

FOREWORD

BY DAVID OWNBY

In the winter and spring of 2020, when the coronavirus erupted in China and then spread around the world, I had already been studying the world of contemporary Chinese establishment intellectuals for some time, mainly by translating and “curating” important examples of their work and sharing them via my website “Reading the China Dream,”¹ as well as in print form.² Why are Chinese establishment intellectuals interesting? Because China’s rise to superpower status, together with the West’s seeming “decline” in the first decade of the 21st century, has convinced many of these intellectuals that world history is at a turning point as important as the moment when, for example, monarchies were replaced by democracies. Their reasoning is that both Soviet communism and American (or more broadly, Western) liberal democracy have failed economically and politically, while China surges forward. This means not only that China is the “wave of the future,” but also that China’s (and the world’s) past, present, and future must be revisited, since most people’s

basic vision of the world has been fundamentally shaped either by liberalism—which focuses on the individual and market forces—or socialism—which focuses on class struggle and the dialectic.

The belief that liberalism and socialism have both lost their explanatory value can be liberating (it is what motivates many postmodernists, after all), and between roughly 2000 and 2015, the world of Chinese establishment intellectuals exploded in a burst of creativity not seen since the Republican Period (1912–1949) as they sought to rethink the world and China’s place in it, to reimagine contemporary China’s founding myths. We are of course free to agree or disagree with Chinese establishment intellectuals, but as the world’s second largest economy and chief competitor with the United States, it behooves us to at least know what they are thinking, because while these figures are not dissidents, they are not propagandists either, as the book translated here richly illustrates.

The events of the spring and summer of 2020, when China largely bested the virus and the West did not, seemed in the eyes of many Chinese establishment intellectuals to confirm their view that China was rising and the West declining. I decided that Chinese intellectual commentary on the coronavirus and its management would likely become an important aspect of the broader ongoing discussion in China, and launched a project to attempt to follow along.³ The commentary sounded some fairly predictable notes—such as a certain amount of chest-thumping pride in China’s, and East Asia’s, “communitarian” culture, which made collective efforts to fight the virus less onerous than in the “individualistic” West⁴—as well as exploring more interesting

nooks and crannies regarding particular aspects of Chinese society and politics.⁵ The project also yielded the book translated here: by far the most interesting and surprising example of anything I read by Chinese establishment intellectuals talking about the coronavirus.

In this book, Qin Hui, one of China's most prominent liberal intellectuals and champions of human rights and democracy, who often publishes, in China, things that look to me very much like "dissent," says essentially: it is a *fact* that China's authoritarian regime, through a combination of coercion and science, did a *much better job* than any major Western country in handling the pandemic, a fact which is destined to make China more powerful and more authoritarian. What are the supporters of democracy and human rights going to do about that? To drive the point home, Qin notes that if any country—or terrorist organization—ever "weaponizes" something like the coronavirus and deploys it in a war, it is clear which side will win. Again, what are the supporters of democracy and human rights going to do about that?

The Life and Work of Qin Hui

Of course, not everyone knows who Qin Hui is.⁶

Born in 1953, Qin was starting middle school in Nanning, the capital of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, when China's Cultural Revolution began in 1966 and schools were closed so that Red Guards could make revolution. Qin joined a Red Guard faction that "dared to rebel," an experience that gave

him some of his first lessons in political hypocrisy; the distance between the political slogans—those of the Red Guards and those of the government—and the reigning social reality provided much food for thought. In addition, luck had it that Qin had joined the losing side in a fight with huge personal consequences: he spent nine years—between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four—as a sent-down youth⁷ in a mountainous remote Zhuang (a minority ethnicity in China) village on the border between Guangxi and Yunnan. Both the remoteness of the village and the length of Qin's stay were conditioned by Qin's early political *faux pas*. Qin nonetheless joined the Chinese Communist Party, of his own volition, during his stint in the countryside.

In 1978, when China's universities reopened, Qin managed to gain entry to an MA program in History, having skipped over middle school, high school, and university. Clearly, Qin had used his "free time" in the village to educate himself, even learning English, testimony to his great intelligence and energy, as well as the lack of much else meaningful to do. He studied in Lanzhou, in northwest China, in order to work with Professor Zhao Lisheng (1917–2007), a well-known specialist in the history of rural China, who at the time focused on topics such as peasant wars and landlord exploitation. Qin worked diligently on these subjects for at least a dozen years before enlarging his field of study, but the questions he asked and the answers at which he arrived continue to guide Qin's work even today.

To make a long story short, Qin ultimately decided to abandon the classic approach to rural studies, an approach grounded in Marxist theory, and to replace it with a more empirical methodology,

based in textual documentation or facts gathered through fieldwork. His research led him to reject the Marxist vision, which saw rural conflicts as the product of a class struggle between peasants and landlords; Qin's interpretation was that these conflicts were the result of abuses perpetrated by an authoritarian state, in the form of arbitrary taxes, the appropriation of peasant property, or excessive corvée labor exactions. Qin's work, carried out at first with his professor and later with his wife, Jin Yan, a well-known specialist of the history of Russia and Eastern Europe, has both historical and comparative dimensions, and is impressive in its sophistication and complexity. His research also has implications for contemporary politics; the People's Communes established during the Great Leap Forward in 1957 had been abandoned in the early 1980s. The problem of China's rural order—or more broadly, the question of the treatment of China's rural population—thus emerged once again in the Reform and Opening period and in many senses still awaits a solution.

Qin Hui lost his faith in communism—or at least communism as it is practiced in China—when Deng Xiaoping sent troops to fire on student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Subsequently, his research became more polemical if not necessarily more political, but he has never abandoned his primary identity as someone who does serious professional research, and most of his publications over the course of the 1990s continued to focus on typically academic subjects. At the end of the 1990s, however, we begin to note the publication of works like *The Market Yesterday and Today: Consumer Society, the Rationality of the Market, and Social Justice*,⁸ where Qin's research questions take on

more abstract, general dimensions, or *The Farmers Speak: Collected Essays on Peasant Studies*,⁹ where Qin traces his own intellectual evolution through the presentation of already published essays. The same year (1999) he published *Problems and "Isms,"*¹⁰ taking up a trope from the New Culture Movement of the 1920s to criticize his colleagues who lose themselves in "theory" without paying attention to the social reality around them.

Similar works followed. In 2003, Qin published *Ten Thesis on Tradition*,¹¹ which aimed to revisit received wisdom on the "Chinese tradition," and *Peasant China: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Choices*,¹² which is a variation on the same theme. The following year, Qin published *Practice and Freedom*,¹³ which looks at the exchanges between the state and the peasants in the context of changes in China's rural order. In 2007, he published *The Path of Reform*,¹⁴ which enlarged on Qin's opinions on the subject, emphasizing among other things the importance of human rights (especially, but not solely, in China's rural context). In 2013, Qin published *South African Perspectives*,¹⁵ an important part of which is a long treatment of "China as Seen from South Africa," where Qin compares the treatment of Black South Africans and Chinese migrant laborers in terms of the roles both have played in the economic development of their respective countries, as well as the treatment they have received at the hands of those countries. Qin finds that the roles the two played were similar, in the sense that both states took advantage of cheap labor created by artificial status barriers (the system of racial discrimination in South Africa, the internal passport—*hukou*—system in China). Qin also argues that, in general, South African Blacks have been treated better than Chinese migrant workers.

It is not easy to sum up Qin Hui's *oeuvre*. Isaiah Berlin grouped writers and thinkers in two categories: hedgehogs and foxes. The hedgehog (Plato) knows one thing, but it's a big and fundamental thing. The fox (Shakespeare) knows many things. Qin Hui (who could be the Chinese Isaiah Berlin if such a thing were possible) is both hedgehog and fox.

I've explored Qin's "fox" side a bit in the preceding paragraphs. As for his "hedgehog" side, the fundamental thing that Qin has understood, and which guides him in practically all of his research work, is the idea that ideology—any ideology—exists to obscure the ways in which authorities abuse their power. He works at two levels. First, he illustrates the flawed reality on the ground, and then he proceeds to try to take apart the ideology that has constructed and defends the flawed reality. As a result, his only allegiance is to the fundamental rights of humanity and, by implication, to the constitutions that defend those rights. But he is profoundly distrustful of *any* political or ideological *system*, because all systems, be they "democratic," "socialist," or "authoritarian," are grounded in power, and power inevitably results in abuse. In many instances, Qin even seems mistrustful of stylistic elegance, less for "ideological" reasons and more because style can be a mask that camouflages the truth just as ideology can be an apology for abuses of power, telling us a story in order to sell us on reality as it exists.

An excellent example of this is his 2015 text on "Dilemmas of Twenty-First Century Globalization," in which, enlarging on his self-appointed task to review Thomas Piketty's work, *Twenty-First Century Capitalism*, Qin offers his own reading of the destinies of "capitalism" and "socialism" in the age of globalization.¹⁶

Piketty focuses on the problem of increasing economic inequality in all developed economies, and compiles massive data sets illustrating that, with very few exceptions, capital is systematically invested in financial instruments rather than in the productive economy. This fundamental characteristic of capitalism means that inequality is a natural result of market function, and that the fight against inequality, which handicaps more and more the workings of the capitalist system in developed countries, requires active state intervention to assure the necessary redistribution.

Qin Hui rejects Piketty's analysis, as well as the debate that Piketty's work inspired. In Qin's view, the source of the inequalities that are plaguing the developed economies is China, which has taken advantage of the workings of globalization to erode the very foundation of Western prosperity in the post-War period. His basic argument is simple: when China rejoined the world economy in the Reform and Opening period, capital from throughout the world rushed to China to take advantage of China's cheap labor and what Qin calls China's "low human rights advantage"—in other words, the Chinese state's willingness to pursue economic development at any price, including land confiscation, the suppression of workers' rights, and the exploitation of migrant labor, among other things (that the Chinese state has been doing long before becoming communist). Over time, China became the "factory of the world," producing quality items at cheap prices, to the detriment of jobs and tax receipts in what until then had been the developed world, now abandoned by capital, which preferred the Chinese El Dorado. Despite a surplus of capital and increasingly frequent labor shortages, the power of

the Chinese state keeps the machine churning, loaning Chinese profits back to developed economies so that the “exchange” can continue. The debts created in this way only intensify the crisis of the developed world, because these governments attempt in any event to deliver more “welfare” to a growing number of unemployed despite the fall in tax revenues.

Thus, according to Qin, Piketty misses the point, first because no state can “redistribute” money that does not exist, and second, because the debate provoked by Piketty’s book was all about different capitalist “models” (American, European, Scandinavian), while in fact all of these economies are in the same boat when it comes to China. As a result, not only is there no conflict between “capitalism” and “socialism”—all developed economies being a mixture of the two and China being a free-rider—but ideology blinds the developed world to what is actually happening: the abuse of the world system by the Chinese state. Consistent with arguments he has made elsewhere, Qin demands that Chinese workers receive the same rights as better-protected workers elsewhere. Thanks to Qin’s research, we see here the immemorial conflict between the peasants and the Chinese state transposed onto the globalized economy of the 21st century.

Qin explores this “immemorial conflict between the peasants and the Chinese state” in his 2015 (banned) book, *Abandoning the Imperial System*.¹⁷ The book offers a new reading of a key period between the fall of the Qing in 1911 and the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949, generally known as China’s Republican Period, because a republican regime replaced the dynasty, to be replaced in turn by the People’s Republic. I mentioned above the

effort by Chinese establishment intellectuals to “reimagine China” and to create “new founding myths” for China’s contemporary experience, a challenge inspired by China’s rise in the early 21st century. The period examined by Qin in his book is *the* crucial period for those attempting to rethink China, because all of the central elements in any narrative of modern China’s history are found here: the failure of the dynastic order, the establishment of the Republic, the May Fourth Movement, the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party, the Nanjing Decade, the anti-Japanese War, and the Communist victory in 1949.

Qin’s book is in fact a reaction *against* a conservative, New Confucian rereading of this entire period, which insists that both the “democratic” choices (especially those of the May Fourth Movement), as well as the “socialist” choices were all unfortunate and erroneous, because they were not “*Chinese*” choices. This rereading, in which the late-Qing reformer Kang Youwei (1858–1927) plays a major role as the principal Confucian “hero,” argues that despite important conflicts with the West, China was, at the moment of the Revolution of 1911, well on its way toward the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, the achievement of which would have allowed China to avoid a painful rupture with its glorious tradition, as well as a century of violent and unnecessary revolution(s).

Qin rejects this argument completely. According to Qin, the Revolution of 1911 was neither unnecessary nor a failure, because it put an end to the imperial regime, what he calls the “Qin system,” a regime that had defined the entire dynastic history of China. Far from being “Confucian” as widely asserted, the spirit of this regime was instead “Legalist,” a philosophy championed

by Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BCE), China's first emperor, and which attempted to concentrate all power in the hands of the emperor at the expense of the rights of the people. This system, vestiges of which continue to exist today, abuses its power without assuming its responsibilities to the people. The fall of the Qin system occurred when the Chinese people, and above all the Chinese elite, understood that Western, constitutional systems were stronger, more efficient, *and* more virtuous than the Qin system. In light of this, the arguments of today's New Confucians that the Revolution of 1911 was unnecessary do not hold water. The Revolution of 1911 was imperative, and its promise is yet to be realized, because China's regime is not fully constitutional.

The Coronavirus and Globalization

Finally we arrive at Qin's book on the pandemic and globalization. To my knowledge, this text has not been published in China or in Chinese, or at least searching the title on internet does not lead me to a link. Over the course of the spring of 2020, I noted an online announcement that Qin was going to give a public lecture of the topic, and wrote him asking if he had a draft I could read. My memory is that the talk was cancelled, but there is a YouTube recording¹⁸ (without images) of a talk with the same name from some time in April, so perhaps not. In any event, Qin emailed me his text on October 16, 2020, asking me to translate it, and it appears here in book form for the first time. In the current climate in China, it may not be possible to publish a probing, critical treatment of a sensitive topic.

Qin's text is a stunning reflection on the successes and failures of fighting the coronavirus in China and the rest of the world, but his principal focus is on China and the West. As always, his goal is to cut through the rhetoric, the finger-pointing, and the chest-thumping to get to the simple, if chilling, crux of the issue: China used its "low human rights advantage" to impose coercive lockdowns that rapidly got the virus under control after the disastrous outbreak in Wuhan, while the West, handicapped by its "high human rights (dis)advantage," stumbled badly, and continues to stumble. Yet the point of Qin's text is not to sing China's praises, but instead to wake the West up to the flaws in its institutions revealed by the failure to get the virus under control, the sad fact that Western concern with human rights has—understandably if tragically—increased the number of cases of illness and death. As mentioned above, Qin asks us to imagine the scenario in which the conspiracy theories asserting that the coronavirus had been engineered by a Chinese laboratory or by the American military were to come true, and the world found itself in a state of biological warfare using contagions vastly more lethal than the current virus. What are the chances that Western democracies would win? Or even survive?

Qin very much wants democracy to survive and prosper, in the West and eventually in China as well. His text is thus an even-handed and objective criticism of *both China and the West*, a rare bird in such polarized times. His criticisms of China are fairly straightforward. Allow freedom of speech and leave whistle-blowers alone, which would have expedited the management of the initial crisis in Wuhan and perhaps spared the rest of the China—and the rest of the world—the pain and loss of the

subsequent pandemic. Stop bragging about China's superior performance in fighting the virus. The "medieval" methods China used were not invented in China but came from the West, and the reason for China's success was their "low human rights advantage," which facilitated the imposition of coercive measures. Be vigilant that the heightened powers seized by the state during the emergency not become permanent additions to what is already a potent arsenal.

Qin's criticisms of the West are more complex and indeed often difficult to follow. This makes sense because here we have a Chinese champion of democracy and human rights essentially telling the West that human rights concerns have blinded them to the greater importance of human life during an emergency. Clearly exasperated by those who claim the human right "not to wear a mask" (as well as by their opponents who refuse to recognize that they indeed have this "right," even if exercising it in the moment is inappropriate), Qin offers a long disquisition on the confusion that occurs when we conflate rights with values.

A right, Qin insists, is the ability to do, or not to do, a certain thing, and hence equivalent to a freedom. Such rights are not absolute (you cannot scream "fire" in a crowded theater because you have freedom of speech), nor is the exercise of a right always a good thing (I have the right to tell my boss exactly what I think of him, or to pick my nose on a first date). The right to bear arms is treated as God-given and absolute in the United States, but not even the NRA defends the right to bear *nuclear* arms. Some rights—such as the right to smoke cigarettes or market opioids—have serious consequences for public health. Some rights—such as the right to whistle on a crowded bus—are simply stupid (and yet not easily taken away).

If we stop and think about it, it is immediately obvious that “give me liberty or give me death,” however inspiring, in no way describes how we live our daily lives (we wait in line, we take turns), to say nothing of the calculations necessary in times of emergency. Qin Hui has spent much of his life writing about the fundamental importance of human rights, and it clearly pains him to say to the West that “rights discourse has gotten out of hand.” But he says it, and without attacking “political correctness,” as are many of his fellow liberals in China. Rights, Qin insists, are one element of community and political life, and should not absolutized or decontextualized.

Next, Qin tackles the related question of dictatorship, reminding Westerners that historically, the first dictators were Roman military figures who received a special and temporary mandate in times of war, when democracy was suspended. In other words, this institution is part of the West’s heritage, even if in modern times it has been associated with the scourge of communism and thus seen as the antithesis of democracy, instead of a temporary interruption (Qin notes for good measure that Lenin’s—and China’s—“democratic dictatorship” makes no sense in historical or logical terms). Qin is clearly aware that democracy has indeed been “interrupted” during wartime more than once in modern history, but is frustrated by the hesitation of Western democratic leaders to use the powers at their disposal to fight a different sort of “war.” (Qin being Qin, we also have several paragraphs on the differences between waging war against a declared enemy and fighting a non-human virus.)

There is much, much more to the essay: the rise and fall of serfdom after the Black Death (which followed a similar logic

to the growth of China's economy under conditions of globalization); revelations concerning little-known pandemics that occurred in the People's Republic; the invention of the practice of quarantine in medieval Venice; the history of leprosy; the Siracusa principles, established in 1984, which attempt to establish how to deal with human rights under states of emergency. The text is long and fascinating, if at times a bit obscure, in part because Qin often returns to arguments developed in other contexts without informing the reader, in part perhaps because he does not want to be *too* clear in certain criticisms that may be addressed to China's over-sensitive premier leader. But to my mind, the best way to view the length and difficulty of the text is to see it as a reflection of the difficulty of the question Qin is trying to answer: How do we save democracy when one part of the organism—rights discourse—has metastasized out of control, endangering the survival of the organism itself?