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“Illiberal China, from its punning title forwards, reveals how China is the objectified “other” of the West, but is also an actually existing subject with its own intrinsic logic full of paradoxes and tensions. It examines the political-economic and cultural narratives surrounding the different representations of China, as well as their logical boundaries and interrelationships. The book intertwines external and internal, global and domestic perspectives. At the same time, Vukovich tries to reflect critically on Western liberalism by presenting “China as a problem.” Vukovich deals frankly with many complex and sensitive topics, although this style is not an end in itself but serves to open up a new discursive space. He believes China challenges previous theoretical and historical narratives, especially those attached to political theory and concepts such as liberalism or democracy. This is a powerful, subtle book that challenges Chinese research from a different paradigm and theoretical system. It deserves serious attention indeed.”

—Lu Xinyu, *East China Normal University*

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Illiberal China

The Ideological Challenge of the People's
Republic of China

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To Ella, Sofia, and Vicky

PREFACE

This book may be read as a follow-up to my previous one, *China and Orientalism*, which had the good fortune to be reviewed often and favorably, if also critically, in the good, constructive sense. I'm grateful to those reviewers and indeed to all the book's readers, and hope that the present volume will also be of interest and, moreover, of *use* in the larger effort to re-orient the analysis of China away from colonial and ill-fitting liberal anti-communist templates. *Illiberal China* no doubt resonates with the earlier book, but it is also a different animal. It is in many ways the fruit of my undergraduate government major at Lehigh University many years ago, an education that I continue to be grateful for. I have been obsessed with questions of politics and political theory ever since, albeit from outside political 'science,' and the present volume reflects this as much as my cultural studies background and my work in and on China and its representation.

Illiberal China begins after Tiananmen and in the decidedly post-1980s era of China's rise, a rise I take to be a real thing, definitive and even epochal, not something that is going to blow away as so much hype. We can love it or hate it or feel both things at once or with sentiments in-between. But the People's Republic of China has 'happened' and 'arrived' and isn't going to collapse or shut up or snap out of it. Frankly this stability—as opposed to regime-collapse or some Russian-esque abdication of the party-elite—is a good thing. I do not understand why so many people—primarily outside of China, it must be said—desire an end to the Party-state when this does not seem at all to be a major desire, let alone movement, within its own borders. Also good, in the analysis here, is the speaking back to the arrogance or presumptuousness of supposedly universal norms and political forms.

My desire here is to understand and think through China's 'illiberalism' as well as to offer a more cogent critique where needed, especially in terms of China's political economy and paradoxical commitment to liberal free-market economics, or what I will later call economism, that is the subjection of politics and society to the dictates of the market. I have never pretended to be an economist, unlike some of my academic Marxist comrades, but there is no doubt that 'the political' and politics (and ideology and so on) must be read economically as well, as a venerable and subtle base/super-structure dialectic without end.

Illiberal China does not seek to define or even adequately illustrate China, or even all of Chinese politics. At the outset allow me to signify a non-monolithic and hence pluralistic, even liberal-relativistic notion of China: that it contains multitudes and there are several, perhaps even a lot of Chinas. The ones I am focusing on here might fit under a general rubric: political China. The China of the state and of Chinese politics, not just between states, as in China versus the West, but within and against the Chinese state. So, in sum, at least these Chinas: socialist China, in the form of the new left in particular; liberal China in the form of the liberal intelligentsia as well as the state's own, liberal-Dengist commitment to free trade and markets and profit-motives; and the 'Western' or occidentalist/orientalist China from the outside, and paradoxically including Hong Kong: the China Watcher's China or the 'common sense' that China lacks liberalism (or 'democracy' if you prefer), and that if it had it, it'd become normal and free. At the same time I do think the China I am talking about here actually exists, and I trust what follows will not be taken as some type of Derridean or 'comp lit' approach to matters of representation and discourse. Thinking through politics is too important to leave to the 'scientists,' or to the humanists who would replace the political with the ethical and individual.

Illiberal China attempts instead to think through the meaning and discourses of Chinese politics since the 1990s and the rise of the new left as well as, more consequentially, the stability and even the perceived legitimacy of the Party-state. What are the consequences for politics or 'the political?' How might we think differently about Chinese politics and political discourses in particular? Can we take post-Mao politics seriously? What are Chinese (or global) politics in a bleak age of (attempted) depoliticization? What if liberalism was the problem, not the solution? In sum, how to *interpret* Chinese politics and what we think we know? This is precisely where a humanist aka textualist can make a contribution.

‘Taking China seriously’ has been one of my signature phrases for some years now, and the present book also follows suit to the earlier one. I owe that specific phrase—and the *attitude* behind it—to a bunch of other people, not least William Hinton, Edward Said, Richard Rorty (albeit writing on Habermas and Lyotard on post-modernity), Wendy Larson, Gao Mobo, and Liu Kang (who along with Tang Xiaobing and others kick-started the bringing of theory, representation, and critical comparativism into ‘cultural studies’ of the PRC). But of course it is also something that, for me, flows out of my encounters not just with thinking through the PRC ‘after’ Sinological orientalism, but with being in real as well as virtual or even imagined dialogue with mainland scholars of various stripes and locales, from Beijing and Shanghai to Wuhan and Anhui and Guangdong.

Most specifically this book’s unique question is this: Is China illiberal? This would seem the general popular consensus from outside of the PRC, including some ‘expert’ opinion on the matter, certainly from Washington or New York to Taipei and Hong Kong and back to London. But what does this mean when ‘we’ also know that China is radically different than, say, North Korea or Iran or Russia or whoever else is on the list of states ‘we’ don’t like? What do ‘we’—that is, foreign experts or liberals or erst-while liberals inside China and its Special Administrative Regions (SARs)—mean by the Party-state being illiberal?

My very general, slightly tongue-in-cheek, yet hopefully clear answer to the charge of Chinese illiberalism is yes and no. In some ways China is clearly illiberal in the bad ways: repressive of dissent, for example, to the point of it being done on principle(!), and policing ‘free’ speech too much for its own or for anyone’s good. But in other ways—for example, in its commitment to a ‘strong’ or effective state or state capacity (which it must now reclaim from the market and capitalists), in its refusal of political liberalism, that is of the latter’s total commodification of politics by money and capital and ‘interest groups,’ in its ‘statist’ commitment to livelihood and raising living standards as opposed to profit for its own sake, and in an anti-imperialist critique or refusal of Western universalisms—this is an interesting, rational, and arguably useful and welcome refusal of liberalism.

Likewise it does not seem to me at all useful (and I am bracketing it off from analysis in any case) to make comparisons toward some global tide of illiberalism (Russia, Hungary, North Korea, Iran, Poland, etc.) that China is a part of. This would be reification. Though it is also clear that the dominant force of liberalism or neo-liberalism, the degradation of a ‘good’ liberalism from the immediate post-war period, is reaching its limits and

has lost whatever legitimacy it had outside of the bankers and rentiers and the rich. The blowback (Trumpism, Brexit) or pushback (protest) is real and understanding this is an urgent matter for cultural and global studies. Responses to this failure of liberalism will necessarily evolve (or devolve) on their own foundations. In this the PRC and its so-called statism have perhaps more resources of hope than, say, its former enclave Hong Kong.

As I try to argue later, ‘illiberalism’ means, in the end, *not-* or *anti-*liberal. Of course there is a difference between ‘not-’ and ‘anti-,’ which I must leave to others to parse in future work. The essential point here is the refusal as well as the examination of what, at an admittedly theoretical level, China does have in place of liberalism. This is all the more important when we face up to the fact that liberalism as ‘we’ have known it—again, we non-Chinese residents—is dead. Or rather has been degraded and ‘commodified,’ made utterly economic and formalistic to the point that it simply fails to command belief (excluding perhaps certain civics lessons curricula or purveyors of same). And viewed historically, institutionally, and from beyond Euro-America, liberalism has, as Dominico Lusordo among others has reminded us, always been rooted in exclusion, hierarchy, and indeed imperialism.

To call or assume or think of China as being ‘illiberal’ necessarily carries with it a clear normative charge, beyond the recognition that all states have a monopoly on violence, and that all states are, or can be at will, completely authoritarian. Were China to simply be referred to as authoritarian would be, in my view, entirely different than what I am seeking to examine and refute and read against the grain here.

Orientalism and colonial discourse: these terms appear far less in the present book, but I do not take back my insistence that these things matter for the analysis of China and any representation of China. To say that China is illiberal is to speak to its unfortunate difference from a certain norm that just so happens to be ‘Western’ (or European or whatever other term you prefer: it lacks that). But this is also to say that China *should be* liberal. It should become like us in this—quite important, very political—sense. This to me still seems to be an important interpretive, ‘politics of knowledge’ issue that calls out for more recognition and debate.

Hong Kong SAR, Hong Kong

Daniel F. Vukovich

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I thank the following publishers for allowing me to reproduce parts of a few previously published articles and chapters. Each of these older pieces has, however, been extensively revised and rewritten, to the point of becoming new creatures altogether. Once upon a time I envisioned just lightly revising these, but this is not an option when dealing with contemporary phenomena.

Parts of Chap. 2 appeared as “The Battle for Chinese Discourse and the Rise of the Chinese New Left: Towards a Post-colonial Politics of Knowledge.” *China and New Left Visions: Political and Cultural Interventions*. Ban Wang and Lu Jie, eds. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012.

A few paragraphs of Chap. 2 also hail from “Postcolonialism, Globalization, and the ‘Asia Question’.” *Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Graham Huggan. Oxford UP, 2013. 587–606.

Parts of Chap. 3 appeared first as “From Charting The Revolution to Charter 2008: Discourse, Liberalism, Imperialism” in *Culture and Social Transformation: Theoretical Frameworks and the Chinese Context*, Eds. Cao Tianyu, Ban Wang, and Zhong Xueping, Brill Press, 2014.

Parts of Chaps. 4 and 5 are taken from “Illiberal China and Global Convergence: Thinking through Wukan and Hong Kong,” *Third World Quarterly*, 36.11 (2015): 2130–2147.

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I note that all errors, overly risky claims, infelicities, jump cuts, debatable loyalties, and quixotic moments are mine alone.

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