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China's New Leftist

By PANKAJ MISHRA

One day earlier this year I met Wang Hui at the Thinker's Cafe near Tsinghua University in Beijing, where he teaches. A small, compact man with streaks of gray in his short hair and a pleasant face that always seems ready to break into a smile, he arrived, as he would to all our subsequent meetings, on an old-fashioned bicycle, dressed in dark corduroys, a suede jacket and a black turtleneck that would not be amiss on an American campus.

Co-editor of China's leading intellectual journal, *Dushu* (Reading), and the author of a four-volume history of Chinese thought, Wang, still in his mid-40's, has emerged as a central figure among a group of writers and academics known collectively as the New Left. New Left intellectuals advocate a "Chinese alternative" to the neoliberal market economy, one that will guarantee the welfare of the country's 800 million peasants left behind by recent reforms. And unlike much of China's dissident class, which grew out of the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and consists largely of human rights and pro-democracy activists, Wang and the New Left view the Communist leadership as a likely force for change. Recent events — the purge of party leaders on anticorruption charges late last month and continuing efforts to curb market excesses — suggest that this view is neither utopian nor paradoxical. Though New Leftists have never directed government policy, their concerns are increasingly amplified by the central leadership.

In the last few years, Wang has reflected eloquently and often on what outsiders see as the central paradox of contemporary China: an authoritarian state fostering a free-market economy while espousing socialism. On this first afternoon, he barely paused for small talk before embarking on an analysis of the country's problems. He described how the Communist Party, though officially dedicated to egalitarianism, had opened its membership to rich businessmen. Many of its local officials, he said, used their arbitrary power to become successful entrepreneurs at the expense of the rural populations they were meant to serve and joined up with real estate speculators to seize collectively owned land from peasants. (According to Chinese officials, 60 percent of land acquisitions are illegal.) The result has been an alliance of elite political and commercial interests, Wang said, that recalls similar alliances in the United States and many East Asian countries.

As he spoke about how market reforms have widened the gap between rich and poor, between rural

and urban areas, smartly dressed students browsed through a highbrow collection (Leo Strauss, Jürgen Habermas), checked their e-mail and sipped their mochas. At the privately owned Thinker's Cafe and the adjoining All Sages bookshop, Wang seemed to be famous. Students greeted him reverentially; the staff was extra attentive. Yet Wang still belongs to a minority. Recoiling from the excesses of Maoism and the failures of the old planned economy, most Chinese intellectuals, even those with no connection to the state, see the market economy as indispensable to China's modernization and revival. Zhu Xueqin, a history professor at Shanghai University who is one of China's best-known liberal intellectuals, told me that he wants more, not fewer, market reforms. For him, China's present instability is caused not by economic forces but by a politically repressive regime that has prevented the emergence of a representative democracy and a constitutional government.

Wang readily acknowledges that China's efforts at economic reform have not been without great benefits. He applauds the first phase, which lasted from 1978 to 1985, for improving agricultural output and the rural standard of living. It is the central government's more recent obsession with creating wealth in urban areas — and its decision to hand over political authority to local party bosses, who often explicitly disregard central government directives — that has led, he said, to deep inequalities within China. The embrace of a neoliberal market economy has meant the dismantling of welfare systems, a widening income gap between rich and poor and deepening environmental crises not only in China but in the United States and other developed countries. For Wang, it is the task of intellectuals to remind the state of its old, unfulfilled obligations to peasants and workers.

Despite his invocation of socialist principles, Wang was quick to tell me that he dislikes the New Left label, even though he has used it himself. "Intellectuals reacted against 'leftism' in the 80's, blaming it for all of China's problems," he said, "and right-wing radicals use the words 'New Left' to discredit us, make us look like remnants from the Maoist days." Wang also doesn't care to be identified with the radical intellectuals of the 60's in America and Europe, to whom the term New Left was originally applied. Many of them, he said, had passion and slogans but very little practical politics, and not surprisingly, more than a few ended up with the neoconservatives, supporting "fantasy projects" like democracy in Iraq.

Wang prefers the term "critical intellectual" for himself and like-minded colleagues, some of whom are also part of China's nascent activist movement in the countryside, working to alleviate rural poverty and environmental damage. Though broadly left wing, Dushu publishes writing from across the ideological spectrum. Wang's own work draws on a broad range of Western thinkers, from the French historian Fernand Braudel to the globalization theorist Immanuel Wallerstein. "Intellectual quality is important to me," Wang said. "I don't want to run just any left-wing garbage." The magazine has carried abstract debates on postcolonial theory as well as, he claims, some of the most interesting analyses in China of how the government's urban-oriented reforms have damaged rural society. There

are restrictions on what Dushu can publish, of course, and Wang is frank about them. As with all intellectual journals in mainland China, authors and editors at Dushu have to exercise a degree of self-censorship. Articles cannot directly criticize the leadership or deviate much from the official line on subjects that the Chinese government considers most sensitive — Taiwan or restive Muslim and Buddhist minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet.

“I get asked in Western countries, ‘How do you define your position?’” Wang said. “‘Are you a dissident?’ I say no. What is a dissident? It is a cold-war category. And it has no meaning now. Many of the Chinese dissidents in America can return to China. But they don’t want to. They are doing well in the U.S. To people who ask me if we are dissidents, I say, we are critical intellectuals. Some government policies we support. Others, we oppose. It really depends on the content of the policy.”

Born in Yangzhou in the southeast province of Jiangsu, Wang was just 7 and entering primary school when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. The decade-long chaos, which traumatized older generations, seems to have left benign memories for Wang. He remembers being taken by his school to work in the villages for a week or two during the school year. “My generation of urban intellectuals,” he said, with a hint of pride, “is the last to have firsthand experience of conditions in the countryside.”

He counts the 20 months he spent working in factories around Yangzhou after middle school as a valuable experience. In 1977, he took the first university entrance exams to be held after the Cultural Revolution, during which many universities were either shut or would admit only peasants, workers and soldiers. “Thousands of aspiring students,” he reminisced, “were competing for a single place.”

When he moved from Yangzhou to Beijing to begin his doctoral studies in the mid-80’s, Wang found himself part of an even more privileged class. “Intellectuals,” he said, “had been targeted during Mao’s time; now, post-Mao, they were the elite again.” And by then, Wang said, they all agreed on what needed to be done: China had to abandon its “feudal” and socialist traditions and catch up with the capitalist West. Scarred by the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals saw socialism in China as a failure. Consequently, they had, Wang argues, no real debate on whether a Western-style consumerist society could be successfully recreated or was environmentally sustainable in China. The West, especially the United States, was idealized.

Wang first began to develop his own views on contemporary China while working on a dissertation about one of the most admired of modern Chinese writers, Lu Xun (1881-1936). Lu Xun, Wang explained to me, was a writer of the left, but he was very critical of left-wing writers and activists. He criticized Chinese tradition, but was also an excellent classical scholar. He welcomed the Western idea of progress, but was also skeptical of it. The paradoxes in Lu Xun helped Wang to see that Chinese modernity could not be a simple matter of abandoning the old and embracing the new — as it had

been for both Maoists and free-market capitalists.

For Wang, the problems associated with China's uneven development were first identified by the demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Wang himself was one of the last protesters to leave the square on the morning of June 4, 1989, as the tanks of the People's Liberation Army closed in. Normally rather brisk and matter-of-fact, he grew animated as he described in fluent, if occasionally idiosyncratic, English how a "broad social movement" began to grow out of the distress caused by the shock therapy of market reforms. The students demanding freedom of speech and assembly were certainly the most visible. But there were, he said, many more Chinese in the cities — workers, government officials and small businessmen — demanding that the government control corruption and inflation, which had shot up to 30 percent after price controls on basic commodities were lifted.

In the spring of 1989, Wang was a fellow at the prestigious Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Wang told me that he saw "democratic potential" in the protests and felt obliged to participate even though he had reservations about the students' lack of "theoretical or methodological coherence." For Wang, the student leaders recalled the Chinese intellectuals of the early 20th century, who were never more united than when they radically rejected everything in the past. Nevertheless, after the government sought to crush dissent by declaring martial law on May 20, 1989, Wang was drawn deeper into the movement. On the night of June 3, when the tanks and armored cars charged through Beijing, killing hundreds of unarmed resisters and injuring thousands more, Wang was among those assembled in the center of Tiananmen Square. He could hear the gunfire, but some of the more radical among the students still refused to leave.

Wang decided to stay and to try to persuade the students not to sacrifice their lives. "I knew," he said, "that if the result was violence, it would be disastrous for the whole country." Wang said that his fears were proved right: violence shrank the space for political debate, and the Chinese government used the period of intellectual silence that followed to begin dismantling more aspects of the welfare state, like the state-owned enterprises, that had long offered cradle-to-grave benefits to workers.

Eventually, the students advocating peaceful retreat prevailed and persuaded the People's Liberation Army to give them safe passage in the southeast corner of the square. Just before dawn, hundreds of students left the square through a narrow corridor, jostled and taunted by hostile soldiers. Within minutes, the students dispersed. Some of them were arrested and sentenced to long prison spells; others fled to Hong Kong and eventually to the West; many others, like Wang, disappeared for a few weeks.

When Wang returned to Beijing in late 1989, the authorities were waiting for him. "That was the most difficult time for me," he said. He was asked repeatedly: "What was your organization? Who were your associates?" After interrogations lasting for many months, he was sent to the northwestern

province of Shaanxi, where dozens of other young scholars from Beijing were already undergoing — in the uniquely Chinese way — “re-education” by exposure to rural conditions.

In Wang’s case, punishment by pedagogy seems to have been more successful than Chinese authorities could have anticipated. He dates his “real education” to the time he spent in Shaanxi, one of the poorest regions of China. He was shocked by the obvious disparity between the coastal cities, then enjoying the first fruits of economic reform, and the provinces. He was shocked, too, by his own ignorance and that of his colleagues in the 1989 social movement. “We had no idea that the old order in much of rural China was in deep crisis,” he said.

The commune system in Shaanxi was dismantled as part of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, and land was redistributed. But the area produced nothing of much value, not even enough food. Deepening poverty led to a sharp increase in crime and social problems; violent conflicts broke out over land; men took to gambling, beating up, even selling, their wives and daughters. Wang lived in a low-lying village where his dormitory was frequently flooded while he slept. Much of his daily work consisted of writing didactic pamphlets warning peasants against gambling and crime; he also worked on the reconstruction of a primary school that had been destroyed by floodwaters. “It was during that year,” Wang said, “that I realized how important a welfare system and cooperative network remained for many people in China. This is not a socialist idea. Even the imperial dynasties that ruled China kept a balance between rich and poor areas through taxes and almsgiving.

“People confine China’s experience to the Communist dictatorship and failures of the planned economy and think that the market will now do everything. They don’t see how many things in the past worked and were popular with ordinary people, like cooperative medical insurance in rural areas, where people organized themselves to help each other. That might be useful today, since the state doesn’t invest in health care in rural areas anymore.”

Many poor people Wang met during his year in Shaanxi saw him as the educated man from Beijing who would tell the mandarins of the central government to send them some help. “I felt burdened by this role,” Wang said. “I couldn’t tell them that I was in no position to do anything.” Wang returned, he told me, from his 10-month exile with a keen sense of the gap between the worlds of intellectuals and ordinary people.

During his time in Shaanxi, the influential *Journal of Literary Review* denounced his research on Lu Xun as an example of “bourgeois liberalization.” Nevertheless, Wang had no trouble returning to academic life.

Wang doesn’t like to talk much about 1989. He complains about the “stereotype” of China in the Western media conjured by Tiananmen. Nonetheless, our conversation about Tiananmen was

unusual. While traveling through Chinese cities, I had found it hard to get people to talk about it. When Deng Xiaoping sought to bury the ghosts of Tiananmen for good by calling for speedy market reforms in 1992, he may well have calculated that the prospect of personal wealth — and access to Western brand-name goods — would compensate many newly enriched people for the lack of political democracy. If so, he seems to have been proved right. The largest public disturbance in China since Tiananmen occurred in August 1992, when hundreds of thousands of Chinese tried to buy shares in the newly opened stock exchange of Shenzhen.

The effort to create wealth in urban areas through export-oriented industries — part of the “let some get rich first” policy announced by Deng Xiaoping and affirmed by his successors — has given the Chinese economy an average growth rate of 10 percent and made it the fourth largest in the world. Yet China remains one of the world’s poorest countries. More than 150 million people survive on a dollar a day. About 200 million of the rural population are crowding the cities and towns in search of low-paying jobs. More than four million Chinese participated in the 87,000 protests recorded in 2005, and these statistics may not fully convey the rage and discontent of Chinese living with one of the world’s highest income inequalities and deteriorating health and education systems, as well as the arbitrary fees and taxes imposed by local party officials. Much of this, Wang said, could be laid at the feet of the “right-wing radicals” or neoliberal economists who cite Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek (advocates of unregulated markets who inspired Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 80’s) and who argue for China’s integration into the global economy without taking into account the social price of mass privatization. And it is they, Wang added, who have held favor with the ruling elite and have dominated the state-run media.

Only in the last decade, Wang said, have intellectuals of the New Left begun to challenge the notion that a market economy leads inevitably to democracy and prosperity. Wang, who helped found an academic journal called *Xueren* (The Scholar) after returning from exile in 1991, was well placed to observe those intellectuals. As they came into greater contact with Western academics and scholars, they became more aware of problems not just in European and American societies but also in post-Communist countries that were trying to bring their planned economies closer to neoliberal models. China’s intention to join the World Trade Organization (which it did in 2001) provoked unexpectedly sharp debates among scholars. As Wang described it, the terms of the debate had changed: “Many people knew by then that globalization is not a neutral word describing a natural process. It is part of the growth of Western capitalism, from the days of colonialism and imperialism.” Which is not to say that the New Left embraced an easy antiglobalist position; it has been critical of recent anti-Japanese and anti-American outbursts among urban, middle-class Chinese — of what Wang dubbed “consumer nationalism.” That, Wang said, was the same kind of globalization that America advocates: “It is really a form of hypernationalism, which is why you hear talk of tariffs and penalties on China when American economic interests are hurt.”

Wang paused and then added: “Many people also learned that the reason the Chinese economy did not collapse like the Asian tiger economies in 1997 was that the national state was able to protect it. Now, of course, China with its export-dominated economy is more dependent on the Western world order, especially the American economy, than India.”

In January of this year, Wang published a long investigative article exposing the plight of workers in a factory in his hometown, Yangzhou, a city of about one million. According to Wang, in 2004 the local government sold the profitable state-owned textile factory to a real estate developer from the southern city of Shenzhen. Worker-equity shares were bought for 30 percent of their actual value, and then more than a thousand workers were laid off after mismanagement of the factory led to losses. In July 2004, the workers went on strike. In what Wang calls an agitation without precedent in the history of Yangzhou, the workers obstructed a major highway, halted bus traffic and attacked the gates of local government buildings.

Wang told me that he was helping the workers to sue the local government. He had spent time working in a nearby factory before college and this, he said, made him feel a particular connection to them. He remembered that his pay had been low — less than \$2 a month by current exchange rates — but, he said, what was crucial was that the workers he knew then felt secure in their jobs. “People claim,” he said, “that the market will automatically force the state to become more democratic. But this is baseless. We only have to think about the alliance of elites formed in the process of privatization. The state will change only when it is under pressure from a large social force, like the workers and peasants.”

Wang’s story about Yangzhou is not unique. There are many accounts of how local government officials controlling public property have amassed fortunes by privatizing state assets. According to a recent report by the activist Liu Xiaobo, more than 90 percent of the 20,000 richest people in China are related to senior government or Communist Party officials.

For Wang, democracy is not just a simple matter of expanding political freedom for the middle class or creating legal and constitutional rights for a minority already substantially empowered by market reforms. Democracy in China, he said, has to be based upon the active consent and mobilization of the majority of its population, and be able to ensure social and economic justice for them.

Yet for some New Left intellectuals, like Cui Zhiyuan, a close friend and collaborator of Wang’s who teaches political science at Tsinghua University, there is opportunity in the collision of capitalism and socialism. “There is more space here for new ideas,” Cui told me as he described why he had returned to China after many years in the United States. “The capitalist system is fixed in the West, but things are still in flux in places like China and India. We have a historic opportunity to build a better, more just society than the West.” For Cui, it is important to clarify the concepts first. “It is not helpful,” he

said, “to see socialism and capitalism as opposed and separate. Both have traveled together in the 20th century. Not just European welfare states, even American capitalism has a socialist component, which was arrived at after compromise with the trade unions.”

In recent years, Cui has found a receptive and powerful audience on an issue that lies at the very foundation of the Chinese socialist state: the collective ownership of property. Liberal Chinese economists argue that private property is sacred and inviolable in a market economy, a radical idea in the Chinese context. In an article he published in *Dushu* in 2004, Cui challenged this notion, emphasizing the essentially communal nature of property ownership. He cited Thomas Jefferson’s decision to reword John Locke’s principles of life, liberty and property with life, liberty and happiness in the Declaration of Independence.

“Jefferson recognized,” he said, “that property rights emanate from society, not from nature. That’s why there was no specific article on property rights in the U.S. Constitution and it had to be brought in later through the Fifth Amendment.” Cui went on to relate with something close to glee that his article had circulated widely among legislators in the National People’s Congress, China’s Parliament, in 2004. It had helped, he said, to provoke a debate that led the Congress to adopt a compromise amendment to the constitution, similar in wording to the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which simply states that no person “be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law.”

This spring it began to become clear that the New Left’s advocacy of a welfare state is being echoed within the Communist leadership, which is fearful of social instability and is keen to consolidate its power and legitimacy. In March, a few weeks before I met with Wang, the National People’s Congress convened in Beijing and unexpectedly became a forum for the first open ideological debate within the party for years. Legislators accused government officials of selling out China’s interests to market forces. Such was the antimarket mood that a bill to defend private property and grant land titles to farmers — one that both foreign investors in China and Chinese businessmen had been lobbying for — was not even discussed. Describing major new investments in rural areas, the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, emphasized that “building a socialist countryside” was a “major historic task” before the Communist Party. He also outlined steps to balance economic growth with environmental protection.

A German journalist told me that it was the most left-wing speech he had heard from a senior Chinese leader during his eight years in Beijing: “Even American and European politicians don’t talk about achieving a Green G.D.P.” Wang agreed. He said that he was also pleased to see President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao focusing on relations with Asian countries. “We were too obsessed with the United States during Jiang Zemin’s time,” he said. “We really need to improve our relations with Japan and India. We belong to such old and distinguished civilizations, and we cannot just be simple

followers and imitators of America.

“It is a huge achievement,” he added, a smile on his face, “that the premier should openly admit that health care and education is a failure. It has never happened before.” Wang said he thought that the government was sincere about eradicating rural poverty. But he was still cautious. “There has been so much decentralization in China,” he said, “that it is not easy to translate central government policy into action.” Last month, in the first purge of a high-ranking party member since 1995, the central leadership removed the Shanghai party chief on corruption charges, leading to speculation that there would be a reconfiguring of relations between the central government and provincial leaders and perhaps a shift in policy toward shoring up social-welfare systems and stemming pollution. Wang remained skeptical. “The Shanghai case is encouraging at least,” Wang said in a recent e-mail message. “I think there will be some political results from it, but they are results rather than reasons.”

The dangers of failing to improve conditions for the majority are clear to Wang: “If we don’t improve the situation, there will be more authoritarianism. We have already seen in Russia how people prefer a strong ruler like Putin because they are fed up with corruption, political chaos and economic stagnation. When radical marketization makes people lose their sense of security, the demand for order and intervention from above is inevitable.”

In attacking corrupt local governments, the New Left often seems to want to institute big-brotherly government of the kind authoritarian politicians like. Certainly the growing accord between the central government’s socialist rhetoric and New Left ideas makes many uneasy. Lung Yingtai, a well-known Taiwanese writer and democracy advocate, told me earlier this year that she was wary of the New Left intellectuals, who, she said, appear too close ideologically to the Communist regime. Taking this view one step further, Liu Junning, a popular liberal political theorist who left China in 1999 after being blacklisted by the Chinese government but has since returned, claimed that the New Left was another name for the nationalistic old guard of the Communist Party, which was inspired by hatred of the West.

While this seems an exaggeration, Wen Tiejun, a former government official who runs rural reconstruction projects and is identified as New Left, had attended what he called “brainstorming sessions” with Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. Typically, intellectuals in Communist countries (Vaclav Havel or Adam Michnik, for example) have gained moral authority by assuming a critical stance toward the all-powerful state. How do New Left thinkers in China calibrate their relationship with a state that has imprisoned many of their colleagues and generally shown little tolerance for criticism of the party?

When I posed this question to Cui, he momentarily lost his exuberant manner. “It is a very important question,” he said. “How to deal with the government, both morally and intellectually. This is a big

challenge for us.”

Cui does not regard the Communist regime as a “totality.” There were, he said, many different aspects of it, at both the local and central levels. “Almost every day,” Cui said, “The New York Times carries reports of peasants agitating against the Communist government, but if you listen to what the peasants are saying, they are telling the central government that the local government has violated their rights. So even the peasants can see the different aspects of the state, who supports them and who doesn’t.”

Wang Xiaoming, professor of cultural studies at Shanghai University, positions himself to the right of Wang Hui but says that he sympathizes with the New Left’s pragmatic attitude toward the Communist regime. “Civil society is very weak in China,” he said, “and since the government is the most active agent of change, we have to push the government to do what it should do besides pushing the government to give up some of its powers.”

When I met with Wang Hui for the last time, he dismissed any claims about increased New Left influence over the regime. “What we have tried to do is create an intellectual situation in which new policies can be explored,” he said. “I know that many leaders read Wen Tiejun’s article; they also read Cui’s article on property rights. There have been other articles in Dushu that have been equally influential, and I am pleased about this. But we have no other connection with the regime.”

Wang also seems to have no anxiety that ideological convergence with the regime will turn New Left intellectuals into pro-government policy wonks and hacks, part of an old Chinese tradition of intellectuals advising the state. “We look at things from a Chinese perspective naturally, but we also try to think beyond the framework of the nation-state,” he said. “People ask in the West, How could China develop capitalism with an authoritarian state? But that’s ignoring how modern capitalism grew in the West, without much democracy and with the help of imperialism and colonialism. You have to ask whether this unique economic model of the West can be globalized without great wars and destruction of the environment. This is not an abstract issue. China has stopped felling its forests, most of which have disappeared, but some country still has to produce wood for Chinese consumption.”

At our last meeting, Wang also spoke more about a subject Cui had brought up with me: how the rise of China and India throws up new challenges and possibilities with profound implications for the world at large. “Western societies have been on top for the last two centuries and shaped the world with the decisions they made,” he said. “China and India will now play equally crucial roles in the new century. But what will they be? I think it is very important for Chinese and Indian intellectuals not just to imitate the West. They have to explore alternatives to the Western model of modernity. Otherwise, the ‘consumer nationalists’ are already saying, ‘America was on top; now we are on top.’”

Wang laughed, and added, “This is not interesting.”

Pankaj Mishra last wrote for the magazine about Tibetan exiles. His most recent book is “Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet and Beyond.”

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