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An Anatomy of Trump's Appeal to Chinese Liberals

A Conversation with Teng Biao

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Since coming to power, former US President Donald Trump has attracted and maintained a remarkable following among the Chinese diaspora in and outside the United States. These Trump followers come from different backgrounds and their support has a variety of motivations, which is nothing unusual. What is out of the ordinary, though, is the popularity of Trump among one particular group: the so-called Chinese liberal/prodemocracy intellectuals, dissidents, and activists (hereinafter 'Clidas', as termed by Teng Biao). Members of this cohort include some of the most celebrated Chinese liberal academics and political thinkers, political activists, and human-rights lawyers. The embrace of Trumpism by

the Clidas is most unusual and noteworthy because of the glaring incongruity between the illiberal policies and ideology that Trump represents and the liberal ideals these individuals have advocated through their intellectual output and/or political activism.

In this conversation with Teng Biao, I try to understand: What are the common denominators that have created an affinity between this group and the Trump administration? In other words, what are the specific qualities of Trump's leadership that resonated so strongly with his Chinese supporters? The answers to these questions are important and remain relevant despite the end of Trump's presidency, which will undoubtedly dampen the enthusiasm of his supporters to various extents across the board.

As this conversation will reveal, the prevalence of reductionist thinking, the popular appeal of political Machiavellianism, and the cultivated belief in social Darwinism—the combination of which has created an irresistible lure for Trumpism—are deeply rooted in the psyche, for the lack of a better word, of the pro-Trump Clidas. Admittedly, the political profile of this group certainly does not represent the political attitudes of every Chinese liberal intellectual, political dissident, or human-rights lawyer, let alone those of all 1.4 billion Chinese nationals. However, it does provide a glimpse into the nature of the social chasms and debates that could emerge if free elections were to take place in China. In this imagined scenario, the same cocktail of ingredients that has created a feverish following for Trump today would remain prevalent in China for the foreseeable future. And it would not be entirely unexpected if, when one day free elections become a political reality in China, the leader chosen by the Chinese people may not be a cool-headed liberal-minded political sage as many China observers in the West expect, but a Trump-like, homegrown Chinese populist.

The phenomenon of Trump's popularity among the Clidas has been covered in both news media and academic circles. The former includes Ian Johnson's 2020 op-ed 'Why Do Chinese Liberals Embrace American Conservatives?' in *The New York Times*. The latter includes Lin Yao's (2021) 'Beaconism and the Trumpian Metamorphosis of Chinese Liberal Intellectuals', the most thorough and incisive academic analysis of the topic by far. This topic has also been covered on other media platforms—for instance, in an episode of the popular *Sinica Podcast* (2021), featuring both Johnson and Lin.

Also related to our conversation is the topic of the 'white left', or *baizuo* (白左), which is an ideological caricature of Western progressive liberalism. For a more comprehensive treatment of this topic, one should read Zhang Chenchen's 'The Curious Rise of the "White Left" as a Chinese Internet Insult' (2017) and 'Right-Wing Populism with Chinese Characteristics? Identity, Otherness and Global Imaginaries in Debating World Politics Online' (2019).

The conversation below is the product of a series of recent exchanges I had with Teng Biao. I chose Teng as my interlocutor not because he is one of a handful anti-Trump Clidas, but rather because he is both a political activist and a liberal academic—two circles that overlap only marginally. He spent years in China championing the movement to promote human rights through legal representation in both classrooms and courtrooms and shared many of the experiences that have become the motivational basis for those who embrace Trumpism. Prior to our conversation, Teng wrote a long-form essay in Chinese titled ‘Why Should Pro-Democracy People Oppose Trump?’ (2020), which addresses some of the questions below in more detail.

Ling Li: In your analysis, misinformation is an important contributing factor to the popularity of Trump among the Clidas. What do you think the Clidas have been misinformed about? What are the sources of such misinformation?

Teng Biao: Most Clidas rely on Chinese media, including WeChat, which is censored and teeming with conspiracy theories, as the primary, if not the only, source of information on US politics. They don’t read English sources or aren’t able to.

LL: Yes, this is certainly true for a great number of Trump supporters but not all of them. I have come across some prodemocracy intellectuals or activists who are proficient in English and have easy access to alternative sources of information, which have apparently not led them to reflect critically on Trumpism. Confirmation bias must have played an important role here, leading people to seek only information that confirms their pre-existing opinions. In many cases, such biases can then be reinforced by the ‘backfire effect’ or ‘belief perseverance’, where one’s conviction to a misperception becomes even stronger when contradicting facts are presented.

TB: Yes, but then we get ourselves into a chicken and egg problem. Confirmation bias does not grow out of a vacuum. What has led to the formation of the original opinion that these people seek to confirm?

LL: Okay, you are asking what has caused the one-sided understanding of Western political thoughts among the Clidas. Specifically, why is it the case that the impact of progressive liberalism is limited in China? Is it because Chinese intellectuals are less exposed to progressive liberal ideas or because they are less receptive to such ideas?

TB: Western political thoughts were introduced to China mostly through translated works in the 1980s and 1990s. The decisions on what books could be translated and published were determined partially by the political orientation of the authors and partially by the editors and publishers, who were subject to political censorship. The intellectual landscape at that time was disproportionately influenced by Western neoclassical economic thoughts—in particular, the

Austrian and Chicago schools, represented in the works of Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman, just to name a few, and economic policies championed by Reaganism and Thatcherism. Subsequently, these neoliberal economic thoughts started to spill over and influence other disciplinary spheres, including law. Progressive liberalism has enjoyed very little exposure in China.

LL: If this is the case, it seems that when Western political thoughts were introduced to China in the 1980s, they were limited to economic thoughts and excluded all other topics—for instance, political rights, rights to physical integrity, individual liberty, procedural fairness, etc. This selectivity of Chinese intellectuals' exposure from early on might have produced a special affinity for them towards political conservatism, rendering Trumpism particularly attractive. This makes sense. However, many people are able to modify their opinions and avoid the 'backfire effect' when they are challenged by new, contradictory information. The pro-Trump Clidas seem to exhibit a conspicuously high level of conviction in their beliefs. Why is this group more susceptible to confirmation bias than others?

TB: I can think of two reasons. First, for many pro-Trump Clidas, the exposure to Western conservative political thoughts took place when they were in their twenties or thirties. This acquired knowledge has left them with a stable impression and strong opinions about what democracy is and how it is supposed to work, which cannot be shifted easily. Second, the Clidas have generally assumed an anti-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) political position, which is informed by their experience living in China and by bearing witness or being subjected to various forms of repression. It does not require much analytical skill, academic knowledge, or training to assume such a political position. However, to overcome one's confirmation bias requires conscious and disciplined self-questioning and self-correction, which are qualities that many Clidas do not necessarily possess.

LL: Is the pro-Trump Clidas understanding about current political affairs in the West, in particular in the United States, also one-sided or distorted?

TB: As for current political affairs, Chinese-language media focus on the 'dark sides' or flaws of Western society. However, such negative reporting only has limited influence upon many Clidas, who have always been sceptical of Chinese state propaganda. If the state propaganda says the cat is black, then they would believe that the cat must be white. Therefore, in this sense, the allure of the 'beacon' of Western democracy, to use Lin Yao's term, has not been tarnished by the negative reporting of the state media.

LL: Yes, it may explain the conviction to 'beaconism' by those who live in China and have never had any firsthand experience of living in the West. But how to explain the attitude of those overseas Clidas who enjoy access to pretty much as much information as they wish?

TB: It is due to a stereotypical or indoctrinated understanding of democracy. Once a conviction is established, one is likely to ignore all other contradicting evidence. For instance, an important reason that many Clidas support Trump's policies on racial issues is because they either are ignorant about the slavery and racism practised in early American history or have reinterpreted these realities to fit their preconceived opinions. For example, many of the Clidas believe that racism in the United States occurs only in sporadic instances and is not a systemic problem because there are various democratic institutions in place to counter these issues. Many Clidas are unaware of the scale and pervasiveness of racial injustice throughout the history of US politics. In addition, a lot of overseas Clidas live in Chinese enclaves in their host countries and have very limited interactions with other minority groups—a situation that has only sustained their prejudices and biases.

LL: Let's talk about social Darwinism, which seems to be another factor that has amplified support for Trump among the Clidas. What does social Darwinism mean? How is it related to the Clidas and their support for Trump?

TB: Those who subscribe to social Darwinism hold the view that successful people can succeed because they are better or more fit than others, from which it follows that unsuccessful and poor people cannot succeed because they are unfit. Social Darwinism attributes success to individual dispositions and qualities, such as aptitude, industriousness, and diligence, while dismissing structural factors. For instance, many Chinese human-rights lawyers and political activists come from humble family backgrounds. They tend to attribute their achievements to their individual dispositional qualities and to overlook the structural situation. At the same time, they hold others to the same standard and believe that, for instance, the low levels of upward mobility for disadvantaged minority groups in the United States are because these groups have a bad work ethic or inaptitude, for which they should shoulder the blame.

LL: This sounds like victim blaming, which attributes a wrongdoing to the victim rather than the perpetrator. Some psychologists have found that victim blaming is driven by the just-world hypothesis, which is a cognitive bias producing the belief that people's own actions are inclined to bring fair and just consequences to them. By blaming the victims, one can preserve a sense that the world is just and hence more comfortable to live in: the victims deserve what is done to them because of what they have done or what they are. From this logic it also follows that unfair and unjust things would never happen to someone if he or she does not engage in any improper conduct to trigger them. But I am not sure whether this explanation applies to all of the Clidas since their espousal of social Darwinism seems to contradict the nature of the activism of at least one group of them, the human-rights lawyers, who have made it their mission and exposed themselves to great risks to defend, instead of blaming, the disadvantaged members of Chinese society.

How to explain the coexistence of their commitment to defend the rights of the disadvantaged or 'unfit' population in China on the one hand, and their objection to the equal rights claims of the 'unfit' population in Western countries on the other?

TB: This is due to the qualitative difference between the issues of injustice in China and in the West. In China, the bulk of work for human-rights activists concerns violations of basic rights and freedoms—for instance, the restrictions and discriminations imposed upon people by the household registration system—a practice that does not even exist in Western countries. Other types of standard human-rights work in China involve intervention, prohibition, and punishment for the exercise—within the authorised space of Chinese law—of the rights to election, association, speech, and religion, none of which is a major problem of injustice in the United States. Therefore, a lot of pro-Trump Clidas share little sympathy or empathy towards, for instance, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Guided by their belief in social Darwinism and free-market fundamentalism, they believe that minority groups in the West end up at the bottom of the social ladder simply because they are outperformed by others. And for this reason, most of them have strong objections against progressive social policies such as affirmative action, progressive taxation, and the guarantee of a minimum wage.

LL: Now, I would like to go back to the issue of racism that you touched upon earlier when we talked about misinformation. It seems that the blissful ignorance of racial injustice or a lack of sympathy towards African Americans is not a misperception held only by the Clidas, but a prejudice widely shared in the Chinese society. In recent years, reports of racial discrimination incidents in China have become more and more frequent. This phenomenon is difficult to understand because the Chinese, as an ethnic group, have also periodically suffered serious racial discrimination and injustice both inside and outside China. How come it is racism, instead of empathy and solidarity, that has become the prevailing sentiment shared by many Chinese towards other races of colour?

TB: Many Chinese believe in the existence of a racial order based on skin colour. This racial order puts whiteness at the top, followed by yellow and brown, with blackness at the bottom. The existence of this claim of discrimination appeared as early as the late Qing in the writings of prominent political thinkers, such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Tang Caichang, who led the 1898 Reform Movement and represented the most progressive political thinking at the time. Such thoughts have had a strong impact on the world view of many Chinese people. According to this discriminatory chain, many Clidas believe that every ethnic group has an assigned position in the social structure and, if one group intends to move up from their assigned position, its members have to outcompete others, however unfair the rules of competition may be. If one intends to progress by overturning the rules of competition or changing the structure, then

it is transgression. Therefore, many Clidas have strong objections against the affirmative-action programs and the BLM movements because they think these groups are overreaching and transgressing.

LL: This cosmic racial order looks like an extension of the Confucian social order. Classic Confucianism advocates that every member of society is assigned a role in any given interpersonal relationship—for instance, husband–wife, mother–son, teacher–student, emperor–subject—in which powers and obligations are hierarchically distributed. If, according to Confucianism, everyone conforms to the behaviour related to his or her roles, then harmony will be achieved in the social order. The ‘racial discrimination chain’ that you just mentioned looks like an extension of the Confucian social order that is applied in an international dimension.

TB: Well, it is compatible with the world view in imperial China, which centred on Han Chinese and rendered all other races alien and inferior.

LL: That was so until the advent of the nineteenth century, when China was compelled to ‘upgrade’ the position of the ‘white race’. More interestingly, I also notice that there is a common behaviour pattern that underpins both social Darwinism and the perceived racial order. It begins with an initial structural inequality built into the social order, such as the one advocated by Confucianism, and then the inequality inherent in this social order is only reinforced by the collective adoption of a survival strategy that allows individuals to improve their welfare by acquiring more privileges over the less privileged to compensate for being exploited by those above them. This strategy is fundamentally different from the political project of reconstructing the social order based on the principle of equality, because the former does not seek to eradicate inequality, but only to substitute its victims. Such a strategic choice seems to be underpinned by something that I call the ‘downward retribution mechanism’, which is sometimes used to deal with injustice and inequality by its victims. It means that when someone is exploited by a powerful party, instead of defending themselves by challenging the moral and/or legal impropriety of the situation, they take action first to survive the exploitation with tolerance and endurance (忍) and then to seek retribution by exploiting another weaker party when possible. Setting aside the issue of the moral and legal justifiability of retribution as a principle, this downward orientation is totally distorted because you are seeking retribution not from the one who abuses you, but from someone whom you can abuse. In your explanation of the popularity of Trumpism among the Clidas, you also mentioned the role of evangelicalism. Could you please elaborate?

TB: In the minds of many Clidas, Christianity is the second ‘beacon’ of Western civilisation, the first being democracy. In this context, Christianity is also considered a cornerstone of the construction of the nation-state of the United States. It is no coincidence that a considerable number of Clidas have converted to Christianity, which helped them to fulfil their spiritual needs and to alleviate the anxiety caused by the challenges facing them in their political pursuits. And,

for a number of reasons, the Christian evangelical school, which is known for its political and social conservatism, seems to have had a much stronger influence upon Chinese activists than others.

LL: In your analysis, the Clidas also share a strong objection to socialism and leftism, which is another reason they prefer Trumpism. How do you explain this objection?

TB: Having witnessed and experienced all the suffering inflicted upon Chinese society in the name of socialism, the Clidas have an almost intuitive revulsion against leftism. And they have very limited knowledge of the types of social democracy practised in Europe. This combination leads to an instinctive dislike of and antagonism towards progressive social policies. The labelling of right-wing and left-wing politics is another problem.

LL: Do you mean the labelling of political positions based on the direction of one's occupied space in relation to a point of reference—for instance, the leftist and the rightist? I also find that this labelling practice is confusing at best and misleading at worst because, when the point of reference changes, the labelling will reverse—namely, what is considered as left in one context becomes right in another.

TB: Exactly. For instance, because the point of reference in China is the communist system, any policies resembling those in the capitalist system will be considered 'right' and any policies that advance communist agendas will be 'left'. Even though party ideology has changed significantly during the past four decades—in particular, shifting from demonising capitalism to embracing it—the labels remain the same. If you are supporting the Party, you are on the left and if you are against the Party, you are identified as being on the right. Clidas take great pride in being identified as on the 'right' simply because of their anti-party stance. They further apply their understanding of the left in the Chinese context to the left-wing politics of the West, which, in their minds, is not much different from advocacy of communism, including absolute distributive equality, mass movements, governmental intervention, class struggle, etc.

LL: Interestingly, such confusion about the meaning of socialism is not unique to the Clidas. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 2018, when asked to explain the meaning of socialism, 23 per cent of the American respondents related socialism to equality, which is the same percentage of people who were not able to provide an answer (Newport 2018). And 6 per cent of the surveyed Americans thought socialism means communism or some modified forms of communism, which is the same percentage who thought socialism means being social. You have also mentioned elsewhere that the attraction to a strongman as a political solution is also an important reason for the popularity of Trump among the Clidas. But a strongman connotes a form of authoritarian political leadership. Does it not clash with the nature of the Clidas's primary political goal, which is the democratisation of China?

TB: We have to look at it from a historical perspective. The US Government had for a long time adopted an engagement policy towards China and assumed that by inviting and integrating China into the international political and economic order, China would be assimilated into the Western world and democratise. This policy has failed and made many Clidas not only despondent but also cynical, as described very well by Perry Link in his recent essay ‘Seeing the CCP Clearly’ (2021). China has become economically stronger but without progress in terms of political freedom and liberalisation. Clidas attribute this failure to the lack of vision, political will, and shrewdness of the previous US presidents, who have been, in their eyes, blinded by the self-destructive equal rights ideals held by left-wing US politics.

LL: Yes, it is exactly against this backdrop that Trump took centre-stage. I have heard frequently from Chinese Trump supporters that his China policies are the most decisive and effective in containing China and that he is both the only one who is clever enough to identify the problem and the only one, they believe, who has the required determination and strategic wisdom to execute a counterstrategy. However, another issue that seems puzzling to me is why the Clidas, many of whom are fearless and heroic in character, would worship Trump as a strongman, when in fact he is the exact opposite of a hero, and is rather a character utilising power endowed to the highest public office of the most powerful country of the world in order to best serve his political interest. Isn't it paradoxical that the Clidas would worship someone like him?

TB: It is not difficult to understand. It is exactly because the Clidas, especially the human-rights lawyers and political activists, have experienced the kind of oppression and even persecution that they know how vulnerable they are and how insignificant the impact of their personal sacrifice is in China. Only the outcome determines who is right and who is wrong. A losing hero is nothing. They believe only a strongman can have a chance when dealing with another strongman.

LL: Yes, I assume it is indeed difficult to challenge an asymmetric power structure when all the resources are distributed asymmetrically against you. Two final questions to conclude our conversation: Why should we care about which political leader is popular among the Clidas? Why should their support for Trump be a matter of concern?

TB: First, for most Chinese Trump supporters, the most important and often the single reason for their support is that Trump is ‘tough’ on China. They are ignorant of or indifferent to the damage that Trump has done to US democratic institutions. What they care about is the ‘overthrow’ of the Party, which they expected Trump to deliver. This is ultimately counterproductive, however, as these attitudes and behaviours could easily cause the withdrawal of support by groups and individuals in the West who had been sympathetic and supportive to prodemocracy causes in China. Second, quite a

few of the Clidas are prominent public intellectuals and opinion leaders, who are expected to play a significant role in shaping the thoughts of prodemocracy followers. Their conservative Trumpian thoughts may harm the course of democratic transition in China. Third, quite a few pro-Trump Clidas have explicitly expressed support for the mob that sieged the US Capitol. They embraced the idea of proclaiming martial law and launching a *coup d'état* just to keep their favourite leader in power. Their blatant disregard for the value of constitutional democracy makes one wonder: if they were given the opportunities to establish a new political system in China, would it even be democratic? ■

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