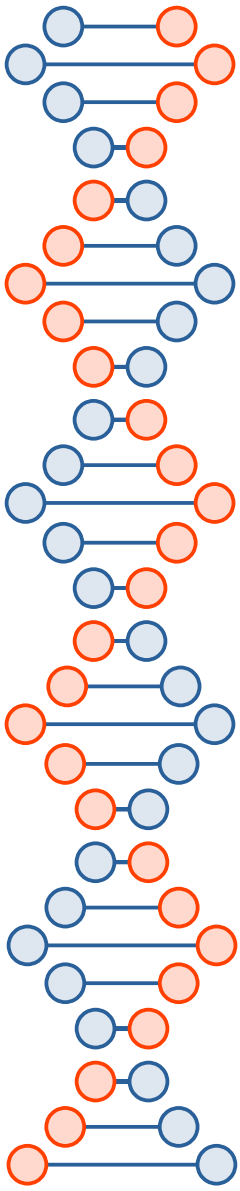


Social Contagion

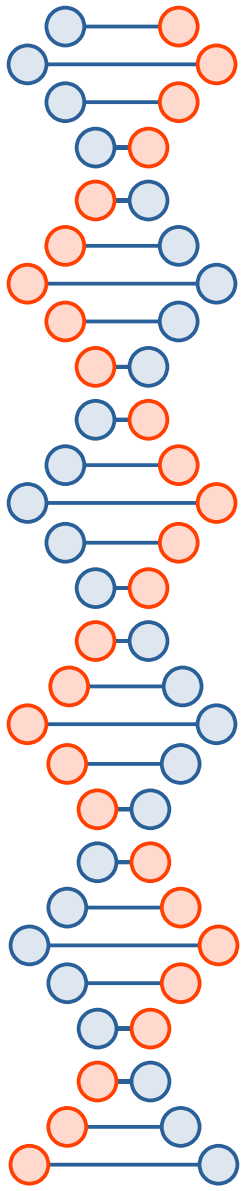
And Other Notes About Microbiological Class Warfare in China



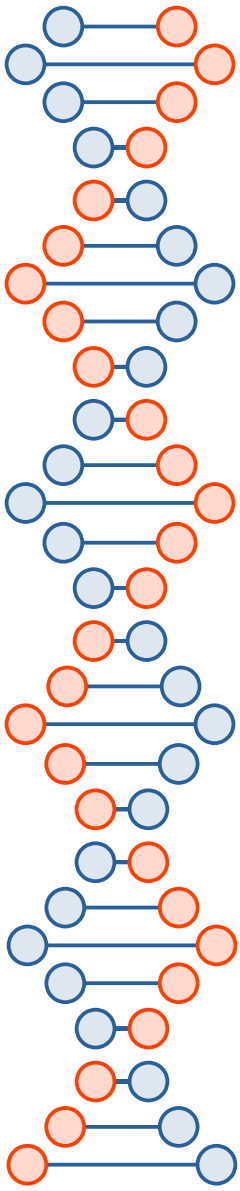


About This Presentation

- Lot of content, will be using quotes to summarize
 - TLDR statements to summarize quotes
- Surface level overview, will go deeper during questions
 - Designed to revisit
 - Red text are topics I won't get into, but can be explored during discussion



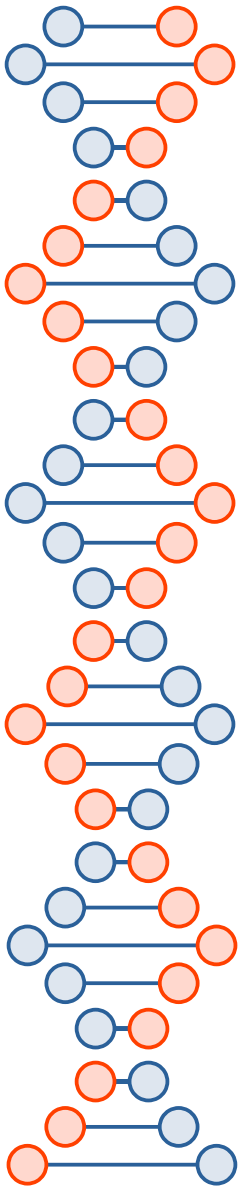
Introduction



What is Chuang?

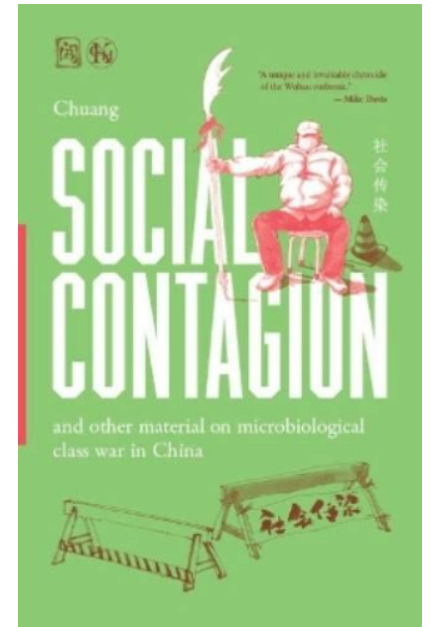
- Collective of anonymous Chinese communists both living within and outside of China
- Project is to demonstrate China at the heart of world capitalism, provide a proper account of its origins and ongoing development

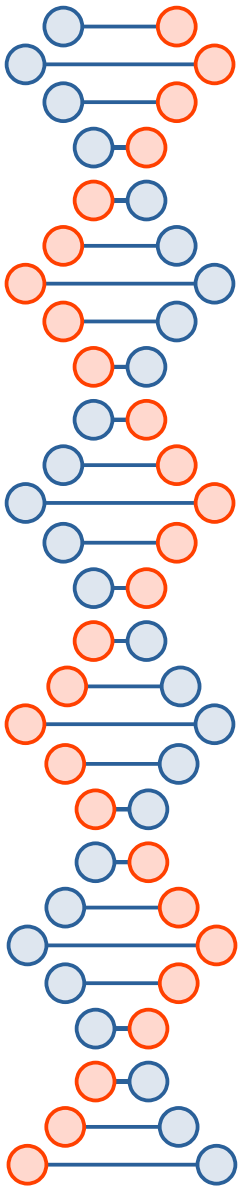




Social Contagion: Main Themes

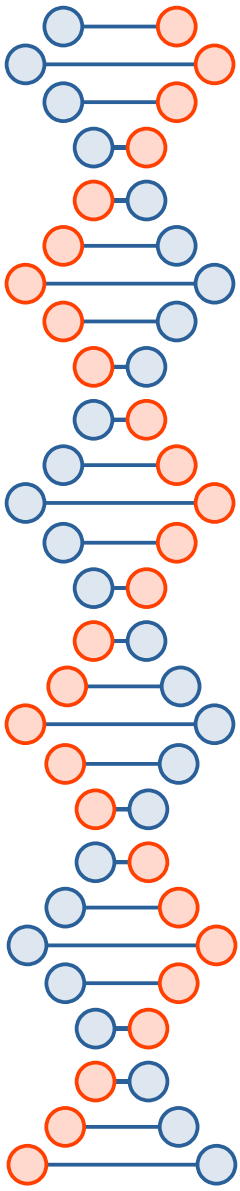
- Comprised of various first person accounts/interviews, valuable
- Putting the COVID-19 crisis into Marxist context
 - Lockdowns unprecedented in scale (p. 118)
 - Capitalism fundamentally at odds with nature
 - The relationship between statecraft and capitalism
 - Direct action within a modern context
- Failure of the Western press (p. 9)
 - Unable to understand pandemics
 - Unable to understand China



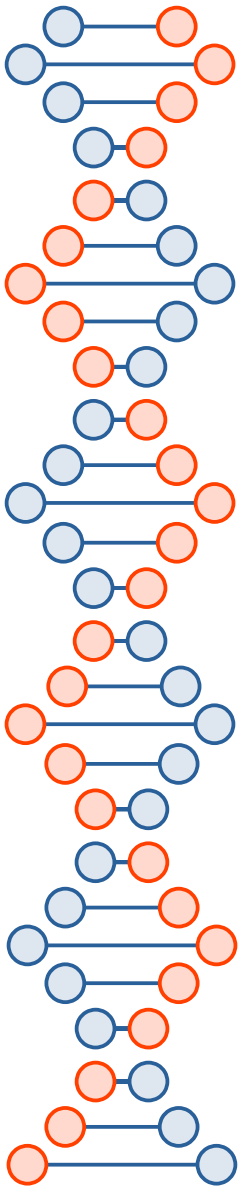


Overview

- Introduction
- How Pandemics Form
- Capitalism in China
- The Chinese State
- The Chinese People
- Takeaways



How Pandemics Form

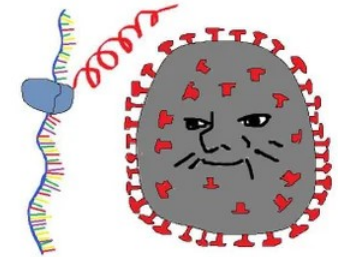


The Production of Plagues

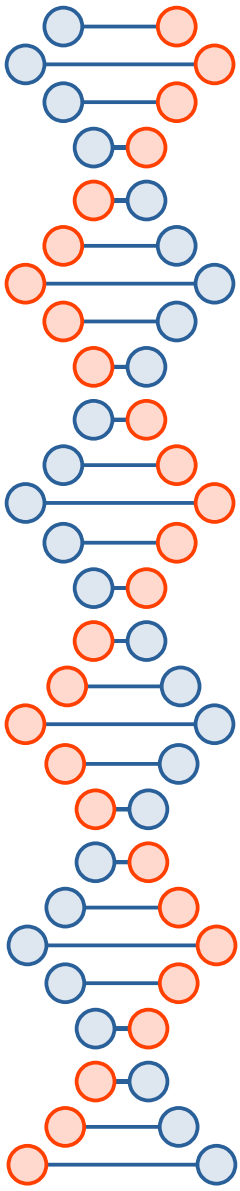
- Pandemics are a feature of capitalism, not a bug
 - Ebola, SARS, MERS, Avian Flu, Swine Flu, etc. (p. i)
 - Tendency to biological crisis
- How capitalism creates plagues (p. ii)
 - The conditions of factory farming
 - Globalization and the flow of capital
 - The logic of urbanization



Noooo you can't just hijack my cell membrane and force me to make copies of you!



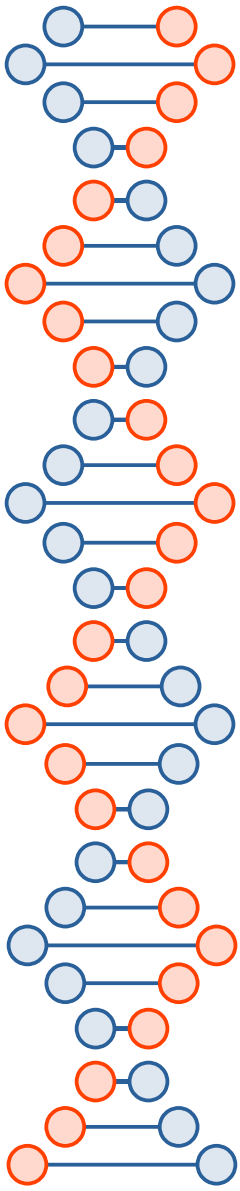
haha protein printer go brrrr



Biological Crisis (p. 24)

COVID-19 can't be understood without taking into account the ways in which China's last few decades of development in and through the global capitalist system has molded the country's health care system and the state of public health more generally. The epidemic, however novel, is therefore similar to other public health crises that came before it, which tend to be produced with nearly the same regularity as economic crises, and to be regarded in similar ways within the popular press—as if they were random, “black swan” events, utterly unpredictable and unprecedented. **The reality, however, is that these health crises follow their own chaotic, cyclical patterns of recurrence, made more probable by a series of structural contradictions built into the nature of production and proletarian life under capitalism.**

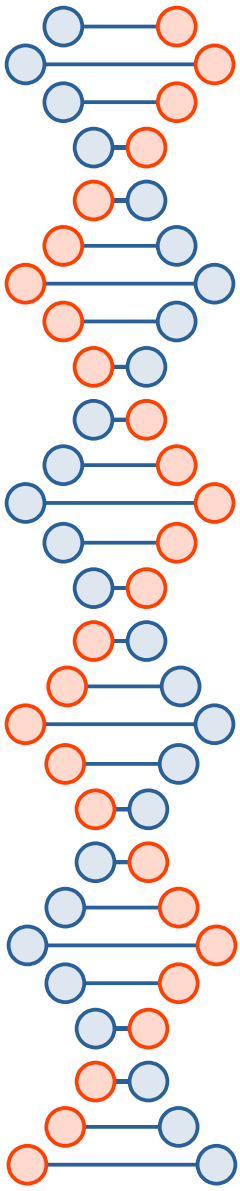
TLDR: There exists an inherent tendency towards biological crisis within capitalism parallel to that of economic crisis.



Factory Farming

- Slaughterhouses are inherently unsanitary
- Factory farms act as incubators for viruses to evolve
 - Evolve to infect humans
 - Evolve to spread faster



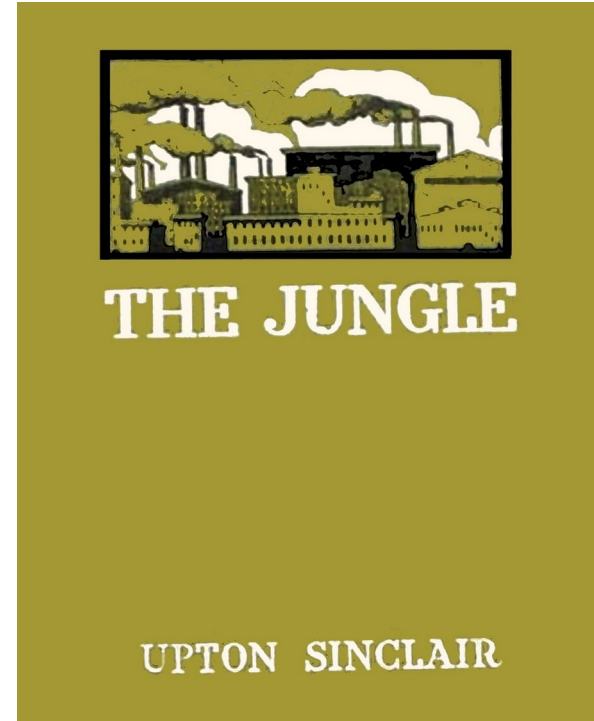


The Jungle (p. 22-23)

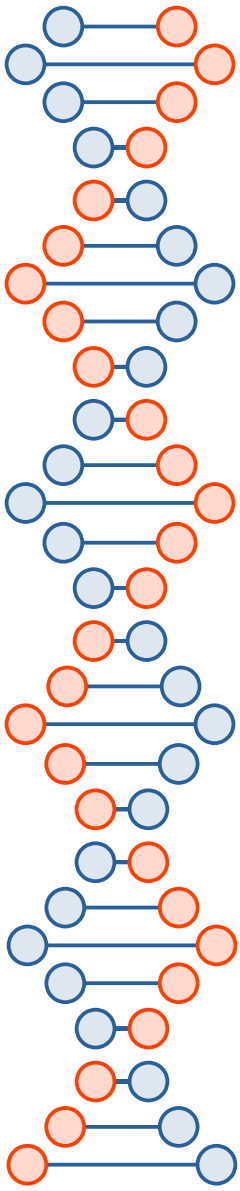
The explanations for why so many epidemics seem to arise in China is not cultural, it's a matter of economic geography. This is abundantly clear if we compare China to the US or Europe when the latter were hubs of global production and mass industrial employment.^[vi] And the result is essentially identical, with all the same features. Livestock die-offs in the countryside were met in the city by poor sanitary practices and widespread contamination. This became the focus of early liberal-progressive efforts at reform in working class areas, epitomized by the reception of Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*, originally written to document the suffering of immigrant workers in the meat-packing industry, but taken up by wealthier liberals concerned about health violations and the generally unsanitary conditions in which their own food was prepared.

This liberal outrage at "uncleanliness," with all its implied racism, still defines what we might think of as the automatic ideology of most people when confronted with the political dimensions of something like the coronavirus or SARS epidemics. But workers have little control over the conditions in which they work. More importantly, while unsanitary conditions do leak out of the factory through contamination of food supplies, this contamination is really just the tip of the iceberg. Such conditions are the ambient norm for those working in them or living in nearby proletarian settlements, and these conditions induce population-level declines in health that provide even better conditions for the spread of capitalism's many plagues.

Take, for example, the case of the Spanish Flu, one of the deadliest epidemics in history. This was one of the earliest outbreaks of H1N1 influenza (related to more recent outbreaks of swine and avian flu), and it was long assumed to have somehow been qualitatively different from other variants of influenza, given its high death toll. While this appears to be true in part (due to the flu's ability to induce an overreaction of the immune system), later reviews of the literature and historical epidemiology research found that it may not have been that much more virulent than other strains. Instead, its high death rate was probably caused primarily by widespread malnourishment, urban overcrowding, and generally unsanitary living conditions in the affected areas, which encouraged not only the spread of the flu itself but also the cultivation of bacterial superinfections on top of the underlying viral one.



TLDR: Factory farming and industrial cores are inherently unsanitary and cause plagues.

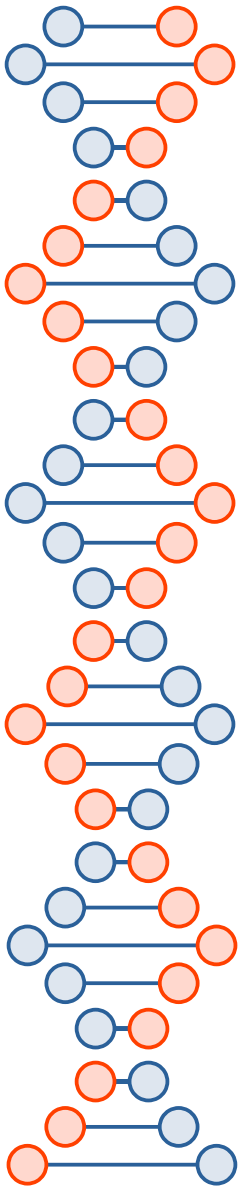


Factory Farming: Biodiversity (p. 13)

Growing genetic monocultures of domestic animals removes whatever immune firebreaks may be available to slow down transmission. Larger population sizes and densities facilitate greater rates of transmission. Such crowded conditions depress immune response. High throughput, a part of any industrial production, provides a continually renewed supply of susceptibles, the fuel for the evolution of virulence.

And, of course, each of these characteristics is an outgrowth of the logic of industrial competition. In particular, the rapid rate of "throughput" in such contexts has a starkly biological dimension: "As soon as industrial animals reach the right bulk they are killed. Resident influenza infections must reach their transmission threshold quickly in any given animal... The quicker viruses are produced, the greater the damage to the animal. Ironically, the attempt to suppress such outbreaks through mass culling -- as in the recent cases of African swine fever, which resulted in the loss of almost a quarter of the world's pork supply -- can have the unintended effect of increasing this selection pressure even more, thereby inducing the evolution of hyper-virulent strains. Though such outbreaks have historically occurred in domesticated species, often following periods of warfare or environmental catastrophe that place enhanced pressure on livestock populations, increases in the intensity and virulence of such diseases have undeniably followed the spread of capitalist production.

TLDR: Industrial concentration and standardization of livestock undermines ecological checks against pandemics.

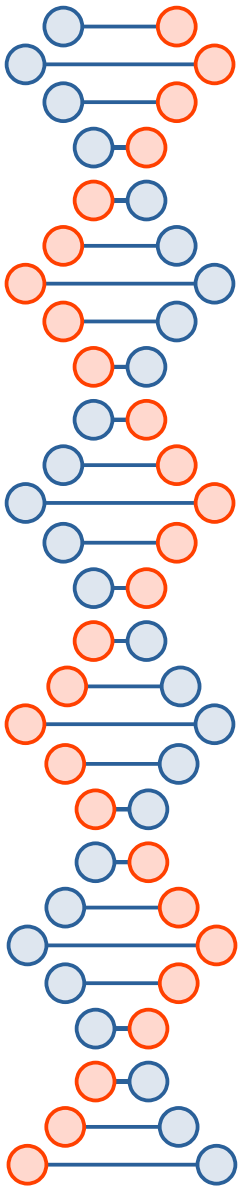


Factory Farming: Livestock (p. 16)

Flu or influenza viruses find their ultimate reservoir in birds, and the farms of South China, where domesticated ducks, chickens, and pigs often cohabit, are the perfect environment for their spillover into human populations. Villagers who once engaged in subsistence farming gradually shifted more of their production to serve the market. At first this meant increasing yields of grain and planting more vegetables, but as urbanization accelerated these villages were encircled by industrial development and increasingly incentivized to produce meat. The result was that many such farms have often replaced rice fields with ponds to produce ducks, leading to higher incomes. To place the scale of this shift into context: China now produces about 80% of the world's ducks. But this production is not just a shift from one land use to another on isolated plots, because these plots exist within a larger process of urbanization, with all its accompanying environmental consequences. Most relevant here is the fact that the destruction of native habitat and wetlands have forced wild birds to make use of these duck ponds on their migrations, and from there influenza viruses spread from the wild birds into the farmed birds.

While many of the avian influenzas cannot spread directly to humans, these viruses do often infect local pigs, putting them in contact with human viruses that infect pigs at the same time. This leads to what can be thought of (in somewhat imprecise terms) as a process of hybridization, with the body of the pig acting as a bridge between avian populations, with their specific viral mix, and human populations carrying human-adapted viruses. Because pigs are often susceptible to both avian and human viruses, those viruses remix across pig populations to create new varieties of influenza that can lead to epidemic diseases. This process is happening continuously: in fact, a new version of the H1N1 influenza has been spreading among pigs on Chinese farms over the last few years and infecting workers on those farms.

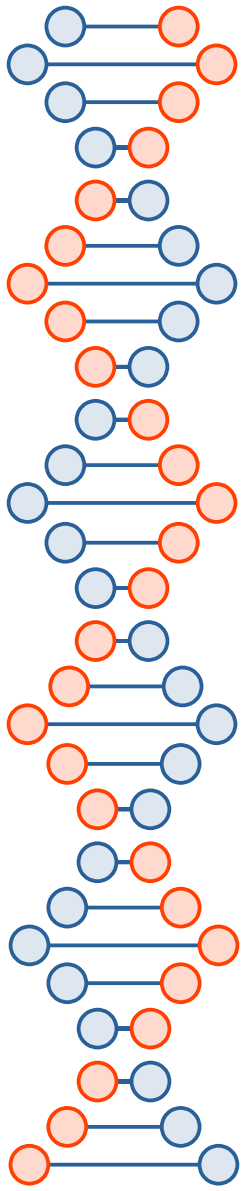
TLDR: Livestock act as the perfect incubator to convert animal diseases into human diseases.



Factory Farming: Evolution (p. 13)

This is a point already made in the mainstream press the fact that "globalization" enables the spread of such diseases more quickly -- albeit here with the important addition that this very process of circulation also stimulates the virus to mutate more rapidly. The real question, though, comes earlier: prior to circulation enhancing the resilience of such diseases, **the basic logic of capital helps to take previously isolated or harmless viral strains and place them in hyper-competitive environments that favor the specific traits which cause epidemics, such as rapid viral lifecycles, the capacity for zoonotic jumping between carrier species, and the capacity to quickly evolve new transmission vectors.** These strains tend to stand out precisely because of their virulence. In absolute terms, it seems like developing more virulent strains would have the opposite effect, since killing the host sooner provides less time for the virus to spread. The common cold is a good example of this principle, generally maintaining low levels of intensity that facilitate its widespread distribution through the population. But in certain environments, the opposite logic can make more sense: **when a virus has numerous hosts of the same species in close proximity, and especially when these hosts may already have shortened lifecycles, increased virulence becomes an evolutionary advantage.**

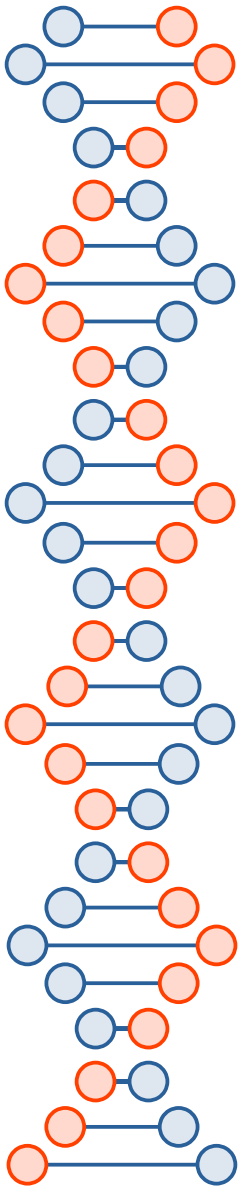
TLDR: The frequency at which livestock is slaughtered encourages viruses to spread as fast as possible.



The Flow of Capital

- Viruses hijack global commodity circuits
- Trade agreements pave the way for capital's global expansion (p. viii)
- Geographic isolation as an ecological bulwark

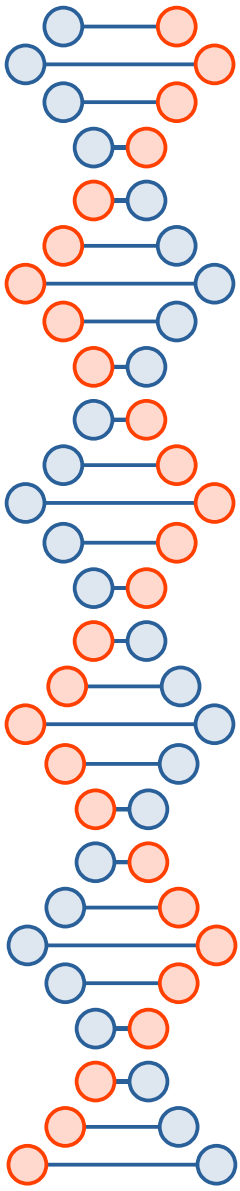




Globalization: Connected to China (p. 14)

The zoonotic transfer of disease is social in a broader sense as well. Urbanization has changed both eating habits and farming practices. China has to feed 1.4 billion people, almost 20% of the world's population but with under 10% of the world's arable land. These basic material facts have been made more complicated by the dramatic changes that China has undergone over the last several decades. In the late 1970s, the urban population of China was less than 10% of the total population: it is now around 60%. That is phenomenally fast urbanization. Nor is it just a distant phenomenon taking place in a far-off country. In many ways, we all come into contact with this urbanization in one way or another: For example, this process was driven by the migration of poor rural residents to new industrial complexes that were arising in places like the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong Province in the South. There, these new workers flooded into factories producing exports for foreign markets. This means that **what seems like a simple purchase of some piece of cheap consumer electronics at Target or Walmart is also essentially a social connection to these spaces. Nor is this a fanciful metaphor: it's a material link that manifests as a chain of social interactions between people and between people and their environment. Seemingly simple economic purchases have resounding consequences.** In this case, fueling a wave of urbanization at a size and scope unprecedented in human history.

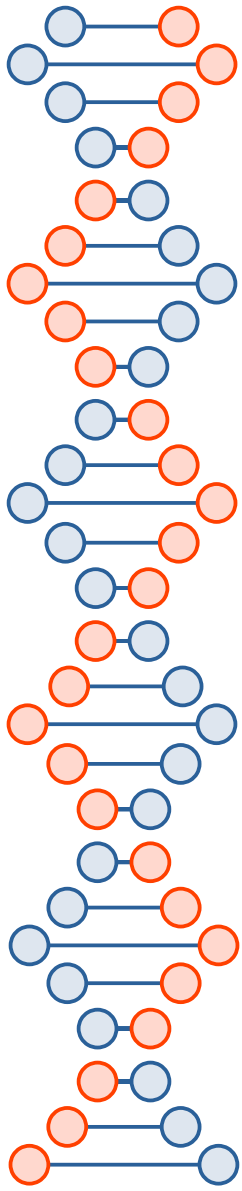
TLDR: Global commodity circuits serve as a literal connection between Chinese workers and international consumers.



Globalization: The Role of Trade (p. viii)

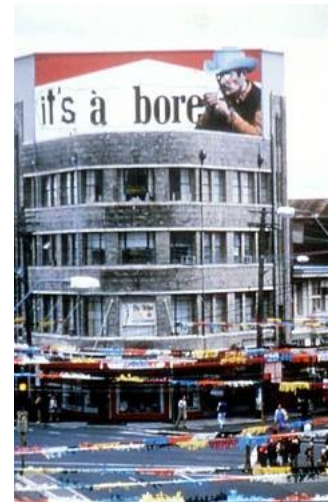
As these struggles were going on in factories across the US and Europe, think tanks, foundations, international associations like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, the Trilateral Commission, central banks, and others began to meet in the mid-seventies to discuss ways out of the crisis of both labor insurgency and falling profit rates. The global shift that resulted developed over time. It had many elements, but basically global capital needed greater mobility that would move production to areas of the world where wages were low and regulations protecting workers and the environment were nonexistent. Technological and institutional changes throughout the 1980s made such a strategy feasible. Process technologies made it possible to break up the production process and to produce pieces of products in different locations. These developments literally changed the metrics for scale economies. The big box containers and the new ships, trucks, and trains to move them made it feasible for these different places to be located long distances from one another. Computer technologies, robots, and now artificial intelligence not only automated production but offered innovations in inventory control to enable firms to get materials they used in production when they needed it ("just in time" or JIT). **Meanwhile loans to "third world" nations included conditions that forced nations to open their economies to foreign investment.** In the 1990s, institutional innovations arose to eliminate any barriers to the flow of capital around the world under the guise of "free trade." Finance became a highly profitable "product" during this period and was used to open nations to manufacturing. These developments were not the product of some "master plan" or a conspiracy but the response of many actors asserting their class interests. **The rapid urbanization and industrialization of China** discussed here by Chuang occurred in this broader context.

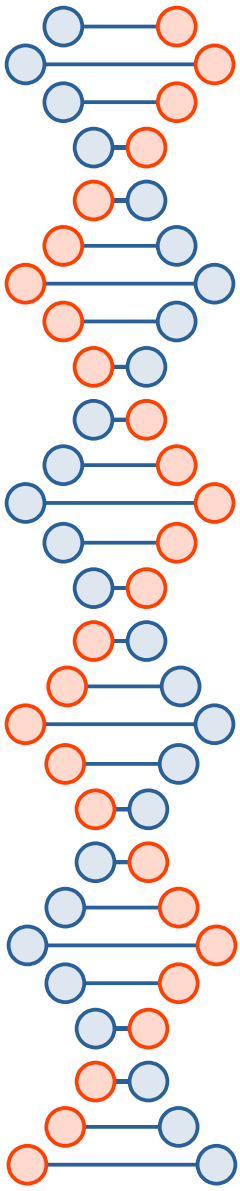
TLDR: International trade agreements and globalization opened more paths for capital flow, thus increasing transmission vectors.



The Urban Logic of Capitalism

- Capitalism is totalizing, this includes geographically
 - There is no “wilderness”
 - Blurring of rural/urban divide (p. 30)
- Capitalism has a tendency towards centralization
 - Accomplishes this through displacement
- Spatial logic of urban segmentation (p. 166)
 - Funny note: Mall cop-ocracy (p. 148-149)



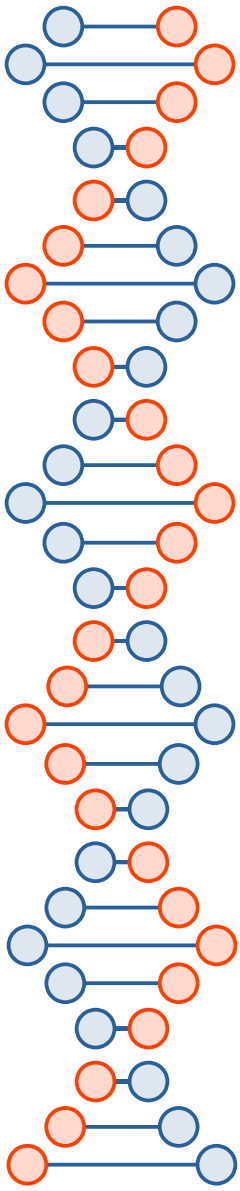


Urbanization: Nature Subsumed (p. 31)

The fact is that the "natural" sphere is already subsumed under a fully global capitalist system that has succeeded in changing baseline climatic conditions and devastating so many pre-capitalist ecosystems that the remainder no longer function as they might have in the past.

Here lies yet another causative factor, since, according to Wallace, all these processes of ecological devastation reduce "the kind of environmental complexity with which the forest disrupts transmission chains." **The reality, then, is that it's a misnomer to think of such areas as the natural "periphery" of a capitalist system. Capitalism is already global, and already totalizing. It no longer has an edge or border with some natural, non-capitalist sphere beyond it, and there is therefore no great chain of development in which "backward" countries follow those ahead of them on their way up the value chain, nor any true wilderness capable of being preserved in some sort of pure, untouched condition. Instead, capital merely has a subordinated hinterland, itself fully subsumed within global value chains. The resulting social systems—including everything from supposed "tribalism" to renewals of anti-modern fundamentalist religions are wholly contemporary products, and are almost always de-facto plugged into global markets, often quite directly.** The same can be said of the resulting biological-ecological systems, since "wild" areas are actually immanent to this global economy in both the abstract sense of dependence on the climate and related ecosystems and in the direct sense of being plugged into those same global value chains. **This fact produces the conditions necessary for the transformation of "wild" viral strains into global pandemics.**

TLDR: Capitalism breaks down boundaries between traditional and modern, "natural" and "artificial". There no longer exists an "untouched" nature to escape to.

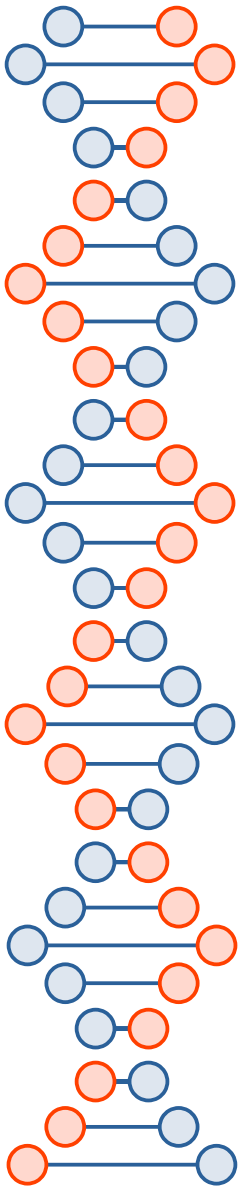


Urbanization: Displacement (p. 30,34)

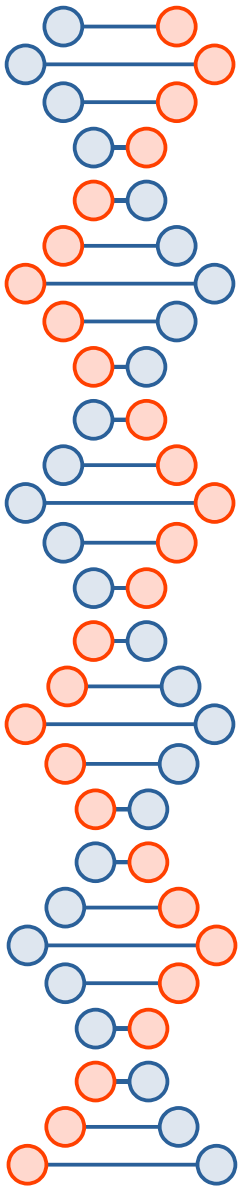
Both have occurred precisely when the expansion of primary industries has been further displacing forest-dwelling peoples and disrupting local ecosystems. In fact, this appears to be true for more than the most recent cases, since, as Wallace explains, **"every Ebola outbreak appears connected to capital-driven shifts in land use**, including back to the first outbreak in Nzara, Sudan in 1976, where a British-financed factory spun: wove local cotton." Similarly, **the outbreaks in 2013 in Guinea occurred right after a new government had begun to open the country to global markets and sell off large tracts of land to international agribusiness conglomerates.** The palm oil industry, notorious for its role in deforestation and ecological destruction worldwide, seems to have been particularly culpable, since its monocultures both devastate the robust ecological redundancies that help to interrupt transmission chains and at the same time literally attract the bat species that serve as a natural reservoir for the virus.

The sale of large tracts of land to commercial agroforestry companies also entailed both the dispossession of forest-dwelling locals and the disruption of their ecosystem-dependent local forms of production and harvest. This often leaves the rural poor with no choice but to push further into the forest at the same time that their traditional relationship with that ecosystem has been disrupted. The result is that the survival of the rural population itself increasingly depends on the hunting of wild game or harvesting of local flora and timber for sale on global markets. Such populations then become the stand-ins for the ire of global environmentalist organizations, who decry them as "poachers" and "illegal loggers" responsible for the very deforestation and ecological destruction that pushed them to such trades in the first place. Often, the process then takes a much darker turn, as in Guatemala, where **anti-communist paramilitaries leftover from the country's civil war were transformed into "green" security forces**, tasked with "protecting" the forest from the illegal logging, hunting and narcotrafficking that were the only trades available to its indigenous residents—who had been pushed to such activities precisely because of the violent repression they had faced from those same paramilitaries during the war. The pattern has since been reproduced all over the world, **cheered on by social media posts in high income countries celebrating the (often literally caught-on-camera) execution of "poachers" by supposedly "green" security forces.**"

TLDR: Agribusiness' land-clearing displaces local populations, opening paths for pandemics to spread.



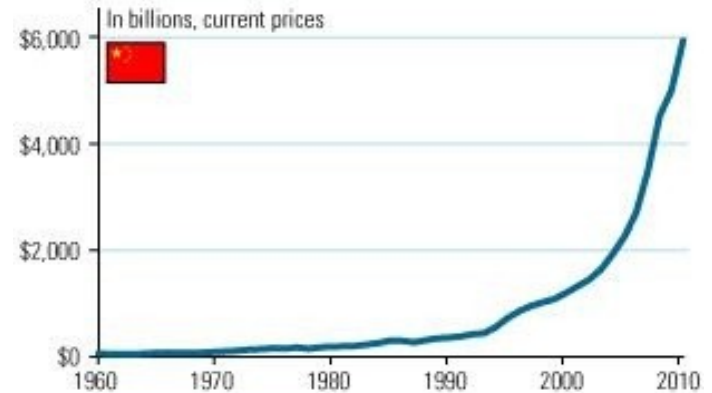
Capitalism in China



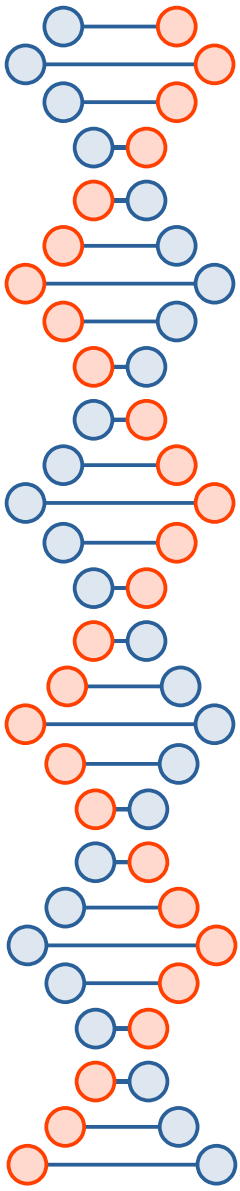
The World's Furnace

- Rapid growth/urbanization in past decades
 - Signs of future deindustrialization
- Centrality to the world
 - Largest supplier of various meats (pork, duck, etc)
- China as an export economy
- Dismantling of the social safety net

China GDP Since 1960



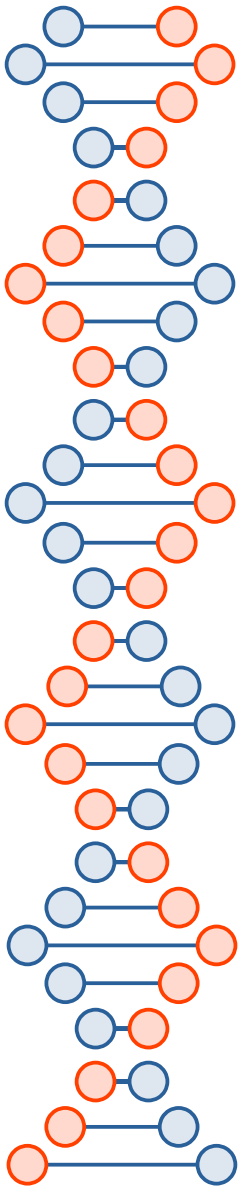
Source: NBSC 2010; World Bank 2011



Export Economy (p. 25)

Meanwhile, the quality of domestic-market products is often dangerously poor. For decades, Chinese industry has produced high quality, high value exports, made to the highest global standards for the world market, like iPhones and computer chips. But those goods left for consumption on the domestic market have abysmal standards, causing regular scandals and deep public distrust. The many cases have an undeniable echo of Sinclair's *The Jungle* and other tales of Gilded Age America. The largest case in recent memory, the melamine milk scandal of 2008, left a dozen infants dead and tens of thousands hospitalized (though perhaps hundreds of thousands were affected). Since then, a number of scandals have rocked the public with regularity: in 2011 when 'gutter oil' recycled from grease traps was found being used in restaurants across the country, or in 2018 when faulty vaccines killed several children, and then one year later when dozens were hospitalized when given fake HPV vaccines. More mild stories are even more rampant, composing a familiar backdrop for anyone living in China: powdered instant soup mix cut with soap to keep costs down, entrepreneurs who sell pigs that died of mysterious causes to neighboring villages, detailed gossip about which street-side shops are most likely to get you sick.

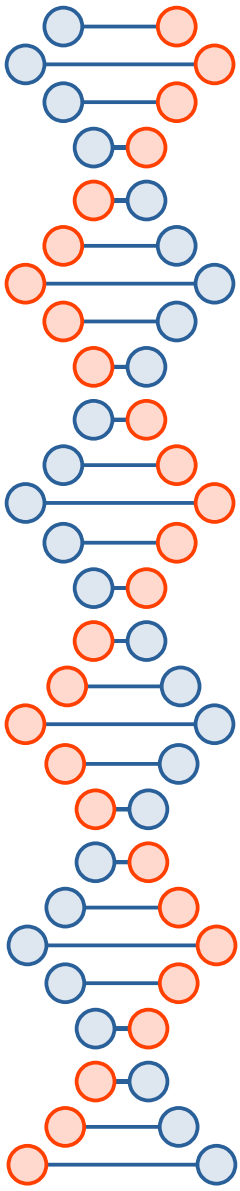
TLDR: China's economy relies on producing high-quality exports, While leaving its working-class with unsafe and substandard products.



Healthcare and Social Services

- The problem with the traditional system
 - China was *very* poor and *very* dispersed, urban bias
- Barefoot doctor system
 - Provide basic paramedical training/medicine to peasants and send them back to their village
- Dismantled during the Deng-era to disastrous results



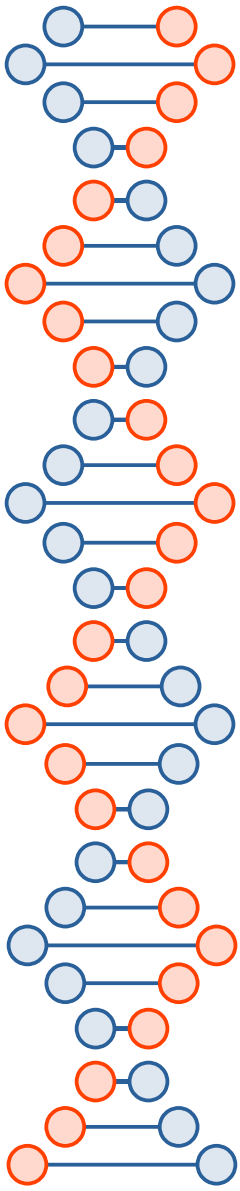


Healthcare: Barefoot Doctors (p. 26)

Before the country's piece-by-piece incorporation into the global capitalist system, services like healthcare in China were once provided (largely in the cities) under the *danwei* system of enterprise-based benefits or (mostly but not exclusively in the countryside) by local health care clinics staffed by plentiful "barefoot doctors." all provided as a free service. **The successes of socialist-era healthcare**, like its successes in the field of basic education and literacy, were substantial enough that even the country's harshest critics had to acknowledge them." Snail fever, plaguing the country for centuries, was essentially wiped out in much of its historical core, only to return in force once the socialist health care system began to be dismantled." Infant mortality plummeted and, even despite the famine that accompanied the Great Leap Forward, life expectancy jumped from 45 to 68 years between 1950 and the early 1980s. Immunization and general sanitary practices became widespread, and basic information on nutrition and public health, as well as access to rudimentary medicines, were free and available to all. **Meanwhile, the barefoot doctor system helped to distribute fundamental, albeit limited, medical knowledge to a large portion of the population, helping to build a robust, bottom-up healthcare system in conditions of severe material poverty.** It's worth remembering that all of this took place at a time when China was poorer, per capita, than your average Sub-Saharan African country today



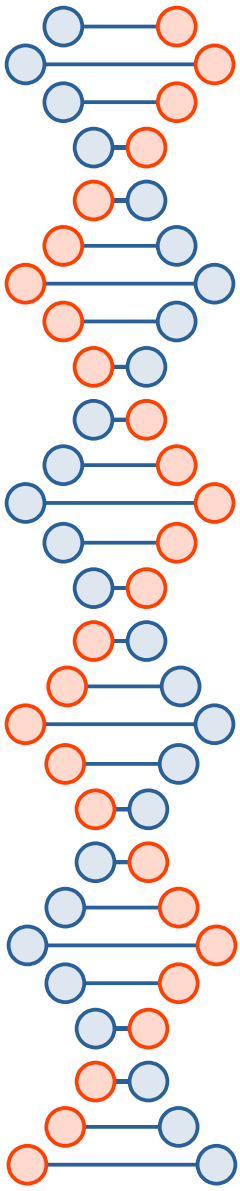
TLDR: During the Mao-era, China had an incredibly effective socialist healthcare system which was instrumental in curbing pandemics.



China's Liberalization

- Mass privatization under Deng
- Most investment now towards infrastructure and industry (p. 25)
- Only 22% of workers with health insurance
 - Neither the state nor businesses can afford this, rate of profit is too low
- Widespread deregulation of food and drug industries





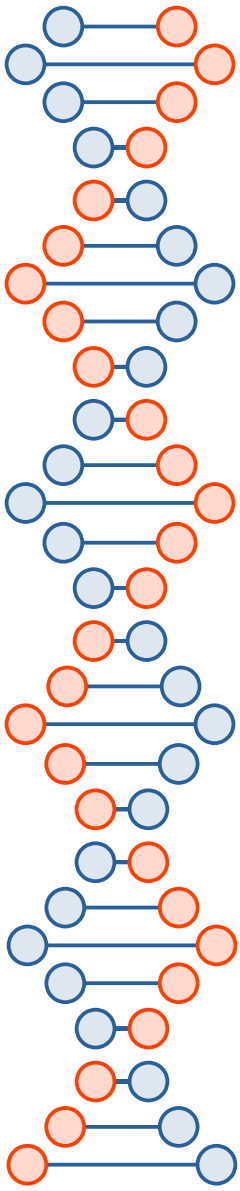
China's Liberalization (p. 26-27)

Since then, a combination of neglect and privatization has substantially degraded this system at the same time that rapid urbanization and unregulated industrial production of household goods and foodstuffs has made the need for widespread healthcare, not to mention food, drug and safety regulations, all the more necessary. Today, China's public spending on health is US \$323 per capita, according to figures from the World Health Organization. This figure is low even among other "upper-middle income countries, and it's around half that spent by Brazil. Belarus and Bulgaria. Regulation is minimal to non-existent, resulting in numerous scandals of the type mentioned above. Meanwhile, the effects of all this are felt most strongly by the hundreds of millions of migrant workers, for whom any right to basic health care provisions completely evaporates when they leave their rural hometowns (where, under the hukou system, they are permanent residents regardless of their actual location, meaning that the remaining public resources can't be accessed elsewhere).

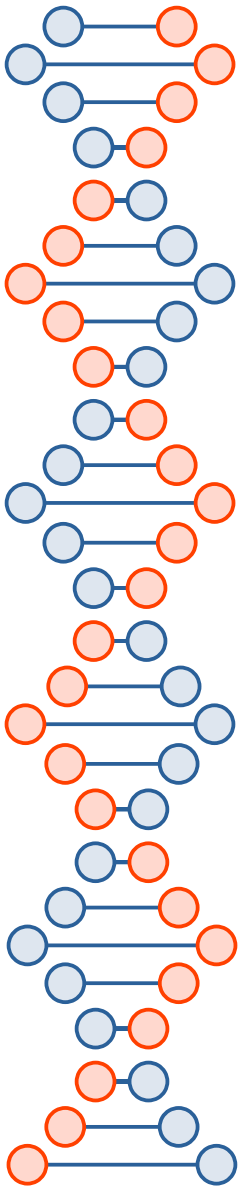
Ostensibly, public healthcare was supposed to have been replaced in the late 1990s by a more privatized system (albeit one managed through the state) in which a combination of employer and employee contributions would provide for medical care, pensions and housing insurance, But this social insurance scheme has suffered from systematic under-payment, to the extent that supposedly "required" contributions on the part of employers are often simply ignored, leaving the overwhelming majority of workers to pay out of pocket. According to the latest available national estimate, only 22 percent of migrant workers had basic medical insurance. Lack of contributions to the social insurance system is not, however, simply a spiteful act by individually corrupt bosses, but is instead accounted for largely by the fact that slim profit margins leave no room for social benefits. In our own calculation, we found that coughing up unpaid social insurance in an industrial hub like Dongguan would cut industrial profits in half and push many firms to bankruptcy. To make up for the massive gaps, China has instituted a bare-bones supplementary medical scheme to cover retirees and the self employed, which only pays out a few hundred yuan per person per year on average



TLDR: China is plagued by a combination of unregulated food regulation and an inability to provide widespread healthcare.



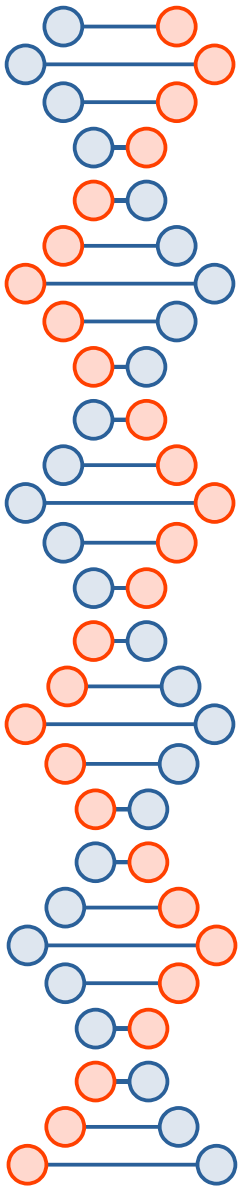
The Chinese State



The Myth of “Leviathan”

- How discourse about the pandemic stops being about the pandemic
- The fundamental capitalist imperatives of the state
 - Resolve conflicts between the bourgeoisie
 - Maintain baseline conditions for capital accumulation
- Past this, other factors can influence statecraft



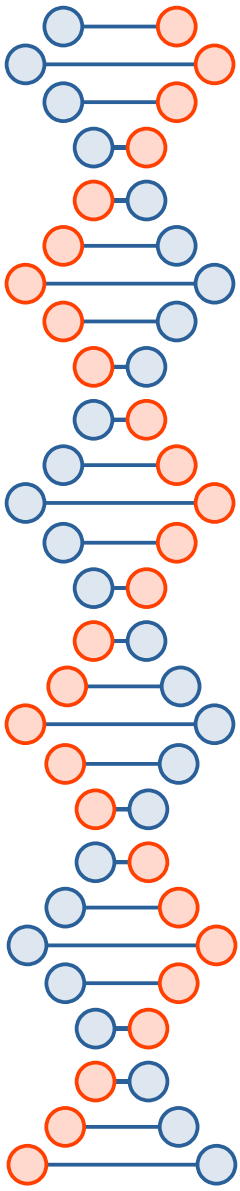


The Myth of the State (p. 109-110)

Plague literature is rarely about the plague. It is, instead, a drama simultaneously social and microbial. As existential ruminations condense in isolation and seep outward, these tributaries slowly sculpt the terrain of a popular culture now faced with a type of catastrophe that can no longer be denied out of convenience. The exemplars of the genre see in the plague a more monstrous return of class conflict, scorning its long denial. In these cases—for example Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" or Bruno Jasiński's *I Burn Paris*, which, in a chilling echo of the present, envisions an insurrection occurring in the midst of a plague in 1920s France -- the drama mobilizes the plague as a form of class warfare severed from political agency altogether, since political agency has failed it. [...]

But the more common cultural current is conservative, defined by a recognition of the catastrophe without the ability to delineate its cause. At its most reactionary, this manifests as a pure substitution: tens of thousands of people for whom politics is nothing but endless paranoia deny the existence of the virus outright, seeing in it nothing but an excuse for the overreach of the state. Others take an equally reactionary but opposite position. They vigorously amplify the myths that states craft for themselves by pointing to the relative success of various East Asian governments in containing the outbreak (and conveniently ignoring their failures that facilitated it). Whether rallying around the state or rallying against it, these are a concise expression of an almost universal approach to the question of the plague, ranging from the party propagandist, to the paranoid anti-masker, and from there all the way up to the ivy-league philosopher. The thematic core is this: **the plague is not the plague but is instead simply one face of the totalizing state. The state here acts as a sort of final threshold of ideology.** This is the limit-point beyond which one has no other option but to gaze upon contours of the beast we call capitalism. At this threshold, the rule is to speak of the plague without speaking of its origins, to speak of society without speaking of the social and to speak of the pandemic as a purely administrative matter conducted by those at the helm of the state. In short, **the most common way that the pandemic is spoken of today is not to discuss it at all and to discuss the state in its place.**

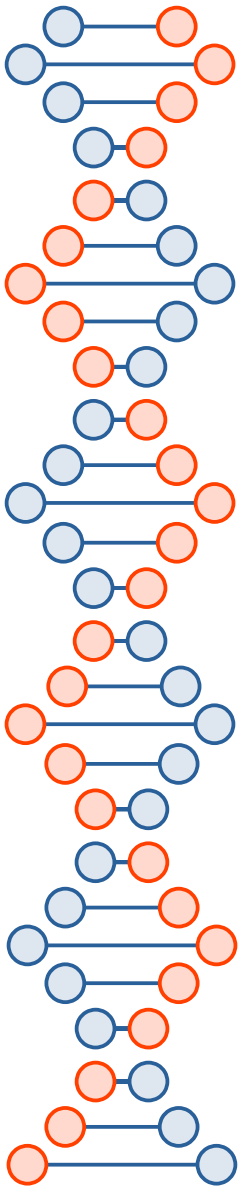
TLDR: Ideology obfuscates real, systemic crises such as pandemics, turning discourse towards vague diatribes about the State.



The Myth of Leviathan (p. 114)

In these accounts, the totalizing state and its pervasive, panoptic power seems to be the prime mover in a paranoid conspiracy that flips Hobbes's Leviathan on its head. This sort of sovereignty has no material origin. In this conception, the state becomes little more than an ancient, amorphous specter haunting humankind. This is the state's own myth of itself, the final reification disguising the fact that the state today cannot be understood separate from its functions under capitalism just as, historically, states are inseparable from questions of class and production. Capitalist imperatives are the foundation of the state and conflicts arise from the fact that disjointed processes of state building and state decay exist side by side within a single global economy. This material conception of the state requires an understanding of it in its specificity -- that is, in relation to civilization as a whole and to particular modes of production -- rather than as some exaggerated, paranoiac Leviathan haunting humanity from the moment the first grains were cast into the soil.

TLDR: Discussing the state in isolation from its functions in global capitalism is absurd.

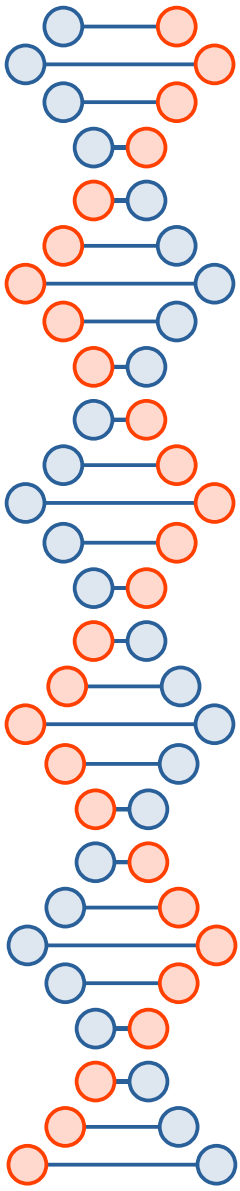


Chinese Political Philosophy

- New regime's political soul-searching
- **Caution: Ideology is not a “playbook” (p. 122, 201)**
 - Describes the already-ongoing processes (p. 140)
- Xi-Jinping Thought:
 - Classical revival in dialogue with Western thinkers
 - Foucault, Bookchin/Albert (p. 190), Schmitt
 - Legalism, Confucianism, Daoism
 - Thinkers and ideas:
 - Jiang Shigong – “Sovereignty” (p. 195)
 - Gan Yang – The Three Traditions (p. 192)
 - Jiang Qing – Constitutional Confucianism (p. 194)



Jiang Shigong



How States Are Made (p. 114)

In other words, the key questions are: how much must the Chinese state resemble the capitalist states that have preceded it, how much latitude is there for adaptive experimentation and what intellectual environment might provide the resources for such adaptation? Answering these questions requires a concrete analysis of the mechanics on the ground-how power is actually developed and deployed rather than a purely discursive approach detailing how the state speaks of itself and articulates its power to the populace. These pragmatic features are what we emphasize below. At the same time, the deployment of power does not occur in a vacuum. We might echo a truism here and say that the mode of production (mostly, but not exclusively, its ruling class) **makes its own states, but it does not make them as it pleases.** Instead, it crafts them under circumstances given and transmitted from the past, with materials salvaged from the contingencies of culture and geography. These materials are assembled within a given intellectual context, through which they are made available to those with the power to shape wide-ranging transformations in governance. Today, this intellectual context is global, but not homogeneous. Similarly, the globalization of European practices of statecraft-and the influence thereby exerted by capitalist imperatives on their evolution- has been an incidental outcome attending imperialism and colonization. not a logical necessity. Given the different material challenges faced by capitalism today and a different intellectual genealogy from which to draw, there is every reason to expect that the state currently being constructed in China will, in certain respects, be without precedent even while its fundamental function remains the same.

TLDR: Capitalism works *with* the given cultural context, adapting and making use of its rationalizations to construct a suitable state.



Xi Jinping Thought (p. 196)

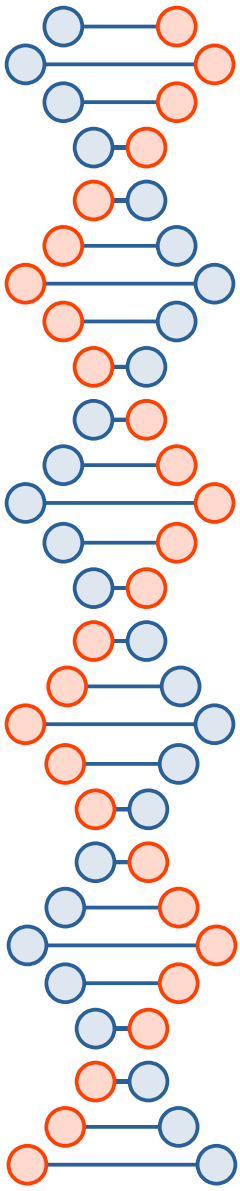
[To quote Jiang Shigong...]

What we must pay particular attention to is the fact that when Xi Jinping emphasizes a return to Communist principles, he is not talking about the "communist society" that was of a piece with scientific socialism but is instead using the idea that "those who do not forget their original intention 初心 will prevail," drawn from traditional Chinese culture. In so doing, he removes communism from the specific social setting of the Western empirical tradition, and astutely transforms it into the Learning of the Heart in Chinese traditional philosophy, which in turn elevates communism to a kind of ideal faith or a spiritual belief. [...]

Precisely within the context of traditional Chinese culture, the understanding of this highest ideal is no longer that of Marx, who thought within the Western theoretical tradition; it is no longer in humanity's Garden of Eden, "unalienated" by the division of labor within society. Instead it is intimately linked to the ideal of "great unity under Heaven" from the Chinese cultural tradition. The last section of the report to the Nineteenth Party Congress begins with the phrase "when the Way prevails, the world is shared by all", an ultimate ideal that encourages the entire Party and the people of the entire nation.

Jiang Shigong's synthesis is one wherein communism itself is mystified even while the secular character of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is upheld through the historical centrality of the party itself, which acts as the dialectical vehicle integrating theory and practice.

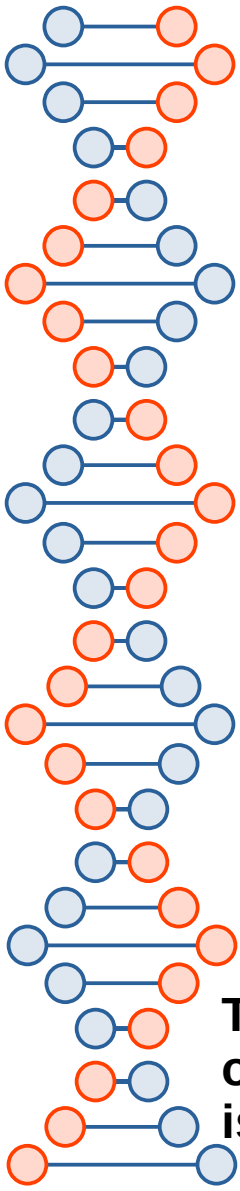
TLDR: The current regime ascribes to a version of socialism not based on Western humanism but a long-standing Chinese ideal of "universal social harmony".



Chinese State Incapacity

- Common theme, curse of federalism
 - Trouble keeping local governments in line
 - Weak surveillance infrastructure (p. 146-147)
 - Restrictions theoretically unenforceable
- Botched pandemic response
 - Local governments defaulted to cover-ups, fallout embarrassed the State (p. 39-40)
 - Legitimacy dependent on retconning (p. 177)
- Lockdowns as counterinsurgency
 - Initiative unprecedented in scale (p. 38)



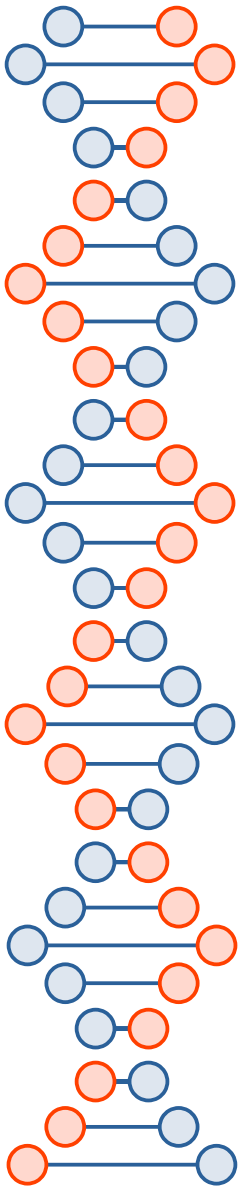


The Limits of Surveillance (p. 146)

While certain criminal activities will today more regularly lead to higher-level police attention, and therefore some degree of tracking from city to city and coordination between police departments, **basic police records and command chains remain heavily balkanized in many areas.** For many years, it was possible, for example, for individuals who might be arrested for political organizing in one region to simply move to some other city in a distant province and not be bothered by the local police. Recent efforts at national integration of policing infrastructure have made this less and less possible, however, for more serious crimes -- especially those of a political nature."

On the other hand, this is also a question of more fundamental **material decentralization**, which has seen less progress. A good example can be found in the recent expansions of digital surveillance infrastructure throughout many Chinese cities - including cellphone tracking, facial recognition and now public-health QR codes-which is treated in the foreign press as a particularly egregious example of China's authoritarianism. In reality, these **forms of surveillance in China all lag far, far behind that of the United States**, for example, where the NSA has built one of the world's biggest spy centers in Utah and **aggregated immense amounts of surveillance data domestically and**, apparently, on people **worldwide**.

TLDR: China lacks the technological infrastructure and institutional oversight to properly police its citizens. Ironically, American surveillance is far more dystopian.

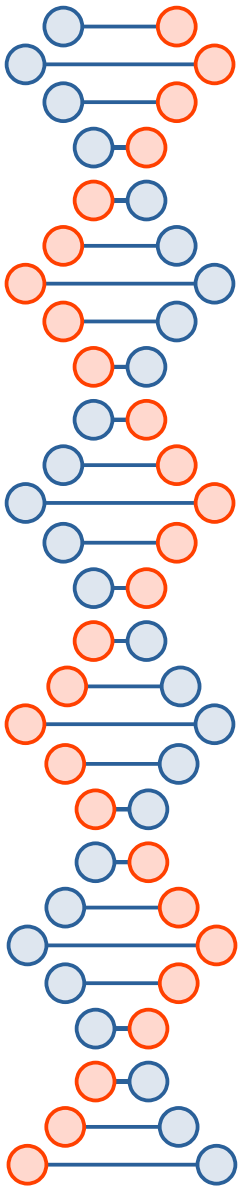


Lockdowns as Counterinsurgency (p. 37)

The viral outbreak was in every respect assisted by poor connections between levels of the government: repression of whistleblower doctors by local officials (contra the interests of the central government) ineffective hospital reporting mechanisms and extremely poor provision of basic healthcare are just a few examples. Meanwhile, different local governments have returned to normal at different paces, largely beyond the control of the central state (except in Hubei, the epicenter). At the time of writing, it seems almost entirely random which ports are operational and which locales have restarted production. This bricolage quarantine has meant that long-distance city-to-city logistics networks remain disrupted, since any local government appears able to simply prevent trains or freight trucks from passing through its borders. And this base level incapacity of the Chinese government has forced it to deal with the virus as if it were an insurgency, roleplaying civil war against an invisible enemy.

The national state machinery really started to roll on January 2nd, when authorities upgraded the emergency response measures in all of Hubei province, and told the public they had the legal authority to set up quarantine facilities, as well as to "collect" any personnel, vehicles, and facilities necessary to the containment of the disease, or to set up blockades and control traffic (thereby rubberstamping a phenomenon it knew would occur regardless). In other words, the full deployment of state resources actually began with a call for volunteer efforts on behalf of locals. On the one hand, such a massive disaster will strain any state's capacity (see, for instance, hurricane response in the US). But, on the other, this repeats a common pattern in Chinese statecraft whereby the central state, lacking efficient formal and enforceable command structures that extend all the way down to the local level, must instead rely on a combination of widely-publicized calls for local officials and local citizens to mobilize and a series of after-the-fact punishments meted out to the worst responders (framed as crackdowns on corruption). The only truly efficient response is to be found in specific areas where the central state focuses the bulk of its power and attention -- in this case Hubei and Wuhan generally.

TLDR: China's central government is limited in its ability to exert authority on the local level, having to rely on public goodwill to maintain social control.

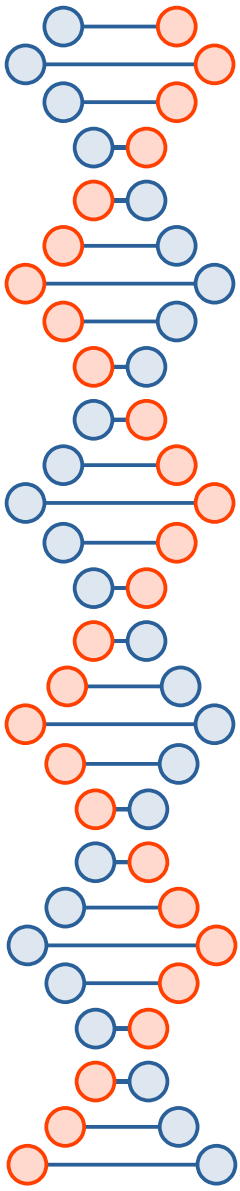


The Chinese State In Practice

- Literally run by capitalists (p. 134-135)
- Chinese federalism
 - Xi's "war on corruption"
 - Campaign-style governance
 - Residential committees
- The para-formal state



Jack Ma



Campaign-Style Governance (p. 136-137)

Essentially, this meant that the system worked as follows:

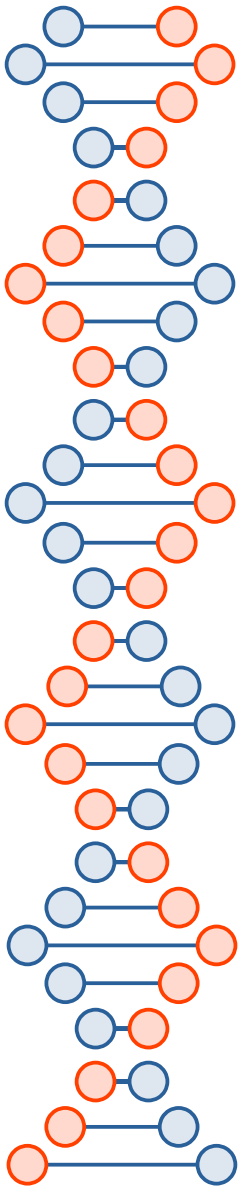
“the central government sets up goals and targets in specific areas and then subcontracts to the intermediate government, which has the right of incentive provision and actual organization of implementation, while the central government maintains the right of periodic inspection to review and evaluate the outcomes.

Since the superior authority could cast arbitrary power to its subordinates despite the official rules and legal-rational logic of bureaucracy, Chinese bureaucrats tend to develop informal personal relationships with their superiors to seek protection and promotion while at the same time focusing more on passively avoiding misbehavior.

The state thus employs a campaign-style governance to overcome setbacks and failures of the routine power of bureaucracy, which always requires intensive mobilization of resources and attention, therefore campaigns are always partial, selective and temporary.”

Though **this system** might seem riven with inefficiencies, it **has proved capable of stretching state resources while also** maintaining, and in fact **strengthening, the** integral **core of the bureaucracy** and the party's unchallenged control over it.

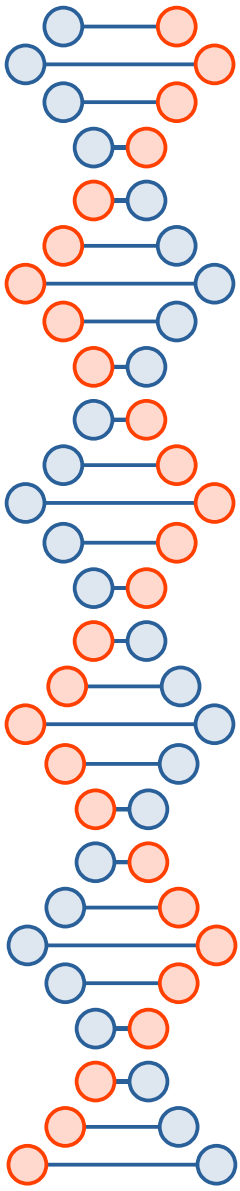
TLDR: The Chinese government deals with its federalism problem by setting targets and then giving local governments freedom of implementation.



The Para-formal State (p. 127)

Power was defined concentrically by proximity to the imperial court, in terms of geography and nearness to integral state functions, such as waterworks projects, road-building and military activity. It therefore took the shape of a relational network of interlinked authority and social obligation wherein the formal state power of the bureaucracy emerged from and gave way to more local obligations and customary forms of authority. Horizontal, relational linkages were fundamental here. We might argue, with only the slightest bit of irony, that dynastic states were composed of a thousand plateaus: Formal, vertical command was only enabled through an overlapping of myriad, less formal, horizontal networks interpenetrated by the bureaucracy -- where kinship ties, for instance, remained a central and widely acknowledged factor in all forms of appointment, despite the system being technically meritocratic -- and which tended to grow in prominence the further one went from the central activities of the imperial state. But even the furthest, least formal deployment of authority at the local level, or in various tributary states, were conceived of as still being included in this civilizational conception of sovereignty.

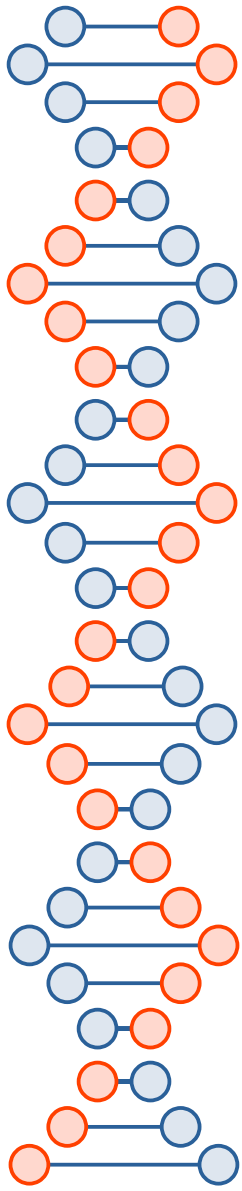
TLDR: Chinese governance makes no clear distinction between the State and civil society: authority and custom are deeply intertwined.



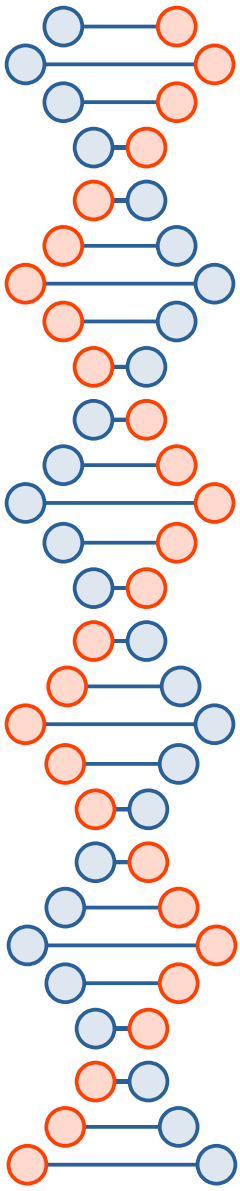
Village Democracy (p. 132-133)

This process was codified at the administrative level as the implementation of "village autonomy" accompanied by local "democracy, including the election of members to the village committee. In reality, this "democracy" ultimately amounted to direct control by those with more power in the village -- usually some combination of well-connected officials, representatives from the largest lineage groups and emergent local capitalists who often already belonged to one of the former two groups, but gradually developed distinct interests. In this way "autonomy," now explicitly rendered as local self-government, came to be seen as an important component of reforming the structure of the Chinese state itself. While some saw in this a return to older practices, in which the central state ceded territory to a new generation of local gentry, the reality was that this was an administrative expedient that allowed the state to concentrate its resources elsewhere. **Autonomy was never imagined to be in opposition to the state**, something signaled by its codification in law. This is precisely why theorists who took the claim of village "democracy" seriously were so baffled when no one seemed to care that village elections were most often deeply undemocratic. These theorists therefore portrayed the promise of local autonomy as perpetually unfulfilled and in need of further reforms to ensure its reality. But its reality was already evident on the ground. Local elites were developing corrupt self-government. This served two necessary functions: to buffer higher authorities from popular opposition, since they could always step in to punish the most extreme cases of local overreach, and to begin to shape a coherent network of capitalists who were also capable administrators, thereby forming the skeleton of the future state that is only today in the early stages of being formalized.

TLDR: The Chinese government offloads its local management burden by co-opting local elites, expressing it in the language of autonomy/democracy.

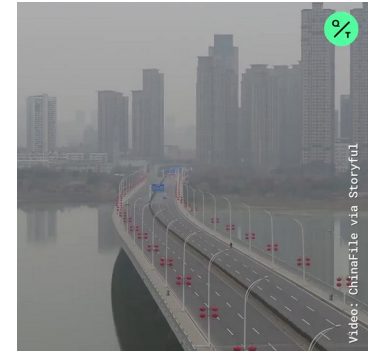


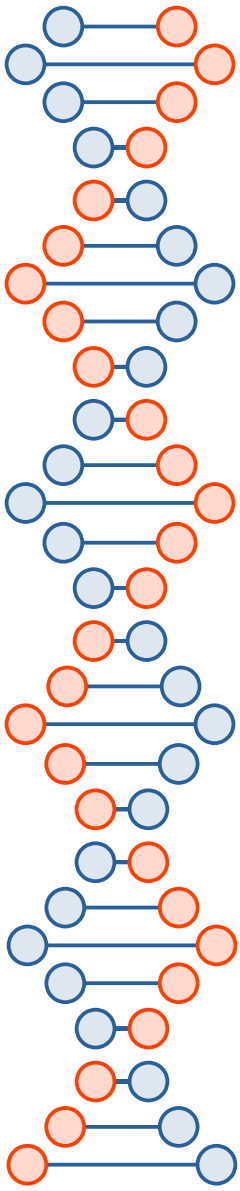
The Chinese People



Impact of the Pandemic on Workers

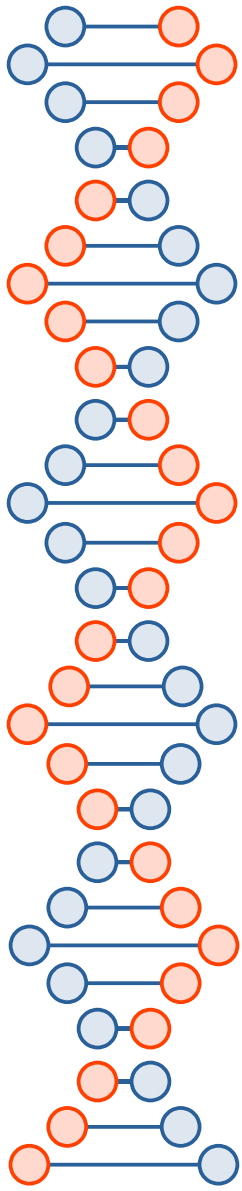
- Lockdowns provided a rare moment of reflection
 - Spurred sense of historical consciousness (p. 71)
 - Myth of the state shattered
 - Not tyranny, but incapacity/absurdity (p. 94)
 - “When there’s a fire, you run” (p. 98)
- Companies passing pandemic costs onto workers
 - Lower wages, not paying wages, overwork (p. 56)
- Population initially unprepared for resistance
 - “Hoping dumb luck will save them” (p. 52)
 - No evidence of serious labor organizing (p. 54)





The Mass Strike (p. 9-10)

Within China itself, the ultimate trajectory of this event is difficult to predict, but the moment has already brought about a rare, collective process of questioning and learning about society. The epidemic has directly infected nearly 80,000 people (at the most conservative estimate), but it has delivered a shock to everyday life under capitalism for 1.4 billion, trapped in a moment of precarious self-reflection. This moment, while full of fear, has caused everyone to simultaneously ask some deep questions: What will happen to me? My children, family and friends? Will we have enough food? Will I get paid? Will I make rent? Who is responsible for all this? In a strange way, the subjective experience is somewhat like that of a mass strike—but one which, in its non-spontaneous, top-down character and, especially in its involuntary hyper-atomization, illustrates the basic conundrums of our own strangled political present as clearly as the true mass strikes of the previous century elucidated the contradictions of their era. **The quarantine, then, is like a strike hollowed of its communal features but nonetheless capable of delivering a deep shock to both psyche and economy.** This fact alone makes it worthy of reflection.



Self-Organization Among the Masses

- Internet played a key role in communication and coordination
 - Not a replacement for direct labor organizing (p. 50)
 - Online information and journalism (p. 162)
- Direct action -- not state action -- stopped the pandemic (p. 178)
 - In times of crisis, humans cooperate (p. 157)
 - Face-mask supply groups (p. 48), bulk-buy apps (p. 158), carpools (p. 160)
 - Establishment of “neighborhood watches” (p. 163)



He positions himself in front of the car, blocking the driver's path. He is reportedly doing this to stop anyone who may be infected with the coronavirus from entering his village

The Government's Response

- Feared independent organizing efforts (p. 82)
 - App to report worker complaints, defused labor unrest (p. 59)
 - Shut down unsanctioned forms of organization (p. 80)
 - Most immediately complied, unprepared for struggle
- Lessons on direct action:
 - Not inherently political/empowering (p. 165)
 - Helped keep the state afloat, subsumed into para-formal governance (p. 122)
 - Lack of op-sec (p. 164)

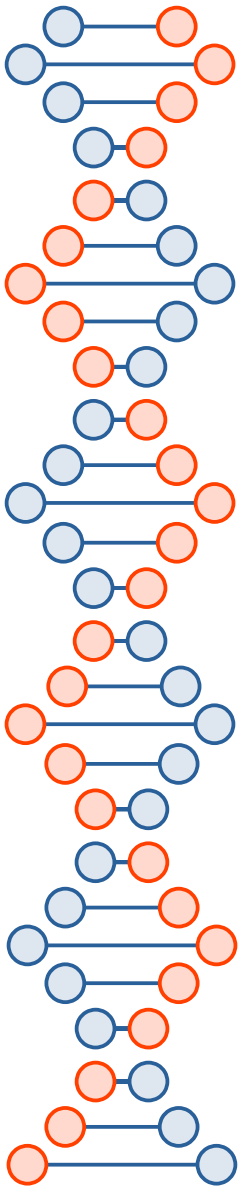




Failure of Direct Action (p. 164)

That said, **the government** has detained several professional journalists and a few other already well-known activists, it **hasn't** to our knowledge **cracked down on any organized volunteer effort**. The closest it has come to doing so are cases where groups have explicitly been asked to stop distribution, but not punished for it. **Instead, these organizations have tended to merely evaporate after their initial goals were met** and the need for the services decreased. **At the same time, many of those engaged in even moderately ~~oppositional~~ activities operated with a reckless naivete and failed to follow any of the security practices that have long been common necessities for those in labor and/or feminist organizing circles. If the state had cracked down on any of these organizations** (or decides to in the future), **very little would have stood in its way.**

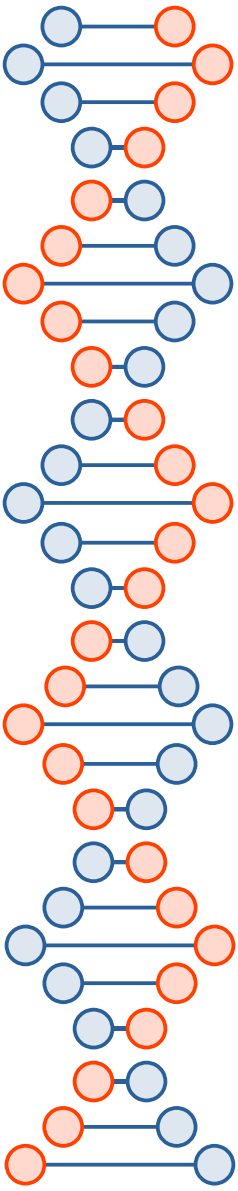
TLDR: Organizers failed from the outset to take seriously the threat of the state, and as a result were entirely unprepared to deal with pushback.



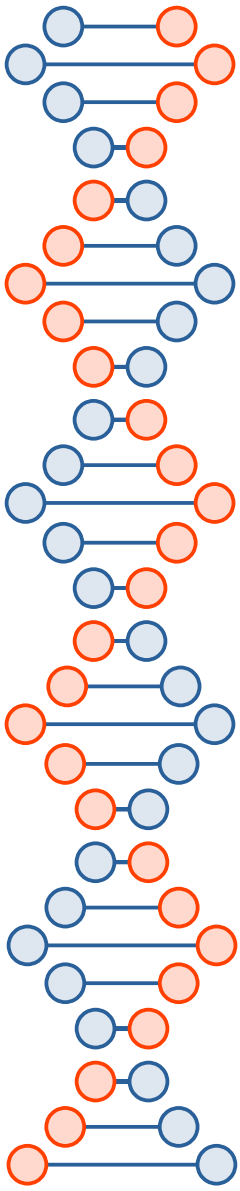
What Direct Action Needs (p. 164)

These are all the exact opposite of the features necessary for any type of self-organization that builds political power. **Such self organization should exhibit inertia, antagonism and at least a basic awareness of security.** Inertia means that such organizations would have a staying power beyond their momentary function and independent from official administration or private sector philanthropy and profiteering. In this regard, the mutual aid efforts were far more ephemeral than small-scale labor actions. **Antagonism means that such organizations could potentially be either at the level of awareness or activity or both -- poised against the state and the present organization of society.** This would not need to be explicit (in fact, it should not be, for security), but would have to exist in some form. The citizen journalist groups give some indication of how this might take shape, and it is an important fact that such groups essentially forced the public rehabilitation of Li Wenliang and other heroic doctors who had initially been reprimanded by the state, for which they became some of the only mutual aid organizations that saw participants detained. Nonetheless, most volunteer efforts had far less potential for opposition than even the most mundane labor actions or populist folk religions. **Security is essentially awareness of the potential for antagonism, leading to the conscious preservation of self-organization through secrecy.** This dimension is both particularly important and particularly difficult in China, where crackdowns against any potential opposition are swift and thorough.

TLDR: Direct action isn't automatically subversive: it must be accompanied by a militant awareness and measures taken to ensure its persistence.

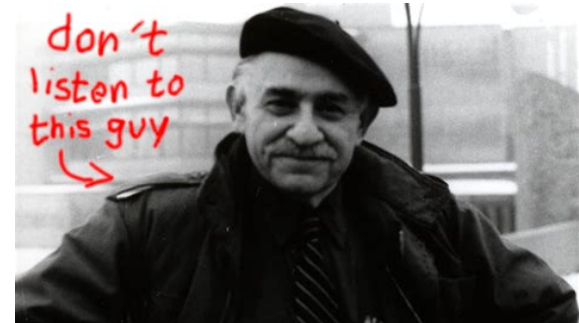


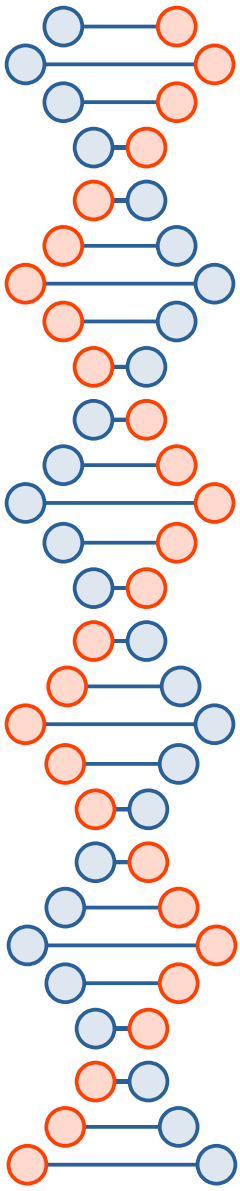
Takeaways



How Language Obfuscates

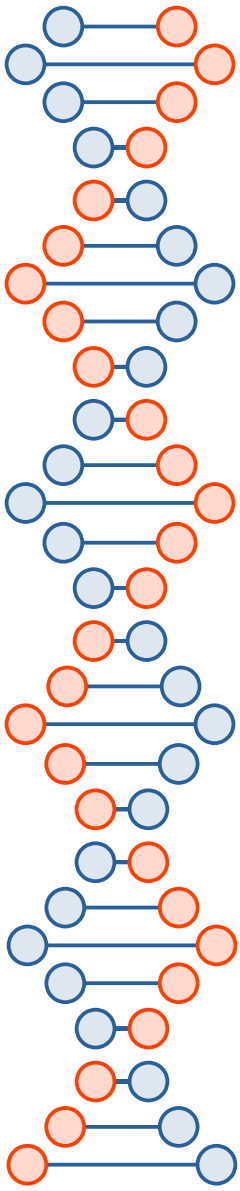
- Leftist discourse dominated by terms such as “democracy”, “autonomy”, “direct action” etc.
- Because leftists are so reliant on broad terms to express their ideals, they mistake the universalist nature of their ideals for an uncritical universality of the terms themselves
 - Entirely different connotations in non-Western contexts (p. 200)
 - Language used to describe institutions can change even where the institutions themselves don't (p. 185-186, 189)





Conclusion: The Role of Theory (p. 2)

Any application of communist critique to make sense of the real flow of events in history and the present layout of global power must, in the end, have a practical orientation -- as a means for building international connections between those engaged in struggles on the ground- while also contributing to the more general advance of communist theory as such. A purely "empirical" description of events is never possible. Theoretical positions are always taken, whether they are avowed or not. Even the most abstract and rarefied theory can often illuminate substantial connections between empirical data points that would otherwise remain in shadow. But, by the same measure, any purely "theoretical" description is quickly swallowed by the churning chaos of empirical reality. **Theory thrives only as dynamic critique, sculpted in the churn of the very history that it seeks to shape...** The only true orthodoxy is that of a living theory that grapples with the world and, through this, maintains its political fidelity.



Capitalism: A Boring Dystopia (p. 43)

In a quarantined China, we began to glimpse such a landscape, at least in its outlines: **empty late-winter streets dusted by the slightest film of undisturbed snow, phone-lit faces peering out of windows, happenstance barricades staffed by a few spare nurses or police or volunteers or simply paid actors tasked with hoisting flags and telling you to put your mask on and go back home.** The contagion is social. So, it should come as no real surprise that the only way to combat it at such a late stage is to wage a surreal sort of war on society itself. Don't gather together, don't cause chaos. But chaos can build in isolation, too. As the furnaces in all the foundries cooled to softly crackling embers and then to snow-cold ash, the many minor desperations cannot help but leak out of their quarantine to gently cascade together into a greater chaos that might one day, like this social contagion, prove too difficult to contain.