

Interview with Professor Minqi Li

by Chronis Polychroniou

1. In 1990 you were arrested for giving a brief talk at a student assembly at Beijing University for advocating a workers' democracy and were sentenced to a two year imprisonment by a state which allegedly advocates communism and regards itself as the vanguard of the workers. Was this just because of the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square tragedy or would you have also met the same today had you spoken out in favor of a workers' democracy?

Like what happened in Eastern Europe, the 1989 student movement in China was complex and often misunderstood. In retrospect, by 1989, China was already in the early transition to capitalism and a bureaucratic capitalist class was taking shape. On the other hand, large sections of the intellectuals and some of the university students saw western capitalism as an ideal social model. I want to emphasize, there were no fundamental differences between the bureaucratic capitalist class (in the form of the “Communist Party”) in power and the liberal intellectual elites with respect to the objective of transition to capitalism. Despite the talk of “democracy”, the intellectual and student leaders cared very little (if at all) about the interest of the working class. The Chinese working class, politically disoriented, was unfortunately taken advantage of by both sides of 1989. We should recall that 1989 was the year when global neoliberalism was at its peak and the capitalist classes all over the world were celebrating the “end of history”. The Fall of the Berlin Wall, instead of having ushered in a new era of freedom and democracy, should more properly be remembered as the beginning of the neoliberal dark age or the era of global counter-revolution.

2. While in prison you used time to read Marx and Mao. Why Marx and Mao, and not, instead, pro-market advocates like Adam Smith and Milton Friedman? I am just trying to understand what led you to reading works from the revolutionary tradition while imprisoned by a self-professed communist regime.

I was a believer in free market capitalism in 1989. After the end of the student movement, I began to question and rethink my previous positions and by the time I was in prison, I was already becoming a left socialist and would actually like to use the precious time to equip myself with classical Marxist readings.

3. There are many and contesting views in the West about the political nature of the state in China since its full incorporation in the world capitalist economy. How do you define the state in China and its role in the economy?

From 1949 to 1976, China was a revolutionary socialist state. Despite many failures and imperfections, during the Maoist period, the general relations of class power within China were relatively favorable for the working class and the peasants. Since 1976, the bureaucratic capitalist class had taken over the political power and China had undergone the transition to capitalism. By the 1990s, the transition was largely complete. Today, private ownership of the means of production dominates the Chinese economy. Hundreds of millions of the Chinese workers suffer from the most intense exploitation with no rights or dignity to speak of, while the Chinese capitalists have accumulated enormous wealth that is the envy of international capitalists. The remaining state owned enterprises are no different from state owned enterprises in other capitalist countries, organized in the typical capitalist hierarchical, exploitative manner.

4. In your book *The Rise of China and the Demise of the World Capitalist Economy*, you argue that Mao and the Communist Party paved the way for the transition to capitalism. Can you

elaborate on this?

I am afraid I will have to correct your question. Mao Zedong was the great leader of the Chinese Revolution and the Chinese people, who mobilized working people to fight against the “capitalist roaders who are in authority in the Party” while he was alive. It was only with the failure of the Cultural Revolution, that the capitalist roaders took over the Party and political power and the political conditions were prepared for China’s transition to capitalism.

At a more fundamental level, this raised the question why a socialist state would fail and capitalism would come back. I think it is a general misperception among many that socialism failed because it failed to raise people’s living standards. In my book, I argued that socialism was much more successful than capitalism in raising people’s living standards, especially in low income countries. The basic problem had to do with the fact that in the mid-20th century, history had not yet advanced to the point where the entire capitalist world system would become historically unviable. Instead, the new socialist states had to live in a capitalist world system and had to engage in capital accumulation to compete with capitalist states. This created the favorable conditions for the rise of a new bureaucratic-technocratic privileged class which was in favor of capitalist development. Given the political inexperience on the part of the working people, the ensuing struggle ended with the triumph of the bureaucratic capitalist class.

5. With annual growth rates as high as 8 percent per year, but with social and economic inequalities also growing exponentially, China's social formation must be full of contradictions and social unrest must be really brewing at the bottom of the society. Is this the case?

Indeed, the internal contradictions within the Chinese society have been intensified over the years. The traditional working class based in the urban sector has organized resistance against privatization. Many of them have developed a comparatively high level of socialist, working class consciousness. In July this year, there was a massive workers’ protest in which a capitalist was beaten to death (these days, rich people in China can almost kill poor people at will without suffering any punishment – so this is only a small payback). The protest forced the government to suspend privatization in the steel industry.

On the other hand, there are the 100-200 million migrant workers who originated from the countryside. The migrant workers suffer from the most intense exploitation but have comparatively low level of organization and class consciousness. But I think it is a matter of time before they will learn to organize and fight for their class interest.

The petty bourgeoisie (or the urban middle class) used to be a strong ally of the capitalist class. But now with growing income and wealth inequality, many among the petty bourgeoisie have also suffered from unemployment, unaffordable housing, and lack of access of health care and education. The split of the petty bourgeoisie has contributed to the growth of the intellectual left in recent years.

6. Are there any remnants of socialism left in China?

I think “remnants” is really an understatement. China is probably one of the places in the world where you observe the most rapid growth of the political and intellectual left. Many and a growing number of young people now question or reject the dominant capitalist ideology (in China, it is known as “reform and openness”). Many of them have also rejected the Chinese official (or western mainstream) version of the history of the Chinese socialism. They recognize the Cultural Revolution as a great historical effort to dramatically democratize the Chinese society and prevent capitalist restoration. Unlike the “solidarity” movement in Poland before 1989, the leftists in China today clearly rejected any form of pseudo democracy based on free market capitalism. Within the Chinese left, various versions of Maoism have a clear dominance. Overall, it is the leftist, socialist

tendencies that are advancing in China today and the right wing, capitalist tendencies are in retreat. (This is in term of the influence of different ideological tendencies among the general masses, and especially among the young people. In term of political and economic power and control over media, no doubt China is under bourgeois dictatorship.)

7. In the West, there is a lot of talk and even fear about China's emergence as a world power. Do you see China as having the potential to emerge as a world superpower in the near future?

The Chinese capitalism has become a key pillar for the global capitalism. China's financing of the US trade deficits play a crucial role in propping up the US dollar. The Chinese workers form an enormous pool of cheap labor force that helps to undermine the global workers' bargaining power. However, neither the US nor China can overcome the inherent contradictions of global capitalism. As the US imperialism is in decline, China will not be able to replace it, leaving global capitalism with no effective leadership. As the Chinese economy grows rapidly and China's demand for energy and resources surge, global ecological contradictions have been intensified and we are racing towards global ecological collapse. Finally, as the Chinese workers in the not distant future again rise up fighting against the capitalist class, I hope that in the future Chinese workers' struggle will contribute to turn the global balance of power again to the favor of the global working class.

8. What do you think Obama is hoping to achieve for the US from his visit to China?

They will talk about their usual stuff: the exchange rate between the US dollar and China's *renminbi*, trade, so-called "human rights". It is expected that the US and China will form a "climate pact" that involves collaboration on "clean" energy technologies. But neither side is willing to really sacrifice capital accumulation to make substantive moves to stabilize the global climate. There is no hope whatsoever to achieve climate stabilization so long as the world is organized as a system that is based on production for profit and structured to pursue endless capital accumulation. People should have no illusion about this.

The Obama administration has demonstrated that it is simply another colonialist, imperialist administration with some minor tactical changes. Unlike Franklin Roosevelt, Obama will not accomplish any meaningful social reform. This is probably the indication that capitalism has exhausted its historical space of reform and self-correction and is not far away from its eventual demise.

I know, Marxists in the past have predicted the death of capitalism and it has not died yet. But it would be quite mistaken to think a person can be immortal simply because the person has survived a few surgeries.