

Neo-Napoleonism and the Politics of Trust

POMPEO'S NEO-NAPOLEONISM AND THE CCP RÉGIME

Eric C. Hendriks-Kim

“Liberal opinions will rule the universe. They will become the faith, the religion, the morality of all nations; and ... this memorable era will be inseparably connected with my name.”¹

—Napoleon Bonaparte

Abstract

The People's Republic of China arguably represents the world's most politically significant deviation from the liberal democratic model. Anglo-American foreign policy discussions frequently express frustration at China's defiance of liberal democratic norms, especially in recent years, as the China debate re-ideologized. Under Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, the White House rebranded the technology-oriented Trade War as a world-spanning ideological struggle between the US-led “Free World” and “the Beijing regime.” Pompeo's suggestion that the Chinese people should be liberated from an evil regime echoes not only American neo-conservatism but also, ultimately, the anti-regime-ism of the French Revolution. The overthrow of the Ancien Régime—from which the contemporary ‘regime’ semantic derives—is the paradigmatic modern regime change. Since Napoleon exported this regime change and styled himself “the first soldier” of liberty's global propagation, one may call the liberationist strand in modern political idealism ‘Napoleonic’. ‘Napoleonic’ criticisms of China's political system treat it as an ‘ancien régime’ standing in the way of liberty's global march. Pompeo's suggestions of bringing regime change to China seem so unserious, however, that it might be better understood as a hyper-real simulacrum of Napoleonism. Such Neo-Napoleonic rhetoric seeks to delegitimize China's political leadership, sketching a dichotomy between the ‘evil’ Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the ‘good’ Chinese people. This moral dichotomization may seem sympathetic and humanistic as it exonerates ‘the people’, yet it, in fact, serves to justify and encourage unrestrained ideological aggression against the CCP by

¹ Comte Emmanuel-Auguste-Dieudonné Las Cases, *Memoirs of the Life, Exile, and Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon*, Vol. II, translated from French by W.J. Widdleton (Auckland, NZ: Pickle Partners Publishing, 2013[1855]), Chapter: “Politics: The State of Europe.”

painting it as a target isolable from the rest of Chinese society. In response, mainland-Chinese political theorists often conceptualize the West's ideological aggression as the civilizational antithesis of China's supposedly harmonious Tianxia tradition. However, this overdrawn civilizational dualism is complicated by the fact that the CCP, ironically, also comes out of the anti-regime-ist modern revolutionary tradition.

The modern West's constitutive revolutionary hostility to the Ancien Régime echoes through the centuries. I propose to call this tradition of aggressively idealistic, liberationist anti-regime-ism: 'Napoleonic'. A contemporary reincarnation of this Napoleonic idealism appears in an ideological hostility to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Many Anglosphere intellectuals and politicians deem the CCP-led People's Republic of China (PRC) – which is perhaps presently the world's most politically significant and outspoken deviation from liberal-democratic normativity – an 'ancien régime' standing in the way of liberty's global march.

The long-standing controversy around China's regime deviation from liberal democracy has flared up as part of the recent Sino-American or Sino-Anglosphere conflict. In its intensified form, this conflict, which unfolds in both diplomacy and intellectual and academic spheres, probably goes back to 2017. It has various complexly interrelated causes, the relative weights of which can be disputed. Among these causes are less ideological ones, such as the economic power struggle between China and the US and the dramatically increased Western anxieties about Chinese information technologies.² Other factors were China's increased authoritarianism during the 2010s; the 2017-exposure of Muslims' mass internment in Xinjiang, which complicates defenses of the Chinese government's legitimacy in Western public spheres; and the corona pandemic.³ One result of the conflict's intensification was the rise (or revival) of a hyper-idealistic, neo-conservative and Cold War-like discourse vis-à-vis the PRC in geopolitical discussions in the Anglosphere (and to a lesser extent in the EU).⁴

This essay will first touch upon the aggressive liberationist idealism claimed and, indeed, epitomized by Napoleon. Second, it will show how some reincarnation of this idealistic imagining is at work in the speeches of US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. Third, it will analyze the specific vehicle through which this discourse legitimizes and maximizes its

² Kaiser Kuo, "Fear of a Red Tech Planet: Why the U.S. is Suddenly Afraid of Chinese Innovation," *SupChina blog*, October 13, 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/10/13/fear-of-a-red-tech-planet-why-the-u-s-is-suddenly-afraid-of-chinese-innovation/>

³ Dali L. Yang, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Estrangement of US-China Relations," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2020), pp. 7–31.

⁴ The European Commission for the first time branded China "a systemic rival" in its report *European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council: EU-China – A strategic outlook*, March 12, 2020, p. 1. Also, Dr. Janka Oertel, director of the Asia Programme of the European Council on International Relations, suggested that China may have an "interest in destroying the European Union." She added that China currently "attempts to divide Europeans during the crisis, along with its fierce and openly hostile rhetoric targeting the capacity of Western democracy." Those are rather bold statements for any scholar or diplomat to make, let alone in the absence of evidence or further elaboration. See Janka Oertel, "China, Europe, and Covid-19 Headwinds," a commentary article on the website of the European Council on International Relations from July 20, 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_china_europe_and_covid_19_headwinds/

ideological aggression. This vehicle is the overdrawn moral dichotomization of ‘the evil regime’ and ‘the good people’. Last, this essay will compare the ‘Napoleonic’ label with the image of a ‘new Roman Empire’, which is invoked by contemporary Chinese political theorists such as Zhao Tingyang and Jiang Shigong to typify the West’s imperialistic idealism.

Napoleonic idealism

Imagining a possible world that, in some respects, is better than the one that currently exists is what allows us to envision improvement. In this sense, idealism is indispensable, creative, and quintessentially human. But idealism is also unavoidably aggressive. In any idealism, there is inherent aggression, no matter how subtle. The idealist slams an *idea* against an existing, evolved, complex reality which she swears to eliminate and overwrite. Admittedly, many forms of idealism are modest in scope. An idealism can be ethical and even merely personal, as in the case when one thinks: “I am not the person who I want to be, and will try to destroy my bad habits!” In that case, all the ‘violence’ of one’s idealism is directed against one’s existing habits, not against other people. Yet, if an idealism is political, targeting a change in society’s organization, then particular people or groups or even entire societal orders may appear to stand in the way of the right idea’s realization. Those ‘obstacles’ must be denounced, pressured, and reformed – or cast aside or overthrown.

Arguably no strand of political idealism has been as politically ambitious and influential – and violently destructive on a global scale – as that which finds its ultimate source in the French Revolution. The Revolution enabled us to imagine the possibility of a society-wide, culturally transformative ‘regime change’. In fact, the contemporary usage of the word ‘regime’ derives from polemics against the French Ancien Régime. Its original referent – the first object of ‘regime change’ – was the system of aristocratic, clerical, city, and university privileges that the revolutionaries abolished. Hence, it is a legacy of the Revolution that we call supposedly unenlightened, authoritarian political systems: ‘regimes’. Take the ‘Assad regime’, the ‘Apartheid regime’, the ‘Nazi regime’, etcetera: we implicitly (and unconsciously) associate such political systems with France’s Ancien Régime.

However, the continuity is not merely linguistic, for the Revolution lives on in our political imagination. We keep discovering new (kinds of) ancien régimes to overthrow. After Louis XVI’s execution, the Girondists wanted to export the Revolution to the rest of Europe. A decade later, the Napoleonic Code began overwriting the Continent’s ancien régime order. For the next half-century, liberal and liberal-democratic revolutions spread globally. Simultaneously, Marxists expanded the Revolution’s goal to include full equality in the economic realm, turning capitalism into an ‘ancien régime’ to be overthrown. And recently, American activists have discovered an ‘ancien régime’ in America’s ethnic stratification.⁵ Groups like BLM have reintroduced the concept of *privilège*;⁶ it is just that now ‘whites’, rather

⁵ See for example: Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020).

⁶ The word “privilege” derives from the Latin *privus* and *legum* and means “private law.” Under Europe’s ancien régime, the privilege system included tax exemptions for aristocrats and clerics, as well as self-determination rights for universities, monastic orders, free cities, and guilds. In France, during the night of August 4, 1789, the French revolutionaries of the National Constituent Assembly officially abolished all privileges. Little did they know that one day future activists would identify a range of new privileges, including ‘white privilege’.

than aristocrats or clerics, are deemed to be the bearers of an oppressive system of privilege. In each of these outbursts of modern political idealism, there is an echo of the French original.

This modern (Western) political idealism, which forever seeks to liberate people from ever new ‘ancien régimes’, can also manifest itself as an ideologically aggressive universalism in the domain of foreign policy. If one supposes that ‘the people’ must be ‘liberated’ in every country on earth, and that a few ‘leading states’ already show the way, it would be hard to tolerate substantial politico-ideological diversity on the world stage. And it would be tempting to dream of pushing all ‘illegitimate regimes’ off the map.

We may call such a geopolitical and political-philosophical idealism ‘Napoleonic’ because Napoleon embodied the intertwining of liberal idealism with expansionist imperialism. He was indeed the great founder of the modern, foreign exported ‘regime change’. Two centuries before the neo-conservative Bush administration ordered the Iraq invasion in the name of *Liberté* and *Égalité*, Napoleon rode through Europe under the banner of freedom and equality, ‘nation-building’ all over the Continent. The Emperor was a neo-con *pur sang*, *avant la lettre*. In his Saint Helena memoirs, he styled himself the “first soldier” of liberty and prophesized the global hegemony of the liberal ideas:

Liberal ideas flourish in Great Britain, they enlighten America, and they are nationalized in France; and this may be called the tripod whence issues the light of the world! Liberal opinions will rule the universe. They will become the faith, the religion, the morality of all nations; and, in spite of all that may be advanced to the contrary, this memorable era will be inseparably connected with my name; for, after all, it cannot be denied that I kindled the torch and consecrated the principles; and now persecution renders me quite their Messiah. Friends and foes, all must acknowledge me to be their first soldier, their grand representative. Thus even when I shall be no more, I shall still continue to be the leading star of the nations...⁷

This Napoleonic imagining continues to inform and reemerge in strands of Western geopolitical and political-philosophical thought. At present, its arguably most prominent object of (frustrated) idealism, and its biggest stumbling block and target is the CCP-led PRC. Reemerging with some frequency in Western discussions about China is the background assumption, thesis, or prophesy that the CCP’s PRC *must fall*, eventually, perhaps inevitably. “There has been,” as Xi Jinping complains, “no end to the different flavors of [Western] ‘China collapse’ theory.”⁸ The CCP must fall because it is unfree, authoritarian, and ‘on the wrong side of history’. That is, it is yet another ‘ancien régime’ standing in the way of a fully liberal-democratic – indeed ‘liberated’ – world. In response, the post-Maoist Chinese government officially presents itself as the tolerant one. In the words of Foreign Minister Wang Yi: “We are not interested in [the] rivalry of systems, or ideological confrontation with any country.

⁷ Comte Emmanuel-Auguste-Dieudonné Las Cases, *Memoirs of the Life, Exile, and Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon*, Chapter: “Politics: The State of Europe.”

⁸ Jinping Xi, “Uphold and Develop Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” translated from Mandarin by Tanner Greer, *Palladium*, May 31, 2019, <https://palladiummag.com/2019/05/31/xi-jinping-in-translation-chinas-guiding-ideology/>

Likewise, we hope that the U.S. will respect China's social system and the Chinese people's choice, and give up its failed interventionism."⁹

The irony of Western imaginings of the CCP as an 'ancien régime' is that the CCP is itself a revolutionary party drawing on a branch (the Leninist–Stalinist one) of the Western revolutionary tradition. Accordingly, the Party has always, and especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), styled itself the revolutionary eliminator of the remnants of China's feudal ancien régime (though the Republic of China and the late Qing arguably have a stronger claim to that title¹⁰). Also, the CCP continues to assert that instead of being in the rear, its socialism makes it the world's avant-garde. As Xi stated in 2013: "[C]apitalism is bound to die out and socialism is bound to win. This is an inevitable trend in social and historical development."¹¹ Thus, to the extent to which CCP ideologues have an equivalent 'missionary' zeal to their Western liberal-democratic counterparts (a subject of dispute, which I will touch upon below), we continue to face competing Napoleonisms.

However, the preoccupation of Western and Chinese intellectuals and politicians with this ideological opposition – and with the putative dawning demise or damning divergence of the other side – ebbs and flows. Over the last three years, but especially since the beginning of the 2020-coronavirus crisis, suggestions, predictions, and legitimizations of regime change in China – together with expressed frustrations over the CCP's continued defiance of the Western liberal democratic norms – have again moved to the forefront of the Western, and especially Anglo-American, foreign policy discussions. Illustrative in this regard is the recently intensified ideologization of the Trump administration's approach to China.

Pompeo's regime change talk

This summer, the Trump administration and right-wing intellectual America had a particularly (neo-)Napoleonic moment. When the American presidential elections emerged on the horizon, and China's popularity among the Western citizens plummeted to an all-time low,¹² American foreign policy rhetoric took an 'idealistic' turn. Most theatrical were Steve Bannon, the former White House adviser, and anti-CCP businessperson Guo Wengui. In front of the Statue of Liberty, they launched the lobby group The New Federal State of China, whose stated aim is the overthrow of the CCP. Meanwhile, the White House's course shift produced a serious trend break in its foreign policy. After three years of spewing America First rhetoric and couching the Sino-American Trade War in economic terms, the Trump administration suddenly sought

⁹ Wang Yi, "Full Text: Wang Yi's Interview on Current State of China-U.S. relations," *CGTN*, August 6, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-08-06/Full-text-Wang-Yi-s-interview-on-current-China-U-S-relations-SJ8tae0mIw/index.html>

¹⁰ See Frank Dikötter, *The Age of Openness: China Before Mao* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), p. 15.

¹¹ Jinping Xi, "Uphold and Develop Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," translated from Mandarin by Tanner Greer, *Palladium*, May 31, 2019, <https://palladiummag.com/2019/05/31/xi-jinping-in-translation-chinas-guiding-ideology/>

¹² Pew Research Center, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," October 6, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>

to reclaim the leadership of the “Free World,” calling upon allies to stand up to the Chinese government on ideological grounds.

The policy paper “United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China”¹³ broadened a conflict over primarily economic power to the domain of ultimate values. It proclaims that “Americans have more reason than ever to understand the nature of the regime in Beijing and the threats it poses to American economic interests, security, and values.”¹⁴ The paper sketches a world-ideological conflict, asserting that the “CCP promotes globally a value proposition that challenges the bedrock American belief in the inalienable right of every person to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”¹⁵

Further promoting this revision was a series of speeches, by Robert O’Brien, Christopher Wray, and William Barr on, respectively, June 24th, July 7th, and July 16th, which culminated, on July 23th, in Secretary of State Michael Pompeo’s speech “The Communist China and the Free World’s Future.” Pompeo also made his position known in his November 10th speech titled “The Promise of America,” in which he proclaims that “the fight is between authoritarianism, barbarism on one side and freedom on the other.”¹⁶

Pompeo suggests that America could and should strive to change China’s political regime: “We, the freedom-loving nations of the world, must induce China to change.”¹⁷ His paean to regime change may be echoing the neoconservative rhetoric of the Bush-era, but in contrast to the Bush administration – which not only called for regime change in Ba’athist Iraq but actually executed it through military means – Pompeo’s denunciation of the CCP is merely a performance of assertiveness for the domestic audience. He did not seem to have a plan for furthering its overthrow; instead, he appeared to address the domestic audience within an election season. His speech moves within Baudrillardian hyperreality. If Napoleon was the “first soldier” and “grand representative” of the universalization of liberalism, Pompeo might be seen as its latest simulator and great poser. His call for regime change in China is a simulacrum of Napoleonic idealism; in this sense, we can qualify it as ‘neo-Napoleonic’.

Two features of Pompeo’s discourse escalate its ideological and aggressive character. The first is Pompeo’s consistent reference to ‘the CCP’ or ‘the Beijing regime’ instead of ‘the Chinese government’, which has the effect of foregrounding the ideological differences. This terminological choice is striking. As America’s highest diplomat, Pompeo does not deal directly with the CCP; he meets with China’s governmental officials who, though doubling as Party members under the party-state structure, speak to him in their role as representatives of the government, and not of the party. This may seem a trivial distinction, but as former French

¹³ National Security Council, *United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China*, Report, May 26, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/united-states-strategic-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Michael R. Pompeo, “The Promise of America,” Speech, Ronald Reagan Institute, Washington, D.C., November 10, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-promise-of-america/>

¹⁷ Michael R. Pompeo, “Communist China and the Free World’s Future,” Speech, Yorba Linda, California, July 23, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/>

diplomat Gérard Araud commented: “This use of CCP ... substitutes ideological rivalry – which is unbridgeable – for diplomacy.”¹⁸

The second escalating feature, which I will deconstruct in the next section, is the CCP-delegitimizing dichotomy of Party and people. Pompeo sharply distinguishes between the evil CCP and the good Chinese people: “We must also engage and empower the Chinese people – a dynamic, freedom-loving people who are completely distinct from the Chinese Communist Party.” The latter he calls: “this Marxist-Leninist monster.”¹⁹ In his narrative, Chinese people appear as secretly wishing their liberation from the Party’s communist authoritarianism, a wish at least in part inspired by the American-led Free World:

I grew up and served my time in the Army during the Cold War. And if there is one thing I learned, communists almost always lie. The biggest lie that they tell is to think that they speak for 1.4 billion people who are surveilled, oppressed, and scared to speak out.²⁰

Central in Pompeo’s perspective is the moral claim that, by being against the CCP, the American government is on the side of the Chinese people. As he asserted in an interview on Fox News: “We continue to seek a better life for the people of China. It’s important to us. It’s personal for me too as a man of faith. I’m hopeful that we together will be able to achieve better outcomes for religious minorities inside of China.”²¹ In another interview, when asked what he considered his “greatest accomplishment at the State Department,” Pompeo answered: “[W]orking on religious freedom. We have fundamentally reordered the world’s attention to the challenges presented by the Chinese Communist Party, but we’ve done good things for the people of China.”²²

Yet, complicating this moral claim and the White House’s ideological-humanitarian rebranding of its conflict with China was a revelation by the former security advisor John Bolton. In his memoirs, which appeared on the same days as Pompeo’s speech (July 23), Bolton reports that Trump had told Xi in 2019 that he was fine with the anti-Muslim crackdown in Xinjiang.²³ The US was indeed the only major Western country not to join the 22 nation-states that together, on July 8, 2019, declared their opposition to Muslims’ mass incarcerations in Xinjiang (even though the US joined similar declarations at later moments). That the White House had not led the international human rights criticism on Xinjiang, but had, to the contrary, joined late in the game after having taken the opposite position in the form of Trump’s off-the-record consent, conflicted with Pompeo’s post hoc claim to international human rights leadership.

¹⁸ Gérard Araud, Tweet, July 23, 2020, <https://twitter.com/GerardAraud/status/1286196242226257920>

¹⁹ Michael R. Pompeo, “The Promise of America.”

²⁰ Michael R. Pompeo, “Communist China and the Free World’s Future.”

²¹ Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo with Amy Kellogg of FOX News,” Interview, *Fox News*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-with-amy-kellogg-of-fox-news/>

²² Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo with Tony Perkins of Washington Watch with Tony Perkins.” Interview, November 10, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-with-tony-perkins-of-washington-watch-with-tony-perkins-3/>

²³ John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p. 312.

Explaining the apparent lack of consistency in the White House's China policy under Trump, political scientist Andrew Nathan points to a combination of incompetence and ideological divisions,

The dirty little secret is that the administration has no strategy. It is a snake pit of competing policy entrepreneurs, most of whom understand little about China or world affairs. For many, domestic politics is the key consideration.²⁴

Nathan argues that Pompeo is part of a newly emerged dominant faction that interprets the Sino-American conflict in terms of a world-spanning battle over “ultimate values” and ideological domination. This new faction's ideological and ideologizing interpretation differs from that of Trump, who narrowly frames the conflict as an economic competition (in the beginning, ‘making a deal’ had been his key phrase). Also, it differs from the vision of Peter Navarro, the Director of Trade and Manufacturing Policy, “who apparently dreams of dividing the world into two economic and technological blocs.”²⁵ Pompeo's ideological faction, Nathan argues, is deeply wrong in assuming that China wants to export its political model:

[An] apparently now dominant faction consists of people like Mike Pompeo, Mike Pence, Steve Bannon (out of the administration but still influential), and Newt Gingrich (also influential), who appear seriously to believe, as Gingrich put it, that China poses ‘the greatest threat to us since the British Empire in the seventeen-seventies, much greater than Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union’. This group has turned the competition into a life-and-death struggle over ultimate values. They seem to believe that China wants to extend its political model to the rest of the world, including America. This is a deep misunderstanding of Chinese strategy, which is assertive, helpful to authoritarians, and in many ways dangerous, but not ideologically ambitious.²⁶

Sinologists and China-oriented political scientists disagree, as mentioned, on just how ideologically ambitious the Chinese party-state really is.²⁷ The question of the extent and the

²⁴ Andrew Nathan, In: “What Now? A ChinaFile Conversation,” *China File*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/what-now>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For example, contrary to Nathan's assessment, Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg warn in their book *Hidden Hand* (2020) that “The Chinese Communist Party is determined to reshape the world in its image.” In his previous work, Hamilton, who works at Australian National University, even described Beijing as “Australia's enemy.” (*Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* (San Francisco: Hardie Grant, 2018), Conclusion).

More carefully, but strikingly, the European Commission for the first time explicitly labeled China “a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.” (*European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council: EU-China – A strategic outlook*, Report, March 12, 2020, p. 1).

Indeed, the Chinese political system's intellectual proponents often claim that it is a legitimate and even superior alternative to liberal democracy. Still, because such claims tend to be formulated against the background of, and as a counter to, Western ideological pressure, one can often also read them as primarily defensive, which creates ambivalence. An example would be this strong yet seemingly defensive statement by the CCP-supporting geopolitical analyst Andy Mok in an op-ed on a Chinese state media website: “Many around the world, especially in the United States, are still trapped in a benighted, primitive and perniciously toxic superstition that, of all the available choices, a democratic free market system is the best and most moral form of government. But ... more and more people around the world are coming to see China as the true shining city on a hill.” (Andy Mok, “Latest 5-Year Plan shows benevolence of China's system,” Op-ed, *CGTN*, November 2, 2020,

nature of the Chinese government's international ambitions in this regard lies far beyond both the scope of this essay and my knowledge – although the answer would, indeed, bear on the prudence of 'defending democracy' through hardline containment and decoupling policies vis-à-vis the PRC. Instead, I will analyze the central rhetorical simplification by means of which hawkish or idealistic Anglo-American politicians, pundits, and intellectuals rebuke and delegitimize the CCP's leadership of China, namely, the moral dichotomization of Party and Chinese people.

Dichotomizing Party and people

The sharp Party-people dichotomy – which Pompeo puts forward in a crude form, but which, as illustrated below, is widely employed by hawkishly idealistic China pundits and public intellectuals in the wider Anglosphere – allows the critic to condemn the CCP without implicating hundreds of millions of Chinese people. Of course, there is much sense in avoiding stigmatization; it would be mistaken and unethical to blame individual Chinese for an entire political system. One should not take one's grievances with the CCP out on any Chinese individual, nor consider a whole people as tainted due to political differences.

On the other hand, radically divorcing the object of criticism from its cultural and societal embedding licenses the critic to denounce it in full. The reasoning is that there could be no harm in condemning, even demonizing, the CCP since one has clarified that the CCP does not represent or reflect the character of great masses of Chinese people. Therefore, the dichotomous conception, which superficially appears merely to reflect a sympathetic humanistic concern for empathetic interpersonal communication, is, in fact, also a vehicle for maximizing idealistic aggression.

In his essay "The Communist Party of China and the Idea of 'Evil'," sinologist Kerry Brown depicts the Party-people dichotomy, which he subsequently dismisses as simplistic and patronizing, as follows:

The Communist Party is evil. Chinese people are good. They are oppressed, downtrodden. It is easy to progress beyond this to the heroic statement that we, outside of China, with our enlightened ways are those who will be key in delivering this salvation. We are on our way. Freedom is nigh. The neatness of this approach is attractive. Binary, black and white systems are always easy to engage with. It also evades some of the pointier, more complex issues. We have located the single source of the problem – the evil Communist Party. Once that is out of the way, everything will be plain sailing.²⁸

More nuanced variants of this dichotomous construct frequently appear in scholarly and intellectual discourse. Most directly, the dichotomy serves to preempt the accusation of stigmatizing ordinary Chinese people. The political scientist and public intellectual Andreas Fulda explains, "[W]ild accusations of racism are the key context to understand and appreciate why many non-Chinese discourse participants go to great length to distinguish between the

<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-02/Why-China-s-five-year-plans-work--V5Gn4iu5vW/index.html>).

²⁸ Kerry Brown, "The Communist Party of China and the Idea of 'Evil,'" *Oxford Political Review*, April 24, 2020, <https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2020/04/24/china-series-1/>

political regime and Chinese citizens in their critique of the political situation in mainland China.”²⁹

Additionally, in scholarly and intellectual discourse, as in Pompeo’s speech, the dichotomy suggests that the CCP is at least partly illegitimate. Tellingly, Fulda, who employs and defends the dichotomy, adds to his explanation that despite having a “constituency of supporters,” the CCP, like “other autocratic regimes, e.g., in Syria and Iran,” lacks “political legitimacy”; or “at least the CCP doesn’t have democratic legitimacy.”³⁰ It is not a coincidence that upholders of the dichotomous conception often reject the CCP’s legitimacy; the dichotomy is the very form of delegitimizing criticism.

Finally, upholders of the dichotomy also attach to it a moral weight as a means to exonerating ‘the people’. For example, journalist Tanner Brown (not to be confused with Kerry Brown) warns that without it, one would have to “extend the moral accountability” to “some hundred million people.” According to him, one would have to consider all those people to be “in opposition to universal suffrage [and] in support of concentration camps and mock trials.”³¹ Since it would be immoral to cast such a negative light on so many people, it would seem to follow that we must treat the Party (or the Party’s elite) as located in a separate moral universe. Relatedly, dichotomy-upholders insist that we should abstain from the blanket term ‘China’ as much as possible because it could lower awareness of the need to treat the Chinese people differently – and better – than we do their government. There are the CCP and its leadership, which should be criticized, pressured, and negotiated with, and “the Chinese public, which [American] policymakers should respect in word and deed,”³² as historian Pamela Kyle Crossley of Dartmouth College argues.

However, as sinologist Kerry Brown explains, “a neat division between Party and population” is untenable because “the Party is part of society, and its [ninety million] members are, unsurprisingly, more often than not typical Chinese people.”³³ Thus, though one obviously should not conflate the categories of the CCP and the general Chinese population, their relationship is, as Brown puts it, “complex.” It is also to be noted that the CCP’s governing style and claim to legitimacy creatively interact with various critical Chinese political and political-philosophical traditions. Granted, China’s governance could be fundamentally better and freer. Providing indications of this are the Republic of China on Taiwan and phases of openness in China’s modern history.³⁴ Nonetheless, political China cannot be cleanly separated from ‘the people’ and the rest of society.

²⁹ Andreas Fulda in a twitter response to Kerry Brown’s article “The Communist Party of China and the Idea of ‘Evil’,” April 24, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AMFChina/status/1253699200631652352>

³⁰ Ibid., <https://twitter.com/AMFChina/status/1253699204536549377>

³¹ Tanner Brown, Comment on Kerry Brown, “The Communist Party of China and the Idea of ‘Evil’.” *Oxford Political Review*, April 24, 2020, <https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2020/04/24/china-series-1/>

³² Pamela Kyle Crossley, In: “What Now? A ChinaFile Conversation,” *China File*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/what-now>

³³ Kerry Brown, “The Communist Party of China and the Idea of ‘Evil’.”

³⁴ In the above cited book *The Age of Openness: China Before Mao* (2008), Frank Dikötter develops the claim that the Republican Era (before the Japanese invasion of 1937) had been surprisingly cosmopolitan and forward-looking. The republican government oversaw the modernization of the state apparatus and the legal system, and introduced mass education.

It follows, then, that the CCP is not a boxing sack that one can punch with trade sanctions or decoupling policies without thereby also hurting the ‘real China’ or the ordinary Chinese people. The same counts for its denunciations. Kerry Brown recommends moderation and nuance: “[I]f you want to start deploying language like ‘evil’ about the Party, then you are going to have to start labeling a good number of Chinese people that way too. Party members are Chinese people, after all – not some separate species!”³⁵ The dichotomous discourse, which, by contrast, pictures the CCP as an isolatable target, legitimizes a maximization of ideological aggression and potentially obscures its effects on real groups and individuals.

Or is it ‘Roman’?

Of course, the mainland’s political theorists are all too aware of the discussed ideological pressure because it targets ideologies that they either hold or are otherwise profoundly familiar with. They often describe Western intellectuals’ aggressively universalizing idealism, not as Napoleonic, but as *Roman*. Jiang Shigong, for example, claims that American geopolitics aims to create a “new Roman Empire” on a global scale. He argues that “American liberals” wage “a new Cold War” against China out of a “deep-felt resentment” with the fact that “the CCP leadership and socialist system with Chinese characteristics became a stumbling block in the United States’ construction of a ‘New Roman Empire’ for the entire world.”³⁶ His colleague at Peking University, Zhao Tingyang, has constructed an entire philosophical framework around the conceptional opposition between the ‘Roman’ and ‘Tianxia’. He claims that, “The world order has two traditions: imperialism invented by the Romans and the Tianxia system invented by China.”³⁷

‘Tianxia’ means ‘*all under heaven*’. It is an ancient Chinese concept that varyingly denoted the emperor’s complete territory, the civilized world, or the entire world. Both Jiang and Zhao believe that Tianxia has existed for millennia, not only as a word covering a changing semantic field but also as an imagined order and political practice. They claim that from these, a model for a culturally all-inclusive world universalism can be extrapolated, one in which there is “harmony without [world-regional ideological] assimilation” (*hé ér bùtóng*). Zhao claims that the Tianxia ideal – “a concept of perpetual peace based on non-exclusion” – transcends the different cultures and political systems and is *not* “the universalization of Chinese values.”³⁸ Still, he also argues that “China [is] an epitome of Tianxia,” that it has carried the “Tianxia spirit” from the ancient times to the present, and that it has been, in effect, “a ‘world-structured’ country.”³⁹

³⁵ Kerry Brown, “The Communist Party of China and the Idea of ‘Evil’.”

³⁶ Jiang Shigong, “Zhōng ‘měi guānjiàn shí nián’: ‘Xīn luómǎ diguó’ yǔ ‘xīn de wěidà dòuzhēng’.” Guancha website, May 9, 2020. Quote: “Yóu cǐ, zài tāmen de luóji zhōng, jiàng zhōngguó gòngchǎndǎng de língdǎo hé zhōngguó tèsè shèhuì zhǔyì zhìdù kàn zuò měiguó jiàngòu ‘xīn luómǎ diguó’ tǒngzhì shí jiè de bànjiǎoshí.” (https://www.guancha.cn/QiangShiGong/2020_09_05_564144.shtml).

³⁷ Zhao Tingyang, *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance*, translated from Mandarin by Liqing Tao (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2019). p. 11; cf. p. 58.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 89. Cf. Régis Debray and Zhao Tingyang, “Tianxia: All Under Heaven.” *Noema*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.noemamag.com/tianxia-all-under-heaven/>

³⁹ Zhao Tingyang, *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance*, pp. 38-39.

According to Zhao, a future world order inspired by the ideal of Tianxia would be domination-free, while allowing for much cultural diversity under a gently harmonizing federalist world government informed mainly by New Confucian and Buddhist values. In contrast, on the same view, any neo-Roman imperialism wants to universalize its values – liberal democracy, individualism, the formal diplomatic equality between nation-states, and a liberal understanding of human rights – by pushing the ideological others off the map. Crudely put, Zhao and other Tianxia theorists suggest that in a Tianxia-led world, China and other non-liberal democracies would coexist harmoniously with liberal democracies; whereas in a ‘Roman’-structured world one ideological block would impose an intolerant hegemony.

But why is such an isomorphic ideological pressure called ‘Roman’? What about it is specifically Roman? After all, there have been many empires in history, and the historical Roman Empire consisted of a complex, locally diversified governance landscape, not a regime-uniformized plane. In the Chinese political theoretical literature, many auteurs are vague about what makes Western universalism ‘Roman’, apart from some underspecified characterizations, such as its penchant for ‘domination’.

In what follows, I will attempt to reconstruct the meaning of the term in this mainland Chinese discourse critical of Western ideological pressure. I discern four reasons for the ‘Roman’ framing. First, ‘Rome’ carries common associations. The word ‘imperialism’ derives from the Latin ‘imperium’. In European history, many rulers dreamt of reviving Rome. And over two centuries, non-Western critics of the West’s liberal and liberationist idealism have repeatedly associated this idealism with imperialism and the Roman Empire.⁴⁰ For example, Ottoman political activist Ali Suavi (1839–1878) wrote: “Just look how those Frenchmen talk pretentiously about freedom and equality, all the while seeking world domination like Caesar.”⁴¹ Since the Second World War, with the rise of the United States to the status of a world power, the Rome-America analogy took precedence. The image of a Pax Americana fits nicely to Washington’s political architecture, which is neo-classical, with the American Founding Fathers drawing extensively on Roman political conceptions.

A second, more specific reason for the mainland theorists to associate America with Rome might be their Marxist-Leninist training. In 1917, Lenin theorized that the last stage of capitalism takes the form of imperialism.⁴² This theoretical framework, which closely associates capitalism and imperialism, makes it tempting to conceive of the capitalist US as an empire.

Third, Zhao mentions in passing the influence of Hardt and Negri’s work *Empire*.⁴³ The book indeed argues that the present world order, which it calls ‘Empire’, ultimately derives

⁴⁰ Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Ali Suavi, “Democracy: Government by the People, Equality,” in Charles Kurzman (ed.), *Modernist Islam, 1840–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1870]), p. 142.

⁴² Vladimir I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2010).

⁴³ Zhao Tingyang, “All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism: An Old Story and New World Peace,” *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought: Debates and Perspectives*, in Fred Dallmayr and Zhao Tingyang (eds.) (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), p. 133.

from a Roman legacy. And very indicatively, this legacy's "universal notion of right" is seen there as "form[ing] the core of the Empire."⁴⁴

Fourth, there is Rome's religious connotation. Zhao argues that the new Roman imperialism is informed, not just by ancient Roman and modern European imperialism, but also by "the Christian ideology of cultural universalism." The latter "creat[es] the paradox of launching wars in the name of making peace and destroying liberty in the name of defending human rights."⁴⁵ Indeed, Christianity, like its Islamic brother, has strong universalistic pretensions. The faith is for everyone, for as Saint Paul proclaims in Galatians (3:28): "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This fits the 'Rome' imagery of the Catholic Church, which indeed means 'universal church' and has its headquarter in Rome. Thus, 'Rome' can symbolize both the 'hard power' and the idealistic dimension of the Western political universalism.

If one were to adopt this imagery, one would subsume 'Napoleonic idealism' under the broader and older 'Roman spirit' belonging to and associated with Western civilization in general. However, this perspective has various shortcomings, one of which is that it could lead to essentialized and reified conceptions of the Western and Chinese civilizations. Zhao and Jiang employ a dualistic scheme in which, crudely put, the Roman stands for a dominating West, whereas Tianxia is seen as the global application of the supposed Chinese appreciation for harmony. Zhao writes: "While both envision a universal world order, the imperial system seeks to conquer and achieve a dominating rule, while the Tianxia system, on the other hand, tries to construct a sharable system."⁴⁶ Critics argue that Zhao turns Tianxia into a "utopian world order"⁴⁷ that corresponds neither to something that exists in present-day China, nor to some Chinese golden age in ancient history. This essay lacks the space to delve into that discussion.⁴⁸ But if Tianxia cannot signify the essence of a historical Chinese-civilizational approach to universalism and diversity, then its pair concept of the essentially Roman West might be untenable too.

It is arguably a strength of the '(neo-)Napoleonic' framing that it does not imply any civilizational dualism. Instead of positing a divide between two age-old civilizations, each with its unique tradition of universalistic thought, the 'Napoleonic' framing is more open-ended. Though undoubtedly deriving historically from Christian and Roman-legal traditions of universalism, Napoleonic liberationist universalism has influenced – and perhaps has become a permanent component of – Chinese political thought. Admittedly, the Chinese and Western political-philosophical landscapes do differ fundamentally. Comparative philosopher Thomas Metzger argues that the Neo-Confucian epistemological and ontological assumptions that

⁴⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 198.

⁴⁵ Zhao Tingyang, "All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism," p. 133.

⁴⁶ Zhao Tingyang, *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance*, translated from Mandarin by Liqing Tao (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2019), p. 3.

⁴⁷ Chishen Chang and Kuan-Hsing Chen, "Tracking Tianxia: On Intellectual Self-Positioning," in Ban Wang (ed.), *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 274.

⁴⁸ On the topic, see Ban Wang (ed.), *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); as well as Zhiping Liang, "Xiǎngxiàng 'tiānxià': Dāngdài zhōngguó de yìshí xíngtài jiàngòu," *Sixiang*, Vol. 36 (Dec. 2018), pp. 71–177.

dominate contemporary Chinese political thought cause its utopian idealism to diverge from the (liberal) American political-philosophical mainstream.⁴⁹ This divergence falls outside the scope of this essay. But even if it implies that present-day Chinese political thought lacks a strong universalistic-liberationist strand, branding the latter as entirely non-Chinese and putting it in some disjunctive 'Roman' category would sit awkwardly with the CCP's history. After all, the CCP itself stands in the modern revolutionary tradition. Through its foundational Maoist ideology and Leninist party-state apparatus, the party is connected to a long, global, and historically traceable chain of revolutions and liberationist imaginings that find their ultimate source in the French Revolution.

In conclusion, despite the Revolution's global legacy, currently there is still no single liberal or liberationist ideology that 'rules the universe'. Instead, the co-existence of significantly different regime forms persists, in part because the revolutionary tradition branched out into competing avant-garde ideologies, creating a liberal-democratic and a communist block. Neo-Napoleonic hawks like Pompeo style themselves as the avant-garde of liberty's global march, but the reality of global regime-pluralism is not likely to give in any time soon. Therefore, any realistic diplomacy or activist engagement must acknowledge that the regime pluralism is here to stay for the foreseeable future and that declaring the other side's political system fundamentally illegitimate does not benefit constructive international communication.

⁴⁹ Thomas Metzger, *A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash Between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005), pp. 1–184.