

PASSING MARX

William Sima

ON 5 MAY 2018, the bicentenary of Karl Marx's birth, a bronze statue of the philosopher was unveiled at his birthplace, Trier, in south-west Germany. The Chinese government had funded the statue; Wu Weishan 吴为山, head of the National Art Museum of China 中国美术馆, designed it. Wu is the sculptor behind the bronze statues of ghoulish refugees lining the entrance to Nanjing's Massacre Memorial Hall 南京大屠杀遇难同胞纪念馆, as well as the giant Confucius that was installed at Tiananmen Square in January 2011 to torrents of public ridicule, and subsequently removed overnight in April 2011 without explanation. Wu is flexible: Confucian one minute, Marxist the next. Wu's Marx at Trier symbolises a renewal of state Marxism under Xi Jinping 习近平,

and its promotion overseas — in this case, with the collaboration of the Trier city council.

After debate and consultation with the community, Trier's city council approved the Chinese statue by forty-two to eleven votes in March 2017. Andreas Ludwig of the Christian Democratic Union, who voted for the statue, explained why it passed, and the reason had nothing to do with ideology — '150,000 Chinese tourists visit Trier every year, and there could be many more', he said. Reiner Marz of the Greens was among those opposed to the statue. To accept the gift, he said, 'would be to honour the donor, and the Chinese Communist Party is not worth the honour'.¹ Other councillors, along with many in the community, were concerned that Wu's proposed 6.3-me-



Wu Weishan at the unveiling of the Karl Marx statue
Source: news.cn

tre statue would overpower Simeonstiftplatz, Trier's medieval town square. They preferred a life-sized rendition of an early, humanist Marx, on Brückenstraße — a narrow street that houses his birthplace.²

What was unveiled in May represented a slight compromise: a 5.5-metre Marx in the old town square, in Wu Weishan's original design. 'In measuring a philosopher's value', Wu declared at the unveiling ceremony, 'we must ultimately look at how history has judged him, and [this statue] of Marx in mid-stride signifies that his thought is constantly developing'.³

German dignitaries downplayed concerns about Marx's historical legacy. They ignored a petition from PEN, the international writers association

defending freedom of expression, to defer the unveiling until the poet Liu Xia 刘霞 — the widow of the Nobel Peace Laureate Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波, who died in custody in 2017 — was released from house arrest in Beijing and allowed to seek medical treatment in Germany.⁴ (She arrived in Germany two months later.) Malu Dreyer, premier of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, which encompasses Trier, thanked China for the 'gesture of friendship'. She declared that the statue created a 'space for exchange and interaction'. Trier's mayor Wolfram Leibe stated that 'our democracy is about engaging in public discussion, and that is exactly what is happening here'.⁵

In China, however, the statue was a grace note during a year in which the

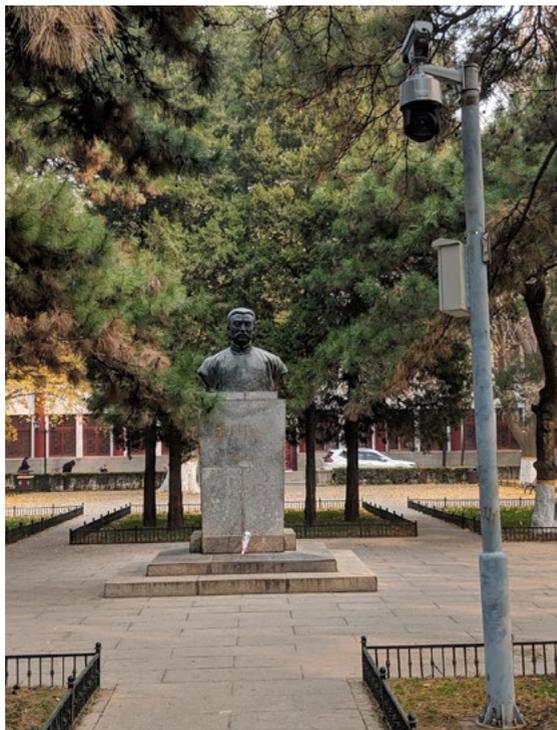
Party-state put renewed emphasis on Marxism — or rather, on a Marxism tailored to augment Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想, now the governing ideology of the Party-state. Historians of intellectual thought Timothy Cheek and David Ownby describe Xi's Marxist revival as being bereft of any of emancipatory impulse; it is merely an attempt to re-inculcate Leninist self-regulation within the Party after decades of atrophy and ill-discipline. At the same time, it draws the German thinker into a nationalistic historical narrative of 'redemption from humiliation by foreign powers', and claims the Chinese Communist Party, after the apparent failure of Marxism in Russia and Eastern Europe, to be the true custodian of Marxism in the twenty-first century.⁶

On the China Central Television (CCTV) talk show *Voice* 开讲啦, Wu Weishan lied that the Germans had 'said all along that [my statue] was exactly what they had envisaged' for Trier; he even implied that the federal Bundestag had approved it directly. He then launched into a patriotic rave about his Nanjing massacre statues, declaring that as well as telling 'Chi-

nese stories' of greatness — as epitomised in his Marx statue — it is also important to 'tell the world our stories of national humiliation' 国耻.⁷

For the bicentenary celebrations of Marx in Beijing, Xi Jinping urged Party cadres gathered at the Great Hall of the People to 'keep studying and implementing Marxism, continue drawing upon its scientific wisdom and theoretical power ... [to] uphold and develop Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era, and to ensure that the ship of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese People moves correctly forward against the waves'.⁸ At Peking University the same week, Xi historicised his 'New Era' as the latest stage in China's rejuvenation, which had begun with the May Fourth Movement in 1919, led by students of Peking University.⁹

Many of these students were influenced by Li Dazhao 李大钊 — a former university librarian and co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party. Li, who was hanged by a Beijing warlord government in 1927, is celebrated as an early martyr for communism, and the statue of Li at Peking University continues to inspire Marxist student activists. Throughout 2018, student activists



**Surveillance cameras at
Li Dazhao's statue, Peking
University, December 2018**
Photo: William Sima

clashed with authorities, for decrying what they perceive as a decline of Marxist-Leninist and Maoist governance in Xi Jinping's China, and for their public solidarity with factory workers in Shenzhen.

In July, workers at the Shenzhen Jasic Technology company were arrested after protesting their dismissal by the company. Initially, with backing from the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) 中华全国

总工会, they had attempted to form an independent labour union, gaining nearly one hundred applicants from a labour force of about 1,000. But their efforts were blocked when ACFTU withdrew its support, and the Jasic management created a separate union body stacked with candidates who were not elected by the workers. Thirty Jasic workers were detained on 27 July for 'picking quarrels and causing trouble' 寻衅滋事.¹⁰

In early August, the Jasic Workers Solidarity Group 佳士工人声援团 was formed, consisting primarily of Marxist university students, operating from an overseas-registered website and Twitter account. Throughout August, students flocked to Shenzhen to join the workers' ongoing protests. In an event they dubbed the '24 August Violent Clean-up Incident' 8.24 暴力清场事件, dozens were arrested in a police raid at their hideout in Huizhou, near Shenzhen.¹¹ Marxist student chapters at Peking University, Renmin University, Nanjing University, and other centres of higher education continued to face crackdowns over the following months.

'Do our authorities even have the face to stand in front of Li Dazhao's statue?', asked the Jasic Workers' Solidarity Group, after the university refused to release surveillance footage that might have shown Zhang Shengye 张圣业 — a Marxist student activist — being dragged into a car on 11 November. They compared the university's obfuscation to that of Hu Shi 胡适 — the pro-Nationalist (Kuomintang) president of Peking University during the Chinese civil war. After the rape of a female student by two American marines in December 1946, Hu, worried that the

incident would add fuel to anti-American left-wing protests, had declared it 'a matter for the courts to decide'. A US Navy court infamously acquitted the marines.¹²

Visiting the university in late 2018, I found that of all the numerous statues of famous figures that dot the campus — including Miguel de Cervantes, and Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, who was Peking University's president in the 1920s and 30s — only Li Dazhao's was overlooked by a surveillance camera. The camera had been installed some time soon after my arrival in early November, and was still there when I left in mid-December. On 2 December, the Jasic Workers Solidarity Group marked one hundred days since the 24 August Clean-up. University activists and citizens, along with dozens of staff and students from Cornell University — the university had severed a research exchange program with Renmin University in protest against the crackdowns — sent in videos and group photographs in expression of solidarity. As of the time of writing, a total of thirty-two Jasic workers and their Marxist student supporters remained in detention.¹³ This is the reality of Marxism in Xi Jinping's China.

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