



PC: *Blind Line* (盲行), Deng Cheng Wen, Oil on Canvas.

## From the Outside Looking In

A Response to John Garnaut's Primer on Ideology

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For China's leader, Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) future depends, to a large degree, on the revitalisation of ideology. In his works, Xi repeatedly stresses the importance of ideological 'belief' (信仰) as the key ingredient of the Party organisation's cohesion and discipline. Xi's words are not empty declarations; under his leadership, the CCP has tightened control over the public sphere, and defended itself against the 'infiltration' of Western ideology.

The Party's renewed emphasis on ideology has not gone unnoticed by China watchers. Over the past years there has been an endless stream of opinion pieces and pontifications about the latest alleged 'ideological turn', with the broad consensus being that China has abandoned the non-ideological pragmatism that made it more rational and prosperous in the reform period to return to the irrational communist ideology of the Mao era. These accounts, however, rest on an unexamined notion of ideology as a form of brainwashing that is fundamentally different from the Chinese conception of ideology, a misunderstanding that ultimately serves to cloud our vision of how power works, both in China and more generally.

In ordinary English usage, the word ideology has a pathological quality to it; it is what we diagnose in others but do not admit to having ourselves. To accuse someone of being ideological implies that they are *imposing* their own beliefs on the world. Moreover, such beliefs are resistant to reason, derided as 'false consciousness'. It would seem self-evident that this is the not the definition of ideology that Xi has in mind.

In the Chinese language, the word for ideology (意识形态) means consciousness (意识) of patterns and forms (形态). One learns how to act like a human (做人) by following rituals and norms of social behaviour. In this conception, ideology is not imposed on the world from the outside, but consists in the practices and patterns of political, social, and cultural life. These do not just occur 'naturally' or 'spontaneously' but originate from a locus of authority. In China, intellectual historian Timothy Cheek suggests, 'the [Communist] party is civil society and its propaganda system is the public sphere' (Cheek 1998,

237). The CCP claims the authority to shape the public sphere, which consists not only of words, but also of attitudes and emotions.

In this editorial, I take a different approach and propose that ideology is the inescapable air we breathe as political and social beings. We are never above, beyond, or outside ideology. For that reason, we should not project as ideology that which takes place elsewhere, something that happens to other, 'passive' minds. Understanding ideology requires self-reflexivity, and attunement to historical and political contexts. When one believes that one is free of ideology, all other attempts to politically order the world appear the same, and dissolve into 'the night in which all cows are black'. They become the fever dreams of dictators; silhouettes of power; incursions into liberal timelessness.

In the age of Xi, China pundits have been asked to become overnight experts on ideology. But which definition of ideology do they reach for?

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In August 2017, former journalist and policy advisor on China John Garnaut gave a seminar to the Australian government called 'Engineers of the Soul: What Australia Needs to Know About Ideology in Xi Jinping's China'. The speech, circulated in January 2019 in the *Sinocism* newsletter, is a warning to the Australian government (and the rest of us) to sober up about Xi and the direction he is taking China. And that direction is the frightening world of 'ideology'.

For Garnaut, following in the footsteps of 'Lenin, Stalin, and Mao', Xi Jinping is driven by the 'totalitarian aspiration of engineering the human soul'. In this one sentence, Garnaut positions Xi in an unbroken lineage of communist dictators. History falls out of the picture. Ideological battles that raged and divided the communist world during the twentieth-century are collapsed into a monolithic, totalitarian communist ideology: 'Elite politics from Mao's death to the Tiananmen massacres was a genuine contest of ideas. But ideology won that context.' The implication of this passage is that China lost the opportunity to become a liberal democracy and free itself from the grip of ideology. Perhaps Garnaut genuinely believes that he is speaking from a place of 'ideas' free of 'ideology', as he recites Cold War scripts as if they were second nature.

The disavowal of ideological difference results in not just impoverished politics, but also bad history. Take the following example of how Garnaut treats the problem of language in communist revolutions and states during the twentieth century: 'For Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Xi, words are not vehicles

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of reason and persuasion. They are bullets.’ Before reading on, ask yourself: are Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Xi genuinely the same authoritarian personality like a set of Russian nesting dolls? Are the historical moments they exist(ed) in and political visions they pursue(d) entirely the same? Were Lenin’s polemics aimed at mobilising workers to join in revolution the same language as confessions during Stalin’s show trials? Was Mao’s folksy vernacular of class struggle the same as Xi Jinping’s turgid civilisational discourse of harmony and prosperity? Was the Mao-era practice of writing big character posters (大字报) replicated anywhere else in the communist world (even in China, Deng Xiaoping banned them in the 1980s)? For Garnaut, these differences are erased under the ahistorical notion of ‘total ideological control’.

In addition to folding all history into a pancake-like concept of ideology, Garnaut’s speech is also littered with historical errors. For example, the claim that ‘Mao’s men first coined the term “brainwashing” . . . in 1942’ overlooks the fact that the term *xiniao* (洗脑)—literally, washing the brain—actually originated in the late Qing period. For example, according to an unpublished manuscript by Ryan Mitchell, in the work of Chinese scholar and translator Yan Fu (1854–1921), the term was positively associated with Enlightenment, and remained that way until it was taken up by Western reporters during the Cold War. The purpose of Garnaut’s speech, however, is not to confront the latent potentials, revolutionary ruptures, and continuities in ways of being and speaking, but to paint Chinese history with a brush of oriental despotism, and sooth an anxious Cold War mentality that condemns any alternative to capitalist hegemony as unnatural ‘ideology’. Garnaut shows his hand in the astonishing claim that Xi is ‘pushing communist ideology at a time when the idea of “communism” is as unattractive as it has been at any time in the past 100 years.’ To argue on the centenary of the October Revolution that the idea of communism has never been attractive is wilful ignorance and self-delusion. But beyond that, the idea that Xi is pushing communist ideology may come as a surprise to many Chinese people, especially the group of Maoist students who were recently detained and forced to give confessions for taking Mao and Marx at their word, and daring to see class struggle and inequality in the world around them. Xi is about as far from Mao on the ideological spectrum that he might as well be standing on the North Pole.

Garnaut insists, however, that Xi and Mao are the same because for him ideology is simply another word for power/dictatorship/control: ‘For Xi, as with Stalin and Mao, there is no endpoint in the perpetual quest for unity and regime preservation.’ By Mao, is Garnaut referring to the same person who launched the Cultural Revolution, which nearly toppled

China's political system? The one who called on the masses to 'bombard the headquarters' (炮打司令部) and sanctified the 'right to rebel' (造反有理)? The only possible way to describe Maoist politics as a part of a 'perpetual quest for unity and regime preservation' is by disavowing the complex political significance of the Cultural Revolution.

Garnaut is correct at least that under Xi, China is vigorously pursuing 'ideological control' within and beyond its borders, and is becoming intolerant of critical voices that present China's stories in a negative light. But is increased control evidence that China is returning to the Mao era? Is there a role for mass politics in Xi Jinping's China? Is there a role for class struggle in Xi's China? If the answers to the above questions are 'NO', then Xi is not returning China to the Mao era.

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Garnaut's lecture on ideology avoids actually thinking about ideology. This matters because Garnaut's opinion on China is well respected and listened to in the policy community; he has the ear of the Australian government. Fashionable clichés, such as 'Xi has reinvigorated ideology to an extent we have not seen since the Cultural Revolution', lull people into believing that China is aberrantly ideological. It is an old fable about capitalism's origins in human nature, as if Australians or Americans, or any of us, are not the product of ideological conditioning, habit formation, and coercion. In a time when policy analysts are debating a low-intensity revival of the Cold War, Garnaut's speech is an attempt to rekindle the fire. People like Garnaut and his target-audience of hawkish policymakers need the spectre of a 'brainwashed' China to defend their own ideological platform. Perhaps more perniciously is the fact that such Cold War rhetoric directly feeds into the CCP's persecution complex. China's leaders are able to deflect meaningful and well-intentioned criticisms by labelling them as part of a Western conspiracy to humiliate their country. Garnaut calls this out in his essay but does not see how he himself is a part of it.

My purpose in writing this editorial is not to attack or defend Xi Jinping's China, but to reclaim the concept of ideology as a permanently open political question. The issue here is not to deny that there are serious problems but to reflect on the framework in which these problems are discussed. What kind of world do we want to live in? For me, the problem with China is not that it poses an ideological threat to global capitalism but that it has abandoned its revolutionary potential and failed to open up an alternative future to capitalism. In the words of theorist Dai Jinhua (2018, 20): 'If a Chinese model exists, then it

seems to be inevitably a capitalist model and not an alternative to capitalism.' Dai adds that without such an alternative, the future of humanity is at stake: 'For China, this topic is especially urgent, because China must be a China of the future, or there will be no future' (2018, 22). Within capitalist ideology, that question is foreclosed; all one can do is 'watch the fires burning across the river' (隔岸观火) and hope that they do not spread. ■