact would become particularly relevant when the pandemic broke out. Historically, this system also recruited new capitalists into the party, adapted old mechanisms of the bureaucracy to serve accumulation and crafted new ones that facilitated the organized leadership of the domestic capitalist class to intervene on behalf of the long-term interests of that class as a whole. Thus, the attempt to systematize governance in China should not be seen as an effort to overturn all of these features of the inherited system. These features were not simply failures of governance. Instead, they gestated a new type of governance, more suitable for maintaining the baseline conditions of accumulation into the near future.

It is in this regard that the revival of older concepts from Chinese political philosophy are becoming particularly relevant. Xi Jinping is well known for his numerous references to Chinese classics and, in particular, for his repetition of Legalist adages such as the need to “govern the state according to law” (依法治国).³⁵ But this is not merely a per-

34. Zhang Shiyu, “The Institutional Logic of Governance in China: An Organizational Approach,” *Book Reviews—Harvard-Yenching Institute*. 2017. The quote here summarizes the main positions of Zhou Xueguang [周雪光], *The Institutional Logic of Governance in China: An Organizational Approach* [国家治理的制度逻辑：一个组织学研究], which is only available in Chinese.

35. David K. Schneider, “China's New Legalism,” *The National Interest*, No. 143, May–June 2016. pp. 19–25.

sonal affect. Instead, similar terms have been increasingly utilized in both state propaganda and in more detailed political treatises by theorists as justification for the current administration's policies. For example, a recent white paper released by the State Information Council on global development cooperation programs emphasizes a number of neo-traditional moral platitudes and gives prominent mention to *tianxia* as a positive framework for China's global influence. It claims that "China's launch of international development cooperation has its origins in the Chinese philosophy of Great Harmony for All Under Heaven [天下大同]" and that "China carries forward the traditional value that 'all under heaven are one family and share one fate.'"³⁶ Platitudes aside, such ideas are even more thoroughly developed by prominent philosophers like Jiang Shigong (强世功), a contributor to key white papers released by the State Council in the past, a former official posted in the Hong Kong Liaison Office, and one of the best known exponents of Xi Jinping Thought.³⁷ Jiang is at least partially responsible for this branding itself, having produced probably the most "authoritative statement of the new political orthodoxy under Xi Jinping" in his 2018 essay "Philosophy and History."³⁸ Here, he argues that Xi Jinping Thought represents the "crystallization of the wisdom of the entire party," the culmination of an entire century of political philosophy and, most importantly for our purposes, "the product of the merging of Marxism with Chinese traditional culture."

Jiang himself explicitly frames this as the "Sinification of Marxism" (马克思主义中国化) and it is within this framework that he argues in another essay "Empire and World Order" for a pursuit of global power

36. 新华网 [Xinhua], (受权发布) «新时代的中国国际发展合作» 白皮书 [(Official Release) Modern China's International Development Cooperation: White Paper], 国务院新闻办公室 [State Council Information Office], Jan. 2021.

37. Jiang was directly influential in the decision to increase central government power over the Hong Kong political system and is widely suspected to have been the primary author of a 2014 white paper which began the process of reinterpreting the nature of the "one country, two systems" model, a process continued in recent years by increasingly open and direct intervention in Hong Kong politics.

38. The essay is available in English here, with the quote in this sentence coming from the translators' introduction and those in the following sentence coming from Jiang himself: Jiang Shigong, "Philosophy and History: Interpreting the 'Xi Jinping Era' through Xi's Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP," Trans: David Ownby and Timothy Cheek, *Reading the China Dream*, Jan. 2018.

not under the hypocritical notion of Westphalian sovereignty but instead through the cultivation of an inherently plural, civilizational "empire" distinct from and dialectically interdependent with the state.³⁹ Jiang is wary enough that he never explicitly claims that China is currently seeking global hegemony in an imperial fashion. He merely characterizes it as "a great world power that must look beyond its own borders [and] absorb the skills and achievements of humanity as a whole" in order to ensure "the reconstruction of Chinese civilization and the reconstruction of the world order as a mutually re-enforcing (sic) whole." Throughout, he clearly draws from older notions of civilizational, *tianxia*-style sovereignty. But he does so by referring to the material reality of party rule in China, which he defines as offering a *de facto* constitution providing continuity beneath amorphous legal changes. This concept is also formulated in conversation with various Western thinkers, the most important of which is the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, whose works Jiang has translated and actively introduced to Chinese intellectual circles. These facts ensure that Jiang is not as speculative in his prescriptions as other, similar thinkers. He always poses his arguments in realist terms. For example, he points out that, despite its disavowals, the United States helmed the first true "World Empire 1.0" after overtaking the British and that this global empire is now stricken by intensifying internal competition. This "single world empire" is now in the process of being torn apart by its own centrifugal forces.

Jiang is clear, however, that this is absolutely not a repetition of older conservative positions about an inevitable "clash of civilizations," which he argues are a holdover from preceding regional empires, whose geographical, cultural and linguistic features are periodically mobilized in "revolt[s] against the world empire from within." For Jiang, this separation is an illusion, since:

henceforth, no country will be able to exist outside this system of global trade [...] every country, whether it wants to or not, will of necessity be implicated in the construction of this

39. The basic outlines are explained fairly well by one rightwing European philosopher, whose ultimate conclusions and points of emphasis must be treated with a critical eye: Vincent Garton, "Jiang Shigong's Chinese World Order," *Palladium*, Feb. 5, 2020.

world empire [...and thus] this competition is a competition occurring *within* the system of world empire, a struggle to seize economic and political leadership *after* the realization of world empire.⁴⁰

China is no exception here. Instead of a simple disintegration, Jiang sees the fate of this “world empire” as integrally connected to simultaneously economic and geopolitical competition, and he seems to imply that China may be better poised to helm a reconstituted world empire precisely because of its own more open, civilizational concept of sovereignty.⁴¹ More importantly, his purely theoretical vision of a coming Chinese hegemony is both influenced by and has exerted influence upon the official state discourse about overseas development programs and the expansion of geopolitical power in the region. Jiang’s theory is not the secret playbook of the party. Instead, he is quite straightforward and acknowledges that the relationship runs in the opposite direction: he is merely synthesizing in theory a process already underway on the ground.

40. Jiang Shigong, “The internal Logic of Super-Sized Political Entities: ‘Empire’ and World Order,” *Wenhua Zongheng* (文化纵横), Trans: David Ownby, *Reading the China Dream*, 2019.

41. Jiang’s argument is worth quoting in full: “The United States is under great pressure as it seeks to maintain its world empire, the pressure coming especially from Russian resistance and Chinese competition. But we must acknowledge that this competition is a competition occurring within the system of world empire, a struggle to seize economic and political leadership after the realization of ‘world empire.’ In fact, we can understand it as a struggle to become the heart of the world empire. This struggle could lead to the collapse and disintegration of the world imperial system, or to a change in who holds the ultimate power in the world empire, or even to the reconstruction of the system of world empire, but what will absolutely not happen is a return to the historical period marked by the existence of regional civilizational empires.”

Local Organs of Government

Until now, this state-building project has been most visible in its extremities: the anti-corruption campaign, the repression of the recent revolt in Hong Kong and the deployment of increasingly carceral policies in Tibet and Xinjiang. In each of these instances, certain new features of governance were piloted in more extreme and experimental forms. Now, the state of emergency induced by the outbreak has unveiled similar, previously shrouded capacities in every major city. While much had been written about how the upper echelons of the state and its official public health infrastructures were reformed to be more responsive and attentive to potential outbreaks following the original SARS debacle, the exact character and efficacy of local-level state administration remained somewhat murky. The everyday function of these organs of government was often little more than rubber-stamping village/neighborhood development projects and keeping standardized residential records, or at least pretending to. If local party officials are in the news, this is usually because of some corruption scandal or new development deal. Natural disasters like the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and winter storms gave some indication of how higher authorities might mobilize these networks, but the fact that these disasters were somewhat localized meant that central resources could be funneled to just one or two regions. Thus, these instances did not demonstrate the absolute capacity of these organs at the national level or their potential differentiation by geography. Only with the pandemic do we have a clear case in which the central government called for more or less total active mobilization of its administrative organs, all the way down to the local level. This simultaneously displayed their surprising capacity and their more fundamental limits.

From our own series of interviews, alongside research into secondary reports, we have identified a handful of local administrative organs and ancillary agencies that acted as the main points of contact between the general populace and the state. Two were directly administrative: the **village committee** (村委会) and the **resident committee** (居委会), both of which have local-level shadows in party organization. Two were police organs, including the formal apparatus represented by the **precinct-level police station** (派出所) and the informal apparatus represented by the numerous unofficial **security guards** (保安) who populate Chinese

cities but are not legally police and are often on the payroll of private companies. One is related to urban residential housing complexes specifically: the **property management authority** for the complex (物业管理), which is usually a company hired by the homeowners association. In addition, foreigners, those from Wuhan and anyone who had recently travelled to a high-risk area often came into contact with the **local medical system**, and temperature-taking became standard practice when returning to work after the lockdown. Sometimes this just meant an interview and temperature check upon entry into an area, followed by periodic contact with a nurse, such as sending in a temperature. In more extreme cases—as when the temperature came back too high—this could entail involuntary quarantine at local hospital facilities. These organs of local governance were, altogether, the primary points of contact between the state in its broader definition and the population. It will be helpful, then, to give some detail on each.

The two “committees” (委会) listed above are “grassroots mass organizations for self-government” (基层群众自治组织).⁴² The villager committee is the rural variant, while the resident committee is the urban variant. Both are part of nested structures with similar higher-level committees standing above them, to which they are accountable.⁴³ In the city, the point of contact was specifically the *shequ* residents committee, which is the smallest and most local. In both city and countryside,

42. “Self-government” here is often translated as “autonomy” and “grassroots” (基层) but is more literally translated as “base-level.”

43. This nesting is still a bit uneven, but in general it looks something like this: in the countryside the village (村) lies at the 5th order, which is the level of “grassroots mass organizations for self-government” (基层群众自治组织). In the city the *shequ* or “community” (社区) residents committee sits in the same position. Above these are 4th-order organs which exist at the “township level” (乡级) and include urban subdistricts (街道), rural towns (镇), and a few other similar categories unique to particular areas. Above these are the 3rd-order organs, which exist at the “county level” (县级), though some effectively extend into 2nd-order roles. The most common of these are rural counties (县) and urban districts (区). In the centrally administered municipalities and a few other special cases, the county, district or other special units take on 2nd-order roles, but elsewhere there are specifically 2nd-order administrative organs operating at the “prefecture level” (地级), including prefectures (地区), prefecture-level cities (地级市) and sub-provincial-level cities (副省级城市). Above these lie the 1st-order units: centrally administered municipalities (直辖市, currently numbering four: Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Chongqing), provinces (省) and autonomous regions (自治区). Above these lie the central government.

these committees are also shadowed by local party branches, which themselves were reformed in the same period and in a similar direction. While the party branches trace back to the socialist developmental regime, the committees have a more recent history with only a loose precedent in either the early PRC or in the dynastic states that preceded it.⁴⁴ Such organs for local autonomy were first piloted in the countryside in the reform period, leading to the explosion of literature on theories of local direct democracy mentioned above.⁴⁵ In reality, the result was that the **villager committee** and its counterpart in the local party branch were quickly dominated by local elites. These were usually either local officials who’d lost access to official resources due to the retreat of direct state power in the village in this period; heads of the local lineage groups which resurged after the collapse of the developmental regime; or nascent local capitalists who usually began as one of the former but gradually developed distinct interests.⁴⁶ Their day-to-day business is usually just the management of their own local investments, while also trying to attract outside money to the village and settling any minor disputes that arise. Periodically, this can escalate into a larger conflict

44. Technically residents committees existed during the developmental regime, overseeing the provision of welfare services to urban populations not assigned to a formal work-unit. At first, this meant that the institution was minor, overseeing a small and impermanent fraction of the urban population, such as the first migrant workers. As migration increased and the traditional work-units were dismantled, the residents committees were automatically expanded, but without many more resources being assigned to them. Thus, they remained skeletal until recent years, when they became the target of intentional reforms to bolster the local state.

45. This scholarship was popular in both English and in Chinese academic circles. For one example of the reception of such topics in English, see *The China Quarterly’s* “Special Issue: Elections and Democracy in Greater China,” No. 162, June 2000. For one example from the Chinese literature, see: Wang Xu 王旭. 1997. 乡村中国的基层民主：国家与社会的权力互动 [Grassroots Democracy of Rural China: The Interaction of Nation and Society], 香港：二十一世纪 [Hong Kong: 21st Century]

46. There has been an enormous amount of literature produced on this phenomenon among Chinese scholars. See, e.g.: He Xuefeng 贺雪峰. 2005. 论村治模式 [Methods of Village Politics], 江西师范大学学报 (哲学社会科学版) [*Jiangxi Normal University Journal, Philosophy and Social Sciences*], 2; Jin Taijun 金太军. 2002. 村庄治理中三重权力互动的政治社会学分析 [A Sociological Analysis of the Three Interacting Powers in Village Politics], 战略与管理 [*Strategy & Management*], 3; Li Changjian and Wu Wenhui 李长健、伍文辉. 2006. 建设社会主义新农村的第三种力量 [“The Third Force Building the New Socialist Countryside”], 黑龙江社会科学 [*Heilongjiang Social Sciences*], 3期.

between local capitalists who lie “outside the system” and the official bureaucracy “inside the system,” as in the famous case of Wukan village. In these conflicts, local elites are often able to draw on dissatisfaction among villagers to mobilize the population against higher levels of government. But the common outcome is a reshuffling of who, exactly, sits on the village committee.⁴⁷

The *shequ* residents committees have a very similar legal mandate to that of the villager committees. When villages are absorbed into neighboring cities, it seems that committees from several villages are merged into one *shequ* over time and then further subdivided as population increases, meaning that some *shequ* may actually be rural. Residents committees were never subject to the same illusions of “direct democracy” that proliferated in the academic literature on village elections. By law, the main responsibilities of the residents committee include conducting propaganda on state policy and law, settling civilian disputes, “assisting in public security” efforts and relaying public concerns to the government and police. The law also requires the committee to assist the government or police with public health and family planning. In the 1990s, the law stated that the villager committees serve communities between 100 and 700 households. In recent years, the management size of a resident committee in large cities is around 1000 homes, or between 4000 and 5000 people. Though residents committees are technically also subject to similar elections as villager committees, most places seem to have abandoned even the illusion of this process. In reality, they tend to be dominated by a particularly petty class of local elite, often themselves small landlords or business owners who then extract further rents and other minor advantages from the position. Absent an emergency, their normal duties essentially just entail advertising government programs and snitching on anyone breaking the subset of rules that the central state has deemed particularly important. In the past, for instance, they would regularly report people for having more children than allowed under the family planning policies, even while they would use their own position to break those same rules. The residents committees often worked closely with the local police precincts (派出所), and

47. Shannon Lee, “Looking Back at Wukan: A Skirmish over the Rules of Rule,” *Shannon Lee’s China Blog*, July 14, 2017.

in some cities there were rumors of dark local detention centers jointly controlled by the two. More recently, cities that have seen some application of the experimental “grid-style social management” (网格化管理) system with civilian “grid managers” (网格员) who legally lie under the command of Public Security but, in fact, tend to work under the authority of the residents committee. These grid managers collect data on everyone living within a certain area, by knocking on doors and registering their phone numbers through a QR scan. In the places that had such systems in place during the outbreak, these grid managers were tasked with assisting the residents committees in the containment of the pandemic.

Local police precincts are the official extension of the state’s repressive capacities in an area. They are the official local-level organizations of the Public Security Bureau (公安局), which lies under the authority of the Ministry of Public Security (公安部), both of which are often colloquially referred to as *gong’an* (公安).⁴⁸ By law, each local precinct

48. The *gong’an* has its own higher-level political and national security police (国保—*guobao*) who operate in a similar capacity to organizations like the FBI in the US. They keep their own records and have access to a wider array of government data, but there are continual mismatches in data-sharing between different branches and between localities and higher authorities. Almost all accounts of national biometric systems being rolled out in China include the caveat that they only exist right now in local instances. They are most developed in areas like Xinjiang and Tibet and these are where the databases appear to be the largest and best integrated. The single largest national Automatic Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) in China still appears to be owned by a private company (海鑫科金) and individual cities and provinces apparently contract with separate AFIS companies rather than using an integrated system. Though the exact extent of centralization is unclear, it’s almost certain that China still lags behind the widespread centralization of fingerprinting, criminal and general background records gathered by local police and accessible by organizations like the FBI in the United States. See Han Congying “Fingerprint recognition system curbs crime in China,” *Orms Today*, Feb. 5, 2019. If the *guobao* need to obtain information from local arms of the *gong’an*, they are often met with data collected according to inconsistent standards and sequestered behind various veils of local corruption and decades of *de facto* autonomy. Separate from either the *gong’an* or its *guobao* arm is the Ministry of State Security (国家安全部, abbreviated to 国安—*guoan*), which operates somewhat like comparable international state intelligence and counterterrorism agencies such as the CIA in the US or MI5 in the UK, but also tends to have a more expansive domestic purview as well, often stepping in to handle particularly high-level political cases or issues of national security. More commonly, though, political cases are pursued on the ground the *guobao* (they are usually the agency that does the actual arresting, for instance) with investigative support from the *guoan*. Even in cases of interest, however, it’s often surprising how begrudging and inefficient local police arms of the *gong’an* can be with their resources and information—as when local police officers came

lies under the authority of a public security office that lies at or above the county level, which is itself further nested within higher levels of command. But in many places this extension of power is not particularly direct. Policing in China is still surprisingly decentralized and local police often have extreme amounts of autonomy. This autonomy goes well beyond minor differences in how to interpret the law or prioritize certain activities over others. Instead, the decentralization extends to the more fundamental structure of the national policing infrastructure. On one hand, this is a matter of insufficient cooperation and administrative integration. While certain criminal activities will today more regularly lead to higher-level police attention, and therefore some degree of tracking from city to city and coordination between police departments, basic police records and command chains remain heavily balkanized in many areas. For many years, it was possible, for example, for individuals who might be arrested for political organizing in one region to simply move to some other city in a distant province and not be bothered by the local police. Recent efforts at national integration of policing infrastructure have made this less and less possible, however, for more serious crimes—especially those of a political nature.⁴⁹

On the other hand, this is also a question of more fundamental material decentralization, which has seen less progress. A good example can be found in the recent expansions of digital surveillance infrastructure throughout many Chinese cities—including cellphone tracking, facial recognition and now public-health QR codes—which is treated in the foreign press as a particularly egregious example of China's authoritarianism. In reality, these forms of surveillance in China all lag far, far behind that of the United States, for example, where the NSA has built one of the world's biggest spy centers in Utah and aggregated immense amounts of surveillance data domestically and, apparently, on people worldwide.⁵⁰ Similarly, since 1999 the FBI has overseen a centralized

and essentially just begged one of the feminists of interest to higher-level political police (during the crackdowns in the mid-2010s) to move out of their jurisdiction simply so that they themselves did not get in trouble. Peng X, "Drinking Tea with China's 'National Treasure': Five Questions," *Chuang Blog*, Aug. 28, 2017.

49. Chuang, "Picking Quarrels," *Chuang Journal*, Issue 2: Frontiers, 2019.

50. James Bamford, "The NSA is Building the Country's Biggest Spy Center (Watch What You Say)" *Wired*, March 15, 2012.

national computer database of fingerprint data and, since 1998, DNA data, gathered from local criminal records, military records, and federal employment records, as well as other likely sources today. They were then given enhanced data gathering and information sharing powers after the first Homeland Security act was passed in 2001.⁵¹ In contrast, examining the actual fiberoptics infrastructure of the most advanced surveillance networks in places like Shanghai reveals that the cables themselves run straight to the precinct-level police station, which has no cables of comparable capacity running anywhere else from there, inhibiting the ability to aggregate such data and even implying that it may be getting regularly deleted, given the likely storage requirements.⁵²

Policing infrastructure is not only administratively fragmented at the level of command, then, but also literally fragmented, insofar as it has no material ability to centralize the many small fiefdoms of locally gathered records into a single integrated system, except in instances where higher authorities step in to gather data on their own persons of interest. Nonetheless, these local precincts remain the essential point of contact with the population. Not only do they have responsibility for enforcing basic laws, but they also work closely with the residents or villagers committees, and they're the agencies tasked with primary demographic record-keeping: when moving to a new area, you're still legally required to register your ID or passport, if you're a foreigner, with the local precinct.⁵³ The precinct shares this information with the relevant local committee, but they do not seem to have consistent standards for

51. See: "Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) overview—a short history," *Thales*, Jan. 10, 2021.

52. This information comes from on the ground research into the telecommunications infrastructure of Shanghai, not yet available in any published form.

53. In reality there are many ways around this and the registration is only necessary for certain types of paperwork. Thus, many people simply never register or they register by other means—through an employer, or a driving school, for instance. The rules have been more strictly enforced for foreigners, but even in these cases it's increasingly easy to get around them. Ultimately, it is the landowner's and employer's legal responsibility to make sure that all those living on a property or working at a firm (especially foreigners) are registered. It also does not change your *hukou*, however, since the *hukou* doesn't record actual residence but instead one's "home" residence, which gives rights to welfare resources in that location. They are notoriously hard to transfer from rural to urban areas. See our summary of the recent *hukou* reforms here: "Free to move, forced to move," *Chuang Blog*, May 18, 2020.

sharing it with higher levels of government unless it is specifically requested. During the pandemic, contacts from the local precinct worked with the neighborhood resident committees to oversee those who had reentered the area and were undergoing the mandatory fourteen-day quarantine period in their apartment. This was applied to both foreigners and Chinese nationals. Often, individuals from high-risk areas, like Wuhan or certain foreign countries, were assigned a particular contact at the local precinct who they interacted with daily via WeChat, using the app's location-sharing feature to confirm that they had not left home.

One important variant of the state's policing capacity can be found in the less formal but much larger army of uniformed **security guards** that populate every Chinese city, usually just referred to by the name embroidered onto their navy-blue uniforms: *ba'ān*.⁵⁴ One of the most immediately noticeable features of the Chinese city for foreigners who have never travelled to the country before is the sheer number of security guards. At first, these guards appear to be police officers since they tend to wear nearly identical uniforms. They stand at the entryways of buildings, protect shops, walk patrols through shopping centers or staff official-looking guard stands at subway stops, train stations and airports. This gives newcomers the sense that there are "police" everywhere in China. However, these are private employees of security companies (保安公司) and they have about as much legal power as mall cops or "loss prevention" employees do in any other country—and quite a bit less right to be armed or use lethal force. The only thing that makes them more common than similar security officers in places like Europe or the US is the fact that Chinese cities tend to be highly compartmentalized. They are organized into more of a gated-community cellular structure, within which apartment, shopping and factory complexes are walled or fenced off and have only a certain number of gates leading in and out, staffed by security guards.⁵⁵

54. We will refer to them here as security guards. It should be kept in mind, however, that their precise legal status and sheer numbers make them somewhat distinct from similar workers in other countries. Particularly important is the fact that, in certain settings, they can instead be tasked with "auxiliary police" functions.

55. Urban space is also patrolled by *chengguan* (城管) or "urban management officers" who are under the authority of the Urban Management Bureau. During the

Normally, these guards have essentially no power. In almost every case, you can simply walk by them and not be bothered. The exception is if you are trying to enter into high security areas such as a factory complex, but even in these instances the filtering process is fairly lax and you're only likely to get stopped if you appear like you should not be there (i.e. you are obviously a foreigner, beggar or schoolchild). Even if a security guard harasses you, you are usually within your legal right to ignore them. Meanwhile, since they are organized into various companies, they are even more unintegrated than the local police, and their rights and training vary enormously depending on who is employing them. In terms of demographics, the average guard tends to be an older male migrant worker. Culturally, they're often portrayed doing nothing more than sitting around smoking and chatting. That said, every security company is legally subject to the authority of the Public Security Bureau, where they must register and assist with maintaining social peace in times of emergency, even though they lie outside the bureau's command structure.⁵⁶ During the pandemic, individual security guards on the ground were suddenly mobilized by their own companies to begin engaging in basic forms of population control. They were essentially deputized to serve as a second, far more expansive police force. Suddenly, the guard working the gate at any given housing complex would actually stop people, ask what they were doing and prevent entry to those who didn't live there or weren't on essential business. In other instances, they had thermometers and took the temperature of those who entered the stores that remained open, often while they also staffed the QR health code scanning stations. They were probably the most common point of contact that ordinary people had with the partitioning of the city. As time went on, they slowly began to revert back to their earlier status, with people more confident that they could just ignore the guards and go where they pleased. Nonetheless, the particular role

pandemic, they could be mobilized in the same way as security guards but had more legal authority.

56. Or in more carceral territories, like Xinjiang, where a special "auxiliary police" recruitment effort essentially deputized thousands of security guards. This is reviewed in more detail below. For information on the nexus of private and public security in China, see: Susan Trevaskes, "The Private/Public Security Nexus in China," *Social Justice*, No. 3–4, Aug. 2007, pp. 38–55.

they played during the pandemic proves that traditional separations between “the state” and “the private sector” do not adequately capture the nature and extent of state power and, in particular, fail to grasp the deployment of that power through informal means.

In many cases the most aggressive guards who limited entry were those employed by a given housing complex’s **property management authority** (物业管理). These are mostly private companies for managing the upkeep of a housing complex, though certain residential buildings have retained slightly different administrative systems—for example, some buildings will have appointed “building committee leaders” (楼组长) for each building in the complex, or the *shequ* residents committee might have an actual office in the complex. Sometimes the property management company may also manage sales of empty units or advertising. Their core duties, however, are things like security, cleaning common areas, and maintenance. Legally, they are subject to all kinds of other authorities: their security guards are legally under the jurisdiction of the Public Security Bureau, and administrative personnel in the property management company for any given complex are in regular contact with the residents’ committees for those neighborhoods. These jurisdictional facts are what ultimately allowed the property management authorities to be deputized in a fashion similar to the security companies. Representatives from an area’s property management authority would work with the residents committee to try and keep track of who was actually in the complex since many residents had left early in the holiday and underwent lockdown elsewhere; make sure that people had things like cooking gas, arrange safe systems for food delivery or mobile market days; and manage home quarantines for those returning from outside the area.

Finally, there was the **local medical system**, which tended to only become a point of contact for those entering an area from outside, especially high-risk areas, those who had become sick or failed a temperature check (or whose housemates or family members had) and foreigners undergoing mandatory quarantine after entering the country. Temperature checks became common when returning to work, but these often did not involve direct interaction with medical staff.⁵⁷ It was

57. Instead, it was common for them to be overseen by the company itself (often

common for medical staff to work alongside representatives from the local government at major entry points into the city such as airports and train stations.⁵⁸ At these checkpoints, medical staff were also tasked with conducting free testing—initially just to those who requested it, but later this became mandatory—and facilitated the transport of anyone who failed a temperature check to local hospitals.⁵⁹ After being admitted to the hospital, it often became clear that the chain of authority had been unevenly and inconsistently delegated. Even if an individual had just taken a COVID test at the border or other entry point, the hospital would re-administer it. Frequently, one only found out if a test was positive and simply didn’t receive any result if it came back negative, though foreigners and Wuhan residents often needed proof of a negative test in order to rent rooms at hotels or buy bus and train tickets. Other tests were often required at this point as well, though the exact requirements seemed to be up to the discretion of the local medical facility. If someone still failed to pass temperature checks despite having consistently negative COVID results, they were often bounced back and forth between multiple hospitals, makeshift quarantine zones and entry points for weeks at a time without being able to get through—even if they had a registered address in China. Foreigners who had a smoother experience getting across the border and quarantining at home were often still required to send daily temperature checks (via their phone) to a primary-contact nurse (alongside confirmations of their locations, sent to an assigned contact at the local precinct).

the HR department) which would then notify medical authorities of anyone with a fever.

58. The government staff at these checkpoints were often individuals drawn from various low levels of administration who were also often party members. They frequently volunteered for this responsibility out of an earnest sense of duty and belief in the work and tended to be fairly helpful and straightforward.

59. It’s also worth noting that their official cut-off for a “fever” was 37.3°C (99.14°F), or sometimes even 37.0°C (98.6°F), compared to 38°C (100.4°F) in Hong Kong (which follows the standard set by the CDC in the US).

Volunteer Organizations

Even with the vast mobilization of all the formal organs of local government and the deputization of various informal agents for more widespread management of the population in the pandemic, the outbreak likely could not have been contained if not for the willing mass mobilization of that population itself surging far beyond the existing capacity of the state. At the most minimal level, this entailed a general social trust, not necessarily a trust in the government, so much as a trust in the need for everyone to work together if they wanted to overcome the virus. This required active, earnest participation or at least a begrudging acceptance of the various forms of fumbling and poor management evident in almost every aspect of the official response. In many cases, for example, it was extremely easy to fake one's temperature while quarantining at home and reporting temperature via WeChat, to avoid scanning one's QR code, or to craft a legitimate excuse as to why you might be outside of your apartment during the lockdown. In most cities after the lockdown lifted, the QR-scan requirement so essential to the contact tracing system was only inconsistently enforced—you might be asked to scan to enter a large grocery store or office building, but small, migrant-worker restaurants quickly stopped asking patrons to scan their health code. These persistent inefficiencies at the level of enforcement meant that the entire system essentially relied on people taking the threat seriously and actively self-reporting their own locations, health status and social contacts. Even if many still may not have actively participated, the ultimate success of containment was not due to the state's "authoritarian" measures, later surpassed by even more rigorous lockdowns in Italy, France and elsewhere. Instead, the pandemic was contained in China largely because most people were earnestly engaged in the effort, even if passively.

But many went the extra step and became actively engaged as well. This took numerous forms. The most common was a sort of self-deputization, where certain individuals took it upon themselves to question anyone they thought was out of place in a particular area. It's important to intervene early here and argue against applying prefab theories of "totalitarianism" and the resulting paranoid, self-policing populace to this sort of phenomenon. Instead, it's something much more similar

to everyday activities familiar to readers in any other country: equivalent to having a nosy neighbor, an intrusive landlord or an overbearing homeowners association. In fact, in these other countries the same phenomenon often takes more nefarious forms and often results in extreme violence, such as in the US, when property owners or white people strolling in the park call the police on black people who appear "out of place." In China, this attitude remained mild and mostly amounted to being lambasted in public for not wearing a mask or walking around during the height of the lockdown without a good reason. This was rarely followed by police violence. Throughout the country it also stoked a latent xenophobia toward outsiders or foreigners in general but expressed with far more vigor against Africans. In Guangzhou, African migrants were subject to extended quarantines regardless of whether or not they had left the country, while landlords conducted mass evictions of these migrants. All of this was paired with an outpouring of explicit racism on the Chinese internet. Ultimately, the government was forced to issue an apologetic diplomatic statement and to call on local officials to apply equal standards.⁶⁰ At its most extreme, this sort of neighborhood watch attitude escalated to voluntary cordons often condoned by local committees and set up by villagers in certain rural areas or by residents of particular housing complexes. They essentially walled these areas off from their surroundings and prohibited almost all entry by anyone outside the community. These blockades did become violent in some instances, but the violence was almost always against or between factions of police representing different local authorities. Sporadic clashes became somewhat common along these divisions as official reopening commenced, with some areas refusing to take down their barricades even after government representatives had told them to.⁶¹ Overall, in many places mutual aid efforts were successful not simply because of their cooperative character but instead because their inherent

60. Li Hangwei, "Mistreatment of Africans in Guangzhou threatens China's coronavirus diplomacy," *The Conversation*, April 17, 2020.

61. Sidney Leng, "Coronavirus: police, public clash as border reopens between Hubei and Jiangxi provinces," *South China Morning Post*, Mar. 28, 2020. The most widely publicized of these was a clash at the Jiangxi and Hubei border, where police from two different jurisdictions (alongside members of the public) ended up fighting when authorities on the Jiangxi side set up a barricade to stop people from Hubei (the most virus-stricken province) from crossing the border despite that border being officially reopened.

communitarianism entailed exclusion of outsiders. It is in these cases that we see the most conservative edge of the mass mobilization campaign that succeeded in containing the virus.

Volunteers were integral at a broader level as well. Local government and property management authorities rarely had sufficient staff to conduct all the necessary check-ups on those quarantining at home, keep track of who was returning to their apartments and run the necessary checkpoints. Volunteer labor was the foundation on which these local administrative organs relied. In some instances, these volunteers were low-level party members who were earnest true believers in the party's social mission—here meaning nothing more than the type of belief exhibited by canvassers, social justice activists or phone-bank volunteers in any other country. But far more often they were just regular people who wanted to help. Assisting formal organizations in their work was one way to do this. But less official volunteering was even more common and composed the bulk of mutual aid efforts. Above, we argued that these activities could be split into two broad categories: (1) **self-organization for survival** and (2) **self-organization against the pandemic**. Below, we'll anatomize each category in more detail, exploring what sort of activities they entailed and to what degree they can be characterized as truly autonomous.⁶²

62. We used a wide array of sources for this section, drawing on both English-language literature, Chinese-language literature and reports from our own interview respondents. A few resources were particularly helpful. The first was the "Workers Organizing in the Pandemic," which we translated and include as Chapter 2 of this book. The second was an article posted to the Chinese liberal web platform *Matters*, the first and second parts of which are now available in English translation via *Lausan*: 栗子、几何、蜜糖子弹、百无一用、K、晤、Ноября、水母 [Chestnut, Geometry, Honey Bullet, Useless, K, Ng, November and Jellyfish], 疫情时刻的自组织：民众如何重塑社会 [Self-Organization during the Pandemic: How the People Can Rebuild Society], *Matters*, March 5, 2020; Third, this report in English by the Stanford Social Innovation Review, which gives a little more background on the involvement of pre-existing NGOs in the "civil society" response to the pandemic: Eva Woo, "COVID-19 and Chinese Civil Society's Response" *Innovation Review*, April 14, 2020; Finally, this piece by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization provides some important background data on the Chinese food system under the pandemic, which we reference at various points throughout this summary: Fei Shulang and Ni Jia, "Local food systems and COVID-19: A look into China's responses," Food and Agriculture Organization, Aug. 4, 2020.

1. Survival

1a. General Medical Services

These overlap with pandemic protection somewhat, but they mostly capture activities undertaken to help alleviate the overloading of the formal healthcare system. Technically the medication groups below would belong here, but they were distinct enough to merit their own mention (especially insofar as they operated alongside LGBTQ+ NGOs). The more general medical services groups in this category were organizations such as the NCP Life Support Network, founded by Hao Nan, "China's leading disaster relief social entrepreneur." This was clearly an outgrowth of existing civil society networks, since Hao had played a similar role organizing aid from civil society for the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. The network ran an online clinic to help with all kinds of common medical consultations and provide mental health support and end-of-life support for families who had lost people during the pandemic. Similar groups existed with more specific focuses, such as a mutual aid group for pregnant women, who could no longer go to the doctor for regular pre-natal checkups.

1b. Essential Medication Groups

This category includes a number of makeshift organizations, many of which were more aligned with pre-existing NGOs. Basically, the problem was that normal supplies of necessary life-saving medication were constrained by the lockdown and the overload in the medical system. In addition to this, restraints were often placed on even basic painkillers like ibuprofen because of their capacity to reduce fever and thereby allow individuals to disguise the fact that they were sick. As of January 2021, individuals in most cities are still required to use real name registration to obtain fever reducing medicines. A side effect of all this was that people living with conditions that required regular medication could not easily access that medication. These groups coordinated the distribution of such medication outside the bounds of the formal medical system. The best-documented case of this activity was the distribution of medicine to those living with HIV/AIDS, where even temporary

interruptions can lead to severe deteriorations in health. In Wuhan, LGBTQ+ and AIDS support groups mobilized to coordinate the distribution of medicine. One way this worked was that those with access to a larger personal store of medication couriered their access to those whose supplies were low. It's unclear how, exactly, medication was accessed in other instances, but some practice of bulk buying and informal supply from local medical facilities was likely.

1c. Labor Organizing

Chapter 2 covers this subject in detail, but the summary is that labor organizing under the lockdown was sporadic and small. It then tended to pick up after the lockdown lifted. There was at least one example of a strike among healthcare workers in Xuzhou, Jiangsu. Smaller protests began among delivery drivers and some others in the logistics sector. These efforts culminated in the fall with a series of widely publicized slowdowns, mass resignations and a series of small strikes leading up to “Single Day” on November 11, 2020, when online shopping hits its annual peak.⁶³ There were also some more minor labor disputes in manufacturing and service sectors generally, almost all focused on cut bonuses and missing back wages. The most common factor was individual-level refusal to return to work in dangerous conditions. This resulted in companies having to charter labor in the early stages of the reopening to ensure that their factories would be staffed. In general, however, the fact that the lockdown occurred during the Spring Festival holiday meant that most workers had already planned on taking time off. In fact, for most migrant workers employed in low-end services or manufacturing, the holiday is often an opportunity to switch jobs anyways and they often leave early. This is why strikes have tended to peak in the months prior, as workers demand all their back wages before moving on. After the holiday ends, workers frequently take some extra time in their hometown or look for work in a new city. Many migrants who had come home early for the holiday ended up trapped there for longer than planned, but the timing of the pandemic made the experience much less onerous than it would have been otherwise. In the interview

63. “Delivery Workers, Trapped in the System,” *Chuang Blog*, Nov. 12, 2020.

printed above, the construction worker “W” notes that workers’ access to land and savings were essential here. If current trends continue, rising consumer debt and gradual dispossession of land will ensure that such a response will be less feasible in the future.

1d. Informal Resource Sharing and New Apps

This is a very broad category including an amorphous assortment of volunteer activities, some of which were later commodified. Much of this can hardly even be categorized as “volunteering” or “self-organization,” since it occurred mostly within extended family networks or in the form of a general neighborliness. For example, those who had stocked up on food tended to share it when other residents of the same building or village ran out. What’s notable here is, in part, the old anarchist lesson that in moments of general social strain cooperation still appears to be much more common than ruthless black-market bartering. This also demonstrates the essential role taken by informal reproductive labor in general and during the crisis specifically—a fact now clearly visible to much of the world’s population forced into a mandatory confrontation with questions of housework and food preparation under lockdown. It should be noted, however, that food supply chain problems in China were less severe than those that arose later elsewhere, where initial disruptions led to widespread shortages of particular goods, even while the massive decrease in demand overall (largely due to the closure of restaurants) has led to extreme overproduction, requiring the liquidation of not only food meant for final consumption but also the production of things like seed potatoes. In India, all these factors contributed to the widespread participation of farmers in the world’s largest general strike to date, involving some 250 million people and including a march of tens of thousands of farmers to New Delhi.⁶⁴ In China, by contrast, the formal food system was kept operating at its agricultural base throughout the lockdown. Initial strangulation of logistics networks meant there were some issues of supply—particularly in Wuhan and other parts of Hubei. But very quickly all kinds of informal and formal methods

64. Julia Hollingsworth, Swati Gupta and Esha Mitra, “Tens of thousands of farmers swarm India’s capital to protest deregulation rules,” CNN, Dec. 6, 2020.

arose to solve these issues. Food shipments were officially given priority status on roadways and were some of the few vehicles allowed to pass through checkpoints. Similarly, there was an enormous amount of intervention here on behalf of the e-commerce sector, where all kinds of mechanisms quickly composed to create new ways of contactless or risk-reduced shopping. These included the forms of “community group buying” mentioned above and sometimes facilitated by the resident committee. In these cases, there was no real e-commerce innovation, you’d just pool orders in a single group chat and one person would put in the order, then all the food would be delivered to the community the next day. This was a safer version of the early example where the mobile market would come to the community, since it didn’t require any interaction between sellers and most residents. But there was also a wide proliferation of different apps serving similar functions, such as being able to buy groceries online while getting gas and have the order placed in your trunk. Many of these apps actually began as volunteer efforts by tech workers and were then spun off as privatized entrepreneurial ventures and sold to larger firms.⁶⁵

2. Pandemic Containment

2a. Fundraising and PPE Distribution Groups

Probably the most prominent of any of the volunteer efforts, these groups raised money for supply of PPE or coordinated donations of PPE to medical professionals and undersupplied hospitals. They then either distributed these themselves or worked with other groups, like mask groups, private car service groups, to do so. In many ways they were the most makeshift of organizations with the greatest local variation in who founded them, who participated and what scale they reached. The majority seem to have been based among student groups or alumni networks. But many became quite large and grew into substantial web platforms to coordinate donations. For example, the Hubei Medical Resource Supply-Demand Platform, founded by a small group of

65. Examples of this are mentioned in the *Matters* article and in the collaborations listed in the Stanford Social Innovation Review piece on civil society measures.

volunteers but growing into a network that included more than a thousand people, with regular information on supply needs in 308 Hubei hospitals. Such organizations helped to address some of the resource misallocation that occurred due to the state’s emphasis on central economic areas. One important sub-category here were the fundraising and PPE groups that focused on supplying women medical workers specifically, such as “Sisters Against the Virus Support Group,” which not only donated additional necessities like sanitary pads but also argued publicly against the sexist portrayals of women medical workers who were referred to in the media as “mothers, girlfriends, and wives making immense sacrifices.”

All the above groups were technically operating outside the bounds of the legal restrictions on fundraising laid out in the relatively new Charity Law. Some of them therefore aligned themselves with formal groups already in compliance with the law, like pre-existing NGOs sanctioned by the state. Others simply flew under the radar and were surveilled but not cracked down on. But this has also led to cooperation with (or even buying-up of many such activities by) large e-commerce and logistics platform. The group Wuhan2020 mobilized thousands of volunteer tech developers and thousands of on-the-ground volunteers to help solve supply shortages among hospitals. This effort was led by a Stanford Business School graduate, Xue Wu, and the group then went on to collaborate with IBM. Similar efforts extended globally through business networks, such as the Blazing Youth Community, “formed by young entrepreneurs, study-abroad students and professionals, and researchers in Wenzhou,” a city known for its early entry into global markets and its substantial connections across the global supply chain. Blazing Youth drew on extensive Wenzhou capital networks (via the Global United Wenzhou Society) to extend aid to other countries hit by the pandemic.

2b. Mask Distribution Groups

These were related to the fundraising groups but in many places they took on a distinct form. Instead of attempting to distribute general PPE to medical facilities, these volunteers focused on masks specifically and tended to offer their resources to the population at large as well. These

volunteers were particularly active in the earliest weeks, when mask supplies were extremely limited, had sold out quickly and were further constrained by the shutdown. It was very common in the first month of the lockdown for people to be completely without masks and, with production stalled, these groups helped facilitate a more equitable distribution of existing supplies. Like the fundraising groups, these seem to have initially been based among students. In certain places, this led to a notable expansion of the group beyond the coordination of resources. In one example, a Beijing-based mask distribution group formed to distribute PPE to street sweepers whose job left them particularly exposed to infection and then used these contacts to produce an investigative report on the city's street sweeping industry through a detailed survey of the workers.⁶⁶

2c. Private Car Services

More colloquially referred to as “carpools” (车队), these volunteers helped drive medical workers to and from their workplaces and periodically delivered the medical supplies gathered by the groups discussed above. This was made necessary because the lockdown cancelled bus and subway service in many places and the availability of ride-share services substantially declined, meaning that anyone who was, for example, a rank-and-file nurse who couldn't afford their own car had essentially no way to easily get to work or home again after. This was a major structural weakness of the healthcare system in the context of lockdown. These volunteers covered the cost of gas, disinfectant and face masks for the

66. 疫情之下：北京环卫工人防护情况调查 [Under the Pandemic: An Investigation on Health and Safety among Beijing Sanitation Workers], 品葱 [Pincong], January 31, 2020; Some of their results are worth quoting here: “The majority of the interviewees, 56.52%, were between 50–65 years old; the second largest cohort was 40–50 years old, making up 28.26% of the interviewees; while the share of both 30–40 year old interviewees and interviewees older than 65 was 6.52% for each of these two cohorts. Not being able to return home for Chinese New Year is a very common situation for cleaners. Three fourths of the interviewees were not registered as Beijing locals—among these cleaners coming from Hebei, Henan, Shandong and Shanxi made up one half. As they maintain the deserted Beijing streets the ‘state of exception’ does not apply for them, unlike other city dwellers. Being overburdened with work is the normal state of things. More than one half of the workers interviewed reported that they worked more than eight hours. One of the workers reported that they start working at 4 am and finish at 7 pm.”

drive out of pocket. Though the actual trip only required one driver, the infrastructure to connect those in need of rides to these drivers meant that the services were organized by entire teams of volunteers. According to one source, “over 4,000 volunteers participated in these transport teams.”⁶⁷ And despite protections, a few people died doing this. In fact, it was likely the deadliest of all the volunteer activities.

2d. Pandemic Information Groups

These were organizations of higher-educated volunteers who tried to help spread accurate information on the pandemic. This need was conditioned by the fact that the government's official pronouncements were initially contradictory and, paired with its active suppression of information from early whistleblowers, its recommendations were often seen as not entirely reliable. This information problem was aggravated when detailed instructions for the handling of the lockdown in Hubei were not provided in a timely manner. As stated in Chapter 3, the initial lockdown ordinances merely announced the closure of mass transit and most shops but gave no detailed instructions on how the lockdown would be managed or what health protocols should be implemented. It wasn't even clear how people were supposed to get food. Two weeks into the lockdown, the Wuhan Municipal government finally released a series of more detailed instructions, via the newly-formed Epidemic Prevention and Control Center, on the basic ways that the lockdown would work and the expected public health practices. At the same time, behind the scenes, the state had finally given at least basic instructions for its local delegates in village committees or neighborhood-level residents committees, who were also the official organs tasked with distribution of masks, disinfectant and other supplies—but again, this wasn't until two or three weeks after the lockdown had begun. This was the context in which volunteers mobilized to produce, gather and distribute reliable information on the pandemic and the proper public health practices, ranging from basic instructions on how to wear masks or properly disinfect a space to more complex ideas about the nature of the virus and how containment of an epidemic was supposed to work. Such groups

67. Quoted in the *Matters* article, cited at the beginning of this section.

often saw themselves as fulfilling a broader social mission. For example, the A2N Volunteer Organization was founded to “promote scientific literacy and refute rumors” but grew quickly to include “collating data about the pandemic, mapping the spread of the virus, writing and editing popular science articles, debunking rumors, verifying hospitals and suppliers, and providing information about how to donate resources.”⁶⁸

2e. Petition Groups and Citizen Journalism

At times, the more general-purpose information groups spawned more specific initiatives geared toward citizen journalism or petitioning the government for policy changes. Similar initiatives also periodically grew out of other volunteer activities like mask distribution. These were driven by a broader mandate than the pandemic information groups, since they tended social media channels, gathered data on people’s views of the state’s handling of the pandemic and published articles summarizing their social research. This included overseeing and promoting public discussion via online platforms. One of their biggest channels was the WeChat feed “Delay Going Back to Work, Control the Pandemic,” where they demanded that the State Council extend the official Spring Festival vacation. Ultimately, the resumption of work was delayed, though it is not clear how much of this was in response to such demands and how much was simply seen as necessary for containment of the outbreak. Similar groups were founded to petition for increased worker protection after the lockdown was lifted as well as to advocate for workers’ rights and payment of wages. These groups also had to face the problem of being constantly censored, because citizen journalism was treated as “rumor.” So, they also formed an infrastructure to compile and archive pandemic-related posts in regions of the internet outside the Great Firewall.

68. Also quoted in the *Matters* article.

2f. Volunteer Blockades

While many volunteer efforts helped to improve the circulation of necessary personnel and equipment in the context of general constraints on movement, there was also widespread volunteer participation in the segmentation of space itself. These included volunteers working for property management companies and neighborhood resident committees to seal off entire housing complexes, volunteers staffing road blockades to prevent traffic from entering or exiting certain cities, and various makeshift barricades that arose across rural China, sealing villages off from their surroundings. These became particularly visible symbols of the lockdown. In part, this was due to the widespread circulation of humorous images of some of the more absurd blockades, like those staffed by “old uncles” carrying traditional pole arms (关刀—*guandao*) in “defense” of their village. But it was also because these volunteers were an integral element of the everyday segmentation of urban space, represented at the most basic level by the fact that anyone wandering around on the streets might be accosted by locals and asked what business they had to be outside. These forms of self-organization were by far the most conservative, in that they tended to work directly alongside the official organs of the government, and insofar as they exposed the exclusionary dimension of such communitarianism.

In general, the lifecycle of volunteer organizations was such that the most truly independent forms of mutual aid tended to be the shortest-lived. Even if they were momentarily tolerated by the authorities, all the groups that engaged in any activity, such as citizen journalism, that was more oppositional toward the official management of the pandemic simply failed to find any foothold after the lockdown lifted. None of these groups seem to have (at this point) suffered any strong direct repression on the part of the state aside from the normal internet censorship and reprimands given to those “spreading rumors.” That said, the government has detained several professional journalists and a few other already well-known activists, it hasn’t to our knowledge cracked down on any organized volunteer effort. The closest it has come to doing so are cases where groups have explicitly been asked to stop distribution, but

not punished for it.⁶⁹ Instead, these organizations have tended to merely evaporate after their initial goals were met and the need for their services decreased. At the same time, many of those engaged in even moderately oppositional activities operated with a reckless naivete and failed to follow any of the security practices that have long been common necessities for those in labor and/or feminist organizing circles. If the state had cracked down on any of these organizations (or decides to in the future), very little would have stood in its way.

These are all the exact opposite of the features necessary for any type of self-organization that builds political power. Such self-organization should exhibit inertia, antagonism and at least a basic awareness of security. **Inertia** means that such organizations would have a staying power beyond their momentary function and independent from official administration or private sector philanthropy and profiteering. In this regard, the mutual aid efforts were far more ephemeral than small-scale labor actions. **Antagonism** means that such organizations could potentially be—either at the level of awareness or activity or both—poised against the state and the present organization of society. This would not need to be explicit (in fact, it should not be, for security), but would have to exist in some form. The citizen journalist groups give some indication of how this might take shape, and it is an important fact that such groups essentially forced the public rehabilitation of Li Wenliang and other heroic doctors who had initially been reprimanded by the state, for which they became some of the only mutual aid organizations that saw participants detained. Nonetheless, most volunteer efforts had far less potential for opposition than even the most mundane labor actions or populist folk religions. **Security** is essentially awareness of the potential for antagonism, leading to the conscious preservation of self-organization through secrecy. This dimension is both particularly important and particularly difficult in China, where crackdowns against any potential opposition are swift and thorough. In this case, however, the unobjectionable nature of many volunteer efforts would have posed

69. This was the case with the “Masked Angels” group mentioned in the interview with our friends in Wuhan. The group was officially asked to stop distributing masks and therefore pivoted to the distribution of food.

an excellent opportunity to expand the capacity of secure forms of self-organization.

As for any relationship between mutual aid and political awareness, the evidence is sparse. For the most part, volunteering either remained largely apolitical or even tended to reinforce faith in the social and civilizational mission of the Chinese state—a perception that only grew after China was able to contrast its own success in containing the outbreak with the spectacular failure of the much wealthier US, UK and EU. This informal, autonomous mobilization of the population has never stood in stark theoretical opposition to the state in China. This mobilization is only understood to be a distinct threat when it is engaging in active opposition to the interests of the bureaucracy or is evidently consolidating its power and privilege in a self-serving manner. The key factor is therefore not the formal vs. informal, or governmental vs. autonomous character of any organization, but instead the direction that its action tends toward—namely whether or not its activities run parallel or perpendicular to that of the organized capitalist class, embodied in the party-state bureaucracy. At best, the most oppositional groups seemed to agree with liberal authors like Fang Fang and offered unthinking support for the introduction of Western style “civil society” institutions to act as checks and balances on state administration and economic interests. In particular, such groups have pointed to the spectacular information failure of the early pandemic to push for a more open media, the argument being that freer information flows would help state administration and assist central authorities to root out corruption. The fact that these were the most prominent, automatic political positions even among the more oppositional groups makes sense, given that many such groups were staffed by urban professionals. The exception here, again, was the small ripple of labor actions throughout the year, peaking in the fall. Meanwhile, many of the groups that cooperated most actively with the state, civil society, the e-commerce and logistics platforms, or various capitalist charity networks have had the longest staying power and tended to build the most robust tools and networks, many of which persist today.

Spatial Splintering

Now that the basic organs of local administration, the most prominent examples of self-organization and each sub-category's respective functions within the pandemic have all been illustrated, we can proceed to discuss the more general picture of how, exactly, the lockdown was implemented and experienced on the ground. Here, the most important factor was how space was segmented. In this regard, the urban geography of China was an enormous advantage, since Chinese cities are typically organized in a cellular fashion: residential complexes, shopping areas, industrial campuses, schools and universities are all already built with walls and fences separating them from the outside and only a few official gates, often staffed by security guards. At first, this might appear to be a more recent inheritance of the autarkic economic units of the developmental regime, where each individual urban factory had an affiliated residential complex that included localized, communal reproductive services, all distributed according to one's inclusion or exclusion from particular work-units (单位). In fact, this autarkic urban geography was itself influenced by much older practices in architecture and urban design, where cellular structures had long been a norm in built space across the region. More importantly, these norms were integrally linked to Chinese cosmology and political philosophy in that they tended to gesture toward the ideally subdivided, orderly and quantifiable population curated and overseen by the sagely state imbued with the mandate of heaven.

The prototypical example was Chang'an (today Xi'an) as rebuilt from scratch in 582 CE right before the inauguration of the Tang Dynasty (in 618 CE), which soon became the most populous city in the world and provided the paradigm emulated by other cities across the region. Chang'an was designed at its most fundamental level to be cellular, with its gridiron layout cut up into a nested hierarchy of functional zones, each walled off from the others. Helmed by the palace complex, these functional zones included government compounds, market areas and urban parks. But the bulk of the city was given over to residential wards, which were similarly walled off from other functional zones and from one another. Moreover, the wards were then internally parcellated into distinct plots dominated by walled structures, including

temples, government offices and courtyard housing compounds.⁷⁰ At every point of entry and exit from these walled zones, there was often a gate and frequently also a guard. Meanwhile, at night the wards essentially closed, their gates overseen by a nightwatch who allowed no passage except for in the case of emergencies and high-level official business. Though subsequent centuries saw transformations to this basic urban structure and to the political philosophy that underpinned it the essential geographic form retained a powerful inertia. Not only would this cellular urban logic again predominate in the cities of the socialist developmental regime—enhanced by the autocratic nature of production and everyday life—but a similar logic of parcellation and subdivision then returned at a larger scale in the transition to capitalism. The cellular organization of the average Chinese city then became particularly visible in the response to the pandemic.

Urban development cannot be understood without reference to the economic logic driving it. On the one hand, this is defined by the pragmatic, material requirements of production and population management. We might think of this as the organic dimension of urbanization, in the sense that it is driven by essentially impersonal material incentives. On the other, the class relationship generates its own grander political rationality, which manifests in intentional urban administration and takes influence from its contingent cultural heritage. This administrative dimension is therefore split between its primary functions: serving the impersonal requirements of production, giving spatial expression to the class relation and in particular providing for the security of the wealthy; and its ancillary function: weaving the prevailing political rationality of the ruling class into the fabric of the city. Thus, we can argue that the cellular structure of contemporary Chinese cities is an outcome of distinctly capitalist development in a simultaneously organic and administered sense and that it is also *incidentally* shaped by the political logic of a ruling class that has increasingly portrayed itself in continuity with the past. The material conditions that underpinned the hyper-cellular logic of ancient Chang'an no longer prevail.

70. Heng Chye Kiang, "Visualizing Everyday Life in the City: A Categorization System for Residential Wards in Tang Chang'an," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 73 (1), 2014. pp. 91–117.

Nonetheless, such places are still upheld as prototypical examples of the “Chinese city” in discourse today, since they are paradigmatic of the political rationality of the ruling class. Geography, urban planning and architecture departments still use these as models of a distinctly “Chinese” urban logic and train scholars, designers and administrators with these points of reference in mind. Meanwhile, recent administrative efforts to further subdivide the city into “grid” structures echo the pattern.

Of course, as the circulation of commodities and the movement of the population has increased with the transition to capitalism, Chinese urban geography has also become more permeable. This is certainly true at the large scale, with the population no longer strictly fixed to rural hometowns or the compounds of autarkic urban work unit. The rapid spatial opening of the city was also visible on the ground in the early period of transition to capitalism, when these flows were newest. At the same time, old cellular geographic divisions have taken on new functions serving capitalist accumulation and entirely new ones have taken shape: the capitalist enterprises founded in places like the Pearl River Delta tended to also form themselves into walled-off compounds, for instance, and the greenfield residential complexes built in that era operated according to the same logic — only now rendered as upscaled communities. Altogether, the mega-urban complexes such industrial development shaped tended to take on the character of exploded cities marked by a deep balkanization. But now, instead of self-sufficiency, this balkanization was driven by capitalist imperatives and built to facilitate flows of labor and goods between different segments of the city. These divisions initially took shape through competition. Some villages were able to successfully attract investment and therefore to finance its affiliated infrastructure earlier; others were not and became relegated to agricultural production or even left to lie fallow. Within the rapidly developing urban core, meanwhile, old courtyard houses were demolished at record speed, but they tended to be replaced by larger housing, shopping or administrative complexes that were often literally still walled off or, at minimum, were built such that entire segments of the city could be easily sealed from others. This was particularly true of the encirclement of remaining poor districts dominated by informal housing (the “villages in the city” or 城中村), where entries were

few and easily controlled.⁷¹ Similarly, the most fundamental logic of spatial segmentation embodied in things like one’s *hukou* status — which is, after all, a deeply geographical category, linking social rights to one’s place of origin — remains integral to production (disciplining labor and driving down the wage bill) and the maintenance of social order (sequestering the “low-end” population in easily sealed-off industrial districts).⁷²

Many features of this older, cellular logic have been retained or reproduced precisely because they make sense both within the political rationality of the ruling class, drawing from and referring to inherited presumptions about the nature of urban space, and within the material logic of capitalist production. In fact, if the early reform era seemed to hint at a more general opening, this was only because the autarkic, small-scale, fixed-in-place cellular structures of the developmental regime — which were at least, in their own way, still distinctly human spaces built on intimate social bonds — were in the process of being razed to make way for a new cellular subdivision of the city that retained, reinforced and even created further segmentation within the population, all while ensuring the dynamic movement of money, goods and labor. In other words, the urbanization of China saw the dismemberment of whatever remained of deeply inhabited spaces defined by intimate social relationships. These remnants were then uprooted and replaced by a cold terrain of alienated economic interactions, administered by an aseptic state scoured of any mandate to tend to human needs except in an ancillary fashion, as one step in an algorithm ultimately serving the inhuman imperatives of capital. This is in no way a process unique to China. It defines capitalist urbanization everywhere. But, as elsewhere, these baseline imperatives are accompanied by distinct contingencies of history, culture and geography, including the peculiarities of how the ruling class understands itself and rationalizes its

71. During the pandemic, this fact would become particularly relevant in cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen, which have higher numbers of urban villagers. From late January onward the villages’ few entrances were blockaded with random construction materials affixed with ropes and zip ties. As late as November of 2020, guards still took everyone’s temperature at the entrance of each urban village and barred entry by outsiders even though the rest of the city had by then returned to normal.

72. Lu Bu (卢布), “Adding Insult to Injury: Beijing’s Evictions and the Discourse of ‘Low-End Population,’” (*Trans: Ignatius Wu*), *Chuang Blog*, Nov. 24, 2017.

political practice. The bureaucracy was itself restructured in this period in largely the same fashion as the razing and rebuilding of urban space, but with an even greater emphasis on orderly partition and subdivision. In recent decades, the rebuilding of the bureaucracy has accompanied both invocations of tradition and new, increasingly aggressive subdivisions of urban space.

According to this logic, the *shequ* was made the basic level of urban governance, which increased the granularity of administration by further subdividing the urban fabric down to the neighborhood level, where functionaries responsible for seeing through the implementation of key policies were assigned. In the countryside the village continued in this capacity, but now with its new “autonomous” administrative organs and restructured party branches. At the same time, these base-level administrators often lacked the resources to implement such policies in any systematic fashion and were therefore effectively expected to rely on informal networks. In many places, they remained essentially inoperative or had so little capacity to enforce policy that temporary *shequ* committees would have to be established in their place when the pandemic broke out. In one sense, then, this was a “vertical” extension of the state since it better integrated these areas with the upper echelons of the command structure and linked them back directly to the central bureaucracy. At the same time, this was also an extension of the state’s traditionally balkanized, “horizontal” governance, since these new administrative subdivisions were expected to form their own rhizomatic plateaus of informal government in order to be able to implement policies in the first place. Thus, the *shequ* (and, to a lesser extent, the village) and the administrative divisions (subdistrict, district, county) immediately above it became the main site at which the outbreak was contained. Though this containment involved the vertical chain of command, any authority transmitted through that chain was slow, incomplete and often contradictory. The effort was primarily successful through the horizontal mobilization of relational government, most visible in the massive numbers of volunteers who staffed essential positions and their open coordination with these base-level organs of the state.

The ease with which space could be splintered and sealed off was a great advantage in containing the outbreak. At the same time, it also exhibited a persistent incapacity since the very splintering of space

necessary for wide-ranging quarantine was only manageable through reliance on informal networks and masses of volunteers. This also meant that attempts to vertically integrate various local mobilizations continually ran up against the reality of *de facto* horizontal autonomy, which produced numerous non-commensurate public health measures that simply could not be packaged together into a single standard. In its ideal form, the model to be implemented across China was called “closed management” (*fengbishi guanli*—封闭式管理). In most of the areas where this came into effect, villages, communities and other divisible spatial units, such as housing complexes, would only keep one entrance and exit point open, and each household was allowed limited numbers of entrances and exits. In some places, night-time access was prohibited, instituting a local curfew despite there being no similar city-wide requirement. In extreme cases, access was prohibited throughout the day. The most stringent application of the closed management system was in Wuhan, where the early lockdown was particularly extreme. It effectively limited most people to their housing complexes unless they were essential workers.⁷³ But a fairly rigorous example of the system also arose in Beijing, where direct administrative links to the central government were already more common. Elsewhere, “closed management” was aspirational, at best. In many areas, its successful implementation was not achieved through rigorous enforcement but simply because people were earnestly concerned about the virus and didn’t venture outside more than necessary. This sort of geographical and administrative fragmentation was by far the most salient feature of the containment effort.

Maybe the best example of this problem was the contact-tracing QR codes. Colloquially, the QR code is simply referred to as a “health code” (健康码) and that’s what we’ll call it here. Health codes were intended to track population movement and rank people as “safe” or “unsafe” based on the places that they’d travelled to. This system was itself modelled on similar QR scans that had been rolled out in Xinjiang in

73. It’s worth remembering that in this earliest period it was not yet clear how contagious the disease was or what the major vectors were for human-to-human infection. There was still widespread concern about aerosol transmission outdoors and infection through surface contact, so it also makes sense that the areas that locked down earliest tended to also pose more limits on any sort of travel outside the household—and people in general were far more wary about leaving the house for any reason.

the name of “anti-terrorism” and that were being experimented with in the “grid-style social management” system operational in a few key cities. On the surface, this seems to be precisely the kind of “totalitarian” measure that the Chinese state should be capable of, especially if one accepts the predominant media narrative about the CCP’s overarching control over society and over Chinese telecoms and internet infrastructure specifically.⁷⁴ This is not simply a myth cultivated in the foreign press. Instead, the central state itself has talked about the health codes as if they were part of a unified system of contact tracing like that deployed in neighboring countries, where they were highly effective, not only in similar single-party states like Vietnam, but also in South Korea, Taiwan and Japan, hinting that success here had nothing to do with undemocratic political institutions.⁷⁵ In reality, this claim was also mostly aspirational. China was substantially larger than any country where such systems were effectively implemented, it had a much more widely distributed outbreak, and it could not restrict domestic travel as easily as places like Taiwan, which could simply cancel international flights. Thus, a public health system overseen by a state with substantially less command capacity was stretched far thinner. The result was that the health code was not a single, unified system, but instead a multi-level maelstrom of semi-overlapping systems, the bulk of which either didn’t work or were incredibly easy to falsify.

This is best illustrated by the fact that almost no one had a single health code that they scanned everywhere. Even though shops, residential complexes and all sorts of transit centers (bus and railroad stations, airports, etc.) all technically required those entering to scan their code, they also used different systems and codes frequently would not work between them, requiring most people to download multiple apps (there were three, each of which then required different mini-apps) in order to scan in and, if this didn’t work, usually just being waved through

74. Here the QR Code might be placed alongside myriad other examples such as the social credit system, facial recognition ticketing jaywalkers or Huawei’s military connections as a favorite tech touchstone in the new yellow peril journalism, bulwarked by similar academic accounts common in International Studies departments bankrolled by the US State Department.

75. For an overview of these systems, see: Dyani Lewis, “Why many countries failed at COVID contact-tracing—but some got it right,” *Nature*, Dec. 14, 2020.

anyways. Technically, these codes all functioned in the same way, using data from your phone’s SIM card (and thereby your cell carrier) to determine if your cell phone had been in an “unsafe” place with ongoing infectious activity. Green codes meant you’d never been in contact with anyone infected, yellow meant you’d been in an infectious space and red that you’d received a positive test, which should have led to formal quarantine until you’d tested negative multiple times. Similarly, the scan of your health code outside your residential complex while you were supposed to be in isolation, if you’d just travelled to the area from a hotspot, for instance, indicated to local authorities that you might be breaking your quarantine. Ideally, this was meant to be a granular measurement that would let you know if you’d come into contact with anyone who later tested positive. Certain health code systems picked up other clusters and effectively traced them, but it was far more common for poor information sharing across systems to result in “missed” contacts. Ultimately, local authorities tended to just focus surveillance on anyone from a foreign country or from Hubei and Wuhan especially, who had recently entered the area. Based on all our interviews, the only reported cases of individuals having a “red” code indicating high risk were those whose cell carriers had placed them in Wuhan. Though presumably those who had contracted the virus, tested positive *and volunteered to self-report that fact across multiple health code platforms* would have also had a “red” status until they were no longer contagious.

The health codes also demonstrate the fragmentation of state authority and the substantial untracked seepage between supposedly sealed-off segments of urban space. Since the codes relied on detailed access to one’s SIM card and the locational data, the first fracture occurred at the level of telecom infrastructure. Different carriers seemed to work better with one or another of the three major apps (WeChat, Alipay and one used in government buildings) and, in most cases, you were required to scan a code specific to your carrier and for the city you were registered in. One irony of this was the fact that even non-Chinese respondents who had re-entered China from a foreign country with high caseloads in the early months of the pandemic were never given a “red” or even “yellow” status, simply because they had never used their Chinese SIM card outside of China, and when they put it back in after crossing the border, the telecom had no record of them ever having

left. Similarly, the array of health code mini-programs was bifurcated between WeChat and Alipay.⁷⁶ This meant that, when scanning a code, you'd not only have to frequently install a separate mini-program but also make sure you were operating within the right platform environment. But it was at the level of the mini-program that the real fragmentation of the system became evident: every different local jurisdiction essentially had its own health code. At airports and train stations, those travelling between different areas would be met with bulletin boards that had numerous printed-out QR codes pinned to them prior to boarding, each for a different destination. These let travelers apply for a valid local health code before departure, rather than relying on WeChat or Alipay to suggest the correct code based on the location of the device after landing, though this latter system also worked and was presumably used by anyone driving long distances in a personal vehicle. Meanwhile, an entirely separate system operated in government buildings and required carrier-specific codes to be scanned which then prompted a site-specific query of your device's ID and ostensibly cross-checked it with more detailed contact tracing records kept by that carrier.

On the ground, the system was further separated by uneven implementation and reinforced at every level by much more mundane methods, which were likely far more important in the ultimate containment of the outbreak. During the early period of lockdown, health code scans (or just showing a picture of the code, which was easier to fake) were mandatory to enter most public spaces, including restaurants and subways, and they were accompanied by temperature checks. But this varied significantly by the degree of formality of the space and by location. Malls and hotels, for instance, tended to more stringently enforce the checks, while neighborhood restaurants run by migrants rarely checked. Similarly, certain cities seem to have been more stringent than others. In Beijing, requirements remained extremely strict, codes were checked with greater consistency, mask-wearing was strictly enforced, and space

76. Common on Chinese smartphones, these small applications can only be installed within the environment of larger all-purpose apps like WeChat and Alipay. The vast majority of e-commerce transactions, in everything from food delivery to Taobao purchases to ordering a taxi, occur through such mini-programs running on one of these master platforms.

was extensively policed by security guards and numerous individuals who had taken on the duty of questioning passersby about their business. In Shanghai, this was true early on but lightened up quickly and never seemed to apply to more informal spaces like small restaurants. In Guangzhou and Chengdu, restrictions were lax to begin with and tended to focus on those who had entered from elsewhere, though many people never talked to volunteers from their local residents committee or property management authority, at most maybe sending in some paperwork confirming they were living in their unit or working in a particular location, and never had to report their temperature to anyone other than the HR department at their workplace or upon entry to airports or government buildings. In these cities, some guards and neighborhood watch types would accost people early on, but the habit seems to have faded more quickly. Most security guards reverted to their normal laziness, standing right next to the sign posted at the shopping mall saying that health code scans were required as everyone simply walked past without scanning.⁷⁷

In part, this fragmented system was overcome by the extreme focus placed on those who entered the area from elsewhere, in particular Wuhan, Hubei more generally, or any foreign country. These are the individuals who would be given a contact from the local police precinct and whose period of isolation would be monitored most stringently. Depending on their initial temperature check and housing status, this either meant home isolation where they would have to send in their temperature to a local nurse via WeChat once or twice a day, or monitored isolation at a quarantine hotel where their temperature would be taken by staff. These are also the people who bore the brunt of the more aggressive quarantine controls at the border, often forced to choose between sequestration at designated quarantine hotels and makeshift hospitals or deportation. At worst, individuals who failed temperature

77. In later outbreaks, these requirements would return, with the system having been smoothed out somewhat in the interim. By the winter of 2020–2021, the fragmentation of the system itself had been alleviated somewhat but travelling to and from a city like Beijing still required that you meticulously input the names of all the counties you had passed through manually, though you'd often only be prompted to do this days after your return. Your answers would then presumably be checked against the locational data on your cell phone and you would be given a “green” status if you answered correctly. It is unclear why the information was not just logged automatically.

checks, even those within the normal range of human body temperature, since the threshold was low, were shuttled between various quarantine and testing sites for weeks, even if they were consistently testing negative. At best, it meant a monitored quarantine period at one's home. During further travel, it was common for those from foreign countries to have to carry physical copies of paperwork showing that they had completed quarantine and tested negative, since the paperwork would almost never come up automatically on your phone. Meanwhile, even after the outbreak had largely been contained and travel restrictions lifted, many locales had inconsistent policies when it came to housing foreigners and people from Wuhan. It was common for certain districts in a city to periodically ban such people from all hotels or assign them all to a single "approved" hotel in the district. But if one were to simply go to a different district in the same city, no such restriction existed.

These decisions were, for the most part, made by local government officials acting alone and attempting to fulfill the vague directives handed down from above with very few resources and almost no guidelines about how to do so. The role played by these local officials gave the post facto impression that the state had successfully mobilized its chain of command to orchestrate the containment and this myth was readily repeated by official media outlets after the fact, especially when it became evident that far wealthier countries were being hobbled by the same virus that China had successfully defeated. Thus, a typical account of the containment became something like:

there has been a proliferation of subdistrict Neighborhood Committees and rural Village Committees. Cities extending this form of social management have split their neighborhoods into grids. Each grid manages the workspaces and the comings-and-goings of tens, and in some cases, hundreds of households, through daily surveillance. People have to show their IDs and obtain temporary permits just to enter or exit their neighborhoods.⁷⁸

78. This quotation comes from the *Matters* article cited above.

As we've already seen, this was an ideal never quite met for the vast majority of Chinese cities, even if it was approximated for a brief time in areas under closer central scrutiny (essentially just Wuhan and Beijing) and independently reproduced on the ground by volunteers and eager local authorities in particular areas of other cities. But this didn't stop the government from claiming it to have been the general case afterward. For example, in September, the Central Committee of the CCP issued awards to 150 "progressive grassroots party organization" leaders from around the country for their efforts in epidemic prevention and control, and nearly all of these individuals were either doctors or residents committee leaders.⁷⁹ This is an extremely common pattern in Chinese statecraft, in which myriad makeshift local responses to a crisis are systematized in later narratives and reframed as if they were the product of central planning. Every weakness is, after the fact, claimed as a strength.

The Anatomy of the Coming State

The pandemic was contained in China not by the all-seeing power of the party-state but instead by the massive, voluntary mobilization of ordinary people. It is incorrect, however, to characterize this mobilization as an enormous outpouring of "mutual aid" in the Leftist sense. Though it certainly proves the old anarchist adage that people thrown into catastrophe will tend to cooperate rather than ruthlessly compete with one another, this cooperation was also cooperation with the state. Only rarely did such groups find themselves positioned against the government and, even then, only in the mildest fashion. Despite—or, in fact, because of—widespread distrust of the competency of government administrators, the volunteer efforts of people in general served to buoy the state itself, as they have historically. At the same time, the catastrophe and the state's incapacity in the face of it has provided further justification for the bureaucracy to accelerate its attempt to develop and extend its local presence. The government now retroactively claims its

79. 新華網 [*Xinhua*], (受權發布) 中共中央關於表彰全國優秀共產黨員和全國先進基層黨組織的決定 ["The Central Committee's Decision to Commend the Nation's Outstanding Party Members and Advanced Local-Level Party Organizations"], Sept. 8, 2020.

containment practices to have been a massive success relative to the truly monstrous failures visible in many much wealthier countries with far more health resources per capita. This is merely the public face of what appears to be a deeper recognition that state capacity proved dangerously limited.

On the one hand, a true success would have seen the virus detected significantly earlier, with containment efforts following much more quickly afterwards. The process of containment should have begun with the exact sort of public announcements from doctors and nurses which were so quickly cracked down on and silenced by local officials. On the other, the central state is certainly aware that its “base-level organs” proved flimsy when pressure was finally applied. In many areas, makeshift “temporary” neighborhood-level residents committees had to be composed at the last minute where official committees had atrophied, not yet formed, or even seen their seats never filled. Ultimately, if the population had not willingly and often vigorously participated in the containment effort, especially by staffing necessary administrative positions, China would today find itself in straits far worse than those of the United States. This sort of catastrophic failure is still possible, depending on the results from the vaccines currently being rolled out, and remains a threat in any future pandemic. While the state will never acknowledge this incapacity publicly, it does appear as if the present catastrophe is already beginning to serve as a significant inflection point in the ongoing state-building process and may prove as important to the consolidation of state power as the great recession and its aftermath a decade prior. In contrast to the 2010s, however, it seems that this is the juncture at which this new state, increasingly centralized and now reconstituted around capitalist imperatives, will now begin to truly determine the nature of its local governance.

There is no reason to believe that the new state being constituted on the initiative of the Chinese capitalist class organized in the body of the CCP will necessarily resemble the democracies of the West or even those of the East Asian nations developed under the military tutelage of the US. The only hard requirement for this state is: that it protect the class interests of the bloc of capitalists that it represents; and that it helps maintain the baseline conditions for accumulation. But there is enormous room for experimentation in exactly how these capitalist

imperatives are pursued. This experimentation is itself a necessity, producing innovations to better facilitate the social reproduction of the capitalist system at ever larger scales and intensities. Crises that threaten this social reproduction often induce the rapid mutation or exaptation of vestigial administrative mechanisms to confront the crisis and its symptoms. This is not a mindless evolutionary process, but an intentional one composed of myriad social innovations commissioned by those in power, formulated by experts in relevant fields, or sometimes invented out of necessity by common people trying to survive the crisis on their own. The majority are failures, but those adaptations that do help overcome that crisis often become enshrined in future governance and take on integral roles in the political philosophy of those who wield power.⁸⁰ At the same time, they are also mythologized such that even the most incidental of their institutional dimensions are exaggerated out of all proportion by both critics and proponents. This is clearly visible in the phenomenon of “neoliberalism” and its associated constellations of theories and policies, wherein even the most minor social transformations are easily analogized to amorphous non-concepts such as “neoliberal subjectivity,” which is about as rigorous and functional a concept for academics today as “original sin” was for medieval scholastics. It would be a major error, then, to see in the Chinese state-building process any evidence for a “new type” of capitalism.

We might argue instead that the CCP functions as something of a vanguard for the global capitalist class. Its experiments are important precisely because they lie at the forefront of the expansion of capital today, in both its industrial and financial dimensions, and are adapted for confrontation with the foremost limits to accumulation at the largest scales. Thus, high-level experiments to found larger conglomerates better integrated with one another through willing coordination between

80. Nonetheless, no single “regime of accumulation” can really be said to prevail globally at any given time, and most attempts to periodize capitalism according to these regimes are doomed to fail. The only functional periodizations are the most minimal ones and those that include seemingly contradictory geographic variation in their basic equation: the era in which capitalism had a non-capitalist periphery vs. the era in which the few shrinking non-capitalist territories have become utterly encircled; eras of increasing growth in global trade vs. eras of decreasing growth in global trade; or simply eras defined by the alternation of periods of rapid movement and periods of relative geographic stability in the location of the global center of gravity of production.

Chinese capitalists have already shown some success in their ability to mobilize capital profitably at large scales and with greater stability than equivalent financial mechanisms in the West, though the conglomerates are of course also interdependent with these foreign institutions. On the one hand, this certainly validates the classical Marxist prediction that long-run capitalist development entails increasing socialization to accommodate the ever-greater scope of production. This socialization nonetheless remains fundamentally private and fundamentally geared toward accumulation, meaning that its various institutional and infrastructural mechanisms cannot simply be seized and used for more rational purposes without systematic restructuring. On the other hand, every means of overcoming one crisis can become the cause of the next or, at minimum, a hindrance to ongoing accumulation. Since these institutions are relatively new, it is not yet clear whether the structural contradictions they have generated—namely a sequence of debt bubbles centered on local governments and an immense increase in global industrial overcapacity—can be reconciled in the coming decades. This is one reason why new extensions of the bureaucracy are increasingly necessary, and why the building-up of its local capacity for governance remains essential to state construction.

The present pandemic represents the first of the major catastrophes to test the new organs of local government. After this, they will see another process of systematic reform and adaptation, only now with far more resources and closer attention paid to the clear apportionment of control rights and chains of command. But this does not mean that the goal is to integrate everything within a single, vertical structure in the fashion of the fictional Leviathan that the Chinese bureaucracy has always been portrayed as. Nor does it entail the formation of vertical systems homologous to federal governments in most wealthy countries, though in certain respects these have proved useful models from which to cherry-pick particularly functional institutional mechanisms.⁸¹

81. The most glaring example is the recent turn toward Western-style institutional models of depoliticized multiculturalism in Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia and other regions with large concentrations of non-Han ethnolinguistic groups, as advocated by the proponents of the “Second Generation Ethnic Policy,” which is explicitly modelled on that of the United States. This has included both a dismantling of older rights of “autonomy” allowing for things like bilingual education (most recently in Mongolia, where the rollback

The state currently being constructed seems to resemble neither these western states, nor the floating state of the imperial era, nor the aspirational universal state of the developmental regime with its roots sunk mangrove-like into the populace. Instead, a state without any real precedent is forming, structured by the need to serve capitalist imperatives under increasingly catastrophic global conditions and informed by new currents of distinctly Chinese political philosophy which developed out of both the failure of the developmental regime and the reinvigorated engagement with foreign theories of statecraft and governance that accompanied the transition to capitalism. To conclude, then, we will first speculate on the practical anatomy of what this coming state might look like and then finish with a more general overview of these new currents of political philosophy in order to demonstrate how such theories are relevant not only to understanding the state-building project currently underway in China but also to theorizing the nature of the state as such.

There is now a widespread recognition that more resources must be committed to local administrative organs and that even this will fail to guarantee effective capacity to govern such a large population. Regardless, there seems to be a consensus that the new forms of *shequ* and village administration piloted in the last three decades should be retained rather than reinvented. There is an effort to integrate them more rigorously into vertical chains of command, but also to reinforce their informal capacity so long as this informality can be effectively wielded and monitored. But again, the formality-informality dyad has never been a particularly good characterization within Chinese statecraft. Not only are the two better understood as existing on a spectrum rather than in diametric opposition—the bureaucracy gives way to customary forms of authority at its base and is interpenetrated by informal social obligations

of bilingual education has faced immense opposition) and the rise of an ethnically-targeted mass incarceration system designed to both sequester populations deemed “dangerous” and to force their cultural assimilation. The latter, of course, is also modelled on examples from the United States, both in its rendering as an “anti-terror” measure in Xinjiang and in its assimilation policies, which resemble both the “Americanization” policies imposed on immigrants in America in the first few decades of the 20th century and, of course, the notoriously brutal boarding schools used to strip indigenous peoples of their languages and cultural practices in the US and Canada.

at every level—but they are also not the only poles in the spectrum. It is better to characterize the bureaucracy as simultaneously operating through formality and the alternation between informality and what might be thought of as a para-formality. If informal relations retain a stronger allegiance to customary authority than to official authority, or if relational social obligations exert more power than formal bureaucratic commitments, then they are deemed informal in a negative sense, as instances of corruption or potential sites of rebellion. This portrayal of informal authority is more common in times and places where the bureaucracy is particularly weak, since it is forced to rely on these mechanisms even while it fears them because they lie outside of its control. This sort of informality therefore exists in mutual interdependence with the formal bureaucracy, but it is an oppositional interdependence. By contrast, in times of stability or in places where the bureaucracy exerts the most direct influence, a second kind of informality is actively cultivated by the formal institutions of the state. For example, customary power becomes a means by which the bureaucracy conducts taxation and informal social obligations become the threads stitching together the upper echelons of the state. We can think of this as a sort of para-formality, also in mutual interdependence with the formal bureaucracy, but no longer in opposition to it. It is a sort of fully domesticated informality capable of reverting to its feral form, but only if it is abandoned by the formal sphere that tends it.

With this in mind, we argue that the extension of the regrouped state down to the local level is an attempt to domesticate the productive informality that arose during the transition to capitalism and to mobilize it as a para-formal apparatus for formal governance. A similar procedure was initiated in the upper echelons of the bureaucracy immediately after the ascent of Xi Jinping, who led a crackdown on “corruption” that extended higher and further than any earlier effort. This was necessary because the very forms of local informality that had once enabled the transition to capitalism, ensured industrial profitability and thereby developed once-poor regions of the country were now becoming hindrances to further accumulation. But this was not an attempt to systematically uproot the sort of informal ties that composed this corruption. Instead, the campaign cracked down most harshly on those who were seen as being in potential opposition to the bureaucracy and its long-term

interests. These were cases where customary ties were perceived as being stronger than official ones and a rebellious form of opposition seemed to lie just over the horizon. In other cases, similarly informal mechanisms were systematized by the state and effectively converted into para-formal means of government. For example, previously “corrupt” practices in which resources would be preferentially allocated to select enterprises with ties to particular bureaucrats were transformed into a semi-formal standard for lending. In this new system, preferential credit is formally allocated through the major state banks that compose the bulk of the financial system. But loans now go to an even narrower subset of major conglomerates with close ties to the party apparatus.

The pandemic has proved essentially the same point at the level of local administration, and we would expect to see a similar approach applied to “base-level organizations” of government. At the same time, the pandemic was already preceded by far more nefarious extensions of the state into the local sphere in places like Tibet and Xinjiang, which were already acting as the foremost testing grounds for the government’s mobilizational and technical capacity. In a certain sense, some of the practices observed in response to the pandemic were even prefigured in Xinjiang, where the lack of sufficient police to staff the new carceral infrastructure saw instead an almost identical mobilization of glorified security guards,⁸² only operating under a different name and taking on a para-formal character:

the data janitors of the Safe City system in Shawan and throughout the region were 90,000 police contractors or assistants (*xiejing*, 协警) hired at the beginning of 2017. According to job listings, most of these recruits would not receive formal training in police academies as Public Security

82. Elsewhere in the article quoted immediately below, the author argues that the assistant police would be categorized as security guards or civil police elsewhere. But that’s not quite true. Assistant police designated as *xiejing* already operate throughout China as untrained or minimally trained laborers hired to assist the police in simple tasks. They can regularly be seen on the streets in many cities. The difference is their sheer number in Xinjiang and the specific tasks they have been assigned. In any case, they lie under the immediate command structure of the police and this is the key thing that distinguishes them from security guards.

Bureau employees do. Most would not be authorized to carry lethal weapons. [...]

[these] assistants conduct spot checks centered on actively profiling passersby, stopping young Turkic people and demanding that they provide their state-issued IDs and open their phones for automated inspection via spyware apps and external scanning devices. Policing contractors monitor face-scanning machines and metal detectors at fixed checkpoints. All of these activities assure that information forcibly collected from Uighur and Kazakh residents continues to feed the dataset of the system, making “extremism assessments” conducted by neighborhood watch units more and more precise.⁸³

These practices, however, don't represent exact models to be applied to the general population in China any more than stop-and-frisk policies, deportation cages and massive prison cities do in the US. Instead, they resemble the American case—including its overseas military interventions, which utilize much of the same “anti-terror” infrastructure—in the way they create militarized, carceral territories where more extreme methods of surveillance, policing and interventionist local administration can be piloted on designated minority populations, after which certain elements of these new technical and administrative systems, like “smart cities,” can then be watered down and rolled out at a broader scale. This is hinted by the fact that, even in their most carceral applications, these systems have consistently been justified not only in anti-terror language but also in terms of their ability to increase the “efficiency of governance.”⁸⁴

83. Darren Byler, “Because There Were Cameras, I Didn't Ask Any Questions’: Chinese Government Documents Provide New Details on a Small Xinjiang Town's Extensive System of Surveillance,” *ChinaFile*, Dec. 30, 2020.

84. In addition to the above-quoted article, further details on Xinjiang can be found in Byler's other work and in his forthcoming book, which represents some of the best on-the-ground scholarship studying events in the region, and in Adam Hunerven's piece printed in the second issue of our own journal: Adam Hunerven, “Spirit Breaking: Capitalism and Terror in Northwest China,” *Chuang Journal*, Issue 2: Frontiers, 2019.

Altogether, then, we might expect future reforms of local organs of government across China to entail the better integration of existing organs with higher authorities, a more systematic and non-overlapping distribution of control rights between different agencies and a general weeding-out of particularly inefficient and corrupt local administrators. At the same time, it also means the open cultivation of informal capacities and their conversion into para-formal mechanisms to amplify the reach of the state. This will include plenty of seemingly “totalitarian” features and many seemingly “democratic” ones, but neither term is particularly informative. For instance, we might expect that new surveillance technologies will, in fact, become more centralized, but not in the direct way that this centralization operates in the US, where such data is siphoned directly by federal agencies who store and sift through it. Instead, this centralization will likely proceed in a “trickle-up” fashion, where new large infrastructural channels are opened to enable the transmission of surveillance data upward to higher levels of the state, but filtered by lower levels on the way, with all kinds of associated loss and horizontal seepage, as when local officials provide information to local employers who happen to be relatives. Similarly, these efforts will require the massive extension of both the formal police apparatus and its less formal security guard counterparts, which will in all likelihood be para-formalized. This might look like a repurposing of the pre-existing “urban management officers” who have long harassed migrant street hawkers, or it could mean the extension of more rigorous organizing and oversight infrastructure into the companies that currently employ security guards. But the extension of policing could also conceivably be undertaken in a more aggressive fashion, resembling the para-formal infrastructure of the “assistant” or “auxiliary” police already piloted across Xinjiang.

We should also expect new, seemingly democratic evolutions of local “autonomy” that are nonetheless designed to bulwark the official bureaucracy. More emphasis might be placed on the election of residents committees—which are legally already subject to elections, but most are simply appointed—or new mechanisms developed to mobilize volunteer labor and coordinate donated resources, similar to those created by tech workers in the course of the pandemic and since absorbed into e-commerce infrastructure. Numerous local experiments already

underway seem to point in this direction, allowing people to report instances of corruption through an app or to contribute to the patchwork of collaboratively produced credit scores used by certain locales and within certain companies.⁸⁵ But, again, such examples exist alongside similar mechanisms of digitized community surveillance that encourage individuals in places like Xinjiang to actively inform on neighbors and family members. While some of these mechanisms may at first appear to be democratic, their “democracy” is that of the social media platforms they are most obviously inspired by. In other words it is a tyrannical form of constant participation that offers little genuine autonomy and instead increases surveillance, snitching and self-censorship. Beyond the digital sphere, it’s perfectly possible that various cooperative forms of local democracy will arise and elections will be conducted, so long as they don’t take on an oppositional character. Such organs will likely be cultivated in order to more efficiently coordinate volunteer labor in times of crisis and “local self-government” will coexist in harmony with even the most egregious surveillance systems imported from Xinjiang.

These vertical integrations and local reforms will then be paired with the additional cultivation of horizontal linkages between formal and para-formal institutions of authority that operate at the same level. For example, the central role played by property management companies and various other organized groups of landlords or homeowners during the lockdown has already led for calls to extend party infrastructure more thoroughly into these organizations:

State media quoted one scholar as saying that the party must “thread” [neighborhood residents committees] together with landlords’ associations and property-management firms. In recent years, the party has been laying the groundwork for this by forming cells within these groups. The central city of Hefei wants at least half of those sitting on landlords’ committees to be party members, according to *Legal Daily*.

85. These are often misreported as the rollout of a single, national “social credit score” that ranks all citizens. Not only does no such thing exist, but in the locations that local variations of the concept have been experimented with they’ve tended to have less impact on people’s everyday lives than the much more systematic and thoroughly enforced influence of one’s combined credit score and criminal record in any Western country.

State media often use the term “red property-management” to refer to firms that use their party cells to interact with property owners and try to keep them happy.⁸⁶

This threading-together will doubtless be conducted both through formal mechanisms, such as direct placement of party cells within these groups, and through the informal cultivation of mutual social obligations between these distinct formal institutions, such as through nepotistic placement of family members in parallel horizontal positions. In fact, these informal familial linkages have already been integral to the expansion of policing in Xinjiang, since the recruitment of police “assistants,” who are themselves predominantly hired from the Muslim minority populations that they are then employed to target, relies on familial networks in hiring and verifies applications not simply through a criminal background check but also by determining whether or not their family connections prove “trustworthy.” Thus, in addition to integration between *shequ* residents committees and property owners, we might expect to see a similar cultivation of further horizontal linkages between the local police precincts and the various companies employing security guards within their territory as a potential first step in the process of para-formalization.

The Philosophy of the Coming State

The new currents of political philosophy that began to take shape in the reform period were deeply shaped by the various administrative transformations piloted in the 1980s and 1990s. They then contributed to these reforms insofar as they helped to lay out the general problematics of governance in the era and created new readings by new interlocutors through which those rising to power might both study Western political philosophy and return to classical texts on statecraft. But the intellectual sphere also tended to exaggerate the potentials of the reforms then underway. An example of this can be found in the proliferation of the concept of “autonomy” to describe local administration. On the one hand, autonomy as a synonym for local self-government in the

86. “On every street: China’s Communist Party worries about its grassroots weakness,” *The Economist*, June 11, 2020.

context of the rollback of state resources was a simple conceptual extension of the term as it had been used in the developmental regime to define ethnic minority policy, where “autonomy” did not really mean self-government so much as the application of a separate set of legal expectations, preferential access to certain resources and the ability to retain some culturally-specific practices, particularly in the language of instruction in schools. The term came to take on its new meaning in 1980s and 1990s as it was used to describe the reduced role of government in the countryside. On the other hand, these administrative changes were themselves occurring amid renewed debate on the nature of government. Though this debate was conducted with its formal veneer still rooted in the then-prevailing orthodoxy of official “Marxism,” its fundamental concepts began to be drawn more explicitly from both classical texts on Chinese statecraft and various Western theories of governance and direct democracy.

In both its theoretical and practical aspects, the debate on “the changing function of government” (政府职能转变), as it was known, was a hybridization that openly used terms imported from foreign political philosophers but subtly transformed their meanings:

The plethora of new governmental terms and concepts that have emerged in Chinese discourse over the last two decades [i.e., the 1980s and 1990s] at first glance appear to have direct and obvious links to foreign counterparts, and no doubt many of these have been “imported” through closer working links with international governing institutions and the domestic resurgence of social sciences. A closer reading, however, reveals that Chinese notions such as *zizhi* and *zhili* [治理], which are generally rendered as “autonomy” and “governance” respectively, must be understood within the complex socio-historical terrain of modern China.⁸⁷

Similar attentiveness must be paid to the transformation of the official “Marxist” orthodoxy inherited from the developmental regime, guided

87. Gary Sigley, “Chinese Governmentalities: Government, Governance and the Socialist Market Economy,” *Economy and Society*, Vol. 35, No. 4, Nov. 2006. p. 489.

now by its mission to build a “socialist market economy.” This was accompanied by other subtle changes in the vocabulary used to describe the function of the state, with terms like planning (计划), administration (行政) and government (政府) giving way to the more modern-sounding management (管理) and governance (治理) over the course of the 1990s. In the same way, autonomy and even terms such as “egoism” (自我主义) began to be used to describe ideal actors under the socialist market system, including individuals, institutions and industrial enterprises. Such terms became the norm among those leading the reforms and within various strains of Chinese liberalism that began to emerge in the period, including that of the supposedly “Maoist” thinkers of the Chinese New Left.

The liberal critique that developed in these years would form the seed for the type of politics advocated, at the popular level, by authors like Fang Fang today. Such thinkers essentially argued for a higher degree of emulation of foreign governance through “civil society” or through a particularly westernized notion of local democracy, though almost always with continuing emphasis placed on the centrality of the bureaucracy. While the classical liberal position has grown less common in the years after the great recession, in the 1980s and 1990s the proliferation of experiments in local self-government that accompanied the regrouping and temporary rollback of the central state led Chinese liberals to place enormous emphasis on the development of local “autonomous” organs that allowed for mass participation in governance. This was particularly true in rural areas, where these thinkers saw immense potential in the state’s implementation of village democracy. Today, these dreams seem laughable. But their inheritance is clear even in contemporary liberal accounts of the volunteer efforts that arose in response to the pandemic. In one of the most popular of these pieces, posted to the liberal blog *Matters*,⁸⁸ the authors offer an intricate critique of the older style of institutional liberalism that advocated the cultivation of Western-style civil society in China as a sort of cure-all to be carried out alongside further marketization. But the authors’ alternative is to turn instead

88. This is the piece cited several times above, thus far only partially translated into English via *Lausan*. The relevant section referenced here is Part III, still untranslated at the time of writing.

to a subset of New Left and left liberal scholars, such as Wen Tiejun and Zhao Xueguang, who have long advocated for the central state to cultivate genuine organs of rural self-government via cooperative forms of direct democracy. Alongside these Chinese theorists, the authors gesture toward well-known Western thinkers like Murray Bookchin, Erik Olin Wright and Michael Albert, as well various technocratic-liberal boosters of the “sharing economy” and the potential of cryptocurrencies to create “radical markets.” Articles such as this represent the general impoverishment of Chinese liberalism in recent decades and its displacement by new strains of conservatism that have tended to emphasize the centrality of state-building above all else.

But this new conservatism did not appear out of thin air. Instead, its emergence indicates that deeper changes were already underway within intellectual circles. One important component of this conservatism has been a new political philosophy of statecraft less reliant on terms imported from the West, enabled by the revival of interest in the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition. The rise of Chinese liberalism and the debate on the “changing functions of government” took place in the midst of two other important intellectual trends: the “culture craze” (文化热) of the 1980s, which saw foreign philosophy rapidly translated into Chinese and thinkers from Taiwan, Hong Kong and even Republican-era China re-introduced to the mainland; and the “national studies craze” (国学热) of the 1990s, culminating in the founding of “national studies institutes” at universities and the reincorporation of the classics into lower level school curricula.⁸⁹ In the intellectual sphere, this process was defined by numerous attempts to resurrect and grapple with classic questions in Chinese philosophy and to put them into conversation with current scientific knowledge, modern governmental techniques and China’s own more recent inheritance of “socialist” philosophy. In later years, this would be portrayed as a “revival of Confucianism,” epitomized by the proliferation of classical quotes and aesthetic flourishes that populated the public image of the Hu-Wen administration and its notion of the “Harmonious Society.” In one respect,

89. Song Xianlin, “Reconstructing the Confucian Ideal in 1980s China: The ‘Culture Craze’ and New Confucianism,” *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, (Eds: John Makeham), pp. 81–104; Chen Jiaming, “The National Studies Craze,” *China Perspectives*, No. 1, 2011, pp. 22–30.

this is a fair characterization, since “Confucianism” does not refer to the specific body of works produced by Confucius and his immediate inheritors but instead to the continual process of synthesis within the Chinese philosophical/literary tradition. This has tended to be conducted under the banner of “Confucianism” even as it has been marked by the incorporation of non-Confucian elements into both the general philosophical inheritance and the specific body of Confucian practice.⁹⁰ At the same time, the more recent visibility of this trend on the political stage disguises the fact that the resurgence began much earlier in the academic sphere and, like other returns to “Confucianism” in the past, is better understood as a broader revival of interest in the Chinese-language philosophical tradition in general.

One of the most representative figures throughout the whole period was Gan Yang (甘阳), whose individual intellectual journey traces larger changes within Chinese political philosophy more broadly. Gan first grew to public prominence in the 1980s as the editor of one of the first book series (*Culture: China in the World*) since the early years of the PRC that sought to systematically translate Western philosophy for a Chinese readership.⁹¹ He was a student of Western philosophy at Beijing University and became involved in the liberal student politics of the time. According to Gan, his essays on Isaiah Berlin were some of the earliest attempts to re-introduce classical liberal political philosophy to China. These political sympathies would ultimately see him leave the country after the Tiananmen Incident, going on to conduct research at the University of Chicago and then the University of Hong Kong before finally returning to China to take up a position at Sun Yat-sen University in 2009.⁹² While in the US, he was introduced to the thought of modern conservatives like Leo Strauss via the classicist Alan Bloom, under whom he studied. Throughout these decades, he grew more and more critical of his youthful liberalism and was drawn instead toward the more conservative social democracy of the early Chinese New Left. In

90. Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*, 2016.

91. Zhang Xudong, “On Some Motifs in the ‘Cultural Fever’ on the late 1980s: Social Change, Ideology and Theory,” *Social Text*, No. 39, Summer 1994, pp. 129–156.

92. William Sima and Tang Xiaobing, “Translator’s Introduction to Gan Yang, ‘Liberalism,’” *Reading the China Dream*, 1999.

this role, he contributed to the popular polemical debates between Chinese liberals and the New Left in the later 1990s.⁹³ Though this often saw Gan classed among New Left thinkers like Wang Hui (汪晖) or Xu Jilin (许纪霖), his influence on more avowedly conservative traditionalists was equally important. Meanwhile, Gan continued in this role as a major interlocutor for Western philosophy, but now with an emphasis on conservative thinkers, joining Jiang Shigong as a major interpreter of Carl Schmitt.

Gan's influence is particularly relevant here, however, because of the way that his 2005 essay on "Unifying the Three Traditions" (通三统) provided the almost universal point of reference for anyone seeking an integration of traditional political philosophy and official state policy. In this piece, Gan argues that "three traditions" coexist in contemporary China. The first is a socialist tradition defined by "its emphasis on equality and justice." The second is a liberal tradition cultivated in the reform era and defined by concepts such as "freedom and rights." The third is "the tradition of Chinese civilization, forged over thousands of years," which can also be thought of as "Confucian culture" and is expressed "in terms of interpersonal relationships and ties of locality."⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the very idea of "unifying the three traditions" is itself a historical reference to Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒), a political philosopher from the Han dynasty who argued that the synthesis of a single civilizational practice from the "three traditions" of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties was a necessary precedent for the emergence of the imperial polity in the Qin and Han.⁹⁵ In echoing this formulation, Gan is arguing that

93. For a summary of these debates, see: Li Shitao 李世涛 (ed.), 知识分子立场：自由主义之争与中国思想界的分化 [*Intellectual Positions: Debates on Liberalism and the Splintering of the Chinese Intellectual World*], Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 2000.

94. Gan Yang, "'Unifying the Three Traditions' in the New Era: The Merging of Three Chinese Traditions," Lecture at Tsinghua University, Trans: David Ownby, *Reading the China Dream*, May 12, 2005.

95. For more detail, see the translator's introduction in *ibid.* The Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties were all pre-imperial polities that existed in the East Asian mainland. The Zhou (1050–771 BCE) was ruled according to a *fengjian* (封建) system, which was a sort of confederated religious monarchy based on a system of enfeoffment (受封). Later, influenced by Marxism, *fengjian* would become the Chinese word for "feudalism," despite historical differences. Something like a *fengjian* system likely prevailed in the preceding Shang (1600–1046 BCE) and Xia (~2000–1600 BCE) dynasties, but this is more difficult to determine since information about both is partially mythical. Very little clear

China today is poised for a similar qualitative leap. The precise traditions he sees as being unified are certainly vague, but this is part of their appeal. The fact that they are open to interpretation and modification is what would make them a functional template for both religious neo-traditionalists and more secular defenders of party orthodoxy such as Jiang Shigong.⁹⁶

The neo-traditionalists on the mainland had the benefit of being able to draw on the unbroken lineages of philosophy that existed in Taiwan, Hong Kong and elsewhere in the Chinese diaspora. The most important of these thinkers were the New Confucians (新儒家),⁹⁷ a school of thought that is neo-conservative in its general contours but can be sub-divided by geography—namely newer mainland thinkers vs. older philosophers in greater China—and into liberal-democratic and more traditionalist interpretations. The most important New Confucian thinkers are likely Mou Zongsan (牟宗三), who represents those who fled the mainland after the revolution, and Jiang Qing (蒋庆) who became one of the preeminent thinkers in the mainland revival of Confucianism in the reform period. But both currents trace their roots to the Republican era, which saw an earlier attempt to revive and modernize Confucianism led by scholars like Xiong Shili (熊十力). While Mou

archeological evidence yet exists for the existence of the Xia. Nonetheless, the importance here is that these were the three loose pre-imperial polities that formed the basis for the region's civilization, which the Qin (221–206 BCE) would unify into a single imperial state, giving way to the Han (202 BCE–220 CE).

96. For Jiang, the three traditions are similar, but not identical. He sees Xi Jinping Thought as the active integrator of its socialist era and reform era predecessors with classical Chinese statecraft. This fusion takes place entirely through the party, which is no longer merely the supposed vanguard of the Chinese proletariat but instead the vanguard of Chinese civilization as such. Throughout, he claims to maintain fidelity to Marxist orthodoxy.

97. Not to be confused with the Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming dynasties. In English the two terms sound similar, but in Chinese they are completely different: Neo-Confucianism is 宋明理学, meaning something like "Song-Ming Rationalism," while New Confucianism is 新儒家, a literal translation of the Chinese. This distinction is important because, while Song-Ming Rationalism was concerned with excavating what it conceived of as an authentically Han philosophical lineage defined by Confucianism, it did so in an openly syncretic fashion that incorporated elements of Daoism, Buddhism and other intellectual currents. In contrast (and as hinted in its name), New Confucianism is more concerned with tracing out and reviving core aspects of Confucianism as such, even while it engages with both Western and non-Confucian Chinese thinkers.

and other diaspora New Confucians preserved and perpetuated key debates within Chinese philosophy and also laid the groundwork for an extensive engagement with Western philosophers, their work took on a particularly rarefied character and tended to emphasize moral cultivation above political transformation. This was natural, given the fact that such thinkers were working under either a slowly reforming dictatorship, in Taiwan, or a colonial regime, in Hong Kong, in the context of the Cold War. But it also meant that their thought tended to engage with explicit questions of statecraft far less frequently than that of thinkers on the mainland.

In contrast to Mou, Jiang Qing denies the title of New Confucianism, which he categorizes as too influenced by liberal democratic presumptions and too concerned with existential questions of individual moral development. This is part of a broader distinction in his philosophy between what he characterizes as Mou's "Mind Confucianism" and his own "Constitutional Confucianism" (or "Political Confucianism") which emphasizes the institutional dimensions of Confucian philosophy and explicitly advocates that these be taken up by the state. Jiang's body of work is complex, and his own biography is itself a fascinating narrative that illustrates a gradual transition from dissenting humanist socialism, to a dalliance with secular liberalism and, finally, concludes in an embrace of a particular brand of neo-traditional conservatism. At every point he is critical of the existing government, leading to eventual voluntary self-exile in rural Guizhou. Jiang's work takes politics as its explicit object and argues that the current state-building effort must be informed by the distinctly Chinese philosophical tradition, rather than just modelled on Western precedents. This is the basis of his critique of liberals and even other traditionalists, who have penned numerous draft constitutions since the late Qing dynasty: "Their basic ideas and systems are, without exception, purely Western [...] not one of them includes any place for China's own historical and cultural specificity in their basic ideas or in their constitutional format [...]"⁹⁸

Against this, Jiang offers a constitutionalism rooted in Confucian

98. Jiang Qing (蒋庆), *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future*, (Trans: Edmund Ryden), Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 45.

tradition which understands questions of sovereignty and legitimacy in a distinctly indigenized sense rather than in the meaning such terms have inherited from the West: "Sovereignty refers to an authority that is sacred, absolute, exclusive, and supreme. Such authority can belong only to heaven, not the people."⁹⁹ This fact guides his concrete political prescriptions arguing that China must be administered by a renewed class of scholar-gentry, organized into a coherent Academy composed of various institutions and operating at multiple levels of governance, with the entire system helmed by "sage-kings" and cohered around a symbolic monarch. The system incorporates Western elements such as a tricameral legislature and institutional features of a constitutional monarchy modelled on the British and Japanese cases. But emphasis is placed throughout on the administration of society by enlightened scholars. Though Jiang offers a variant with explicitly religious overtones, this turn to authoritarian intellectualism has been common among former liberals of all schools, especially those involved in student politics in the reform era, and has thereby become an almost universal element of the Chinese new right. A secular variant of the same basic idea can be seen today in state propaganda emphasizing informed rule by experts and in popular culture, such as in the conservative Prometheanism (工业党) underpinning the work of major authors like Liu Cixin.¹⁰⁰

This authoritarian intellectualism is also evident in Jiang Shigong's¹⁰¹ synthesis of Xi Jinping Thought. In all cases, the basic logic is that relying on popular legitimacy alone leads to catastrophe. Thus, the political infrastructure must be governed by intellectuals who, in the secular version, have access to particular expertise and foresight not prevalent in the general population or, in the Confucian version, are able to act in a "sagely" fashion as mediators between the sovereignty of

99. Ibid., p. 48

100. Yuyan, "The Wandering Earth: A Reflection of the Chinese Right," *Chuang Blog*, Feb. 13, 2019.

101. In order to not confuse the reader by jumping from one Jiang to another, Jiang Shigong will be referred to by his full name throughout this paragraph. In Chinese there is no ambiguity between the two scholars, whose surnames are different written characters and are pronounced in two different tones. Similarly, Jiang Qing the New Confucian is not to be confused with Jiang Qing (江青), famous actress, designer of revolutionary operas, member of the Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution and wife of Mao Zedong.

heaven and the human sphere of the state. Jiang Shigong, meanwhile, offers a synthesis of the two, seeing the party as the *de facto* integration of the old secular socialist mission with the spirit of Confucianism, expressed through the living political practice of Xi Jinping:

What we must pay particular attention to is the fact that when Xi Jinping emphasizes a return to Communist principles, he is not talking about the “communist society” that was of a piece with scientific socialism but is instead using the idea that “those who do not forget their original intention 初心 will prevail,” drawn from traditional Chinese culture. In so doing, he removes communism from the specific social setting of the Western empirical scientific tradition, and astutely transforms it into the Learning of the Heart in Chinese traditional philosophy, which in turn elevates communism to a kind of ideal faith or a spiritual belief. [...]

Precisely within the context of traditional Chinese culture, the understanding of this highest ideal is no longer that of Marx, who thought within the Western theoretical tradition; it is no longer in humanity’s Garden of Eden, “unalienated” by the division of labor within society. Instead it is intimately linked to the ideal of “great unity under Heaven” 天下大同 from the Chinese cultural tradition. The last section of the report to the Nineteenth Party Congress begins with the phrase “when the Way prevails, the world is shared by all” 大道之行，天下为公, an ultimate ideal that encourages the entire Party and the people of the entire nation.¹⁰²

Jiang Shigong’s synthesis is one wherein communism itself is mystified even while the secular character of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” is upheld through the historical centrality of the party itself, which acts as the dialectical vehicle integrating theory and practice.

102. Jiang Shigong, “Philosophy and History: Interpreting the ‘Xi Jinping Era’ through Xi’s Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP,” *Open Times* (开放时代), *Translators*: David Ownby and Timothy Check, *Reading the China Dream*, Jan. 2018.

Not all thinkers engaged in the general revival of interest in the Chinese philosophical tradition explicitly branded their work as Confucian. In fact, the interest of Chinese liberals in questions of autonomy and self-organization was mirrored at a deeper level in the reappraisal of fundamental concepts more often associated with Daoism, which has always been the strain of Chinese philosophy most explicitly concerned with the processual and self-generative theories of nature. Though some point to the publication in the early 1990s of Dong Guangbi’s (董光壁) text *Neo-Daoism* (当代新道家) as a turning point, there was no real “Neo-Daoist” current with anything like the consistency of the New Confucians.¹⁰³ Part of the reason this consistency was lacking was precisely because the loose proliferation of non-denominational texts which emerged in these years was less concerned with making explicit political prescriptions and tended instead to produce more general, existential meditations and engage with modern science, though this sometimes verged on reproducing the worst, Western-style New Age mysticism. Often, the effort was led by philosophers who were experts on major figures in Western schools of thought, putting this work into conversation with the Chinese tradition through their expertise, as in the work of Deng Xiaomang (邓晓芒), who was among the foremost Chinese interpreters of Kant.¹⁰⁴

A number of central philosophical concepts were revived in these years, but maybe the most relevant here, already partially evident in Jiang Shigong’s usage above, was the reappraisal of the core concepts of *wuwei* (无为) and the *dao* (道) itself.¹⁰⁵ Meaning something like “non-action” and “path,” respectively, these terms take on a different valence depending on the school or thinker deploying them. Their relevance for statecraft is central, however, as in the role of *wuwei* in

103. This text and the informal group of philosophers who can, in this period, be characterized as Neo-Daoist are not to be confused with the Xuanxue (玄学) school of the Six Dynasties period (which is also called Neo-Daoism), though many authors in this current do draw influence from Xuanxue.

104. For a more general text of Deng’s, see: Deng Xiaomang (邓晓芒), *人论三题* [Three Topics of Discourse on Humanity], 2008, Chongqing: Chongqing University Press.

105. See, for instance: Cai Degui (蔡德贵) 道家道法自然的和评论 [Daoist Naturalism and the Theory of Peace], *Journal of Anhui University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 26(5), Sept. 2002.

Daoist political philosophy: governing without intervening (无为之治). While the founding texts of Daoism approach the concept from two different angles, these represent inward and outward dimensions of the same thing: “Laozi... places more emphasis on societal change and governing the world, while Zhuangzi emphasizes more the internal transformation and spiritual freedom of the individual person.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the Daoist approach to statecraft is complementary with the Confucian and, according to the philosopher Yuk Hui, the two should be seen as integrally linked despite their apparent contradictions, which are, in fact, the form of their linkage.¹⁰⁷ Both are, after all, concerned with the central question of the *dao*. For Confucianism the *dao* “is recognized as the coherence between the cosmological and moral orders” and, for Daoism, it is fundamentally linked to the self-generative capacity of nature. While “according to conventional readings, they seem to be in tension” since Daoism is “critical of any imposed order” while “Confucianism seeks to affirm different kinds of order,” the pair can also be seen as approaching the same topic by different routes, “as if one asks after the ‘what,’ and the other the ‘how.’” Thus, taken together, “both embody ... a ‘moral cosmotechnics’: a relational thinking of the cosmos and human being, where the relation between the two is mediated by technical beings.”¹⁰⁸ This relationality is essential to understanding the way that such concepts have been translated into a certain approach to statecraft.

One of the most relevant points here is how contemporary appraisals of *wuwei* place emphasis on the fact that its self-organizing capacity, like the generative dimension of the *dao* itself, is not something that happens automatically—as in the romantic misunderstanding of the concept as “going with the flow”—but instead requires systematic

106. Wang Hongyu, “*Wuwei*, self-organization, and classroom dynamics,” *Education Philosophy and Theory*, 2019.

107. Yuk Hui’s interpretation of the fundamental concepts used throughout the Chinese philosophical tradition is among the best overviews of the topic available in either English or Chinese. Though his concern with the question of technology guides his work in a particular direction, many of the same observations can be applied to Chinese political philosophy’s conception of the state which is, after all, composed of similar social technologies and rituals.

108. Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*, Urbanomic, 2016. pp. 64–65.

structuring to ensure.¹⁰⁹ In other words, the enabling of a “non-interventionist” form of governance via the self-organization of *wuwei* requires a series of preceding, systematic interventions in order to rectify social institutions, ensuring that they lie in accord with the *dao* and are capable of cultivating wisdom among sage-like leaders.¹¹⁰ Thus, both the Daoist and Confucian traditions have always been concerned with a deeply processual approach to statecraft (at least as one dimension of a larger “moral cosmotechnics”) and concepts like *wuwei* have been mobilized in even the most bureaucratic Chinese political philosophies. The notion was central to the way that Legalists such as Han Fei (韩非) and his precursor, Shen Buhai (申不害), conceived of the nature of autocratic rule. Thus, *wuwei* and its related constellation of concepts have consistently contained seemingly contradictory imperatives, entailing aggressive intervention in the name of non-intervention. This is evident in the state’s own continually contradictory attitude toward local self-government and the higher-level informal networks that have long buoyed the bureaucracy. In times of stability, these features are cultivated and even enshrined, constituting not so much informal governance as a para-formal state that coexists with its formal counterpart.¹¹¹ In times of chaos, though, these para-formal institutions are reduced again to

109. There is certainly an unconditional or cosmic dimension to *wuwei* which inheres in the self-generating force of the universe. But the emergence of consciousness implies a different form of *wuwei*, which is conditional and requires effort in order to rectify the practice of the conscious being (individually or collectively, both are part of the same moral fabric in Chinese cosmology) with the *dao*, which can be lost or forgotten by consciousness.

110. A few examples can be quoted from the *Tao Te Ching* (道德经): “*Governing a great state is like cooking small fish*” (治大国若烹小鲜); “*A state may be ruled by (measures of) correction; weapons of war may be used with crafty dexterity; (but) the kingdom is made one’s own (only) by freedom from action and purpose*” (以正治国，以奇用兵，以无事取天下).

111. For example, in the early 1980s a nationwide anti-crime campaign was launched, called “Strike Hard” (严打). In order to improve the efficacy of the campaign, the right of death penalty review (死刑复核权), at the time exclusive to the supreme court, was delegated to local People’s Courts so that suspects of serious accusations could be sentenced to death pursuant to the judgment of the local court. This was initially portrayed as a temporary policy, but the devolution of authority was soon formalized (in 1983) in law. Similar powers were later given to provincial courts to deal with drug crimes in later decades. Tracing the same pattern we describe throughout, this localization of authority was then rolled back (in 2006) after the transition to capitalism was complete and the state-building effort was beginning.

informality, systematically treated as threats and supplanted, but always in the name of their future cultivation. Despite being structured to serve specifically capitalist imperatives, then, there is every reason to believe that the current state-building project will incorporate a similar processual logic, defined by these moving contradictions.

Though all this philosophical detail might seem irrelevant to understanding the nature of political dynamics in China today, the reality is that many seemingly straightforward concepts became willfully mangled via a sort of contextual short-circuiting as they were taken up in Chinese administration. The issue is not that terms like autonomy / self-organization, community, governance, etc. are themselves mistranslated, but rather that they carry implications in English which link them to presumptions within Western philosophy or even actual institutional practices that are not implied in their Chinese usage. These false contexts then help to obscure the actual contextual implications and other subtleties carried by these terms. More importantly, they give the false impression that China's state-building project is nothing more than a gradual subsumption into the logic of "governmentality" as it emerged through early capitalist state formation in Europe, and this itself is often traced back to Roman jurisprudence in order to link the logic of the capitalist state with its civilizational precursors. At the most basic level, it should at least be acknowledged that anyone attempting to compose a long-run theory of civilization and the self-reflexive state logics that it produces must be as familiar with the political philosophy of ancient China as they are with the legal theory of ancient Rome.¹¹² But even this attempt tends to lose sight of the fundamental changes induced

112. And we would add that any general theory of civilizational governmentality is obligated to explore commonalities that extend across all civilizational sequences, including those that existed in Africa and the Americas. The failure to do so represents not simply the "Eurocentrism" of Western political philosophy, though this is certainly the case, but also the tendency of philosophers to over-generalize from historical particularities—a practice that they quite ironically justify in the same breath that they reject a supposedly "totalizing" Marxism. The communist method of inquiry embodied in the work of Marx, however, entails abstraction from the general case. This is an active abstraction, continually attentive to changes in the particular and capable of also intervening to coherently explain the dynamics of these particular instances, as in Marx's historical writings, by referring to their underlying logic but without schematically reducing them to it. Marx's method also allows for the identification of "real abstractions" unique to social-scientific inquiry.

in the nature of the state when the mode of production shifts, transforming both the class structure of society and the governing logic of everyday life, defined by participation in and dependence on production. This then changes who, exactly, composes and controls the state and what, exactly, they do with it.

In other words, the perception that states are governed by a strict and universal governmental logic that can be traced by a silver thread back through history is only true in the broadest sense and is at every point obligated to demonstrate the material substrate of such a genealogy. Civilization is one such substrate, defined by certain population dynamics and a general dependence on domesticated crops and livestock, but this is so generic as to be not particularly informative if we are inquiring into the specific ways in which states are organized today.¹¹³ For European states and their colonial offshoots, a closer genealogy is self-evident, and even the Roman connection is reasonable given that early modern governments actively sought to model themselves on the region's last great imperium—or even in some cases derived basic administrative infrastructure from centuries-distant political fragments of the empire's collapse.¹¹⁴ That said, the existence of certain logics of statecraft linked to such a civilizational genealogy cannot override the new imperatives driving the function of states under capitalism. At best, pre-capitalist moral or cosmological attitudes embedded in the state prior to the transition to capitalism are adapted to new uses during this transition. This, however, means that they do not retain whatever necessity they may have had in pre-existing government—nor does capitalism itself emerge from incidental cultural features, such as the Puritan work ethic. The only true necessities for the state under capitalism are the

113. This general theory was formulated first in what would come to be known as the Marxist tradition by Engels, who was essentially just quoting the work of past anthropologists, who were themselves essentially just repeating in descriptive contrast the political theory and practice of indigenous people. It has since been taken up in the academic sphere by anthropologists like James C. Scott, who explored the historical formation of "paddy states" dependent on domestic rice production in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the anti-civilizational critique has long formed the basis of indigenous anarchist and communist politics in the Americas and elsewhere.

114. Edward D. Re, "The Roman Contribution to the Common Law," *Fordham Law Review*, 29(3), 1961. pp.447–494. On the European continent, modern legal systems often bore a direct, ancestral relationship to Roman law. But even the case of English common law operated within the same general frameworks of statecraft.

two, broad functions laid out above—maintenance of baseline conditions for accumulation and management of conflicts within the ruling class—both involve general social reproduction.

This does mean that the management of life and death among governed subjects (i.e., “biopolitical” and “necropolitical” aspects of “governmentality”) is an integral aspect of capitalist statecraft, but only in a general and indirect sense, serving to maintain the input of labor into the system and to guarantee enough overarching social stability to enable the circuit of capital to continually complete itself. There is no reason to believe, however, that specifically European cultural, moral or institutional methods of managing population—or the affiliated discourse on this management—would be necessary to serve this function. Similarly, any universalization of Western notions of sovereignty, right, governance or other aspects of the state’s moral genealogy has been incidental, driven more by the material reality of imperialism and colonization than by any logical necessity. Thus, there is no reason to believe that capitalist states with different genealogies would inherently mirror these European precedents, their colonial offshoots or the states that developed under their direct military tutelage short of colonization. The case of Imperial Japan already began to gesture at this fact, but its defeat and subsequent reorganization under the military hegemony of the United States has tended to obscure this divergence.¹¹⁵ The ascent of

115. Similar local divergences have always been visible in the areas more distant from the economic core but, due to this distance, have tended to be explained in terms of low levels of development and an incomplete transition to capitalism, the presumption being that, if economic development were to advance, the state and affiliated social institutions would grow to resemble those seen in the developed nations. The problem here is that local genealogies of statecraft only really gain relevance insofar as they become successfully fused to capitalist imperatives, through which they then spark debates about the precise divisions between “Western” influence and this local cultural/philosophical inheritance. In Japan, this reached its peak in the formation of the Kyoto school. Similar debates have marked development in numerous other countries, however, even if their economic power has never been great enough to exert much influence on the larger trajectory of global capitalism: Thailand and Ethiopia are two prominent cases with their own long histories of statecraft, though many post-independence and post-dictatorship nations in Africa and the Americas that have seen a similar discourse could be included here as well: Bolivia, Venezuela, Tanzania and Ghana, to list only a few. These are not purely discursive matters, either, since they’ve exerted real power on the re-writing of constitutions and the establishment of various land tenure systems. The difference with China is more a difference of degree in relative influence on the global economy.

a powerful bloc of Chinese capitalists has again created the material prerequisites for a powerful state to emerge, which, although serving the same capitalist imperatives, also incorporates incidental institutional logics from its own indigenous genealogy of statecraft.

There is no space here to pursue a philosophical inquiry into this genealogy in any detail, though such a project is worthwhile. Meanwhile, none of the various philosophers cited above (even Jiang Shigong, despite his claims) should be portrayed as filling some sort of leading role relative to those in the bureaucracy who are most actively shaping the reform of government administration. There is no single school of political philosophy on which the current state-building effort is modelled. Instead, the relevant point is the fact that the construction of the state has been taking place in an intellectual climate marked by the revival of many schools of Chinese thought, all inhabiting a general conceptual universe distinct from the Greco-German lineage but now also in more direct conversation with it. This is the context in which the terms and institutions that have defined reforms in local governance must be understood. Placing such terms in context then allows us to speculate in a more accurate fashion about the character of the state currently being constructed. This is not because the fanciful goals of political philosophers have any chance of becoming fundamental imperatives of the state, but instead because elements of this thought may become incidentally useful in the pursuit of accumulation. What we have offered here is by no means any conclusion. We simply suggest that this inquiry be initiated with the correct foot forward. If this is not done, then a theory of the Chinese state will, at worst, tend to unthinkingly transplant the most mundane accounts of “totalitarianism” into foreign soil or, at best, try to capture the dynamics arising between the Chinese state and the global economy with loose approximations formulated to describe extremely different political formations from the history of Europe or the anglophone nations. Thus will you hear the claim that China deploys “Keynesian” measures, or is a “corporatist” state in the sense first used by Mussolini. We humbly suggest, instead, that China is making its own, original contributions to the brutality of global capitalism as it advances into the twenty-first century.