

# China's Ideological Spectrum

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# China's ideological spectrum: a two-dimensional model of elite intellectuals' visions

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*Andreas Møller Mulvad* is Assistant Professor at the Department of Management, Politics, and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School. His recent publications include: (2015) Competing hegemonic projects within China's variegated capitalism: 'Liberal' Guangdong vs. 'Statist' Chongqing. *New Political Economy*, 20(2); (2016) Hegemonic Projects: Interventions on the Politics of Communist Legitimation in China, 2008–2015, PhD Dissertation Series, Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen; (2017) From Deng to the demos? Han Dongfang's Laborism, Wen Tiejun's peasantry, and the future of capitalism and democracy in China. *Capital & Class*, 41(1); and (2018), The Myth of Bourgeois Democracy (with Stahl, R. M.), in T. Geelan, M. G. Hernando, and P. W. Walsh (editors), *From Financial Crisis to Social Change*. Mulvad's research examines the relationship between capitalist development and democracy in a historical-sociological perspective. Having hitherto focused on China, in his new research project Mulvad engages with the Scandinavian tradition of cooperative self-organization.

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## Abstract

In contemporary scholarship on Chinese ideological debates, both pro-system Chinese intellectuals and Western-based academics present China's future as a binary choice between a "China Model"

of authoritarian statism and a “Western” vision of democratic liberalism. This article deconstructs this dichotomy by proposing a new heuristic for conceptualizing ideological cleavage. Informed by interviews with twenty-eight leading Chinese intellectuals, the case is made for a two-dimensional spectrum allowing for ideological co-variation, on one axis, between two contending socioeconomic roads of national revival, *capitalism and socialism*, and on the other axis between *paternalism and fraternalism* as conflicting ideals for the political system. This model not only resonates with Chinese intellectual history, but also allows us to uncover two crucial ideological tendencies that disappear with the China Model/Western Path dichotomy: (i) the emerging hybrid of Confucian politics and free market economics, and (ii) the tabooed fraternalist-socialist legacy of the 1989 movement.

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## Keywords

Capitalist development  
China’s new left  
Chinese liberalism  
Democratization  
Socialism  
The China model

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This article investigates the problem of conceptualizing ideological cleavage in contemporary China. This problem is relevant for two main reasons. First, a well-crafted map of the ideological terrain helps provide more solid predictions of the future of Chinese politics. For example, to assess the chances for China’s Communist Party (CCP) of remaining in power, we must know whether ideologies differing from those officially endorsed by the leadership circulate in Chinese society. Similarly, to gauge the possibilities for democratization it is necessary to find out how the concept of democracy is contested, and from what ideological positions (Christensen 2014). Second, identifying the structure of China’s ideological spectrum is necessary for understanding the historical context and contested nature of debate around “the China Model.” This debate about whether China’s Party-driven variant of

capitalism constitutes a distinct approach to socioeconomic development, from which other countries can learn has proliferated among Chinese intellectuals and China watchers since the 2000s in step with China's continuing rise (Breslin 2011).

As China's geo-economic clout grows, so does the likelihood of increasing ideological strains between China and "The West." Indeed, since current CCP leader and president of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, came to power in 2012, the CCP leadership has expressed increasing self-confidence about the virtues of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" as a vital governing ideology that remains explicitly and proudly opposed to "Western" notions of parliamentary democracy. Furthermore, some observers find that growing Party insistence on ideological unity and the narrowing of spaces for debate have marked Xi's term (Lam 2015; Shambaugh 2015). In this situation, the need for scholars to resist any simplistic polarization of how "China" and "the West" think is larger than ever. Instead, scholars should acknowledge the multiplicity of voices *within* China (Ferchen 2013).

Most scholars outside China would probably agree to remain critical of the propagandistic CCP discourse that invokes a friend-enemy distinction to denounce any "pro-Western" ideological utterance deviating from the party line. In particular, on "sensitive" issues related to political reform. But the problem is that the CCP leadership is not alone in reproducing the image of Western-style liberal reform as the only possible alternative to China's current Party-controlled model. This apparent dichotomy is reinforced by the use of binaries in scholarly research literatures. On one hand, scholars of comparative politics discuss the prospects of democratization and China's "authoritarian resilience" on the basis of a "transition from autocracy" framework (e.g., Nathan 2003; Gilley 2005). This perspective installs liberal democracy as the polar opposite of "authoritarianism" and as the assumed end-goal of historical development. On the other hand, comparative political economists studying "post-socialist transition" discuss the resilience (and resurgence) of China's Party-driven capitalism through a framework that takes free market capitalism as the more developed counterpoint to "state capitalism" (e.g., Huang 2008;

Bremmer 2010). The problem arises when these two axes of politics and economics are collapsed into one, inspired by the defining assumption of modernization theory that there is a causal link between economic and political “development” (Sakwa 2012, p. 45). On this view, Chinese debates are shaped by the monochromatic struggle of forward-looking “reformers” to complete China’s modernization—taken to be identical to free-market capitalism combined with liberal democratic institutions—in the face of opposition from “conservatives,” taken to stand for both economic statism and political authoritarianism as an ostensibly coherent “China Model.”

The resonance of this dichotomy is so strong that even scholars with a record of documenting the variegated landscape of Chinese ideological debate occasionally reproduce it. For Joseph Fewsmith (2011, p. 6), for example, the “China Model” debate, like many previous rounds of debate, is in the last instance reducible to a question of whether China should resist or embrace “Western” economic approaches, with the question of democratization and “universal values” allegedly lurking “behind that disagreement.” Fewsmith, perhaps inadvertently, leaves his readers with the impression that *all* Chinese politics pivots on the perennial reproduction in new guises of a basic tension between “Westernness” and “Chineseness” that constantly extends into a pro-market, liberal-democratic, and universalist “Western” stance versus a socialist-authoritarian and nationalistic “Chinese” position.

The ambition of this article is to problematize this one-dimensional model through an empirically informed critique of the assumption that in China people either combine an authoritarian and state interventionist outlook or prefer *both* democracy and “the free market.” I posit that precisely because the perception of Chinese politics as structured around an absolute dichotomy of a “liberal West” and a “non-liberal China” is gaining ground in both official and popular imagination, a social theoretical critique is called for. This article thus unpacks how the dichotomy is too crude to provide us with an adequate map of the spectrum of ideological visions in contemporary China. In particular, the statist-liberal binary conceals struggles within both the “authoritarian,” statist camp (over the meaning and institutional implications of ‘socialism’) and the liberal camp (over the relative

importance of popular sovereignty versus a constitutional market in order to protect private property). Thus, we miss how many Chinese intellectuals are combatting the tendency to reduce political space to a binary choice between an authoritarian-statist “China Model” and a democratic-liberal “Western” model.

The argument draws on an historically contextualizing and interpretivist methodological approach. Triangulating between insights from literatures on ideological conflicts in China’s troubled twentieth century and conversations with twenty-eight influential Chinese intellectuals,<sup>1</sup> I propose a two-dimensional model of China’s ideological spectrum (see Fig. 1). The horizontal dimension (from socialism on the left to capitalism on the right) represents disagreements over whether China socioeconomic system should be based on public or private ownership of the means of production. The vertical dimension represents disagreements over the ideal political system. This dimension reaches from *paternalism*—the notion that natural political inequality and corresponding elite rule must be cultivated for the good of all—to *fraternalism*—the notion that the Chinese people are capable of ruling themselves as political equals.

### **Fig 1**

A two-dimensional model of China’s ideological spectrum of intellectual debate



Inspired by Max Weber (1949), this model serves as an *ideal typological* analytical heuristic for disentangling political and socioeconomic visions for China's future and rethinking their intricate connection in contemporary Chinese ideological debates. Thus, the theoretical ambition of this article is to highlight patterns of ideological cleavage that tend to be disregarded in both official CCP discourse and Western scholarship. Following Weber, the (potential) validity of an ideal typological construct lies in its ability to enhance our understanding of "the cultural significance of historical events" (Weber 1949, p. 110). In this case, the claim is that a two-dimensional spectrum offers a parsimonious way to uncover a historically and politically significant pattern of ideological conflict hidden beneath the



increasingly “geopoliticized” surface of an apparent binary struggle between Westernization and “The China Model.” Accordingly, the model is not an attempt to capture every important aspect of ideological cleavage in contemporary Chinese society. The ambition is merely to shed new light on one central, yet undertheorized dynamic of Chinese ideological debates among elite intellectuals.

One useful way to unpack the relevance of the two-dimensional model is to compare it to an influential recent contribution that does purport to achieve a society-wide, objective mapping of ideological cleavage. In the straightforwardly entitled “China’s ideological spectrum,” Pan and Xu (2018) use survey data to map the distribution of ideological opinion across the entire Chinese population. Their article thus provides the first systematic attempt to test the empirical salience of a one-dimensional conceptualization of China’s ideological space.<sup>2</sup> The authors find that not one, but three “latent traits” are instrumental in structuring individual-level preferences: 1) a *political* dimension distinguishing pro-democratic “liberals” from authoritarian “conservatives”; 2) a compounded *economic/social* dimension (economically market-oriented *and* culturally non-traditional individuals versus anti-market *and* culturally traditional individuals), and; 3) a schism over *nationalism* (pro- or anti-).

This finding of a “3D”-pattern suggests that preferences on political and socioeconomic issues do indeed not boil down to the same latent trait. However, Pan and Xu (2018) also report a strong *correlation* between each of the dimensions. The authors conclude that individuals who are politically “liberal” are also more likely to be both “pro-market/non-traditional” and “non-nationalist,” while individuals who are politically “conservative” are more likely to be “anti-market/traditional” and “nationalist” (ibid., p. 255). Indeed, the ideological spectrum is “... better described as a three-dimensional ovoid (football) than either a one-dimensional line or a three-dimensional sphere” (ibid., p. 255). This indicates that in the end authoritarian, statist, and nationalist viewpoints *do* tend to go together as a package, as does liberal-democratic, pro-market, and non-nationalist viewpoints. The notion of a quasi-“1D,” ideological spectrum pitting China against the West comes creeping back in as an apparent empirical fact.

This article picks up where Pan and Xu (2018) leave off, but from a different methodological angle. Pan and Xu adopt what can be termed a “thin” concept of ideology, inferring ideological preferences at the individual level by aggregating answers to a set of predefined discrete statements covering various policy fields. In contrast, the qualitative in-depth interview data drawn upon here allows for an engagement with ideology in the “thicker” shape of holistic visions of China’s future that emerge as the product of the conscious activity of *intellectuals*, i.e., professional producers of ideological discourse. This approach narrows the explanatory scope, as I seek to illuminate ideological cleavage in one sphere of Chinese society only. But it also paves the way for a different kind of insight, namely into ideology production as a distinct form of political agency centered on the articulation of competing systematic worldviews designed to influence both political elites and the general population.

Debates between high-profiled public intellectuals, historically a highly important group in Chinese politics (Goldman 2012), serve as a salient entry point to understanding ideological cleavage in the particular political context of the Chinese Party-state. With both economic class struggle and political party struggle curtailed by the lack of associations independent of CCP control, the visions of intellectuals obtain heightened importance compared with liberal societies (Leonard 2008). Chinese elite intellectuals, defined as professional knowledge producers, are not objectively *representative* of the Chinese population. But they nevertheless serve as key agents in ideological debates, as bearers of historical memory about alternative ways of envisioning and organising Chinese society that are otherwise in threat of becoming marginalized. Furthermore, Chinese intellectuals potentially reach an online audience of hundreds of millions, thus simultaneously articulating and affecting public moods in ways that the state elite can only partially control. Hence, Chinese intellectuals remain a two-way ideological mediator between state elites and ordinary citizens. The discourses of intellectuals, as simultaneously a barometer and causal “shaper” of both state elite worldviews and mass public opinion, serve as an indispensable source of knowledge for outside observers.<sup>3</sup>

As is illustrated below, the two-dimensional model of the ideological spectrum of intellectual debate provides three ways to engage with Pan and Xu's findings. First, in relation to the "political" dimension, I show that not all pro-democratic intellectuals are "liberals"; that not all "liberals" are pro-democratic; and that the key strategy for intellectuals justifying sustained political authoritarianism is to appeal specifically to *paternalist* political values. Second, I point out that as far as intellectual debates go, Pan and Xu's dimension of contestation over values somewhat opaquely related to "the market" is more concisely rendered in terms of a long-standing schism between socialist and capitalist visions for China's future. Third, I propose to discard "nationalism" as a separate third dimension of analysis with assumed explanatory power in its own right. Invariably, Chinese intellectuals—even liberals—are motivated by "patriotic worrying" (Davies 2009), leaving any simple appeal to "the nation" ideologically underspecified. In the sphere of intellectual debate at least, the relevant critical question is rather what *kind* of political-economic vision nationalism is articulated with.

This article is structured in five sections that unpack why the two-dimensional model is relevant for shedding new light on ideological cleavage in intellectual debates. In the second section, I explain how the two dimensions resonate with Chinese intellectual history in a long-term perspective. The third section reviews the existing, predominantly monochrome research literatures on China's ideological debates since 1989, indicating how a two-dimensional model helps us to add nuance and re-think the stakes of intellectual debate beyond the ensnaring, but simplistic dichotomy between liberalism and 'statism'. The fourth, and longest, section illustrates the model by spelling out four arguments, one for each quadrant. Each quadrant represents a political philosophical ideal type about what the CCP must do to remain (or become) a legitimate state elite. It furthermore draws on interview data to highlight four creative 'speech acts' by key intellectuals within this ideological terrain: Xiao Bin, Yao Zhongqiu, Gong Xiantian, and Han Yuhai. The final section concludes and briefly discusses whether the two-dimensional model is applicable beyond the case of China.

## Learning from history: The case for a two-dimensional model

This section unpacks why the two-dimensional model provides an improvement on the binary or one-dimensional conceptualization. As indicated, the problem of the one-dimensional conceptualization is not that it simplifies, but that it *oversimplifies* by confounding two types of non-identical ideological conflict over the ideal property regime and political regime respectively. This results in a compound schism whereby combining economic state interventionism with political authoritarianism (as in the CCP's current 'China Model') or 'free market' capitalism with democracy (the quintessentially 'Western' or 'liberal' route) appear as the only possible ways to construct a modern society. This conceptualization is particularly problematic in that it analytically marginalizes both socialists who favour democracy and non-socialists who are against it. As a remedy, this article proposes to follow the classical example of Rokeach (1973) and map ideological variation onto a Cartesian plane. Next, I specify the axes of this space of contestation and then discuss how they reflect China's intellectual history.

The horizontal axis represents disagreements over what constitutes an ideal socioeconomic system, and measures opinions on whether ownership of the means of production ought to be entirely in public hands (the 'left extreme' position, historically associated with 'socialism') or entirely in private hands (the 'right extreme', associated with 'capitalism'). Competing opinions on socioeconomic reforms (from "roll back to the policies of the Maoist epoch", to "full privatization") can be located along this axis. The vertical axis, meanwhile, measures opinions on political (in)equality in the exercise of state power. The 'paternalist' pole represents visions, which justify institutional inequalities in the access to political power. Following Dworkin's (2016) definition, the ideal typically 'paternalist' axiom of this position is that some elite individuals are entitled to rule because they are superiorly able (through natural disposition and/or education) to discern what is in the best interest of the many. Meanwhile, 'fraternalism' ideal typically represents visions that celebrate complete political equality and the empowerment of ordinary citizens, seen as

capable of defining their own best interest for themselves, through a system of popular self-rule. Metaphorically, whereas paternalism idealizes a parent-child like relationship of benevolent guardianship, fraternalism idealizes the imagined brotherly or sisterly solidarity between emancipated equals.<sup>4</sup>

The specification of the philosophical substance of ideological variation on both axes draws on an interpretation of modern China's specific historical-empirical context based on research interviews and existing literatures. It was through dialogue with Chinese intellectuals that it gradually became clear how both axes of contestation are deeply rooted in Chinese intellectual history in the twentieth century. More specifically, the axes represent long-standing discussions, originally opened by the 'New Culture' (1915–1921) and 'May Fourth' (1919–1925) movements, over what kinds of political and socioeconomic institutions should define China as a modern nation-state. These intellectual movements emerged in the wake of the collapse of the imperial order after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and Sun Yat-Sen's first (failed) attempt to build a Chinese republic as a modern polity and economy (for overviews of China's ideological spectrum in this epoch, see Fung 2010 and Jenco 2013). Two interrelated but substantively different questions about Chinese modernity that the downfall of the Qing left open - and which remain open today - are: First, would China copy Western-style capitalism based on class divisions, or could an alternative, more harmonious socioeconomic system be carved out? Second, who should govern, and with what mandate, when no longer in the role of an emperor?

The first axis – public vs. private property – was the one that from the 1920s onwards set apart the CCP and the KMT (the nationalist *Guomindang* Party, led by Chiang Kai-Shek) as proponents of socialist modernization through collectivized production, and state-directed, capitalist development respectively. But importantly, the issue was never fully closed even after the CCP defeated the KMT and created a socialist economy after 1949. It lingered in Mao's paranoia against potential 'capitalist roaders' within the Party, which informed the Cultural Revolution (Meisner 2007) and was eventually, confirming Mao's fears, re-actualized, as privatization was embraced, but for a core

of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s. Indeed, the discussion over the property question remains a central point of orientation in debates since the 1990s – with intellectuals pushing a hard-left line of rolling back reforms normally termed ‘Neo-Maoists’ or ‘Old Left’ and intellectuals arguing for privatizing even the remainders of state ownership in the statist capitalist model of the CCP sometimes referred to as “rightists” (rather than liberals).

The second axis – paternalist or fraternalist politics – points back to discussions emerging in the 1910s about how the ideal of ‘democracy’ should be institutionally realized as part of the building of modern China. Now, as then, the debate pits those that would retain the principles of the government on behalf of the many by a meritocratic, educated elite versus against those who rebel against Confucian elitism whatever its guise and aspire to bring political power to the masses (see in particular Schwarcz 1986; Ip 1994).

Importantly, there is a rich intellectual history of contestation over this issue on *both sides* of China’s socialist-capitalist spectrum. In the 1920s, both the CCP and the KMT experienced internal rifts over the extent to which the paternalist political control of an elite would be necessary in the modern China to come.<sup>5</sup> But even after 1949, a constant undercurrent both inside and outside the CCP has sought, against the Leninist vanguard paternalism of the CCP leadership, to retain the vision of a democratization in China whereby the CCP would gradually let go of its monopoly on power to be replaced with institutions that represent the whole people. This fraternalist position has a well-researched liberal variant that argues for both parliamentary democracy and a privatized market economy in a distinguished tradition from Gu Zhun in the 1950s to Nobel Prize Winner Liu Xiaobo in the 2000s (see Xu 2003; Béja et al. 2012). But it also has a long but less well-described history as a pro-democratic tendency within Chinese socialism, manifested both in (parts of) the 1978 Democracy Wall Movement and the 1989 uprising (Paltemaa 2007).

The fact that undercurrents of fraternalist political thought have survived both on the left and the right should not be taken as evidence that the Chinese party-state provides a level playing-field for any kind

of ideological utterance, however. The CCP is heavily invested in maintaining and renewing an official ideology that stresses the necessity of elite rule for stability and progress. Whereas a purely discursive *space* of competing ideas knows, by definition, of no such constraints, the intellectual *field* is arguably socio-logically biased in favour of visions that do not stray too far from the ‘paternalist’ pole.<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, many liberal democratic intellectuals with strong fraternalist beliefs either choose open confrontation with the CCP as dissidents or become criminalized by it as enemies of the state – with Liu Xiaobo as a prominent example. Yet, some ‘fraternalist’ Chinese intellectuals choose (and manage) to work *within* the limits set by the regime and to plead for intra-systemic reform rather than regime change. Even within the Party leadership itself, there are entrenched ideological divisions that can be exploited by astute intellectuals who master the practice of speaking in roundabout terms, avoiding tabooed themes, and/or playing along with official doctrine whilst subtly subverting it.

With this caveat in mind, I move next to illustrate how both lines of contestation remain very much alive in intellectual debates over the last three decades.

## Rethinking Chinese ideological debates among intellectuals since the 1990s

The purpose of this section is to illustrate how the two-dimensional model helps improve our sense of the structure and dynamics of the space of ideological contestation among Chinese intellectuals. I first indicate how we can use it to deconstruct a set of apparently monochrome debates that have marked intellectual life in the post-Tiananmen period. I then discuss how the two-dimensional model allows us to situate important currents of thought – neo-Confucianism and neo-Conservatism – that are difficult to place adequately on a one-dimensional spectrum between authoritarian state socialists and democratic liberals.

Since the 1990s a series of partially overlapping debates have alternated as the center of ideological antagonism. After a downturn in open

discussion after the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, a new phase in the intellectual history of China was ushered in around 1993. At this point began the long-standing debates between the 'New Left' and 'Liberals'. The still-ongoing competition between these two ostensibly coherent intellectual camps have been chronicled by many authors (e.g. Zhang 1998; Ban and Lu 2012; Day 2013). The 'New Left' label covers a heterogeneous group of scholars and intellectuals (some of whom resisting the label) cohering only in their critique of the socially disruptive and inequality-inducing consequences of 'market reforms', and in their attempt to revitalize China's historical experience of socialism. This 'New Left' was soon antagonized by 'liberals' who favoured ever-deepening market reforms but railed against the lack of politico-juridical reforms, which they consider the missing piece in China's transition and a key to removing social injustice (for useful introductions to contemporary Chinese liberalism, see Cheek et al. 2018; Hua and Galway 2018). By comparison, 'New Left' opinions on political reform are more divided, although united by rejection of simply importing a Western-style liberal-democratic blueprint.

After the 2008 financial meltdown showed the vulnerability of Western political-economic compact, debates about whether China's Communist Party had developed a superior 'model' of political and economic governance proliferated (for thoughtful stock-takings, see Breslin 2011; Dirlik 2012). Whereas some liberal scholars (e.g. Zhao 2010) disagree that any 'China Model' based on authoritarian rule that can be sustainably successful beyond the phase of catch-up industrialization, the premise of the discussion – namely that of thinking about China as an actual *or* potential alternative to Western neoliberalism - was more well-received by intellectuals affiliated with the 'New Left' (see Ferchen 2013). But the concept was also embraced by non-leftist intellectuals closer to the CCP leadership, such as Zhang (2012), and Eric X. Li (2013). These intellectual position-takings produced, once again, the mirage of a unity of 'New Leftists' and other 'conservatives' defending the 'non-liberal' or 'statist' status quo, versus a unity of liberals rejecting it.

More recently, two additional rounds of debate have confirmed the apparent salience of this dichotomy. First, peaking in 2011, the



‘Chongqing vs. Guangdong debate’ transplanted the ‘China Model’ debate to a sub-national political terrain. Two initially innocuous institutional experiments in local governance became politicized under the influence of leading left-leaning intellectuals, such as Cui Zhiyuan and Wang Shaoguang, seen to support Chongqing’s neo-statist development mode which was being developed by the city’s then-Party secretary, the flamboyant Bo Xilai. Meanwhile liberals instead favored a cautious civil society-oriented liberalization agenda emerging in Guangdong under his counterpart, Wang Yang (Mulvad 2015).<sup>7</sup> Second, the 2013 ‘Constitutionalism Debate’ at the hopeful beginnings of Xi Jinping’s term involved a fierce public discussion on whether China’s constitution should be allowed to override the power of the CCP leadership (Kellogg 2015). Despite Creemer’s (2015:95) insightful observation that there is a wide spectrum of opinion within both the pro- and anti-constitutionalism camps, the polarized logic of the debate nevertheless reproduced two ostensibly unitary opposing camps: “Western-style” liberal constitutionalists vs. their detractors.

The constant reappearance of binary ‘line struggles’ does make it tempting to conceptualize China’s ideological space as monochrome. In a bird’s eye perspective, all of these debates seem to confirm the recurrence of a “for-or-against-liberalism” logic as the underlying driver of intellectual contestation. Arguably, they all do involve an antagonism between liberals and ‘statists’. But only if the latter category is defined very broadly to include any intellectual who endorses a vision in which ‘the state’ plays a more active role in political and/or socioeconomic life than is desirable or tolerable from a liberal viewpoint. Indeed, once we look more closely at the variegated visions for China’s future that participants in these debates articulate, we discover that the alleged ‘statist’ alternative to liberalism fractionalizes significantly. The array of ‘statist’ visions for China’s future that reject liberalism is so variegated that it becomes analytically untenable to contain them within the same category. To illustrate this point, we need not look further than the two main non-liberal competitors to New Leftism: neo-Confucianism and neo-Conservatism.

Neo-Confucianism is conventionally considered the third major intellectual current in China since 1989 (Cheek et al. 2018:107). Having

been written off as an ideological waste product of feudalism during the Cultural Revolution, Neo-Confucianism made a slow-boil comeback in the 1990s in the shadow of the liberals vs. New Leftist feud. However, its importance as an intellectual current calling for a revival of Chinese cultural values has grown explosively since the 2000s, in step with China's newfound self-confidence as a rapidly rising power (for insightful introductions, see Fan 2011; Jiang 2012; JunDeng & Smith 2018). Indeed, Neo-Confucian intellectuals enjoy growing attention from the CCP leadership who sees the value in mobilizing traditional Chinese thought as a resource for legitimization and for perfecting a distinct 'China Model' of meritocratic elite governance in keeping with the millennial tradition of imperial dynastic rule. Neo-Confucians are - like China's left - explicitly critical of Western notions of liberal democracy. But their added anti-revolutionary emphasis on traditional hierarchies and property relations within a market economic order makes it problematic to lump them together.

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Chinese neo-conservatism is another school of thought that fits poorly into a one-dimensional model. This intellectual current emerged as New Authoritarianism in the late 1980s and came to prominence in the early 1990s. In the context of the social upheaval that reached its zenith with the 1989 student movement, Chinese neo-conservatives emphasized the need for a strong authoritarian state elite to maintain social stability and guide the economic reform process steadily (see Misra 2001:146–153; Fewsmith 2008a:83–112). Neo-conservatives were in favor of Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening up" to modernize Chinese society and build a market economy. However, against liberals they argued that allowing too much political reform too early would generate tensions that could put the reform project, and indeed the Chinese state as a whole in peril. In terms of politics, neo-conservatives exuded a paternalist mentality: Giving the vote to the masses would be catastrophic, and only a development-oriented 'Enlightened dictatorship' could save China, at least in the short term (Misra 2001;148).<sup>8</sup>

If neo-conservative thought has never managed to galvanize into a distinct intellectual current on par with New Leftism, liberalism, and

neo-Confucianism, its propositions have nevertheless been crucial as theoretical fuel for the development of CCP ideology over the last three decades. The elevation of a former neo-conservative intellectual, Wang Huning, to the Standing Committee of the Politburo, the highest body of the CCP in 2017, is an indication of its lasting impact on successive leadership generations.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the articulation of the ‘Chinese Dream’ under Xi Jinping can be viewed as an amalgamate of a neo-Confucian appeal for meritocratic elite governance and a neo-Conservative defense of ‘authoritarian modernity’ (for the ideological precedents of this vision in the case of the ‘Singapore Model’ of virtuous one-party rule, see Ortmann and Thompson 2014).

In terms of conceptualizing ideological cleavage, then, the cases of Neo-Confucians and Neo-Conservatives illustrate the value of a two-dimensional model. It is true that both currents are neither on the socialist left, nor on the capitalist right. Indeed, if evaluated solely through a socioeconomic lens, the neo-Confucian emphasis on the elite’s moral plight to secure the livelihood of the general population, and the neo-Conservative acceptance of a heavily state-coordinated market economy, might suggest a centrist position. But locating them in the middle of a one-dimensional spectrum disguises their distinct paternalist skepticism towards the ideal of political equality, which is what makes them stand out from (most) liberals and New Leftists when it comes to envisioning the ideal political system.

In summary, then, to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the landscape, we need to deconstruct the liberal-statist imaginary. The two-dimensional model that I propose is but one of many ways to do so. Importantly, the argument is *not* that the liberalism-statism schism is a myth. It obviously has concrete existence as a powerful imaginary that produces and reproduces the attention space for thousands of knowledge producers, whether Chinese or non-Chinese, and whether academically or politically focused, in a constant feedback loop. In this context, the propaganda apparatus of the CCP plays a key role in nurturing and directly producing narratives that fit the party agenda. But rather than a reason to accept the polarizing imaginary as objective reality, the logic of CCP propaganda is precisely why scholars should focus *beyond* the dichotomy, and affirm expressions of the kinds of

increasingly marginalized ideational variation that disrupt the “binary code”. Indeed, the dichotomization of China’s political-intellectual space is not just simplistic, but potentially dangerous, because it is premised on what Callahan (2013:72) calls ‘essentialised zero-sum identity gaps [that] can foster predictions that zero-sum geopolitical conflict is “inevitable”’.

## Beyond the liberal/statist dichotomy: Four ideological visions for China’s future

The first ambition of this section is to spell out four ideal typical ideological visions, one for each quadrant of the two-dimensional spectrum, about how China could become ‘The Good Society’, and what the CCP needs to do to move in the right direction and thus retain (or obtain) legitimacy as a ruling party. Table 1 provides an overview this argument, to be explained in detail below.

**Table 1**

Four ideological visions compared

|                        | <i><b>Fraternalist capitalist</b></i>   | <i><b>Paternalist capitalist</b></i>  | <i><b>Paternalist socialist</b></i>  | <i><b>Fraternalist socialist</b></i>  |
|------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Ideal economic system  | Enhance private ownership to further liberate the progressive forces of ‘the market’          | Enhance private ownership to restore a traditional market order   | Enhance public ownership to strengthen central state control of the economy  | Enhance public ownership to empower workers and peasants through collective enterprises               |
| Ideal political system | The citizenry empowered by civil and political rights should hold the state elite accountable | The meritocratic state elite should rule as the guardian and in the interest of the entire Chinese people | The Communist state elite should rule as the vanguard and in the interest of the vast majority of the Chinese people | The citizenry empowered by civil, political and social rights should hold the state elite accountable |
|                        |   |   |  |   |

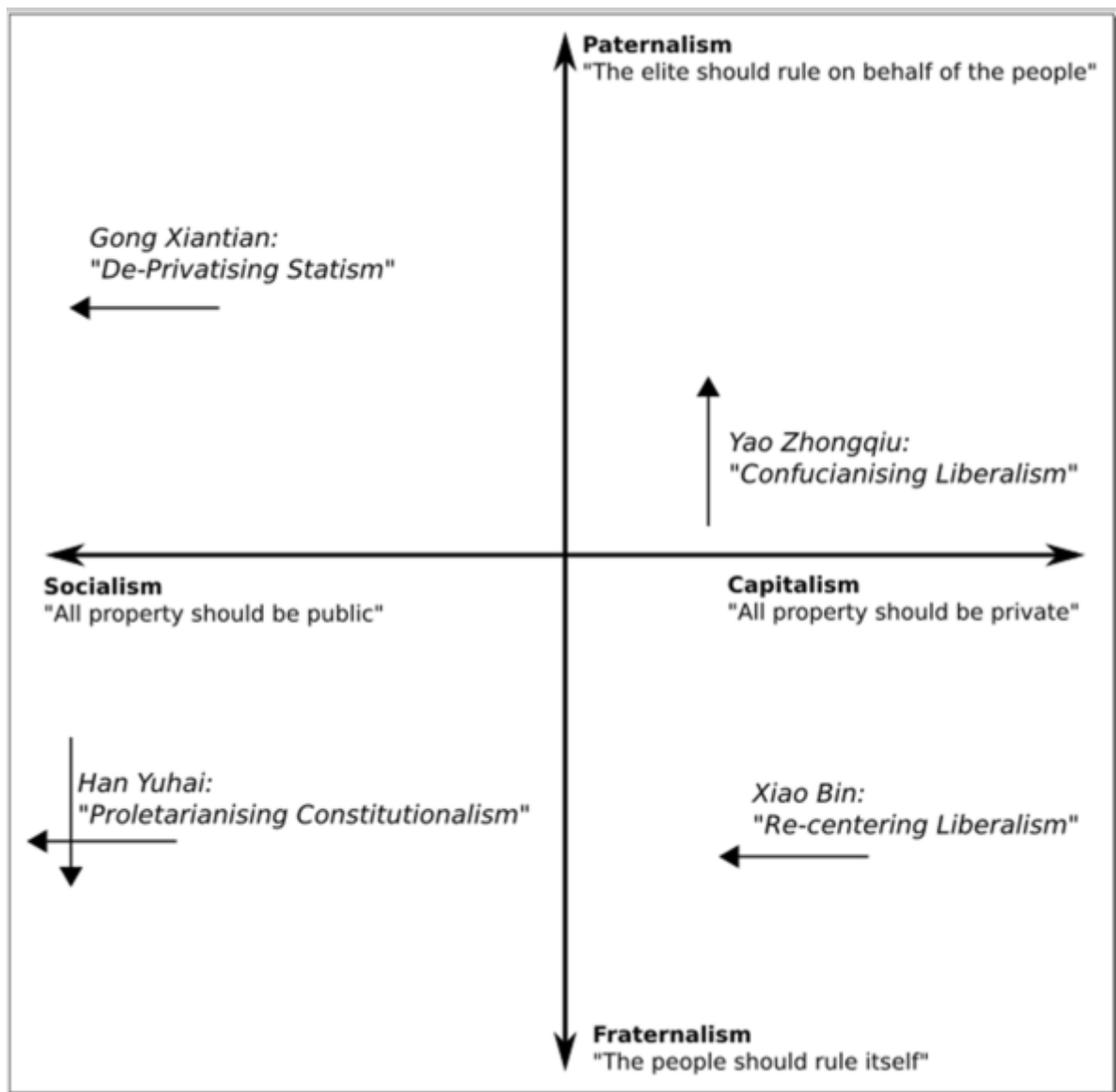
Source: Author’s elaboration

|                              | <i><b>Fraternalist capitalist</b></i>  | <i><b>Paternalist capitalist</b></i>  | <i><b>Paternalist socialist</b></i>  | <i><b>Fraternalist socialist</b></i>   |
|------------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Logic of legitimation        | Political democratization will mediate tensions over the rampant economic inequality | The benevolent rule of a truly meritocratic elite will ensure that people will not feel the need to rebel | The reversal of privatization policies suffices to ensure that the Party regains the trust of the people | The reversal of privatization policies combined with enhanced grassroots power will revitalize Chinese socialism |
| Source: Author's elaboration |  |   |  |  |

The second ambition of the section is to introduce four illustrative case studies. While typological modelling is useful for the overall analytical purpose, it does not provide an in-depth view of how individual intellectuals, as articulators of broader worldviews, actually see the world. Hence, after presenting each ‘ideal typical’ vision, I proceed to present a real-life example. These four case studies support the overall argument that a one-dimensional model cannot do justice to the substance of ideological discussions. However, the point is not merely that the four intellectuals “match” the theoretical model. Rather, the theoretical model is a heuristic for understanding how Chinese intellectuals are responding practically to the ideological context in which they find themselves. Inspired by Quentin Skinner’s (2002) contextual method, the spectrum model is used as a frame of reference to make interpretive sense of specific ‘speech acts’, i.e., creative attempts to ‘do things with words’. Fig. 2 gives an overview of the logic of each of the four moves.

## **Fig. 2**

The two-dimensional spectrum as dynamic space: four empirical case studies



The figure illustrates Skinner's (2002) methodological axiom that individual intellectuals are not passive carriers of homogenous and presumably unchanging "worldviews" or ideologies. Rather, intellectuals are *agents* who operate strategically in a way that they perceive as efficient given their reading of the intellectual conjuncture in which they are positioned, i.e., the parameters of the debates that make up the horizon of intellectual life at a given point in time. The arrows symbolize the ideological directionality of the "speech acts" understood as practical attempts to move gravitational point of what is accepted as political "common sense" in a specified direction. As I show below, this is achieved through different tactics, such as delimiting one's position from that of competitors or taking "ownership" of a contested concept by redefining it. First, Yao

Zhongqiu seeks to make Chinese liberalism less unequivocally identifiable with a perceived “Western” vision of political equality, by pushing its compatibility with Confucian thought and hence with a paternalist political philosophy. He does so at a time when the CCP leadership is itself reaffirming Confucianism as part of its state ideology. Meanwhile, another liberal, Xiao Bin, remains committed to a universalist, fraternal imaginary. His strategy for making his views more appealing is to articulate a centrist “Rawlsian” Chinese liberalism, to replace the “rightist” Hayekian image. At the opposite corner of the spectrum, Gong Xiantian pushes back against what he perceives as a slide towards the right since the early 1990s in debates over property issues. The label “statist” is appropriately put on Gong’s vanguard Leninism, but this statism involves a distinctly *socialist* vision of de-privatizing the CCP’s current “China Model,” which he considers a betrayal. Finally, Han Yuhai’s discourse of “proletarian constitutionalism” makes the case for a New Leftism that is thoroughly fraternal-socialist, thus seeking both to make light of liberal assumptions of monopoly on the idea of constitutionalism *and* to subvert Party doctrine on democracy “from within.”

## The fraternalist capitalist vision

The fraternalist capitalist vision of “the Good Society” is a market-driven economy based on inviolable private property in combination with a political system that constitutes the Chinese state elite as a servant accountable to the body of free and equal citizens.

From a fraternalist capitalist point of view, the stepwise liberalization of the Chinese economy since the late 1970s has been extremely beneficial. Reforms have opened China to the dynamism of an economy driven by private initiative rather than bureaucratic plan and thus greatly expanded the wealth of the Chinese nation. Fraternalist capitalists particularly acknowledge as a step forward that private property is now increasingly respected. However, this affirmation of economic liberalization is coupled with a notion that China also urgently needs to undertake *political* liberalization (constitutional “rule of law” *and* parliamentary democracy) in order to reap the full benefits

of a market-based society. On this issue, the fraternal capitalist vision diverges from its paternalist counterpart.

Whereas paternalist capitalists adhere to a notion that competent political elites are needed to create the conditions for the pursuit of the good life for ordinary people, fraternal capitalists reject the need for intermediaries. But the fraternalist capitalist vision cannot be rendered simply as an anti-elitist demand for popular sovereignty and full political equality. In parallel with modernization theory, fraternalist capitalists endorse constitutionalism and “democracy” as the logical correlate of a market economy. What sets the fraternalist capitalist voices among Chinese intellectuals apart from their fraternalist socialist counterparts is their belief that a production regime based on private property is a necessary precondition of both rule of law and democracy.

However, the fraternalist capitalist vision is not merely articulated through general philosophical principles, but also in terms of sociological necessity. In any advanced market economy, the lack of “accountable government” becomes an increasingly pervasive legitimacy problem because the introduction of market forces provides the state elite and its associates with the opportunity to enrich themselves, resulting in ever wider social disparities between haves and have-nots. Barring political reforms to make the state elite efficiently accountable to the citizenry, China will be plagued by progressively increasing degrees of corruption and perceived social injustice, with catastrophic consequences in the form of popular discontent and societal instability. Political democratization, then, becomes both the necessary and the sufficient means to protect the market order from collapse. Below, one particularly powerful variant of this double-edged argument is presented.

### **Xiao bBin: The civil society optimist**

Xiao Bin, Professor of Political Science at the Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, is an eloquent spokesperson for a vision that combines the liberal defence of markets and private ownership with calls to involve ordinary people more in decision-making. Identifying his intellectual affinities with prominent liberal Chinese thinkers like Hu Shih, Yin Haiguang, and Gu Zhun, as well as the neo-Confucian Xu Fuguan, Xiao



Bin has also drawn significantly on Western, republican thinkers like James Madison and John Locke. While strongly engaged in the works of Friedrich von Hayek in the 1990s, at a time when the private sector was finding its feet in China, Xiao has since focused more on the works of John Rawls, arguing that the issue of social justice is now, with the progressive consolidation of a market order, becoming increasingly relevant to address in a Chinese context (interview with Xiao Bin, December 8, 2013).

In 2011 Xiao Bin became the key spokesperson of a liberal-leaning alternative to the “Chongqing Model” discourse of some “New Left” intellectuals (Mulvad 2015). Xiao worried that the “Chongqing Model” would gain the ideological upper hand nationally, and thus felt the need to confront the “individual arbitrariness and authoritarianism” that he identified in Bo Xilai’s “red,” populist platform (interview with Xiao Bin, December 8, 2013). In contrast, Xiao Bin’s “Guangdong Model” affirmed the experiments in inclusive and rights-based governance simultaneously going on in Guangdong province under its then party secretary, Wang Yang, and called for more involvement of non-state forces of “civil society” (such as citizens’ action groups and NGOs) at all level of governance from budget monitoring to welfare provision.

For Xiao, the empowerment of societal forces is both an intrinsic good and a necessity for social stability. The rapid development of an increasingly unruly “civil society” in the reform pioneering province of Guangdong (the emergence of both strong interest groups and of a new self-consciousness of social classes), precisely demonstrates that tight state control of the political and social systems is simply not possible in the long run in a market-driven society. When interviewed Xiao related a remark he made to a high-ranking local policy maker, on the immense challenges in dealing with Guangdong’s more than thirty-million migrant workers:

I told him that he could not only depend on government, and that he should not forget that society can also contribute a lot. Sometimes policy makers forget the power of society. They want to be babysitters. But that is

impossible. (interview with Xiao Bin, December 8, 2013)

Two powerful fraternalist capitalist ideas intersect here. First, the belief in the “power of society” as a social force that, once unleashed through market reforms, cannot be held back and inevitably lead to the need for political reforms. Second, the idea of a political community of equal citizens *emancipated* from the paternalist dominion of a state elite, here identified through the familial metaphor of “babysitting.” The two ideas are intertwined through Xiao Bin’s assertion that “babysitting” is not only undesirable in a market-driven society, but indeed “impossible,” because the emerging societal forces will not stand for being controlled by “policy makers” forever.

Whether ordinary Chinese people are indeed capable of pursuing “the Good Life” on their own, or whether there is a need for “paternal” guidance of an able elite, is the question, which divides fraternalists from paternalists. As we see below, far from all intellectuals self-identifying with a liberal, pro-market agenda share Xiao Bin’s emancipatory outlook.

## The paternalist capitalist vision

Paternalist capitalists envision a future in which China’s economy, based on the entrepreneurial dynamism unleashed through a private property regime, is stabilized by a morally upright state elite, governing justly on behalf of the Chinese people, thus ensuring social harmony.

The paternalist and fraternalist capitalist visions share enthusiasm for China’s move away from a planned, state-owned economy. However, whereas fraternalists celebrate the emancipating or progressive potential of market society—its likeliness to lead to a citizen-steered political order against the tyranny of state socialism—the paternalist argument is different. The return of private ownership simply means that China revitalizes its traditional order based on natural social hierarchies, after the tumultuous epoch of Maoist class struggle. After many Sisyphean attempts to enforce an artificial equality between naturally unequal individuals, the place for private enterprise, based on the traditional

authority of land- and capital-owners, is being restored. Paternalist capitalists, then, affirm China's unique political-economic and cultural traditions to build a bridge between China's *pre-communist* past and its present integration into the global capitalist economy.

Paternalist capitalists see the state as the guarantor of social stability in a commercial society—but not as a pivotal economic agent in its own right. Whether the state can efficiently carry out this stabilizing function depends on the institutional set-up of the political system. Paternalist capitalists make two demands on the political system, based on the anthropological assumption that there are significant natural differences between individuals when it comes to the capacity for learning the craft of statesmanship (deliberating wisely about politics and thinking of “the Common Good” to ensure decisions widely accepted as legitimate). First, in line with the historical example of the examination system that ensured a meritocratic selection to learned officialdom, institutional mechanisms must ensure that only the “best” candidates—those with the perceived greatest capacity for intellectual and moral wisdom—are selected to political office. Second, the decision-making power of ordinary people outside this intellectual aristocracy must be kept within the limits of their assumed competence. Hence, mass political participation of the uneducated popular classes must be avoided or at least tempered by institutions to ensure that the state elite retains the political control needed to uphold social stability.

Thus, paternalist capitalists remain sceptical towards political democratization on the assumption that the society can function quite well provided only that the right people, those naturally endowed to rule over others, are selected to the state elite. Social stability needs not to be a product of direct representation of “civil society” interests. Legitimacy can also arise from a generalized sentiment that a meritocracy managed by the CCP actually elevates the best possible individuals to the status of guardians of the people. Below one particularly lucid variant of this argument is presented.

## Yao Zhongqiu: The Confucian liberal

Yao Zhongqiu (pen name: Qiu Feng) is director of *Unirule Institute of Economics*, a privately funded, pro-market think tank in Beijing, and an

erudite intellectual with a growing reputation. Yao can be described as a soft-paternalist, pro-market visionary who seeks ideological mediation between the fraternalist leanings of liberal intellectuals such as Xiao Bin and the neo-authoritarian views of conservative proponents of “the China Model.”

In his youth, Yao was inspired by Western thought, especially by Friedrich von Hayek, Edmund Burke’s conservatism, and English Common Law. However, he has since turned towards the philosophy of Confucius in order to produce a liberal-Confucian fusion or “native liberalism.” Positioning himself as more liberal than Jiang Qing, another prominent neo-Confucian intellectual, but more Confucian than his liberal friends, Yao seeks to articulate a variant of liberal thought that is not simply imported as a philosophical and institutional blueprint from the Western world, but rather is adapted to China’s unique historical circumstances and philosophical traditions (interview with Yao Zhongqiu, October 9, 2013).

As a proponent of eliminating state ownership in ever more sectors and stronger legal protection of private property, Yao draws on history to argue that capitalism is not a foreign phenomenon only recently introduced into China. In the epoch of the ‘Warring States’ (ca. 475–221 BC), he argues, China underwent a phase of capitalist modernization, quite comparable to the post-feudal epoch of modernization in sixteenth to nineteenth century Europe, marked by such processes as secularization, the development of a system of private property and enterprise, the expansion of kingship, the introduction of formal equality, culminating in the construction of a sophisticated bureaucracy under the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC). Importantly, it was precisely under these ‘Warring States’ sociological conditions—of centralizing bureaucracies serving bustling market economies—that Confucianism as a political ideology for statecraft first developed. Confucianism, then, is a “modern, rather than classical system of thought,” designed to “solve the problems caused by modernity” (interview with Yao Zhongqiu, October 9, 2013). Thus, Yao arrives at the conclusion both that China’s turn to market implies a return to the historic normal, and that Confucian thought is pertinent as a reservoir of knowledge for Chinese state-makers today.

What, then, can be taken from Confucianism to inform a vision of a just political system? The most important lesson is to ensure that those individuals with a capacity to obtain, through learning, moral superiority and the ability to serve as Enlightened leaders, will also be meritocratically selected to become the ruling state elite. Here, the assumption about the innate differences of capacity between individuals is taken to its paternalist conclusion: that some people are better endowed to rule over others, morally and intellectually, and that any just political system will reflect this fact. Yao, however, insists that unlike many Chinese Hayekians he cares deeply about democracy, and that his brand of Confucianism is compatible with democratic principles:

The Confucian viewpoint and the viewpoint of representative democracy are not that different, because both emphasise the capacity and virtue of its representatives. I accept universal suffrage, but also insist on the elite principle, both of which can be simultaneously manifested in one regime. (interview with Yao Zhongqiu, October 9, 2013)

Yao's vision, then, entails a mixed constitution with an institutional design that allows for some degree of decision-making power from below ("universal suffrage"), but simultaneously ensures—to avoid unqualified mob rule—that the virtuous and capable Confucian "gentleman" is put in a position of leadership to make use of his superior skills ("the elite principle"). Next, I illustrate what this "elite principle" entails when articulated as a pro-socialist ideological vision.

## The paternalist socialist vision

Paternalist socialists hope to see the Party leadership remain firmly at the steering-wheel of national development, so that it may invigorate the public economy vis-à-vis the private to make the leftwards turn that the country badly needs after decades of economic "revisionism."

Philosophically, this vision grows from the orthodox Marxist-Leninist theory of the vanguard revolutionary party as the organized expression of the collective will of the popular classes (Lenin 2012). The paternalism of this theory rests with the key idea—parallel to that found in Confucian paternalism—that a meritocratic elite (in this case the cadre leadership of a revolutionary organization), because of its superiority in skill and moral education, is capable of knowing the objective interests of ordinary people better, i.e., in a more clear-sighted and articulated manner, than those people themselves. Like a father cares for his child in its own long-term interest, while remaining attentive to its signals along the way to avoid losing its affection, the Party elite has a moral obligation to care for the Chinese people.

This foundational belief in vanguard leadership has implications for how paternalist socialists specify their political-economic ideals. First, their inclination is to favour direct state ownership of enterprises, because only this type of production regime provides the vanguard party with the capacity to steer economic development as well as the fiscal resources required to deliver the public welfare needed to ensure the “People’s Livelihood” and keep the bond between party and people strong. Second, they consider China’s current political system an imperfect but still more substantially democratic alternative to those “capitalist democracies” of the West that while formally providing political equality in reality function as veils for capitalist class rule.

The paternalist socialist diagnosis of China’s current ailments, then, can be summarized as follows: Since the 1980s, the Party leadership has pursued an erroneous policy of privatization that, by straying from the “mass line,” has progressively alienated the working masses of China’s population, thus creating a growing legitimacy crisis. However, this crisis is a product not of an inbuilt system error that can only be remedied through profound political reform—or revolution. Rather, it is a contingent policy error, which can be corrected by reversing the privatization course and reconstructing a comprehensive public welfare system. Below, one particularly forceful articulation of this argument is presented.

**Gong Xiantian: The stalwart statist**

Gong Xiantian, a Professor of Law at Peking University, completed his first degree during the Cultural Revolution (1967). As a former PhD fellow in Yugoslavia (1982–1987), Gong is well-placed to make comparative assessments on competing institutional models of “realized socialism” (interview with Gong Xiantian, November 4, 2013). Gong achieved national fame in 2005, when he published an open letter protesting the draft for a new property rights law because its ambition to protect private and public property equally was contrary to China’s constitution, which states that socialist public property is sacredly inviolable.<sup>10</sup> In Gong’s view, public ownership is “the mainstay that socialist reform has to stick to.” But since the 1990s, the CCP’s pursuit of privatization has left people confused as to whether the CCP is still really communist—a path that will “inevitably lead to social chaos” (interview with Gong Xiantian, November 4, 2013). While there is no doubt about Gong’s anti-capitalism, his mode of argumentation is furthermore instructive on the logic of *paternalist* socialism.

First, Gong’s vision pivots on state ownership, rather than decentralized ownership of groups of direct producers (i.e., workers’ or peasants’ collectives). Gong recognizes collective ownership as a legitimate, albeit “lower form” of public ownership, but finds that “ownership by the whole people,” i.e., directly state-controlled enterprises, should be dominant. Second, in Gong’s view, upholding socialism is not only a question of inciting the central leadership to reverse its current policies, but also of defending the prerogative of the CCP leadership to rule politically in the interest of the masses of the Chinese people (interview with Gong Xiantian, November 4, 2013). Gong’s scepticism towards reforming what he considers a fundamentally sound political system comes out when asked about his opinion of “constitutional socialism,” an intra-Party intellectual movement for gradual reform towards political democratization.

For Gong, the very idea behind “constitutional socialism” threatens to abolish the leadership position of the CCP, overthrow the current nature of the state (the “People’s Democratic Dictatorship”), and change the current state form (“a People’s Congress system”) into a Western-style parliamentary system:

“Constitutional socialism” is a kind of empty dream, because socialism has to be realized by the dictatorship of the proletariat. The dictatorship of the proletariat is the core of socialism, and if one leaves it out of the picture, the so-called constitutionalism would have no guarantee. The constitution has to be supported by the violence of the regime behind it. Like Mao once said “power arises out of military force.” Therefore, without the army, the constitution would not be effective. (interview with Gong Xiantian, November 4, 2013)

In Gong’s view, there are simply no realistic alternatives to “dictatorship of the proletariat,” if one truly wishes to uphold the status of the Chinese state as “socialist” in what remains a Western-dominated capitalist world. The capacity to withstand the attempts of foreign capital at subjugating China into economic dependence hinges on the state’s economic clout in the sphere of production and the CCP’s effective coordination of political decision-making. Furthermore, since coercion is the ultimate foundation of *any* state, China’s status is ultimately guaranteed by the coercive capacity of its state apparatus, i.e., the “People’s Liberation Army, the People’s police, public security organs, courts,” etc. Only a political system that allows the vanguard party to control and mobilize resources for national development can keep China socialist.

However, Gong’s Leninism represents one, but not the only, way to formulate a socialist vision for contemporary China.

## The fraternalist socialist vision

Fraternalist and paternalist socialists share the dream of China discovering the path to an alternative modernity beyond the logic of the Western-dominated global capitalist system. Crucially, though, fraternalist socialism, similarly to fraternalist capitalism, posits that no state elite—whatever its self-denomination—can realize “the Good Society” *on behalf of* the masses. The path to socialism must be a combined process of economic and political democratization to ensure



that citizens control the state, rather than the other way around. The philosophical premise is faith in the political competence of the masses; the notion that ordinary people are capable of grasping their own objective interests and achieving “the Good Life” through self-organization, without the need for specially skilled elites to guide them.

On the property question, both paternalist and fraternalist socialists emphasize the urgent need for a reversal of the privatization of state assets. However, the fraternal socialist inclination to prefer grassroots over bureaucratic control means that their ideal political economy emphasizes *decentralization* through the collective ownership and control of productive enterprises, with the state sector of the economy relegated to a secondary position. Crucially, this ideal of producers’ self-management “from below” can only be fully realized together with a transformation of the principles of representation by which the state operates. As long as an unchecked elite controls the “commanding heights” of the state apparatus, the economic organizations of the grassroots will always be at the mercy of the goodwill of this vanguard.

However, the solution is not simply to import the Western model of political democracy. Paternalist and fraternalist socialists share a scepticism of Western democracy, but whereas the former tend to reject its relevance for China entirely, the latter insist that the Western historical experience of political liberation of the citizenry is a positive but limited experience that needs to be superseded through institutional experimentation and political reform to ensure that citizens have not only political and civil rights, but also social rights. Moreover, fraternalist socialists affirm civil freedoms and the right of organization, but also—and here the capitalist and socialist variants of fraternalism collide—reject the notion of private property as an extra-political human right, which must be made politically-legally untouchable. Below, one eloquent articulation of this vision of economic and political democratization is presented.

## Han Yuhai: Proletarianising constitutionalism

Han Yuhai, Professor of Chinese Literature at Peking University, has been an “emblematic figure of neo-leftism” since the 1990s (Chen 2004). As a long-time critic of Chinese neoliberalism, Han points to the

impending liberalization of China's financial sector as the biggest current threat to the capacity of the Chinese state. Nevertheless, Han remains an optimist that China's still unfinished socialist revolution will eventually triumph. The first reason for optimism is that China's revolutionary experience and Maoist legacy has left an indelible mark on the mindset of the Chinese people. The second reason is that the economic crisis, which began in 2008, marks the "winter," i.e., terminal stage of the capitalist world system (interview with Han Yuhai, October 19, 2013).

Han's explicit stance on "constitutionalism" reveals a decisively fraternalist vision for China's future. Drawing on Marx—to whom he admits to stand closer than he does to "the Bolsheviks"—Han contends that constitutionalism is neither good nor bad, but simply something that every country needs to face as a necessary aspect of coming to terms with modernity:

For Marx, the constitution is something that leaves the people no choice but to face it, because it is the modern language. We were put into the prison of modern language, and the basic grammar is the constitution. So even the bourgeoisie and the proletariat have to speak this democratic language. (interview with Han Yuhai, October 19, 2013)

Since there is no way of escaping this language of modernity, what it comes down to is to use it for one's own class-relevant purposes: The task must be, from a socialist point of view, not to reject "liberal constitutionalism" but to improve upon it, that is to change its functionality in favour of the working classes. As Han (2012) has argued,

Proletarian "constitutionalism" must carry on the effective bourgeois innovations of "democracy" and "separation of powers," but the scope and degree of [both] must exceed that of a narrow bourgeois "constitutionalism" (...) *The main form of the "separation of powers" will be to push power and*

*authority from the top down, from the centre to the grassroots, to ensure the greatest amount of power possible is held by the largest number of people.*

In Han's vision, then, democracy should be expanded by instituting mechanisms of direct grassroots control of the state executive. A *proletarian* variant of constitutionalism is needed because without it the popular revolution will eventually be betrayed by a small elite: in the lack of "effective supervision by the proletariat" the organization of professional revolutionaries that possesses "what can be called a tyrannical proletarian role" will with time become corrupted and turn into "a bureaucratic special interest group that rides on the back of the masses":

In the process of establishing their own state, China's proletariat has been heavily affected by the violence and arbitrariness caused by the monopoly of political power by particular groups, and suffered from "mass movements," palace coups, and betrayals. As a result it is useful for the proletariat to research constitutionalism. (cf. Han 2012)

Here, the fraternalist specificity of Han's socialist vision comes out clearly. On a left-right axis, it is impossible to distinguish Han Yuhai's position from that of paternalist socialism due to the shared advocacy of public ownership as the constitutional base of China's political economy. Yet, whereas paternalist socialists would insist on the continued leadership of the CCP vanguard (government *for* the people), Han—like his liberal detractors—favours a system, which endows the popular masses with effective constitutional controls of the state elite (government *by* the people).

## Conclusion and implications

This article has proposed a new heuristic for re-interpreting ideological cleavage in contemporary Chinese intellectual debates. Based on a critique of existing literatures, historical contextualization, and original

research interviews with prominent intellectuals it proposes a two-dimensional model that combines central concerns of comparative political economy and comparative politics, to allow for ideological co-variation between two contending roads of national revival, *capitalism and socialism* (as conflicting ideals concerning the ideal property regime) and between *paternalism and fraternalism* (as conflicting ideals concerning the political system). This model allows us to avoid a simple China vs. Western binary of China's political-ideological horizon. Indeed, drawing on interview data, it is demonstrated that one can identify at least four distinct ideal typical ideological visions.

The virtue of the two-dimensional model is that it allows us to transcend the commonplace dichotomization of a conservative "left" (and ostensibly statist-authoritarian) camp and a pro-reform "liberal" (and ostensibly democratic) camp by making it possible to account for internal disagreements *within* camps. The model invites scholars to rethink liberal democracy not as *the* alternative to the current "China Model," but as *one* alternative among many possible, including a return to a Maoist-style state socialism, an historically novel democratic socialist state, or the further entrenchment of a paternalist variant of capitalism. Three major implications for future research follow from this.

First, the two-dimensional model nuances our understanding of the longstanding New Left-liberal schism, by acknowledging ideological variegation inside both camps and thus moving from a static-binary towards a dynamic-relational reading. By studying how both intellectual "camps" are internally "fractionalized" on the nature of the ideal political system, we uncover their rich inner life of ideological disagreement. This discovery is particularly pertinent when it comes to still on-going battles to define "democracy" and "constitutionalism" and its institutional implications in China. More work must be done, however, to infuse studies of Chinese politics systematically with insights on contextual methods in intellectual history as outlined by Skinner (2002) and others. In this regard, this article has merely scratched the surface.

Second, the two-dimensional model allows us to re-think “the China Model” as a contested concept and vehicle for different ideological aspirations, rather than a substantive and simple descriptor of an actually existing political-economic system. It allows us to see not just *that* this notion is contested, but specifically what the historically salient lines of contestation are. Rather than thinking about “The China Model” as a uniform affirmation of authoritarian statism, we should study how creative intellectuals “do” different things with the concept. Since “the China Model” is most basically defined as the “abstract negation” of the United States or Western model (Dirlik 2012), it is not a completely open signifier. But that does not mean that it is a completely closed signifier either; ideological visions of the “China Model” vary significantly when it comes to its political and economic implications, and the two-dimensional model can be used as a tool for grasping this variation. A comprehensive map of the ideological “varieties of the China Model” is yet to be written.

Finally, beyond the case of China, the two-dimensional model is also useful for opening up the immense ideological variation concealed behind the concept of “populism,” which is taking center stage in debates on ideological conflict across the Western world (Müller 2016). Specifically, the model can unpack topographically how references to “populism” cover two vastly different post-crisis political movements that both contribute to re-expanding the Western ideological spectrum after its temporary confinement to the fraternalist-capitalist quadrant so brilliantly captured by Fukuyama’s (1989) “End of History” trope. On one hand, there is a *leftwards* movement, articulated by such intellectual agents as Spain’s Podemos, Greece’s Syriza, and Britain’s “Corbynistas.” This ‘left populism’ constitutes the return of fraternalist socialism as an ideology aspiring to governing states. On the other hand, there is a move not quite towards the capitalist “right,” but perhaps more adequately towards the *paternalist* pole of faith in Fathers or Mothers of the Nation, embodied by, e.g., Turkey’s Erdogan, Hungary’s Orbán, France’s Le Pen—and America’s Trump—under the pretence of giving power back to the people.

Here lies a prospective avenue for comparative studies with Xi Jinping’s amalgamate of traditionalist elitism and Mao-inspired

strongman populism (Lam 2015). Admittedly, this emergent “Xiism” is radically different from “right-wing” populisms in democratic countries in rejecting the plebiscite element of elections. Yet, it appears strikingly similar in terms of its ethno-cultural and emotional identification of leadership and people, its disdain for a pluralist political culture, and its emphasis on representing the Party of Order. Whether a more universally applicable ideological spectrum model can be construed to reflect this global populist resurgence and whether it will require conceptual re-specification beyond the fraternalist-paternalist tension pivotal to the Chinese case are questions better left to future work. But we need that second axis.

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## Appendix. Interviewees

| Name                  | Professional position (at time of interview)                                     |
|-----------------------|--|
| Bai Tongdong<br>(白彤東) | Professor of Philosophy, Fudan University, Shanghai                              |
| Cheng Guangyun (程广云)  | Dean and Professor, Department of Philosophy, Capital Normal University, Beijing |
| Fan Jinggang<br>(范景刚) | Manager at the Maoist Utopia bookstore, Beijing                                  |
|                       |  |

| Name                   | Professional position (at time of interview)  |
|------------------------|---|
| Gao Feng (高锋)          | Former Chinese General Consul in Gothenburg, Sweden; author of books on the Swedish social-democratic model   |
| Han Dongfang (韩东方)     | Leader of the NGO 'China Labour Bulletin', Hong Kong  |
| He Weifang (贺卫方)       | Professor of Law, Peking University   |
| Hu Angang (胡鞍钢)        | Director of Center for China Studies, and Professor at the School of Public Policy & Management, Tsinghua University  |
| Hu Xingdou (胡星斗)       | Professor of Economics and China Issues, Beijing Institute of Technology  |
| Hua Bingxiao (华炳啸)     | Director of Political Communications Institute, Northwest University, Xi'an   |
| Lin, Justin Yifu (林毅夫) | Professor and Founding Director of Chinese Center of Economic Research, Peking University; former Chief Economist and Senior Vice President of the World Bank |
| Pan Wei (潘维)           | Director of Center for Chinese and Global Affairs, and Professor, School of International Studies, Peking University  |
| Ren Jiantao (任剑涛)      | Professor, Department of Political Science, Renmin University   |
| Wang Hui (汪晖)          | Professor, Department of Chinese Language and Culture, Tsinghua University, Beijing   |
| Wang Xiaoming (王晓明)    | Professor and Chair of Modern Chinese Literature Department, Center for Contemporary Culture Studies, Shanghai University                                     |
| Wang Zhanyang (王占阳)    | Professor and Director, Research Department of Political Science, Institute of Socialist Studies, Beijing.  |
| Wen Tiejun (温铁军)       | Dean and Professor, School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, Renmin University   |
| Zhang Hongliang (张宏良)  | Professor, School of Continuing Education, Central University for Nationalities, Beijing  |
| Zhang Weiying (张维迎)    | Professor of Economics, Guanghua School of Management, Peking University  |

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<sup>1</sup> The author conducted 28 non-standardized, semi-structured, exploratory research interviews (duration: 30 min to 2 h), in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong between 26 September and 12 December 2013. Apart from the eighteen interviewees listed in the Appendix and the four presented in section four, I conducted interviews with an additional six intellectuals who prefer to remain anonymous. Five of these are university professors (three in economics, one in law, and one in history), and one is a human rights lawyer.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from putting the conventional wisdom of a China/West-schism to the test, Pan and Xu (2018) also offer an innovative methodological alternative to extant literatures that aim to conceptualize Chinese ideological space. The commonplace approach remains to distinguish between a number of intellectual currents or ‘schools’ (see e.g. Fewsmith 2008a; Ma 2015; Cheek et al. 2018). This typological approach does not involve making assumptions about the dimensional shape of ideological space. In contrast, Callahan (2013) chooses a multi-dimensional, panoramic strategy, which acknowledges the virtually infinite array of competing ‘China Dreams’ articulated by individual voices, but which does not offer a tool for analytical comparison. Christensen (2014), meanwhile, calls for a superimposition of the European left-right political spectrum (from socialism over liberalism to conservatism) on China, thus providing much-needed nuance but ultimately leaving the problem of the juxtaposition of political and economic conflict lines unsolved.

<sup>3</sup> Due to space limitations, this article does not offer a full analysis of China’s “intellectual field” (Bourdieu 1988). In Bourdieusian terms, my argument primarily concerns the plane of substantive ideological disagreement – the variegated *position-takings* of intellectuals that together constitute an *ideological space* – and largely abstracts from the institutional context of such debates. To extend this contribution into a field analysis, one could usefully draw on the sizeable extant literatures on the role of Chinese intellectuals in a sociology of knowledge perspective focused on institutional

hierarchies, and the changing role of Chinese intellectuals vis-à-vis the state (for introductions, see Goldman 2012; Hao 2012; Marinelli 2012). This would allow for deeper insights into the relationship between social position and ideological position-taking among Chinese intellectuals than can be provided here.

<sup>4</sup> This use of ‘fraternalism’ is inspired by the conceptual history of the civic republican political ideal of ‘fraternity’ contributed by the Spanish philosopher and intellectual historian Antoni Domènech (2004).

<sup>5</sup> In the CCP, the early articulation of a democratic socialism was defeated in the 1920s (see Li 2011), while Chiang Kai-Shek’s quasi-fascist politics as KMT leader after 1925 represented a decisive authoritarian break with the tutelary democratic vision promoted by Party Founder Sun Yat-Sen.

<sup>6</sup> In Pierre Bourdieu’s (1988) parlance, we may think of the paternalist pole as *dominant*, insofar as it reflects the worldview of the state elite, and the fraternalist pole as *dominated* since it presents, at least latently, a challenge to the political status quo.

<sup>7</sup> The subsequent fate of the two pivotal figures is intriguing. The left-leaning Bo Xilai today serves a life time sentence for corruption, having been expelled from the CCP in 2012. Wang Yang, on the other hand, became member of the seven-man Standing Committee of the CCP Politburo, the highest-ranking body of the Party-state apparatus, in 2017.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, some prominent neo-conservatives like Xiao Gongqin, still embraced Western modernization theory in considering liberal democracy the projected, long-term endpoint (Fewsmith 2008a).

<sup>9</sup> Wang Huning (b. 1955), a Shanghai political scientist, achieved fame in the 1980s and was headhunted to the CCP’s Central Policy Research Office by Jiang Zemin in 1995 (Patapan and Wang 2018). Since then, Wang has served as an ideological mastermind for both the Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping administrations, and has allegedly been instrumental to articulating Xi Jinping’s idea of ‘The Chinese Dream’.

<sup>10</sup> The unexpected popularity of Gong’s intervention was such that the central leadership decided to suspend discussions on the draft for a year, before it was finally passed in a revised form in 2007. According to Fewsmith (2008b:84), ‘this was the first time in China’s legislative history that a proposed law had been derailed by a rising tide of public opinion’.