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Editor's Foreword

David Rong

Since its inaugural Summer 2020 issue, our international quarterly, *Contemporary China Review*, has published 24 issues, including six English-language editions. With the support of independent Chinese intellectuals, scholars, and readers worldwide, the journal has remained committed to liberal values and to the defense of freedom of speech and expression in the Chinese-speaking world. Amid the severe censorship and constraints on free expression that persist in mainland China, the continued publication of *Contemporary China Review* is all the more significant. The journal is now subscribed to by East Asian libraries at American universities and by overseas academic institutions, and has gained increasing recognition among Chinese-speaking readers, particularly within academic communities.

This year, the journal has undergone several important changes, most notably the establishment of an Editorial Board. Its members include:

Wu Guoguang, Qin Hui, Xu Zhangrun, Zhang Qianfan, Wang Feiling, Zhang Lun (France), Xia Ming, Hu Ping, Wen Guanzhong, Deng Yuwen, Yu Ping, Rong Jian, Liu Kang, and Chen Chun.

The members of the Editorial Board are distinguished scholars and professors with outstanding achievements in their respective fields. Beyond their academic accomplishments, they share a deep engagement with contemporary political, economic, and social issues, as well as a strong sense of historical responsibility. They have also been long-standing supporters and contributors to the journal. Since its founding by Bouden House, *Contemporary China Review* has operated with complete editorial and financial independence, relying entirely on its own resources rather than institutional funding. We are therefore deeply grateful that all members of the Editorial Board have agreed to serve voluntarily, and we extend to them our highest respect and appreciation.

The journal is also pleased to announce the appointment of Dr. Yi Fuxian as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. Dr. Yi is a Senior Scientist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and an internationally recognized authority on China's population studies. His research has been widely cited by governments, think tanks, and international policy institutions, and has received extensive coverage in major international media, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

This issue's Scholars' Monograph section features *China's Population Data Manipulation*, a six-part study by Dr. Yi comprising more than 40,000 words. It offers a systematic and in-depth examination of the reliability of China's official population data.

Since 2000, Dr. Yi has devoted himself to the study of China's population trends and spearheaded the movement against China's population control policies, contributing to the eventual abolition of the one-child policy. His population estimates and projections have repeatedly proven more accurate than those of Chinese official sources, the United Nations, and the U.S. Census Bureau. He has argued that China's officially reported population has been overstated by at least 130 million.

This monograph corroborates this claim through cross-validation with multiple independent datasets—including census records, education data (such as school enrollment and graduation figures), live birth and

vaccination data, household registration data, and mortality statistics—as well as comparisons of provincial demographic data with national figures. It also examines how fiscal policies and incentives—including education and healthcare financing arrangements and the distribution of provincial fiscal revenues and expenditures relative to national totals—have influenced the accuracy of China's demographic data. Dr. Yi is conducting follow-up research to reconstruct China's actual demographic profile, with results forthcoming in this journal.

The importance of Dr. Yi's research cannot be overstated. Distorted demographic data misled not only China's population, economic, social, defense, and foreign policies, but also international investment decisions and foreign governments' policies toward China. For example, inflated demographic estimates led Chinese government economists to project that China's economy would become two to three times the size of the U.S. economy, reinforcing the narrative of "the rise of the East and the decline of the West" and contributing to a strategic shift from Deng Xiaoping-era integration with the West toward competition and even confrontation. Such exaggerated expectations also intensified U.S. strategic anxieties, including those framed by the "Thucydides Trap." Therefore, Dr. Yi's reassessment and reconstruction of China's demographic profile carry profound academic and policy significance. If adopted by governments and global investors, his demographic assessments could have far-reaching geopolitical and economic implications.

In the late 1970s, Chinese missile expert Song Jian applied an engineering control-systems model imported from Europe to population forecasting and projected that China's population would exceed 4.2 billion by 2080. This flawed, mechanistic projection reinforced policymakers' determination to implement the one-child policy, a classic case of applying engineering logic to a complex social system. The policy resulted in hundreds of millions of foregone births, while coercive practices during its implementation, including forced abortions and sterilizations, caused profound human suffering and contributed to China's persistent low fertility and population aging.

Bouden House has recently published a ten-volume collection of works by Professor Liang Zhongtang, one of China's most distinguished demographers, now available on Amazon. The collection documents his decades of research on China's population issues. Widely regarded as a leading voice of conscience in China's demographic field, Professor Liang opposed the one-child policy from the outset of the 1978 debate. Although he served for two decades as a member of the Expert Committee of China's National Family Planning Commission, he never wavered in his opposition to the policy and in 1985 persuaded the Chinese government to launch China's first two-child policy pilot program in Yicheng County, Shanxi Province.

When Yi Fuxian advocated the complete abolition of population controls, many establishment demographers either opposed him or remained silent. Professor Liang firmly supported his position and joined his campaign. He described Yi's 2007 edition of *Big Country with an Empty Nest* as "a revolutionary book" and praised the 2013 edition as a work that "will inspire people to think and act, thereby opening a new era."

China today is paying the price for the historic misjudgment behind its family planning policy. Its demographic crisis has become a major structural constraint on future growth. More broadly, population decline is emerging as a global challenge threatening economic prosperity and long-term societal sustainability. This is why Dr. Yi's research has attracted growing international attention.

The most significant development in Chinese politics at the beginning of this year was undoubtedly the reported detention of General Zhang Youxia, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, along

with General Liu Zhenli, a member of the Central Military Commission and Chief of the Joint Staff Department. The news triggered extensive speculation overseas about whether Xi Jinping's political position had become vulnerable. This issue features a series of articles by North American political commentator Deng Yuwen, offering in-depth analysis of these developments.

Deng Yuwen is a frequent contributor to major media outlets. His commentaries are known for their objectivity, rationality, and balanced judgment. His analyses of Chinese politics and society are particularly penetrating and insightful.

Since the beginning of this year, a number of online commentators—especially on X—have published widely circulated analyses offering highly optimistic assessments of China's economic prospects. Some have attracted millions of views and sparked extensive discussion. In response, this issue invited two economists to present contrasting perspectives, allowing readers to form their own judgments about China's economic future.

This issue also features selected political commentaries by influential online writers. As the Chinese saying goes, "Wisdom resides among the common folk." With the authors' permission, we have republished several commentaries from X by the prolific writer known as "New Highland." In my view, his political analyses often identify critical issues with remarkable precision. In the internet age, independent voices have gained unprecedented reach, with some commentators attracting millions of readers. Their influence should not be underestimated.

China today faces an increasingly expansive state apparatus under an authoritarian system, reinforced by increasingly sophisticated surveillance technologies. The pursuit of freedom, democracy, and constitutional governance has therefore become ever more challenging. Yet within China and abroad, independent scholars, professors, and public intellectuals continue to speak out, advocating freedom, democracy, constitutional governance, and integration into the broader family of human civilization.

Although these voices continue to face suppression, countless ordinary people—often unknown to the public—continue to move forward with courage, confronting obstacles despite hardship and personal sacrifice. Their spirit is both precious and inspiring. They embody the spirit of those whom the renowned writer Lu Xun described as people who "work silently, strive with determination, plead for the people, and sacrifice themselves in pursuit of justice"—the true backbone of China.

Bouden House has now operated for nearly six years and has published nearly 400 books and periodicals. Our mission is to preserve and disseminate the writings and intellectual achievements of these "backbones of China," ensuring that the intellectual legacy of this era will not be lost under political suppression. Through this work, Bouden House has established a distinctive position in the Chinese-speaking world and earned growing recognition from readers and authors alike. We will continue our efforts to contribute to the preservation and advancement of independent thought.

David Rong graduated from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University with a master's degree in literature and aesthetics in 1988. After graduation, he taught at the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Shenzhen University. From March to June 1990, he was a visiting scholar in comparative literature at the Department of English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In 1995, he came to the United States as a visiting scholar, first serving as a visiting professor in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Oregon, and then as a visiting researcher at the Department of East Asian Studies at Harvard University from 1996 to 1998. He settled in New York in 1999 and worked as a reporter for Ming Pao in New York. He initiated and founded the annual exhibition of independent contemporary Chinese documentaries, "Reel China," in New York. He later founded the independent contemporary art gallery "Art Next Gallery" in Manhattan. He has curated and hosted numerous major international art exhibitions, including the series "Chineseism" and "Over the Wall." He is currently a guest host for the "Artists" and "Humanities" programs on Mingjing TV. He is currently the founder of Bouden House in New York and serves as the editor-in-chief of the international quarterly "Contemporary China Review" and the editor-in-chief of the "Contemporary Chinese World Thinkers Series". He has published works such as "Art Aesthetics and Cultural Criticism". He currently works and lives in New York.

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Scholar's Monograph—China's Population Data Manipulation

About the Author

Yi Fuxian, MD, PhD, is a Senior Scientist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in Obstetrics and Gynecology, a field central to human reproduction and fertility. He has developed an interdisciplinary framework applying biomedical diagnostic reasoning to demographic analysis, integrating medical, demographic, and socioeconomic indicators to forecast demographic trajectories and assess their economic and geopolitical implications.

He predicted that the universal two-child policy would raise fertility only temporarily to 1.4 before falling to 1.0 by 2026, far below official forecasts of 4.4–4.5 births per woman, and that China's population would begin declining in 2017–2018, well before official Chinese and UN projections of decline between 2031 and 2045. He argued that China's actual population was at least 130 million lower than officially reported. He argues that the one-child policy disrupted demographic homeostasis, weakened household income and consumption, and contributed to industrial overcapacity and export dependence, with global consequences including pressures on U.S. manufacturing. He further examines how demographic imbalances, especially shrinking younger cohorts, shaped China's political trajectory and its divergence from Western democratization expectations. His prescient economic analysis was later highlighted in a *New York Times* article titled “The Scientist Who Foresaw China's Stagnation” (August 28, 2023).

He spearheaded an evidence-based intellectual movement that reshaped China's population policy discourse and contributed to the broader reassessment that culminated in the abandonment of the one-child policy. Central and provincial authorities issued more than 100 directives suppressing his work, yet censorship efforts coincided with its wider dissemination and growing influence. His policy research was included in a collection of 116 influential works on China's policymaking from 1979 to 2018. His book *Big Country with an Empty Nest*, banned in China in 2007, was later republished by a State Council–affiliated publisher and ranked No. 1 among China Publishing Today's 100 Best Books of 2013; he later faced renewed censorship for challenging official population statistics.

Yi's work has been featured by hundreds of media outlets worldwide, including more than 50 interviews with *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*, as well as a dedicated Project Syndicate column. He has delivered invited lectures and participated in policy discussions at more than 100 universities and think tanks, including Peking University, the Development Research Center of China's State Council, Harvard University, the University of Chicago, and AEI, and has spoken at major international forums including the 2016 Boao Forum for Asia and the 2021 Reuters NEXT Summit. Jeffrey Bader, former Principal Advisor on Asia to President Obama, cited Yi's research as the sole reference in the Introduction to the Brookings volume, *The Future of U.S. Policy Toward China: Recommendations for the Biden Administration*; Robert Blackwill, former Deputy Assistant to President George W. Bush, cited Yi's research in the 2020 Council on Foreign Relations Special Report, *Implementing Grand Strategy Toward China*. In 2026, the U.S.–China Business Council featured Yi's analysis in its Expert Insights series, reaching executives across member companies, including approximately 115 Fortune 500 corporations.

1 Why Accurate Population Data Matter

Yi Fuxian

1. The Sanctity of Population Data

Population has long been regarded as a fundamental basis of state power, and population data underpin decision-making across major domains including the economy, politics, education, culture, national defense, and diplomacy. The acquisition of accurate population data has therefore been regarded as a central task of governance.

Historical evidence from China's Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE) illustrates the early institutionalization of population governance. The state appointed an official known as the Minor Minister of Justice, who was responsible for population registration and the compilation of demographic records. Annual reports included total population, births and deaths, regional and urban–rural distribution, sex ratio, and physical conditions, and comprehensive verifications were conducted every three years.¹ Each October, a ritual was held in honor of the Simin star, associated with population affairs. The resulting population registers were formally presented to the king, who received them with ritual respect and used them as the basis for allocating state resources and adjusting governance priorities. Copies of these records were also maintained by key state institutions, including the royal secretariat, the ministry of finance, and the prime minister's office, to support fiscal planning and administrative coordination.² This institutional arrangement reflects the administrative importance of population data, as well as its role

in legitimizing state authority in early Chinese governance.

During the Spring and Autumn period, Guan Zhong (?–645 BCE), the chancellor of Qi, argued that formulating major state policies without a clear understanding of basic national conditions—population, land, and wealth—was akin to attempting to cross a river without a boat or oars,³ a metaphor for undertaking highly risky action without adequate means or information. In Qi, population registration followed a structured annual cycle: enumeration in spring, verification in summer, and inspection in autumn. The state also carried out systematic assessments of population characteristics, recording, for example, how many individuals each farmer could support with grain, the number of persons with specialized skills, and the population of widowed, orphaned, ill, and disabled individuals. All such information was systematically entered into official state registers.⁴

During the Warring States period, Shang Yang (390–338 BCE), the Legalist reformer of Qin, elevated statistical data—including population figures—to a matter of state survival. He argued that, without accurate population data, the state would "grow increasingly weak and gradually erode," even if "its land was fertile and its population abundant." In his view, "Statistics constitute the basis upon which rulers govern the state. There has never been a state of ten thousand chariots that, lacking accurate statistical knowledge, could avoid falling into danger and disorder."⁵ For Shang Yang, statistics were not

merely a technical instrument of governance; rather, they constituted the fundamental basis upon which political order, as well as the rise and decline of the state, ultimately depended.

Guided by this understanding, the state of Qin established a highly institutionalized household registration system, stipulating that "throughout the state's territory, information on every man and woman must be registered," and that "the newly born are to be added to the registers, while the deceased are to be removed from them."⁶ Household registration was further refined into a continuously updated system of classification by sex, age, and physical condition, with newborns promptly entered into the registers and deceased individuals immediately deregistered. Through this accurate and continuously updated population information system, Qin ensured that taxation and corvée labor were levied on a reliable basis, that arable land remained fully cultivated, and that granaries remained well stocked—thereby institutionalizing the principle that "a wealthy state is a strong state." This administrative system provided the institutional foundation upon which Qin consolidated its national power, defeated the other six warring states, and ultimately unified China.

Xunzi (c.313–238 BCE), a leading Confucian thinker of the late Warring States period, likewise held that "in governing the people, one must both obtain accurate demographic statistics and regulate them through laws and institutional norms."⁷ In Xunzi's view, a state that lacked reliable population data as well as sound legal and institutional frameworks was inevitably destined to fall into poverty and weakness.

Xu Gan (170–217 CE), a philosopher of the Eastern Han dynasty, held that the major affairs of state—including allocating land, delimiting administrative districts, levying taxes, manufacturing tools and weapons, disbursing salaries, requisitioning labor, raising armies,

formulating institutions and statutes, establishing familial ethics, regulating social conduct, and codifying laws—all ultimately depended on the possession of accurate population data.⁸

Du You (735–812 CE), a Tang-dynasty historian, drew on the governing experience of earlier dynasties and argued that the effectiveness of ancient statecraft was fundamentally rooted in a comprehensive grasp of population data. Only with such knowledge could corvée labor be allocated equitably; only then could all trades and industries flourish, state treasuries be filled, the population live in peace and security, moral instruction spread widely, social customs become orderly and harmonious, disasters be met with composure, and rebellion be deprived of the conditions in which it might take root. He also estimated the empire's total population on the basis of salt consumption.⁹

2. Population Data Manipulation and Misreporting in Imperial China

Because population and cultivated land formed the basis for taxation and corvée obligations, the concealment of population and land represented a chronic structural problem in Chinese history.¹⁰ This tendency became particularly pronounced in the later stages of dynastic rule: as bureaucratic discipline weakened, the central state progressively lost effective control over population and land records, social tensions intensified, and the dynasty ultimately collapsed.

The state of Qin punished those who falsified population data by "execution at the waist"—the same penalty imposed for defecting to the enemy.¹¹ Bamboo slips excavated in 1975 record that local officials who concealed the number of youths who had reached service age, or who reported inaccurate figures for disabled individuals, were sentenced to four years of penal servitude, redeemable by monetary payment.

Commoners who falsely claimed to have reached the age of exemption from labor service were fined two suits of armor; local officials who failed to report such cases were fined one suit of armor; neighboring households within the same five-household unit were each fined one shield; and all parties involved were sentenced to exile. A statistical official who miscounted the population of a single household was fined one shield; miscounting two or more households incurred a fine of one suit of armor.¹²

After the fall of the Qin dynasty, rival contenders vied for supremacy. Xiao He, an aide to Liu Bang, seized the Qin court's official statistical records, including population data, from the imperial palace at Xianyang.¹³ These records provided a crucial informational foundation for Liu Bang's eventual victory over Xiang Yu in 202 BCE and his subsequent reunification of the empire.

Following the establishment of the Han dynasty, Liu Bang instituted a strict system of population registration. Individuals not yet entered into the household registers were required to report to the authorities within thirty days of the promulgation of the decree; failure to register within the prescribed period was subject to severe penalties.¹⁴ Officials who falsified statistical records were likewise harshly punished. For example, Hao Xian, governor of Shanggu commandery and Marquis of Zhongli in recognition of his military merit, was removed from office in 121 BCE for falsifying population statistics.¹²

After the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, the various controls previously imposed by the state gradually loosened, and imperial authority weakened under his successors. Powerful local clans seized the opportunity to expand their influence, annexing vast tracts of land, absorbing large populations under their patronage, and establishing self-enclosed manorial

economies—akin to the latifundia of the Roman Empire—along with fortified strongholds (wubao).¹⁵ Enormous numbers of people thus fell out of the state household registration system and became, in effect, dependent members of these aristocratic lineages.¹⁶

In AD 8, Wang Mang usurped the Han throne with the support of powerful aristocratic lineages. He subsequently attempted to curb the continued consolidation of land and population by these elites, but his reforms ultimately failed. In AD 25, Liu Xiu defeated Wang Mang and restored the Han dynasty, an event known as the establishment of the Eastern Han. In AD 39, Emperor Guangwu (Liu Xiu) issued an edict ordering a comprehensive cadastral survey of land and population, known as the "Guangwu land survey." Ouyang Xi, Grand Minister over the Masses and founding meritorious official; Zhang Ji, Governor of Henan; and more than ten commandery governors were held accountable and killed due to inaccurate survey reporting.¹⁷ Because the court thereby obtained accurate data on population and cultivated land, and dealt a blow to powerful local magnates, this laid the foundation for the flourishing reigns of Emperors Ming and Zhang.

The Eastern Han implemented a strict system known as "checking households and comparing the people" (an hu bi min). Household registers were compiled every three years in what was called the "major comparison," and verified annually in what was called the "minor comparison." Each August, the state conducted a "head count": individuals ranging from the elderly to young children were required to assemble at designated locations for in-person registration. Local officials cross-checked each person's registered place of origin, name, age, height, complexion, appearance, property, and other particulars against existing records. The Juyan Han bamboo slips, for instance, record one such entry: "Zhuang Pan, holder of the rank of

gongcheng, of Taoyou Ward, Xingyang, Henan Commandery, aged twenty-eight, 7 feet 2 inches tall, dark complexion." The Eastern Han also imposed harsh penalties on those who falsified population records. Bamboo slips excavated in 1972 from an Eastern Han tomb in Wuwei, Gansu Province, record a case in which registering a male as female in order to evade corvée labor was treated as a serious criminal offense.

This pattern recurred in the later stages of successive dynasties: powerful local magnates came to control disproportionate numbers of people and extensive tracts of cultivated land. Whenever a new regime was founded, the recounting of population was invariably among its first priorities. For example, after Yang Jian (Emperor Wen of Sui) founded the Sui dynasty in 581, household registration required detailed verification of individuals' physical appearance and scrutiny of whether age, physical condition, or sex had been falsely reported. Officials responsible for inaccurate household registration were exiled to remote frontier regions, while a commoner who reported a household concealing an able-bodied man had that household's tax and corvée burden transferred to the concealing family in place of his own.⁹ Under the Tang dynasty, failure to register household members carried penalties ranging from corporal punishment (caning) to imprisonment of up to three years.

In the Sui dynasty and the early Tang period, the state implemented the equal-field system and the fubing militia system—institutions broadly comparable to the citizen-soldier system of ancient Rome. The state allotted land to households, and in return peasants fulfilled tax and military service obligations. Soldier and farmer were one and the same: in peacetime they tilled the land, and in wartime they marched off on campaign bearing their own weapons, provisions, and equipment. As the classical saying holds, "those who possess stable property possess a stable mind"—land thus

became the institutional bond linking the rights and obligations of the state and the peasantry. Soldiers served with a strong sense of duty and honor, and their fighting capacity was correspondingly formidable. Because soldiers spent relatively little time under any single commander, it was difficult for generals to build durable personal power bases that could evolve into regional separatism. Nor was the state required to maintain a large standing army, which kept military expenditure low.

By maintaining relatively accurate population and land records, the state effectively curbed land annexation and population dependency on powerful patrons, thereby securing both fiscal revenues and a stable supply of military manpower. The strength of the fubing forces in turn guaranteed national defense and political order, created a stable environment for agricultural production, and allowed the government to maintain relatively light taxation and corvée burdens—conditions that together gave rise to the prosperous age known as the "Reign of Zhenguan."

By the Kaiyuan era of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (713–741), however, land annexation had become even more severe than in the late Western Han, and the equal-field system had effectively collapsed. Xuanzong was forced to abandon the fubing system in favor of a recruitment-based military system: the state now supplied equipment and salaries to professional soldiers and established military governors (jiedushi) along the frontiers, many of them officers of nomadic origin. By 742, the forces commanded by An Lushan, a jiedushi of nomadic background, alone accounted for roughly one third of the empire's total troop strength. Because soldiers now served long terms under the same commanders, they formed personal bonds of loyalty to their generals rather than to the state, a shift that paved the way for regional militarization and warlordism. As the jiedushi

competed with the central government for control of population and fiscal resources, their power steadily expanded, until in 755 the An Lushan Rebellion finally erupted. Seven years of warfare cost the country roughly two-thirds of its population and nearly brought the Tang dynasty to collapse.

A similar transformation unfolded in ancient Rome. From the late third century BCE to the first century BCE—particularly between the aftermath of the Second Punic War and the Gracchan reforms (133–121 BCE)—the citizen-soldier system that had underpinned Rome's dominance gradually disintegrated. In the early Republic, landholding citizens farmed in peacetime and armed themselves in wartime, serving out of duty, honor, and civic obligation. Prolonged warfare, however, ruined small farmers and accelerated land concentration among the aristocracy.¹⁸ As imperial expansion brought vast wealth and a growing slave population, elites consolidated holdings into slave-worked latifundia, eroding the social base of the citizen-soldier system. By the Gracchan era, military recruitment was already under severe strain. The Marian reforms of 107 BCE shifted the cost of arms and pay to the state, accelerating Rome's transition toward a professional army,¹⁹ one whose loyalty increasingly lay with individual commanders rather than the Republic, paving the way for figures like Caesar and the Republic's eventual collapse.

The decline of the citizen-soldier system and the spread of the latifundia were both consequences of worsening wealth inequality. Another consequence was mounting economic pressure on ordinary households, which discouraged marriage and childbearing and contributed to chronically low fertility from the late Republic through much of the imperial period. As manpower dwindled, the Western Empire grew increasingly dependent on barbarian recruits and

migrants to sustain its military and economy. As state capacity weakened, integrating these groups became progressively more difficult, deepening political fragmentation and hastening the collapse of the Western Empire in 476 CE, marking the transition to medieval Europe.²⁰

Imperial China, by contrast, proved remarkably resilient. The imperial bureaucracy largely retained the capacity to track demographic data and maintain broad administrative control over society, enabling the state to periodically check excessive land concentration and social polarization. This helped sustain relatively high fertility and strong demographic resilience, allowing the population to recover quickly from crises. Though conquered by nomadic peoples from the north on several occasions, China's sheer demographic scale ultimately enabled it to assimilate its conquerors, preserving the continuity of Chinese civilization.

To consolidate their rule over China, these nomadic conquerors also prioritized demographic accuracy. Kublai Khan (r. 1260–1294), the Mongol emperor who founded the Yuan dynasty, and his predecessors, for instance, conducted several large-scale censuses—in 1235, 1252, 1270, and 1289–1290—decreeing that anyone who falsified population data would be executed.²¹ Liu Kexing, the administrator of Henan Circuit, falsified household-registration figures and was stripped of office, with half his property confiscated.

Yet in the thirty-nine years between Kublai Khan's death in 1294 and 1333, the Yuan throne passed through ten emperors, four of whom reigned for less than a year. With the central government no longer able to maintain reliable records of population and cultivated land, power slipped into the hands of powerful ministers. Population and farmland—which should have served as the basis of taxation, military recruitment, and corvée labor—instead fell under

the private control of powerful elites. The imperial treasury became so depleted that it could not even fund disaster relief or repairs to the Yellow River dikes. The *corvée* laborers sent to repair the Yellow River dikes, cold, hungry, and unpaid, deserted in large numbers to join the Red Turban rebels. The once-mighty Yuan dynasty proved remarkably short-lived, collapsing after only ninety-eight years.²²

Zhu Yuanzhang founded the Ming dynasty in 1368. He held that "the population is the foundation of a nation, and a large population is a sign of prosperity."²³ Drawing lessons from the Yuan collapse, he dispatched military forces across the empire to conduct comprehensive registration of population and assets, including cultivated land, and compiled the Yellow Registers (*Huangce*)—household registers bound in yellow covers. Falsification of these records was punished severely: officials found responsible were executed, while commoners were sentenced to military exile.²⁴ In the Blank Seal Case alone, several hundred people were imprisoned for statistical fraud,²⁵ many of them put to death. The early Ming Yellow Register system closely resembled a modern census system.²³

In 1393, the registered population stood at 60.55 million, with 850 million mu of cultivated land. Given the social stability that followed, both figures should have continued to rise. Instead, owing to widespread falsification of records, the registered population had ostensibly fallen to 50.91 million and registered cultivated land to 423 million mu by 1502.²⁶

The apparent decline in cultivated land was concentrated primarily in the northern provinces, whereas the apparent decline in population was concentrated mainly in the south. According to the Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty (*Ming huidian*), by 1578 the recorded population of the five northern provinces had increased by more than 11 million compared with the early Ming,

while the recorded population in southern regions had declined by more than 9.6 million. Population decline was especially pronounced in economically developed areas: the registered populations of Songjiang and Huzhou prefectures, for example, had both nearly halved.²⁷ This divergence largely reflected differences in bureaucratic incentives, taxation, and *corvée* assessment between north and south.

In the northern provinces, land was abundant, population relatively sparse, and soil generally poor. Roughly ninety percent of the population depended on agriculture, and nearly every adult male owed annual *corvée* labor. Under such conditions, local officials had strong incentives to avoid reporting population decline, since a drop in registered adult males could trigger scrutiny or administrative penalties. As a result, officials often deliberately retained the registrations of those who had died or migrated away, and in some cases even inflated the count of adult males on the books. Anding County, Gongchang Prefecture, Shaanxi Province, for example, reported 2,200 registered adult males though only 400 actually resided there; Tongwei County reported 1,600 against a true figure of only 600. Because *corvée* burdens had already grown extremely heavy, and land itself carried relatively little value, cultivated acreage was typically assessed by rough visual estimation rather than precise measurement — creating strong incentives to conceal landholdings and evade grain taxes, and resulting in widespread underreporting of cultivated land.²⁸

The situation in the southern provinces was fundamentally different. Population density was high and arable land comparatively scarce, and large numbers of people had moved beyond the traditional constraints of land tenure and household registration to pursue trade and handicrafts, making accurate population registration increasingly difficult. Fertile land, a favorable climate, and high agricultural yields,

meanwhile, made cultivated-land figures the primary basis for household assessment and taxation. Corvée demands were correspondingly light in practice: a household might contain several dozen members, yet only one would be called to serve, and even then, only once a decade. Because the state emphasized land registration while paying less attention to population counts, powerful clans and local elites routinely bribed grassroots officials to conceal household members, so that a household with several dozen adult males might appear in the official records with only one. A local gazetteer from Nanchang Prefecture, Jiangxi, records that in 1572 the population reported to the court was approximately 900,000, while the actual population was close to two million.²⁹

When the Yellow Registers (Huangce) were updated every decade, some local officials simply copied over data from previous registers to preserve continuity and satisfy court reporting requirements with minimal effort. As a result, many individuals listed in the Yellow Registers were recorded as being over one hundred years old. Meanwhile, local officials privately compiled a separate set of records—the White Registers (Baice)—containing more accurate population figures, which served as the actual basis for taxation and corvée allocation and often enabled officials to pursue private gain.²³ After the fall of the Ming dynasty, Sun Tingquan, Minister of Revenue under the Qing, discovered that some late-Ming Yellow Registers had simply been transcribed from records dating back to the early Ming.

By the late sixteenth century, the state had largely lost control over its population and cultivated-land records. Fiscal revenues could no longer cover expenditures, tax and corvée burdens had grown severely unequal, and social unrest was mounting — leaving the dynasty, as one contemporary observer put it, "on the verge of

collapse, though not yet collapsed."³⁰ In 1580, Senior Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng ordered a comprehensive survey of arable land and a nationwide population registration. These measures temporarily restored the fiscal base, prolonging the Ming dynasty by more than sixty years.

Population concealment remained widespread in the early Qing dynasty. In the first year of the Yongzheng reign (1723), Yongzheng Emperor introduced the reform known as "merging the poll tax into the land tax" (tanding rumu), folding a poll tax that had existed for more than two millennia into the land tax. This severed, at a stroke, the chain of incentives that had driven households to underreport population: with no separate head tax to evade, concealment no longer paid. Yet the reform also opened a new incentive in the opposite direction — overreporting now became advantageous — and the principal source of statistical distortion shifted accordingly, from underreporting to overreporting. This pattern became especially pronounced after 1990.

3. Demographic Manipulation in the Soviet Union

China's political system was modeled on that of the Soviet Union, which had a long history of fabricating official statistics — including population data — to support state policies. To finance rapid industrialization, the Soviet government forced farmers into collective farms beginning in 1929. These policies triggered a man-made famine that struck primarily Ukraine (the Holodomor), the North Caucasus, and Kazakhstan, killing millions between 1932 and 1933. Following the 1926 census, official data on birth rates, mortality, and population size continued to be published annually until 1936 — yet the demographic consequences of famine and political repression were absent from these official statistics.

In January 1937, the Soviet Union conducted its first census in eleven years. Soviet leaders, Stalin above all, had high hopes for the results: the census figures were intended to demonstrate Soviet productivity relative to the West and to project the image of a healthy, contented, and growing population.³¹ At the 17th Party Congress in 1934, Stalin had declared that the Soviet population had reached "168 million" by the end of 1933, and in a 1935 speech he further claimed that the population was growing by "about 3 million" per year — presented as evidence of Soviet prosperity.³² On this basis, official projections expected the population to reach 177 million by the end of 1936, some 30 million above the 1926 census.

When the 1937 census returns were finally compiled, however, they showed a population of just 162 million — significantly below official expectations and even lower than Stalin's earlier public claims. The results also revealed politically unexpected findings: more than half of the population declared themselves religious believers, contrary to expectations after a decade of anti-religious persecution.

Stalin considered the results a political disaster because they exposed population decline, famine losses, and failure of anti-religious propaganda. Within days of the first, still-secret findings being delivered to the Kremlin, Olimpiy Kvitkin, chief of the Census Bureau, and three senior colleagues were arrested. The Bolshevik journal claimed a "serpent's nest of traitors in the apparatus of Soviet statistics" had been crushed. Pravda said the men had "exerted themselves to diminish the numbers of the population of the USSR". On 28 September 1937, Olimpiy Kvitkin was shot and buried in a mass grave in the beautiful red-brick Donskoy cemetery in Moscow. The importance of his census was only recognized when it partially emerged from the secret Soviet archives 52 years later, in 1989.³³

The results of the 1937 census were hidden and labeled "harmful." A new census was held in 1939, with more "politically correct" methodology, reporting a population of 170.5 million people. The 1939 census was a model for all subsequent Soviet censuses. However, the authorities remained dissatisfied with the results of the 1939 census and did not publish the full data. Materials declassified after the collapse of the Soviet Union showed that the actual population in 1939 was only 167.6 million.³⁴ The next fully published census data came only in 1959, three decades after the 1926 census.

Population data forms the bedrock of all decision-making, yet Soviet leaders clearly lacked access to accurate figures. As early as the 1960s, Russia's total fertility rate had already fallen below replacement level. However, according to Professor Anatoly Vishnevsky, a demographer at the Russian Academy of Sciences, officials and demographers concealed the problem through elaborate "games."³⁵

The Collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was ostensibly due to Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. Yet, these reforms were necessitated by socioeconomic problems, which in turn stemmed from a declining fertility rate. Sustained low fertility rates led to a decline in the Soviet Union's working-age population (15-59) during the 1980s, making it unable to support its extensively expanded domestic and foreign policies. Had scholars sounded the alarm based on accurate demographic data, and had the Soviet government abandoned strategic expansion (such as the invasion of Afghanistan) in favor of strategic retrenchment and market-oriented reforms, the Soviet Union might have survived.

China's political system grew out of the Soviet model and shares its institutional flaw of soft budget constraints—manifested specifically as "soft performance constraints" on political elites. For example, from 1958 to 1961, to cater to

Chairman Mao Zedong's radical goal of "surpassing Britain and catching up with America," officials at all levels exaggerated grain yields, even reporting an outrageous yield of 75-375 tons per hectare. Rather than being held accountable for these fabrications, they were often rewarded with promotions. Qian Xuesen, the father of China's missile and space program, even scientifically demonstrated that rice and wheat yields could reach 300 tons per hectare.³⁶ The inflated high-yield figures reported by local governments, combined with expert endorsements, reinforced Mao's confidence in the Great Leap Forward, which he pursued for three years, resulting in a famine that killed tens of millions.

Following the introduction of the one-child policy in 1980, China's demographic statistics were also shaped by soft budget constraints. As early as 1991, actual fertility had already fallen below replacement level, implying that the policy should, at the very least by that point, have been fully discontinued. However, in order to align with the official narrative of "excessive population growth"—the very premise on which the policy was justified—officials at the National Population and Family Planning Commission and the National Bureau of Statistics, together with establishment demographers, jointly revised key indicators such as the total fertility rate and total population upward. For instance, the total fertility rate was adjusted from 1.22 in the 2000 census to approximately 1.8.

Much as Qian Xuesen had done with grain yields, establishment demographers produced equally fantastical demographic projections. These included forecasts that, under the one-child policy, fertility would stabilize at around 1.8 in the long run and China's population would reach 1.5 billion by 2033,³⁷ while under a universal two-child policy, the population would exceed the 1.6 billion "redline,"³⁸ with fertility projected to rebound to either 4.4 or 4.5 and annual births to

reach 49.95 million.^{39,40} The combination of statistical manipulation and exaggerated forecasting sustained the one-child policy for 35 years, resulting in demographic losses of unprecedented scale and locking China into a prolonged demographic trap.

4. China's Four National Population Censuses from 1953 to 1989

Since the late Qing, China had experienced decades of warfare, and the question of exactly how many people China had became a matter of international concern. In 1901, the Qing government published an estimated national population figure of 407 million in the *Peking Gazette*, the official court newspaper of the time. That same year, the Boxer Protocol — the treaty settling the Boxer Uprising between China and the eight foreign powers — required China to pay an indemnity of 450 million taels of silver. It is said that this figure derived from the powers' estimate of China's total population at the time: one tael of silver per person.⁴¹

The household surveys of 1909–1910 and the national census of 1912 produced total population figures of only 373 million and 324 million, respectively, but both suffered from serious underreporting — particularly of children and women — owing to widespread public resistance to registration.⁴²

In 1931, the Ministry of the Interior of the Nationalist Government released the results of the 1928 national household survey, reporting a total population of 474,787,386. This marked the first nationwide population total officially published by a Chinese government since 1851. However, because only thirteen provinces had actually submitted data for this survey, the figure remained, in essence, an estimate.

In 1936, the Ministry of the Interior revised and supplemented the 1912 census results,

releasing an updated total of 419,640,279. Between 1946 and 1948, the ministry issued national population statistics on several occasions, each reporting totals above 400 million. It was against this backdrop that the phrase "four hundred million compatriots" became a common refrain throughout the first half of the twentieth century.⁴¹

After the Communist Party of China seized state power, the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) adopted The Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in September 1949 — a document that functioned as an interim constitution. It established that the newly founded People's Republic would implement a system of people's congresses elected by universal suffrage, an undertaking that required accurate data on the number of eligible voters. To support this effort, the Soviet demographer S. K. Kradyevich arrived in China in February 1952 to guide population-statistics work, serving as head of the expert statistical team at the State Statistical Bureau.⁴³ On April 3, 1953, the Government Administration Council — the interim central administrative body of the early PRC — issued the Instructions on Conducting a National Population Survey and Registration in Preparation for Universal Suffrage. China's first national census subsequently reported a total population, as of 24:00 on June 30, 1953, of 601,938,035, of whom 582,603,417 resided in mainland China.⁴⁴

During the Great Leap Forward (1959–1961), economic hardship led local authorities to overreport their populations in order to secure additional cloth coupons, grain coupons, and other goods distributed under the planned economy. This was further complicated by a compensatory birth surge in 1963, which, combined with earlier overreporting, made China's actual population size exceedingly difficult to determine. To correct the problem of overreporting, the CCP Central

Committee and the State Council resolved on February 11, 1964, to conduct a second national census; the Central Committee subsequently circulated its Report on Correcting the Phenomenon of Population Overreporting. The census, conducted on June 30, found the total population of mainland China, including military personnel, to be 694,581,759.⁴⁵ It uncovered 8.2 million cases of overreporting and 2.34 million cases of underreporting, for a net overreporting of 5.86 million.⁴⁶

National population statistics were suspended between 1966 and 1970 owing to the Cultural Revolution. By the time annual reporting resumed in 1971, the population had already surpassed 850 million — an increase of 150 million over the 1964 census figure — and China's actual population size once again became a matter of open dispute. At the time, fears of a global "population explosion" dominated international discourse, and there was strong international interest in China obtaining accurate population data and implementing family planning.

For various reasons, however, the next census was repeatedly postponed and did not take place until 1982. The United Nations dispatched You Yunzhong, Deputy Director of its Population Division, to China with funding and a large shipment of IBM 4331 and IBM 4341 computers to guide the census effort. You Yunzhong was originally from Taiwan, and the Chinese government initially expressed reservations about his appointment — until an investigation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs revealed that his father had served as an underground CCP operative sent to Taiwan and had sacrificed his life in the Party's service.⁴⁷

At that time, China had only just begun its reform and opening up, and its economy remained largely planned. Urbanization was still low, and the floating population was small. This census was carried out with the encouragement, funding, and

technical guidance of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). It was the first Chinese census to use computers for data processing, marking a milestone in the development of modern census-taking in China, and its overall quality was exceptionally high.

The census recorded a total population of 1,008,175,288, including 4.24 million military personnel. A post-census sample evaluation of registration quality showed an overcount rate of 0.071 percent and an undercount rate of 0.056 percent, resulting in a net overcount of approximately 150,000 people.

The census recorded a total population of 1,008,175,288, including 4.24 million military personnel. A post-census sample evaluation of registration quality found a duplicate-registration rate of 0.071% and an omission rate of 0.056%, yielding a net overcount of roughly 150,000 people.⁴⁸ Afterward, the UNFPA appointed its resident adviser in China, John R. Mertens, to guide the compilation a systematic population yearbook.

In 1987, China carried out a one-percent population sample survey, which put the total population at 1,072.33 million.⁴⁹ The total fertility rate stood at 2.37 in 1986 and 2.51 in 1987.

Beginning in 1990, China conducted a

national population census every ten years—in 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020. When the fourth national census was carried out in 1990, the country still bore strong marks of a planned economy: urbanization had increased only gradually, from 20% in 1982 to 26% in 1990, and the state still exercised tight control over population registration and mobility. More than ten million people were mobilized for the census, including seven million enumerators, along with instructors and staff at census offices at all levels.

The 1990 census put the national population, including 3.2 million military personnel, at 1,133,682,501—slightly above the year-end registered household population of 1,132.74 million recorded in the Ministry of Public Security's annual report.⁵⁰ The net undercount was about 680,000,⁵¹ an extremely low rate of omission. The Associated Press described this as the most accurate population figure China had produced to date.⁵²

The reference date for the 1990 census was July 1, as in the 1982 census; all subsequent censuses used November 1 instead. Based on the 1990 census figures together with that year's births and deaths, the population as of November 1, 1990, can be estimated at 1,138.32 million.

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2 Data Manipulation in China's 2000 Census

Yi Fuxian

1. Research Method

This study uses the cohort-component method for population projections and reverse projections, the standard method in demographic projection.¹ The method projects a population by age and sex using assumptions regarding fertility, mortality, and migration, with population change decomposed into these three demographic components. Population cohorts are constructed by single year of age and sex.

A cohort refers to a group of individuals who experience a particular demographic event during the same period; for example, individuals born in the same year form a birth cohort. As cohorts age, their size changes through mortality and migration, decreasing through deaths and out-migration and increasing through in-migration. When cohort members reach reproductive age, they generate new birth cohorts through fertility.

Population projections are based on the current population by age and sex, together with assumptions regarding fertility, mortality, and migration. These demographic components are projected over time to generate population change by age and sex.

For each projection interval, the population is advanced by one year of age using age-specific survival rates and net migration rates. Births are calculated using age-specific fertility rates and are added as a new cohort under age 1. The resulting population becomes the base population for the next interval. This process is repeated over successive projection intervals to generate the population by age and sex over time. Equation 1

outlines the basic structure of the cohort-component model.

$$P_{(t)} = P_{(t-1)} + B_{(t-1, t)} - D_{(t-1, t)} + M_{(t-1, t)} \quad (1)$$

Where:

$P_{(t)}$ = population at time t ;

$P_{(t-1)}$ = population at time $t-1$;

$B_{(t-1, t)}$ = births in the interval from time $t-1$ to time t ;

$D_{(t-1, t)}$ = deaths in the interval from time $t-1$ to time t ; and

$M_{(t-1, t)}$ = net migration in the interval from time $t-1$ to time t

Figure 1.1. Overview of the cohort-component method

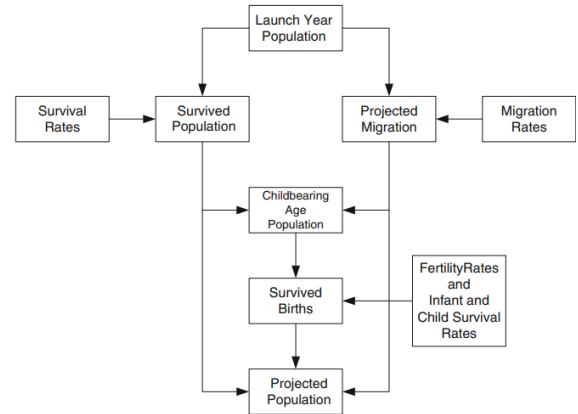


Figure 1.1 summarizes the cohort-component projection framework. The projection proceeds through the following steps:

- Define the baseline population by cohort for the base period.
- Specify fertility, mortality, and net migration rates for the base period population.

c. Specify assumptions regarding the future trajectories of fertility, mortality, and migration over the projection period.

d. Apply the projected rates to the baseline population by age and sex to generate population change over each projection interval.

The population at the end of each projection interval becomes the base population for the subsequent interval, and the procedure is repeated over successive projection intervals.

Base Population

The projections use population data from China's censuses as the base population. China's 1990 census used July 1 as the reference date, while the 2000, 2010, and 2020 censuses used November 1 as the reference date. To ensure comparability across censuses, the 1990 age-specific population distributions were standardized to November 1.

Fertility Projections

The age-specific fertility rate (ASFR) is defined as the annual number of births to women in a specific age group divided by the number of women in that age group during the same period (Equation 2).

$$ASFR_{(x,t)} = \frac{Births_{(x,t)}}{FP_{(x,t)}} \quad (2)$$

$$FP(x, t) = \frac{(P_{F(x,t-1)} + P_{F(x,t)})}{2} \quad (3)$$

Where:

$ASFR_{(x,t)}$ = age-specific fertility rate at age x and time t,

$Births_{(x,t)}$ = number of births to mothers age x at time t,

$FP(x, t)$ = the average female population age x at time t,

$P_{F(x,t-1)}$ = the female population aged x in the year before t, and

$P_{F(x,t)}$ = the female population aged x in the year t.

The total fertility rate (TFR) is the average number of children a woman would give birth to during her lifetime if she were to pass through her childbearing years (15-49 years) experiencing the present day ASFRs, and is calculated by adding up all ASFRs (equation 4).

$$TFR = \sum_{x=15}^{49} ASFR_{(x,t)} \quad (4)$$

The age-specific fertility distributions for 1989, 2000, 2010 and 2020 were respectively derived from the censuses of 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2020. The distributions in intercensal years were derived from the estimations by linear interpolations between every two censuses.

Table 1. Age-specific fertility distributions (%) in 1989, 2000, 2010, and 2020

Age	1989	2000	2010	2020	Age	1989	2000	2010	2020
15	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.06	33	2.00	1.52	3.05	4.23
16	0.13	0.06	0.07	0.16	34	1.60	1.09	2.70	3.63
17	0.46	0.22	0.27	0.35	35	1.27	0.79	2.23	3.07
18	1.22	0.57	0.71	0.70	36	1.01	0.55	1.91	2.53
19	2.85	1.73	1.21	1.15	37	0.81	0.42	1.57	1.99
20	5.52	4.58	2.91	2.00	38	0.63	0.35	1.30	1.57
21	8.01	7.98	4.82	3.11	39	0.52	0.27	1.00	1.19
22	9.92	10.27	6.01	4.26	40	0.37	0.20	0.91	0.87

23	10.77	11.69	7.79	5.40	41	0.29	0.14	0.64	0.62
24	10.36	11.94	8.34	6.36	42	0.23	0.11	0.66	0.44
25	8.88	10.57	7.71	7.15	43	0.19	0.09	0.48	0.31
26	7.48	8.67	7.56	7.88	44	0.16	0.08	0.43	0.22
27	6.52	6.91	6.72	8.15	45	0.11	0.07	0.41	0.16
28	5.07	5.52	7.24	7.86	46	0.08	0.06	0.36	0.13
29	4.29	4.42	6.14	7.20	47	0.07	0.05	0.41	0.12
30	3.61	3.66	5.03	6.34	48	0.05	0.05	0.47	0.11
31	2.99	3.00	4.53	5.72	49	0.05	0.04	0.31	0.11
32	2.46	2.31	4.08	4.89	Total	100	100	100	100

The projected age-specific fertility rates were multiplied by the population of women at each age group to calculate the projected number of births (equation 5).

$$\text{Births} = B_{(t)} = ASFR_{(x,t)} * FP_{(x,t)} \quad (5)$$

Male births (equation 6) and female births (equation 7) are calculated based on total births and sex ratio at birth (SRB), the number of male births for every 100 female births.

$$\text{Male births} = B_{(t)}^m = \frac{100}{(100+SRB)} * B_{(t)} \quad (6)$$

$$\text{Female births} = B_{(t)}^f = \frac{SRB}{(100+SRB)} * B_{(t)} \quad (7)$$

SRB was derived from the most recent census. For example, based on the male and female populations aged 0-9 in the 2020 census, the number of male and female births and the SRB from 2011 to 2020 were calculated using life table survival ratios.

Mortality Projections

Mortality was projected in three steps:

1) Select life expectancy at birth for both sexes. The life expectancy at birth figures is sourced from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS) for the years 1981, 1990, 1996, 2000, 2005, 2015, and 2020.² Data for intermediate years

were calculated using the linear interpolation. These figures correspond to China's documented health status and demonstrate a reliable alignment with data from Taiwan.

Table 2. Life Expectancy at Birth

Year	Male	Female
1981	66.28	69.27
1990	66.84	70.47
1996	69.04	72.75
2000	69.63	73.33
2005	70.83	75.25
2010	72.38	77.37
2015	73.64	79.43
2020	75.37	80.88

2) Select the life table for China in the UN's *World Population Prospects 2024* that corresponds to the selected life expectancy at birth.³

3) Apply the survival ratios for each age cohort extracted from the matched life table to calculate the number of survivors for the next year based on the population size of the current year. The survival ratio was expressed as equation 8.

$$S_{(x,t)} = \frac{L_{(x,t)}}{L_{(x-1,t)}} \quad (8)$$

In Eq. (8), the $L_{(x,t)}$ is the number of person-years of the population aged x years in the life

table living from x years to $(x+1)$ years in year.

Multiplication of the population in the younger age group at the start of the projection interval by these life table measures of survivorship into the next older age group gives the projected population surviving to the next older age group at the end of the interval (equation 9):

$$N_{(x,t)} = N_{(x-1,t-1)} * S_{(x,t)} + M_{(x,t)} \quad (9)$$

In Eq. (9), the $N_{(x,t)}$ is the population aged x in year t , and the $M_{(x,t)}$ is the net migration into the cohort during the interval $t-1$ and t .

However, the survival ratio of births was estimated using the equation:

$$S_{(0,t)} = \frac{L_{(0,t)}}{100,000} \quad (10)$$

The population aged 0 was calculated as:

$$N_{(0,t)} = B_{(t)} * S_{(0,t)} + M_{(0,t)} \quad (11)$$

The estimation of the open-ended survival ratio (equation 12) and the number of survivors (equation 13) were calculated as:

$$S_{(100+,t)} = \frac{L_{(100+,t)}}{(L_{(99,t)} + L_{(100+,t)})} \quad (12)$$

$$N_{(100+,t)} = (N_{(99,t-1)} + N_{(100+,t-1)}) * S_{(100+,t)} + M_{(100+,t)} \quad (13)$$

Net International Migration

Data on annual net international migration was sourced from the World Bank.⁴ The figures show that from 1991 to 2024, China experienced a net emigration of 12.67 million people. The gender and age distribution of these migrants was modeled using the United Nations' Castro model template.⁵

2. Official Forecasts before the 2000 Census

Problems in China's population statistics began to emerge after 1990. Between September and October 1992, the National Family Planning Commission (NFPC) conducted the first nationwide survey under the Family Planning Management Information System. It showed that the total fertility rate had fallen from 2.24 in 1989 to 2.04 in 1990, 1.65 in 1991, and 1.52 in 1992.

This decline in fertility was, in fact, entirely understandable. In 1991, China introduced the family-planning "one-vote veto" system, which tied officials' promotions to their performance in enforcing family-planning policy. Combined with the accelerating pace of China's market-oriented reforms, this inevitably drove fertility rates lower. Yet fertility rates of 1.65 and 1.52 meant that the one-child policy should already have been abolished. Officials at the NFPC and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), along with demographers, refused to accept these survey findings. Instead, they published a stream of papers employing various methodological and statistical maneuvers to revise fertility upward. As a result, the NBS substantially raised annual birth and population figures.

For example, in 1995, Zeng Yi—then vice president of the China Population Association and director of the Institute of Population Research at Peking University—published a paper in *Population Research* revising the fertility rates for 1990, 1991, and 1992 upward to 2.43, 2.20, and 2.10, respectively.⁶ Earlier, he and other prominent demographers, including Gu Baochang, had attributed the rise in the sex ratio at birth following the one-child policy to the underreporting of female infants.⁷ Zeng Yi received his PhD in demography from Vrije Universiteit Brussel in 1986 and conducted postdoctoral research at the Office of Population Research at Princeton

University from 1986 to 1987. He served as a member of the expert advisory group for United Nations Population Fund projects in China and during the 2000 census sat on the expert advisory group of the State Council Census Office. He is regarded as one of China's most authoritative demographers, having received the 2021 Laureate Award from the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population and being recognized in the UN's "Healthy Ageing 50" in 2022.

Since 1990, China has conducted a national population census every ten years (in years ending in zero) and a 1% population sample survey every five years (in years ending in five), commonly known as the "mini-census." Since 1994, the NBS has additionally conducted an annual 0.1% population sample survey. The NFPC conducted a national survey on population and reproductive health in 1997 and a national family-planning /reproductive-health survey in 2001.

Table 3. Total Fertility Rate, 1991–2000

	NBS ⁸	NFPC ⁹		
		1997	2001	Average
1991		1.75	1.77	1.76
1992		1.57	1.59	1.58
1993		1.51	1.52	1.52
1994	1.56	1.32	1.41	
1995	1.43	1.33	1.45	
1996	1.55	1.35	1.36	
1997	1.46		1.27	
1998	1.46		1.34	
1999	1.45		1.29	
2000	1.22		1.45	

This series of studies adopts the officially published fertility rates as follows: for 1991–1993, the average fertility rates from the NFPC's 1997 and 2001 sample surveys are used; for 1994–2020, the fertility rates published by the NBS are used. It should be noted that these official fertility rates are significantly overestimated. In many years, for instance, the first-order fertility rate—the average number of first births per woman—exceeds 1.0, a figure that is demographically and physiologically implausible. Nevertheless, even using these inflated official fertility rates, China's total population in 2000 is estimated at only 1.224 billion. In the 2007 edition of my book *Big Country with an Empty Nest*, I likewise estimated that China's actual population in 2000 was probably only about 1.222 billion.¹⁰

However, contemporaneous official and international projections were substantially higher. Jiang Zhenghua, then Vice Minister of the NPFPC, projected that China's population in 2000 would exceed 1.28 billion.¹¹ The 1996 and 2000 revisions of the UN's *World Population Prospects* projected China's 2000 population at 1.276 billion and 1.275 billion, respectively, both assuming a total fertility rate of 1.8 for 1996–2000.³

In September 2000, Cui Hongyan, deputy director of the Census Division of the NBS, published an article in *Population Research* projecting that China's population as of November 1, 2000 (the census reference date), would fall between 1.267 and 1.280 billion.¹² This projection served as reference data for the Fifth National Census conducted that year. Local authorities likewise had their own reference population figures to guide census work in their respective regions.

Table 4. Comparison of Three Birth Estimates: National Statistical Communiqués, Aggregate Provincial Births, and Fertility-Rate-Based Calculations (million)

	Annual Statistical Communiqué				Provincial	Based on TFR in Table 3
	Population	Births	Deaths	Increase	Births	Births
1991	1158.23	22.65	7.71	14.90	21.05	19.87
1992	1171.71	21.25	7.74	13.48	19.80	18.15
1993	1185.17	21.32	7.82	13.46	19.22	17.6
1994	1198.50	21.10	7.74	13.33	18.96	18.12
1995	1211.21	20.63	7.92	12.71	18.23	16.54
1996	1223.89	20.67	7.99	12.68	18.06	17.67
1997	1236.26	20.38	8.01	12.37	17.80	16.32
1998	1248.10	19.91	8.07	11.84	17.19	15.93
1999	1259.09	19.09	8.10	10.99	16.56	15.43
2000	1267.43	17.71	8.14	8.34	15.53	12.65
Total		204.71	79.23	124.1	182.39	168.27

Data sources: Year-end population, births, deaths, and population increase are drawn from the annual *Statistical Communiqué on National Economic and Social Development*; provincial births are taken from the *China Population and Employment Statistics Yearbook—2010*.

China's population censuses, like those of the Soviet Union, are required to be consistent with previously published official population totals; otherwise, any discrepancy would amount to a political disaster. The NBS publishes annual population data in the *Statistical Communiqué on National Economic and Social Development*,⁸ and provincial statistical authorities likewise publish their own population statistics.

In imperial China, because the state levied a poll tax, local authorities often benefited—both personally and for their locality—from underreporting the population, even though the central government still sought accurate population data. Modern China is entirely different: there is no poll tax; instead, government funding is allocated on a per-capita basis. As a result, underreporting the population brings little benefit (with the exception of out-of-quota births during the one-child policy era, though these accounted for only a small share of the total population).

By contrast, overreporting benefits individuals directly—for example, by improving eligibility for school enrollment, home purchases, and urban or rural welfare benefits such as subsistence allowances and pensions—and also benefits local governments, which can obtain more funding for education and health care, poverty alleviation, and transfer payments, as well as greater leverage in securing approval for infrastructure projects such as railways and expressways. Provincial population figures are therefore inflated and, in principle, should be discounted by the national government.

However, even these provincial estimates still fell short of the expectations of officials at the NBS and the NPFPC, as well as demographers, who further inflated population estimates based on aggregated provincial data. For example, the total births reported by provinces for 1991–2000 summed to 182.39 million,¹³ whereas the NBS reported 204.71 million births—12%, or 22.32

million, higher.

3. The 2000 Census Data Were Tampered With

According to a report by *Oriental Outlook*, a publication under Xinhua News Agency, on October 23, 2010, Lu Chunheng, director of the 2000 Population Census Office and Deputy Commissioner of the NBS, admitted: "The first requirement of conducting a population census is to report the total population. If the total falls short, there would be no way to account for it to higher authorities." Yet the aggregate figure obtained from the 2000 census was far below the population previously published by the authorities. The National Population Census Office therefore instructed localities to conduct an urgent rechecking and gap-filling exercise. The original ten-day enumeration period was extended by an additional twenty days.¹⁴

On July 19, 2010, Professor Liang Zhongtang, a former member of the Expert Committee of the NPFPC, published an article in *Outlook*, a Xinhua-affiliated newsweekly, warning that if the 2010 census were to revise its results by reconciling them with previously published annual population data, as had been done in 2000, the census would become meaningless. Reviewing the 2000 census, he noted that because the raw results were far below the population expected by the NBS and the NPFPC, a supplementary rechecking and backfilling campaign lasting more than half a month was conducted, "recovering" more than 40 million people.¹⁵ The final census tables reported a total population of 1,245,110,826 people, including 2,498,600 military personnel.¹⁶

Even so, the census total remained 13.98 million lower than the 1999 population published in the annual *Statistical Communiqué*, and 2.99 million lower than the 1998 figure. The authorities then used a sample of 160,000 people to "assess"

an underreporting rate of 1.81%,¹⁷ added 20.72 million people, and published a final total of 1,265.83 million¹⁸—a figure that could just barely be reconciled with the annual population data in previous *Statistical Communiqués*.

Thus, as in the Soviet Union's 1937 census, the raw aggregate results of China's fifth national population census in 2000 were far below official expectations. While the first through fourth censuses published both overcount and undercount rates, the 2000 census reported only an undercount rate—thirty times that of the 1990 census.

Fortunately, the additional 20.72 million people were not redistributed into specific age groups in the census tables, so the age structure was not substantially distorted. Death figures from the NBS's annual *Statistical Communiqués* are not excessively erroneous, so this paper provisionally adopts them: deaths were 36.07 million in 1986–1990, 79.23 million in 1991–2000, 87.79 million in 2001–2010, and 98.02 million in 2011–2020.⁸ The World Bank estimates China's net emigration in these same periods at 0.86 million, 2.88 million, 5.35 million, and 2.88 million,¹⁹ respectively.

The 2000 census recorded 159.13 million people aged 0–9. Using survival rates, this implies 166.51 million births during 1991–2000, corresponding to an average total fertility rate of only 1.46—just 1.29 during 1996–2000. The population identity therefore yields:

$$\begin{aligned} 2000 \text{ population} &= 1990 \text{ population} + \text{births} - \\ &\text{deaths} - \text{net emigration} = 1,138.32 \text{ million} + \\ &166.51 \text{ million} - 79.23 \text{ million} - 2.88 \text{ million} = \\ &1,222.72 \text{ million.} \end{aligned}$$

Alternatively, based on the population structure as of November 1, 1990, and using the "officially published fertility rates," the inferred number of births during 1991–2000 is 168.27 million. Therefore: 2000 population = 1,138.32 million + 168.27 million – 79.23 million – 2.88 million = 1,224.48 million.

Even adopting the provincial aggregate of

182.39 million births, the implied total population in 2000 would be only 1.2386 billion.

Table 5. Comparison of Population by Age Group between Census Tables and Census Communiqué (million)

Age Group	Census Tables	Census Communiqué	Communiqué – Tables
0–14	284.53	289.79	5.26
15–64	872.31	887.93	15.62
65+	88.28	88.11	-0.16
Total	1245.11	1265.83	20.72

Even according to *the 2000 census communiqué*, the population aged 0–14 was only 289.79 million. Using survival rates, this implies 299.84 million births during 1986–2000. The population identity therefore yields:

2000 population = 1985 population + births – deaths – net emigration = 1,046.39 million + 299.84 million – 115.31 million – 3.73 million = 1,227.19 million.

In other words, China's true total population in 2000 was only around 1.22 billion—not the 1.245 billion shown in the census tables, and certainly not the officially announced 1.266 billion.

4. Feedback from Grassroots Officials on the 2000 Census

From 2000 to 2012, the Chinese internet remained a relatively open space for public discussion and information exchange, despite existing censorship. During this period, online forums were subject to relatively limited oversight, enabling some local census officials who had participated in the 2000 census to share firsthand accounts of census implementation. In the 2007 edition of my book *Big Country with an Empty Nest*, I incorporated several such online posts and letters, providing rare firsthand accounts from

those involved in census implementation at the grassroots level.²⁰

Netizen 1: Article submitted by "Bingxuelian" and posted on the Cat's Eye Forum on Kdnet.

Although six years have passed since the 2000 Fifth National Population Census, the events surrounding that census remain vivid in my mind. As a grassroots census worker, I feel it is necessary to tell the public the truth about what I personally experienced, and I also hope the relevant authorities will seriously reflect on this census.

I participated in the 2000 national census and was fortunate to serve as a planner and supervisor in my district. In the town where I worked, after verification by our census workers, the final population count was slightly over 39,000. This figure came from door-to-door surveys conducted by census enumerators and should have been the most accurate and reliable. Most of the enumerators were staff from neighborhood committees, which submitted monthly reports on population changes, including marriages, pregnancies, births, deaths, relocations, in-migration, outbound household registration transfers, temporary in-migration, and temporary residents.

After we submitted the data, the Harbin Census Office sent it back for rechecking, claiming that the discrepancy from their expected figure was too large. According to the projections of the Heilongjiang Provincial Census Office, every locality in Heilongjiang was expected to have at least about 10% population growth between 1990 and 2000. If the reported figure failed to reach that level, it was assumed that the local census had missed people.

But I can say with certainty that our census workers could not possibly have missed 5,000 people—12.5% of the total population. Although we repeatedly explained and rechecked the figures, higher authorities refused to listen.

At the time, the preliminary census count for Heilongjiang Province was about two million below the provincial estimate. County census officials mentioned this at a local census meeting. This shortfall later became the numerical basis for requiring us to continue rechecking and ultimately "fabricate" additional people.

Some local officials even said: Why report such a small population?

Fangzheng County, where I worked, was expected to have a population of 230,000. The Heilongjiang Provincial Census Office claimed that 45,000 people had been missed and ordered the county to recheck. How did we eventually satisfy them? In one word: by "fabricating" people.

In my town, the quota was 5,000 additional people. When I received this order, I could hardly describe my feelings. It amounted to a complete denial of our true census results.

We had no choice but to fabricate 5,000 people who did not exist. At first, everyone was oddly enthusiastic about "making people up," but after several of us had invented a few hundred names, we quickly ran out of ideas. We simply did not know how to continue. This kind of lying made us sick.

In the end, we forced ourselves to continue.

How were these extra 5,000 people created? We could not invent separate addresses for them, so we inserted them into existing households. We selected a residential complex with a little over 2,000 households and distributed the 5,000 fabricated people among them. As a result, nearly every household gained two or three extra people.

That was the final reported result for a census district thoroughly distorted by fabrication. In this way, our town completed a census with 12.5% more people than actually existed, and our county completed a census with an additional 45,000 fabricated residents.

Note: As of 2026, the link to this post, which was reposted by the Wuyouzhixiang website from

the Cat's Eye Forum in 2007, remains active (<https://m.wywxwk.com/wx1/content.php?classid=27&id=18271>).

Netizen 2: Netizen lxmb169 wrote:

Regarding the 2000 Fifth Census, I participated in population statistics work in Liaocheng. Guan County and Dong'e County in Shandong reported negative population growth, but the Family Planning Commission considered this impossible and demanded that the figures be resubmitted. At the time, Yin XX (likely Yin Huiqin), county magistrate of Dong'e, reportedly argued with Bai XX, vice mayor of Liaocheng, over the figures. Yin insisted that their numbers were accurate.

Netizen 3: A real account from the 2000 population census: registration was based on place of residence. In the first round, people who had worked away from home for more than six months were not counted at their place of household registration, causing the registered population to fall far below both projected and actual levels. A second round was then conducted, counting all registered residents as well as all those not yet entered into the household registration system. Even so, the total remained far below the expected figure. Higher authorities (I do not know at which level) then ordered that the registered population be increased by 10%. As a result, in my township of 24,000 people, 2,400 people were "born" overnight.

Netizen 4: "Yizhan Laojie" posted on People's Daily Online's Qiangguo Forum on January 21, 2005:

I work in a township in western China and was in charge of family planning for several years. Based on local realities, our natural population growth rate has been negative for five years. In previous years, the county Family Planning Commission did not allow negative figures to be reported. This year, it finally allowed us to report negative growth.

Netizen 5: "Qia Qia Qia" posted on the Cat's Eye Forum on Kdnet:

The 2000 census was essentially a farce. At the time, I was head of a township statistics station and participated in the entire Fifth Census. The initial count was 23,000. Higher authorities said it was too low, so it was adjusted to 25,000. The final reported figure was 28,000. Even more absurd, I received a provincial commendation for it.

As these accounts show, local officials acted exactly as Lu Chunheng, director of the 2000 National Population Census Office, described: "If the total falls short, there is no way to account for it." These grassroots accounts describe the 20-day "rechecking and gap-filling" process after the census. Through this process, tens of millions of people were effectively "born," bringing the total population reported in the census tables to 1.24511 billion. The additional 20.72 million people later added in *the census communiqué* had nothing to do with these grassroots officials; they were "born" on the keyboards of statistical officials and demographers.

5. The Architects of China's Population Data Manipulation

To understand how China's population data have been systematically manipulated over the past several decades, one must trace the key figures behind the process—statistical officials and demographers such as Zhang Weimin, Yu Xuejun, Cui Hongyan, and Zhai Zhenwu. They were the key operators behind the 2000, 2010, and 2020 population censuses. Their revisions, releases, and interpretations of China's population data directly shaped how China's demographic situation was understood by the national leadership, the public, and the international community.

Zhang Weimin held successive positions from 1986 to 2004 as director of the Population

Census Division of the NBS, director of the Department of Population and Employment Statistics, and director of the Department of Population, Social, Science and Technology Statistics. From 2004 to 2016, he served as Deputy Commissioner of the NBS. From the 1980s until his retirement in 2016, he oversaw the verification and revision of China's population data. From 1998 to 2014, he served as executive director and vice president of the China Population Association, whose president was Peng Peiyun, former head of the National Population and Family Planning Commission. Zhang served as deputy director of the Office of the Leading Group for the 2000 Population Census; its director was Lu Chunheng, Deputy Commissioner of the NBS, who was not a demographer. Zhang was also a member of the Leading Group and director of its Office for the 2010 Population Census.²¹

Yu Xuejun received his doctoral training under the supervision of Professor Zeng Yi. He joined the National Family Planning Commission (NFPC), which was renamed the National Population and Family Planning Commission (NPFPC) in 2003, in 1990. He has successively served as Director of the China Population Information Research Center, Director of the China Population and Development Research Center, Director-General of the Policy and Regulations Department, spokesperson, and Director-General of the Department of Development Planning and Information of the Commission. In 2013, the NPFPC and the Ministry of Health were merged into the National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC). Yu then served as director of the General Office, director-general of the Department of Planning and Information, and deputy director of the editorial board of *the China Health and Family Planning Statistical Yearbook*, where he was responsible for population statistics. From 2019 to 2024, he served as vice minister of the

National Health Commission. Since 2023, he has served as Party secretary and executive vice president of the China Family Planning Association; its president is Wang Gang, a former member of the Politburo. Yu also served as a vice president of the China Population Association for more than two decades. He was deputy director of the Office of the Leading Group for the 2010 Population Census and deputy head of the Leading Group for the 2020 Population Census.²²

Cui Hongyan served as deputy director of the Census Division of the NBS during the 2000 census and as director of that division during the 2010 census.

Zhai Zhenwu is director of the Center for Population and Development Studies at Renmin University of China. He previously served as deputy head of the expert group for the China program of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), a member of the Expert Committee of the NPFPC, and vice president of the China Family Planning Association. From 2002 to 2014, he served as vice president of the China Population Association, and from 2014 to 2025 as its president. He was a member of the expert group for the 2000, 2010, and 2020 national population censuses.

6. Yu Xuejun's "Target-Based" Revision of the 2000 Census Data

The 2000 population census marked a turning point for China's demographic statistics, introducing a systematic reconciliation between new census outcomes and legacy annual data series.

Officials and demographers at the NBS and the NFPC were extremely dissatisfied with the 2000 census results. By applying a 1.81% undercount rate, they made the total population in the 2000 census consistent with previously published figures, but this could not conceal the

"tell-tale signs" in the age structure. *The census communiqué* crammed 15.62 million of the 20.72 million "underreported" people into the 15-64 age group, which was logically untenable because those age groups had already been verified in previous censuses.

After the census-table figures were raised by 1.85%, an increase of 5.26 million people, the census communiqué still reported only 289.79 million people aged 0-14. Yet based on the officially published total number of births from 1986 to 2000, 318.48 million, the population aged 0-14 in 2000 should have been 309.93 million, a difference of 20.14 million. For this reason, after the census was completed, officials and demographers from the NBS and the NFPC readjusted the 2000 census data to make the total population and age structure consistent with each other.

In 2002, Yu Xuejun published a paper in *Population Research* attempting to address the inconsistency between total population estimates and age-specific distributions in the 2000 census.²³ Based on the published 2000 census data, he derived a total fertility rate of 1.32 for 2000, lower than his accepted policy fertility rate of 1.58, and therefore considered it "completely unconvincing." He stated, "The total fertility rate has already fallen below the policy level, which could easily mislead scholars and officials, and especially public opinion, into underestimating the importance of population control and family-planning work." He added, "If the number of minors in the Fifth National Population Census is accurate, China would not need family planning policy."

In fact, Yu Xuejun's assumed policy fertility rate of 1.58 was overstated. A 2003 study by Guo Zhigang and colleagues found that nationwide, 63.1% of women were allowed to have only one child, 35.6% were allowed to have two children—primarily ethnic minorities and rural Han women

whose first child was a daughter—and only 1.3% were allowed to have three children, mainly among ethnic minorities.²⁴ This implies that even under full compliance with family-planning regulations and abstracting from singlehood, voluntary childlessness, and infertility, the implied policy fertility rate would be only about 1.38 children per woman. Once these demographic realities are taken into account—China's infertility rate, for example, increased from 12% in 2007 to 18% in 2020²⁵—the effective fertility rate would be close to 1.0 in the absence of out-of-quota births, consistent with a de facto one-child regime.

Empirically, actual fertility falling below policy fertility is not unusual. In Beijing and Shanghai, where each woman was allowed at least one child, total fertility rates were only 0.67 and 0.69 in 2000, and 0.71 and 0.74 in 2010, respectively. Similarly, although Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea imposed no formal upper limit on fertility, their total fertility rates in 2000 were only 1.03, 1.36, and 1.48,²⁶ respectively.

Yu Xuejun said, "I would rather believe the total population figure published in the Fifth National Population Census than the number of minors, and therefore I recommend making corresponding adjustments to the already published population age structure."

He then used the total population, birth rate, and death rate published in annual *statistical communiqués* to reconstruct the number of births and the net population increase in each year from 1990 to 2000. He further calculated that during the ten years and four months between the two censuses, the population increased by about 131.5 million, basically consistent with the results published by the 2000 census. In other words, the 2000 census endorsed the total population and increments officially published each year over the previous decade.

He therefore borrowed the annually published total population, birth rate, and death rate to infer annual fertility rates and the population aged 0-14. For example, he raised the 2000 fertility rate from the 1.22 published in the census tables to 1.55, and raised the number of people aged 0-14 from 284.53 million in the census tables and 289.79 million in *the census communiqué* to 322 million.

Table 6. Total Fertility Rates Inferred by Yu Xuejun

Year	Fertility rate A	Fertility rate A
1991	2.13	1.90
1992	2.00	1.73
1993	2.00	1.70
1994	1.98	1.65
1995	1.94	1.60
1996	1.94	1.59
1997	1.91	1.58
1998	1.87	1.57
1999	1.79	1.55
2000	1.55	1.32

Fertility rate A was inferred from birth counts reported in annual *statistical communiqués*; Fertility rate B was inferred from age-specific population distributions in the 2000 census tables.

Yu believed that the actual fertility rate in 2000 was higher than his inferred 1.55, "because first, the total fertility rate fell too abruptly from 1.79 in 1999 to 1.55 in 2000, which does not accord with the basic laws of population reproduction; second, I believe that the undercount rate in the fifth national population census in 2000 may have been higher than 1.81%, and correspondingly, the total population should be higher than the published 1,265.83 million."

7. Primary-School Enrollment as a Proxy for Birth Data: A Contested Method in China's Census Adjustments

Yu Xuejun's method of using the officially published total population as a "target" and working backward to derive the population of each age group from 0 to 9 lacked empirical support and was difficult to substantiate. Therefore, in 2003 Zhang Weimin and Cui Hongyan published a paper in *Population Research* using first-grade enrollment data to adjust the census age distribution.²⁷

In China, children typically enter primary

school at age six. Using age-specific survival rates, they adjusted the population aged 4–9 reported in the 2000 census (105.37 million) to estimate the number of children surviving to school-entry age, arriving at 105.40 million. Actual first-grade enrollment from 1997 to 2002, however, totaled 125.37 million—19.96 million higher. Based on this discrepancy, they concluded that the 2000 census had undercounted the population aged 4–9 by 18.94%. Assuming the same undercount rate applied to children aged 0–3, they estimated that the total undercount for the population aged 0–9 was 30.14 million.

Table 7. Zhang Weimin's estimate of undercount in the 2000 census using first-grade enrollment data (million people)

2000 census		Age 6		Enrollments		ENR - Age 6
Age	Population	Year	Population	Year	Students	
4	15.22	2002	15.19	2002	19.53	4.34
5	16.93	2001	16.92	2001	19.44	2.52
6	16.47	2000	16.47	2000	19.46	2.99
7	17.91	1999	17.93	1999	20.30	2.37
8	18.75	1998	18.78	1998	22.01	3.23
9	20.08	1997	20.12	1997	24.62	4.50
Total	105.37		105.40		125.36	19.96

Zhai Zhenwu likewise argued that "education statistics are relatively pure, truthful, and reliable," and therefore used total primary-school enrollment figures to revise estimates of births, total fertility rate (TFR), and the sex ratio at birth (Table 8).²⁸

Table 8. Zhai Zhenwu's revision of China's births and fertility rates based on education data

	High variant		Medium variant	
Year	Births (millions)	TFR	Births (millions)	TFR
1991	24.61	2.24	24.61	2.24
1992	22.88	2.05	22.88	2.05
1993	21.98	1.94	21.98	1.94
1994	20.83	1.82	20.83	1.82

1995	21.51	1.86	21.47	1.86
1996	20.39	1.78	20.24	1.77
1997	19.97	1.77	19.5	1.73
1998	19.54	1.77	18.76	1.70
1999	19.07	1.77	18.23	1.69
2000	18.61	1.77	17.69	1.68

He concluded that the 2000 census undercounted 30-38 million children aged 0-9, including 14-18 million males and 16-20 million females, and inferred that China's fertility rate in the late 1990s was around 1.7-1.8.

People living at their registered place of household registration were under the direct eyes of local officials and census enumerators and could hardly have been missed. In 2000, China's urbanization rate was only 36.2%. The population whose place of residence differed from the township or subdistrict of household registration and who had left the registration location for more than six months totaled 144.39 million. Of these, the floating population—excluding people whose household and residence locations were separated within the same municipal district—was only 121.07 million,²⁹ or 9.7% of the total population. If the total population had truly been undercounted by 20.72 million, as *the census communiqué* suggested, this would imply that roughly one in six members of the floating population went uncounted—an implausibly high proportion.

Moreover, among the 121.07 million members of the floating population, fewer than 20 million were children aged 0-9. Yet according to the "estimates" of Zhang Weimin, Cui Hongyan, Zhai Zhenwu, and others, 30-38 million children in this age group were undercounted—implying that the vast majority of children in the floating population were missed. What an absurd "argument"!

Mr. You Yunzhong, a United Nations-

affiliated expert who advised China's population censuses from 1982 to 2010, also accepted the use of primary-school enrollment data to revise birth estimates. In 2009 I engaged in several months of email correspondence with him, arguing that, driven by vested interests, education data contained more than 20% inflation—but I was unable to persuade him.

8. The Underlying Motive for Doctoring Population Data: Perpetuating the One-Child Policy

On the afternoon of October 28, 2006, BlogChina held a seminar on "*Population Aging and Social Security*" in Conference Room 304 of the China Science and Technology Hall. Tian Xueyuan, executive vice president of the China Population Association—who, together with Song Jian, had provided the theoretical justification for the one-child policy in 1980—said:

"Compared with previous censuses, the data quality of the Fifth Census was somewhat poorer. Take the fertility rate, for example—an essential indicator. The nationwide figure was 1.22, meaning that each couple had approximately 1.22 children. Was this figure accurate? No, it was not. The academic community did not accept it, the political establishment did not accept it, and even the census office itself considered it incorrect. But that was the number we obtained, so what could be done? Therefore, we made some adjustments. In 2000, the fertility rate in developed countries was 1.39. It was clearly unreasonable for China's

rate—reported at 1.22—to be so much lower. The undercount rate in this national census was 1.81%. Where did the undercount occur? After analysis, it was determined that the undercount was concentrated in births between 1990 and 2000—that is, among the population aged 0–9 at the time of the 2000 census. We then conducted demographic regression analyses and model-based calculations, applied mathematical methods, and made adjustments. The results showed that in 2000 the urban fertility rate was 1.35, the rural fertility rate was 2.06, and the national fertility rate was 1.73. The officially released national figure was about 1.8."³⁰

In other words, a sample of 160,000 people—just 0.013% of the total population—was used to justify an undercount rate of 1.81%. This resulted in the total population being increased by 20.72 million, all of whom were added to the 0–9 age group, even though the alleged 1.81% undercount in the 160,000-person sample was not concentrated entirely among young children but was spread across dozens of age groups. The fertility rate for 2000 was thereby raised from 1.22 to 1.73.

On July 10, 2007, Yu Xuejun, then spokesperson for the NPFPC and Director-General of its Department of Policy and Regulations, gave an interview on the China Government Portal.³¹ He stated:

"What exactly is our country's fertility level? Or, put differently, how low is it? This question has long troubled both the government and the academic community. Many people inferred from the results of the Fifth Census that China's total fertility rate was around 1.4. This conclusion has in fact misled many officials and scholars... Following a series of subsequent studies, including the national population development strategy study, a broad consensus emerged that China's total fertility rate in 2000 was 1.7 or 1.8."

He further added: "China's fertility level is

certainly not the 1.2 that some people claim, because if it were truly 1.2, there would be no need for China to continue implementing family-planning policies."

The results of the Soviet Union's 1937 census fell far below expectations, exposing the massive death toll caused by agricultural collectivization, famine, and political purges—standing in stark contradiction to official claims of the "glorious achievements of socialism." China's 2000 census results similarly exposed a much sharper-than-expected decline in fertility and an accelerating trend toward demographic aging—standing in stark contradiction to official claims that continued rapid population growth justified ongoing family-planning policies.

In the Soviet Union, it was the supreme leader, Stalin, who was dissatisfied with the 1937 census results and ordered statistical officials arrested and executed. In China, by contrast, the strongest incentives to reject the 2000 census results lay with officials from the NFPC and the NBS, together with establishment demographers. According to the original census results, fertility had already fallen below replacement level by 1991, implying that the one-child policy should have been abandoned years earlier and that the NFPC would have lost its institutional justification. By contrast, the top leadership had less direct institutional stake in preserving the policy itself, although it had a broader interest in maintaining the continuity, consistency, and authority of official statistics. The census figures were subsequently rechecked, undercounts were "filled in," and the data were revised, although whether these actions reflected institutional initiative, higher-level direction, or both remains unclear.

Although the 2000 fertility rate was revised upward from 1.22 to 1.7–1.8, thereby sustaining the statistical basis for the one-child policy, the NFPC remained deeply concerned about its institutional survival. It therefore lobbied the

central government in 2003 to rename the "National Family Planning Commission" as the "National Population and Family Planning Commission," so that even after family planning

was eventually abolished, the agency could continue to exist under the banner of a "National Population Commission" and retain its influence over China's future population policy.

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3 Data Manipulation in China's 2010 and 2020 Censuses

Yi Fuxian

1. Problems with the 2010 Population Census

The Leading Group for the Sixth National Population Census was headed by Executive Vice Premier Li Keqiang.¹ The census, however, was effectively directed by Zhang Weimin, a member of the Leading Group and Director of its Office,

together with Deputy Director Yu Xuejun and establishment demographers such as Zhai Zhenwu.²

According to the annual *statistical communiqué*, China's population in 2010 was expected to reach 1.341 billion. The UN's *World Population Prospects 2010* likewise projected China's population at 1.341 billion.

Table 1. Official Population Data and Births Implied by Published Fertility Rates (million)

	Annual Statistical Communiqué			Provincial	Official	Based on TFR	
	Population	Births	Deaths	Births	TFR	Births A	Births B
2001	1276.27	17.02	8.18	14.94	1.39	14.08	14.27
2002	1284.53	16.47	8.21	14.57	1.4	13.99	14.22
2003	1292.27	15.99	8.25	14.29	1.41	14.02	14.31
2004	1299.88	15.93	8.32	14.43	1.45	14.29	14.64
2005	1307.56	16.17	8.49	14.53	1.34	13.13	13.5
2006	1314.48	15.84	8.92	14.31	1.38	13.58	14.02
2007	1321.29	15.94	9.13	14.49	1.45	14.27	14.79
2008	1328.02	16.08	9.35	14.59	1.48	14.6	15.19
2009	1334.74	16.15	9.43	14.68	1.37	13.64	14.25
2010	1341.15	15.92	9.51	14.72	1.19	11.87	12.49
Total		161.51	87.79	145.55		137.46	141.67

The aggregated provincial birth figures for 2001–2010 are from the *China Population and Employment Statistics Yearbook 2010* and remain 11% higher than the births published by the NBS. Births A and Births B denote the births implied by the officially published fertility rates, using the female age distributions from the 1990 and 2000 censuses, respectively.

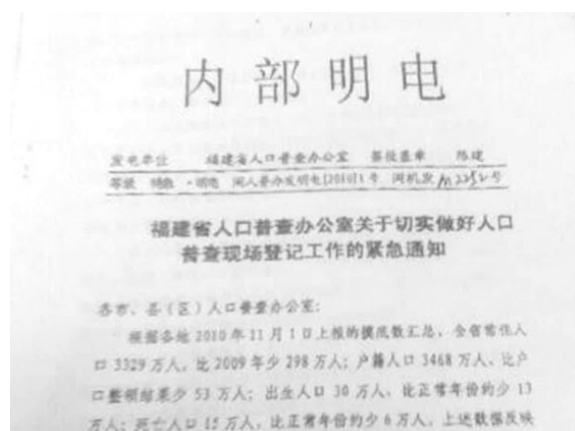
The raw results of the 2000 census fell far short of expectations, catching officials and

demographers off guard. Even after twenty days of rechecking and supplementary enumeration, the results remained unsatisfactory. The hastily released revised figures were incomplete and internally inconsistent, with the published total population conflicting with the reported age distribution. Although officials spent several subsequent years attempting to reconcile these inconsistencies, the credibility of the revised data remained widely questioned.

Having learned from the 2000 census, the 2010 census required enumerators to "register every person encountered" and, when a person was not present, to "register that individual on the basis of available household-registration records."³ Geographic information systems (GIS) were also used to produce detailed maps of enumeration areas, ensuring that "no housing unit would be omitted within any enumeration district, no household omitted within any housing unit, and no person omitted within any household."⁴ Such a design greatly reduced the risk of undercount, but inevitably increased the likelihood of duplicate enumeration. Even so, the aggregated census population still fell below expectations. For example, an internal notice issued by the Fujian Provincial Census Office stated:

"According to the aggregated preliminary enumeration results submitted by localities as of November 1, 2010, the province's permanent resident population totaled 33.29 million, 2.98 million fewer than the official figure for 2009; the registered population totaled 34.68 million, 530,000 fewer than the results of the household-registration rectification; and births totaled 300,000, about 130,000 fewer than in a normal year."

Figure 1. Internal Notice Issued by the Fujian Provincial Census Office



Another round of rechecking, supplementary enumeration, and data revision was therefore carried out, after which the authorities announced a national population of 1,339.72 million.⁵ Unlike in 2000, statistical officials and establishment demographers had by then accumulated considerable experience in revising census data: the tens of millions of additional people created through these "adjustments" were crammed into the various age groups in the published census tables, thereby distorting the age distribution. Fujian Province illustrates the extent of these revisions—its officially published population was 36.89 million and its published births totaled 400,500,⁶ respectively 10.8% and 33.5% higher than the original enumeration results. These discrepancies suggest that the systematic distortion of the 2010 census was even more severe than that of the 2000 census.

The published 2010 census tables reported 146.41 million children aged 0–9. Applying survival rates retrospectively yields 150.86 million births during 2001–2010, corresponding to an average total fertility rate of 1.44. Since the NBS ignored international migration, the implied 2010 population is:

Population in the 2000 census + births – deaths = 1,265.83 million + 150.86 million – 87.79 million = 1,328.90 million,

which is 10.82 million below the officially published total.

Alternatively, using the female age structure from the 1990 census together with the officially published fertility rates yields 305.73 million births during 1991–2010. The implied 2010 population is therefore:

Population in 1990 + births – deaths – net international migration = 1,138.32 million + 305.73 million – 167.02 million – 8.23 million = 1,268.79 million.

Even if births during 1991–2010 are taken as the provincial aggregate of 327.94 million, the

implied total population in 2010 is still only 1,291.01 million.

Notably, the total fertility rate reported in the 2010 census tables remained based on the original, unrevised census data, yielding a national total fertility rate of only 1.19. After the census, however, this figure was revised upward to 1.63.⁷ The UN's *World Population Prospects 2012* likewise adopted a fertility rate of 1.63 for China during 2005–2010. On April 26, 2011, Yu Xuejun and Zhai Zhenwu were invited to brief the Politburo, where they recommended stabilizing "low fertility levels."⁸ Driven by institutional self-interest, officials and establishment demographers falsified demographic data, misleading both the public and China's top leadership. In a developed country, conduct of this kind would have triggered a political scandal comparable to Watergate.

The Han and Zhuang, China's two largest ethnic groups, were subject to the one-child policy, whereas the country's other 54 ethnic minorities were exempt and therefore had little incentive to conceal births. Yet fertility among these minorities was also remarkably low. The aggregate TFR of these 54 ethnic minorities was only 1.66 in 2000 and 1.47 in 2010. Among the 44 non-Muslim minorities, the TFR was only 1.64 and 1.41, while even among the 10 Muslim minorities it was just 1.73 and 1.63. Since ethnic minority regions generally lag behind the national average in socioeconomic development, nationwide fertility would likely have been even lower if the entire country had been subject to the same relatively relaxed birth policy. How, then, could China's national TFR have been as high as 1.7–1.8 in 2000, or 1.63 in 2010 under the much stricter one-child policy?

Moreover, even under the one-child policy, every couple in China was legally permitted to have one child, leaving little incentive to conceal first births. Across countries with TFRs below

about 2.7, the first-order total fertility rate (TFR1) and the overall TFR vary in parallel, exhibiting a strong positive linear relationship with correlation coefficients typically exceeding 0.95. China's TFR1 was only 0.73 in 2010. Applying the empirical relationship between TFR1 and TFR observed in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan implies that, even in the absence of family planning restrictions, China's TFR would have been only about 1.65. How, then, could it still have been as high as 1.63 under the much stricter one-child policy?

2. Problems with the 2020 Population Census

The leading group for China's Seventh National Population Census (2020) was chaired by Han Zheng,⁹ then Executive Vice Premier and later Vice President of China. Yu Xuejun, then Vice Minister of the National Health Commission, served as deputy head of the group and was the only demographer among the group's leadership members, making him a key official overseeing the census. Had the population count come in lower than expected, it would have meant that China's decades-long one-child policy had been fundamentally misguided and that the country's policies—from socioeconomic planning to national defense and foreign affairs—had been built on flawed population data. Such a finding would have triggered a political earthquake. The census carried another risk as well: if the fertility rate around 2010 had actually been below 1.63, officials and demographers such as Yu Xuejun and Zhai Zhenwu could have been held accountable.

According to the annual *statistical communiqués*, China's population in 2020 was expected to exceed 1.4 billion, while the UN's *World Population Prospects 2019* projected it would reach 1.439 billion.

Table 2. Officially Published Population Data and Births Inferred from Fertility Rates

	Statistical Communiqués (millions)			Official	Births A	Births B
Year	Population	Births	Deaths	TFR	millions	millions
2011	1347.35	16.04	9.60	1.03	10.93	11.35
2012	1354.04	16.35	9.66	1.25	13.11	13.72
2013	1360.72	16.40	9.72	1.22	12.77	13.47
2014	1367.82	16.87	9.77	1.26	12.99	13.81
2015	1374.62	16.55	9.75	1.05	10.64	11.38
2016	1382.71	17.86	9.77	1.24	12.39	13.35
2017	1390.08	17.23	9.86	1.58	15.38	16.68
2018	1395.38	15.23	9.93	1.50	14.17	15.44
2019	1400.05	14.65	9.98	1.47	13.47	14.76
2020				1.30	11.49	12.65

Births A and Births B are estimates of births derived from the officially published fertility rates using the female age structures from the 2000 and 2010 population censuses, respectively.

According to the *Plan for the Seventh National Population Census*, the national-level tabulation of the principal census data was to be completed by March 2021. However, the data were not released as originally scheduled in early April 2021,¹⁰ but were delayed until May 11,¹¹ a sign that the inconsistencies encountered in the census data were far more severe than in previous censuses.

The 2020 census reported a total population of 1,411.78 million, including 168.12 million people aged 0–9. Back-calculation using survival rates yields 170.40 million births during 2011–2020, corresponding to an average total fertility rate of 1.67. Accordingly, the 2020 population can be expressed as:

Population reported in the 2010 census + births – deaths = 1,339.72 million + 170.40 million – 98.02 million = 1,412.11 million,

which matches the annual population total previously published in the *statistical communiqués* almost exactly. This demonstrates

that, having learned from the previous two censuses, statistical officials made the revisions to the 2020 census more internally consistent.

Yet if one instead starts from the 1990 population structure and applies the officially published fertility rates to estimate births during 1991–2020, the result is 425.83 million births. The implied 2020 population would then be:

1990 population + births – deaths – net emigration = 1,138.32 million + 425.83 million – 265.04 million – 11.11 million = 1,288.00 million.

While the total population reported in the 2020 census was broadly consistent with the annual *statistical communiqués*, it was inconsistent with the implied age structure. Following the census, the *China Statistical Yearbook* revised upward the reported number of births for 2011–2017 by a cumulative 10.04 million, an average increase of 1.43 million per year.

The design of the 2020 census also made duplicate enumeration more likely than in previous censuses. This is reflected in the reported undercount rate of just 0.05%, compared with 0.12% in 2010. In practice, the lower the reported

undercount rate, the higher the rate of duplicate enumeration tends to be. Although the census was conducted under exceptionally strict confidentiality, leaving the details of the data revisions unavailable to the public, traces of those revisions can still be detected in other publicly available data.

3. Evidence of Duplicate Enumeration in the 2020 Census from Universal COVID-19 Testing

After the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, the Chinese government implemented a "zero-COVID" policy, under which some localities conducted universal nucleic-acid testing of all residents within their jurisdictions, on the principle that "no household and no person should be missed."¹²

3.1 Pre- and Post-Census Universal Testing Cases

For example, from October 12 to 17, 2020, Qingdao carried out citywide testing and sampled 10,899,145 individuals.¹³ On October 27, 2020, Kashgar Prefecture in Xinjiang, where Uyghurs form the majority, conducted universal testing covering 4.7465 million individuals.¹⁴ The census conducted on November 1 reported Qingdao's population as 10,071,722 and Kashgar's as 4,496,377—figures that suggest universal testing effectively covered the entire resident population.

Because Qingdao and Kashgar had already completed universal testing before the 2020 census, there was little scope for upward revision of their population figures in the census.

In most other localities, however, universal testing took place after the census. Had local governments used inflated census figures as their baseline, they would have been unable to complete the politically mandated task of universal testing and would have faced serious political

accountability. As a result, some local governments requested downward revisions of population figures from higher authorities. In one case, the government of Pingtai Township in Baicheng, Jilin Province, requested that the population of four villages be reduced from 1,743 as reported in the 2020 census to 1,195—a drop of about one-third.¹⁵

3.2 Incentives and Mechanisms for Duplicate Enumeration

In principle, a census records usual residents. For example, if a person's household registration (*hukou*) is in location A but the individual has resided in location B for more than six months, that person should be registered in B rather than A. In practice, however, if the individual returned to A within the preceding six months, and given that the 2010 and 2020 censuses effectively adopted the principles of "register everyone present" and "register everyone with a household-registration record," the same person could be recorded in both locations. This design makes population figures in net in-migration areas relatively accurate, while net out-migration areas are more prone to duplicate enumeration.

Because population size is closely linked to local fiscal and administrative interests, local governments—particularly in economically less developed regions and in areas experiencing population outflow or decline—have strong incentives to overstate population figures. The 2020 census recorded 493 million people living away from their place of household registration, including 125 million interprovincial migrants. More than half migrated to Guangdong, the Yangtze River Delta (Zhejiang, Shanghai, and Jiangsu), and Beijing. The provinces with the largest net outflows were Henan, Anhui, and Hunan, while those with the highest shares of outmigrants in the resident population were Anhui,

Jiangxi, and Heilongjiang, at 20%, 17%, and 16%, respectively.

3.3 Northern and Northeastern Regions

The first city to conduct universal testing after the 2020 census was Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei Province, which implemented closed management across all rural villages and urban communities beginning January 5, 2021. Against this backdrop, the city completed three rounds of universal testing on January 6–8, January 12–13, and January 20–22, with 10,251,875,¹⁶ 10,253,103,¹⁷ and 10,256,424 individuals tested,¹⁸ respectively. By comparison, the 2020 census reported Shijiazhuang's population as 11,235,086—approximately 11% higher than the testing-based counts.

Tianjin conducted two rounds of universal testing on January 15 and January 20, 2022, covering 12,431,636 and 12,468,359 individuals,^{19,20} respectively. The 2020 census had reported Tianjin's population at 13,866,009, and *the 2021 statistical communiqué* put it at 13.73 million—11% and 10% higher than the testing figures, respectively.

Among China's three northeastern provinces—Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Liaoning—population aging is most severe, and population decline is most rapid. Heilongjiang and Jilin also experience sustained outmigration, creating strong incentives for population overstatement. Changchun, the capital of Jilin Province, conducted six rounds of universal testing in March 2022, with a cumulative total of 44.323 million tests, averaging 7.387 million per round.²¹ By contrast, the 2020 census reported Changchun's population as 9.0669 million²²—approximately 23% higher than the testing-based estimate. This suggests that population overstatement in the 2020 census was not confined to isolated cases in Jilin

Province but was more broadly observed, including in Changchun, which also receives intra-provincial inflows.

Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang Province, conducted six rounds of universal testing from September 24 to October 6, 2021, with a cumulative total of 48.21 million tests, averaging 8.035 million per round.²³ The first three rounds recorded 7,912,627, 7,878,136, and 7,982,826 tests,²⁴ respectively. By comparison, the 2020 census reported Harbin's resident population as 10,009,854,²⁵ approximately 25% higher than the average testing-based count. Nehe City conducted three rounds of universal testing on November 28, December 11, and December 30, 2021, with 279,716,²⁶ 282,878,²⁷ and 279,796 tests respectively,²⁸ averaging 280,797. The 2020 census reported Nehe's resident population as 436,906—approximately 56% higher than the testing average. Suihua City conducted a universal testing round on January 17, 2021, covering 3,322,450 individuals,²⁹ while the 2020 census reported a resident population of 3,756,167—about 13% higher.

Liaoning, by contrast, is a population-inflow province within Northeast China, attracting migrants from within the province and neighboring provinces to Shenyang and Dalian. Shenyang conducted six rounds of universal testing between March 17 and 30, 2022, with 7.652 million,³⁰ 7.8486 million,³¹ 7.7463 million,³² 7.951 million,³³ 8.124 million,³⁴ and 7.493 million individuals tested,³⁵ respectively, averaging 7.802 million per round. By comparison, the 2020 census reported Shenyang's resident population as 9,070,093,³⁶ and *the 2021 statistical communiqué* reported a year-end population of 9.118 million—approximately 16–17% higher than the testing-based average. On March 20, 2022, Dalian (excluding Changhai Island County) conducted universal testing covering 6,815,224 individuals, while the 2020 census reported

7,383,961—approximately 8.3% higher.³⁷ In addition, the 2020 census reported Tieling's resident population as 2,388,294, approximately 21% higher than the 1,975,273 individuals tested during universal testing from May 7 to 10, 2022.³⁸

3.4 More Developed Regions

Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen are China's four first-tier cities and key engines of economic growth. They are economically advanced, attract population inflows, and therefore have limited incentives to overstate population figures. In Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, migrants account for around 40% of the resident population, while in Shenzhen they constitute the majority. Shanghai launched

universal testing on April 4, 2022, covering 25.665 million individuals,³⁹ approximately 3% higher than the 2020 census figure of 24,870,895. From June 4 to 7, 2021, Guangzhou conducted citywide testing, covering 18.6967 million individuals,⁴⁰ almost identical to the 18,676,605 reported in the 2020 census.

Nevertheless, population overstatement persisted in other parts of Guangdong Province. For example, Qingyuan City conducted universal testing on July 13, 2022. According to results published by *Qingyuan Daily*, a total of 2.371 million individuals were tested across six districts and counties,⁴¹ while the 2020 census reported a population of 2.713 million—approximately 14% higher.⁴²

Table 3. Comparison of population data for districts and counties under Qingyuan City, Guangdong Province (thousands)

District/county	2020 census	2021 communique	Testing	Census/testing
Qingcheng Dist	1,120	1,128	1,084	1.03
Qingxin Dist	619	618	499	1.24
Yangshan Cty	367	368	279	1.32
Lianshan Cty	95	95	79	1.20
Liannan Cty	135	135	115	1.17
Lianzhou City	377	378	315	1.20
Total	2,713	2,723	2,371	1.14

As of September 26, 2021, Xiamen in Fujian Province had conducted five rounds of universal testing, with a cumulative total of 25 million tests. The fifth round alone sampled 5.31 million individuals,⁴³ 2.8% higher than the 5,163,970 recorded in the 2020 census. In March 2022, Putian conducted universal testing and sampled 2.759 million individuals,⁴⁴ compared with a 2020 census population of 3,210,714 — about 16% higher than the testing count.

Zhejiang and Jiangsu are among China's most economically developed provinces. Because they attract population inflows, local governments in

these regions have relatively weak incentives to overstate population figures. In December 2021, Shaoxing in Zhejiang conducted universal testing: Yuecheng District, Shengzhou, and Xinchang County sampled 1,115,625, 667,101, and 400,770 individuals,⁴⁵ respectively—equivalent to 109.4%, 98.8%, and 95.6% of their 2020 census populations of 1,020,037, 675,226, and 419,036. From December 7 to 12, 2021, Zhenhai District in Ningbo conducted three rounds of universal testing, averaging 475,714 individuals per round,⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ on January 4, 2022, Beilun District sampled 866,396 individuals. By comparison, the

2020 census reported populations of 531,830 in Zhenhai and 829,448 in Beilun. Yiwu, known as the "world's supermarket" due to its large-scale small-commodities wholesale market and its attraction of domestic and foreign merchants, conducted ten consecutive rounds of universal testing in August 2022, averaging 2.10 million individuals per round,⁴⁹ approximately 13% higher than the 1,859,390 recorded in the 2020 census.

Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu Province, conducted three rounds of universal testing from July to August 2021, with a cumulative total of 26.61 million tests, averaging 8.87 million per round.⁵⁰ The 2020 census reported a population of 9,314,685, while *the 2021 statistical communiqué* reported a year-end population of 9.4234 million—5.0% and 6.2% higher than the testing-based figures, respectively.

3.5 Central and Southern Regions

In August 2021, Yantai in Shandong Province conducted two rounds of region-wide testing, sampling 6.4826 million and 6.536 million individuals respectively,^{51,52} while the 2020 census population was 7,102,116—approximately 9.1% higher. In March 2022, Linshu County in Shandong conducted universal testing, sampling 470,000 individuals, whereas the 2020 census reported a population of 586,024—about 25% higher.⁵³

Henan, in central China, has the largest household-registered population in the country, and its capital Zhengzhou is among the fastest-growing cities nationwide. From January 5 to 9, 2022, Zhengzhou conducted four rounds of universal testing, sampling 11,708,099, 11,712,257, 11,870,333, and 11,888,937 individuals,⁵⁴ respectively. The 2020 census reported Zhengzhou's population as 12,600,574,⁵⁵ while *the 2021 statistical communiqué* reported a year-end population of 12.742 million,⁵⁶ 6.8% and

8.0% higher than the testing-based figures. Xin'an County in Henan conducted universal testing on December 31, 2021, sampling 418,052 individuals,⁵⁷ while the 2020 census reported a population of 483,375,⁵⁸ 16% higher. Tongbai County conducted four rounds of universal testing in 2022, sampling 271,392, 260,728, 273,055, and 282,031 individuals,⁵⁹ respectively; the 2020 census population was 375,206,⁶⁰ approximately 33% to 44% higher.

Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province and the initial epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak, conducted universal testing on August 8, 2021, sampling 11.2858 million individuals (noting that some university students were absent due to summer vacation).⁶¹ The 2020 census reported a population of 12,326,518, while *the 2021 statistical communiqué* reported a year-end permanent population of 13,648,900—approximately 9.2% and 21% higher than the testing figure. In Jingmen's central urban area, the 2020 census reported 787,470 residents,⁶² approximately 42% higher than the 556,000 individuals tested on August 7, 2021. In Jingzhou's central urban area, 933,960 individuals were sampled on August 2, 2021,⁶³ while the 2020 census reported 1,258,375—about 35% higher.

Changsha County in Hunan Province, adjacent to the provincial capital Changsha city, ranks among China's top ten counties in economic strength. It completed universal testing on October 22, 2021, sampling 1,374,992 individuals,⁶⁴ almost identical to the 1,374,491 recorded in the 2020 census. Zhuzhou's main urban area completed universal testing on August 7, 2021, sampling 1.5611 million individuals,⁶⁵ while the 2020 census reported 1,734,201—about 11% higher. Zhangjiajie in western Hunan (excluding Cili and Sangzhi counties) conducted three rounds of testing from July 29 to August 5, 2021, with a cumulative total of 1,212,274 samples,⁶⁶ averaging 404,091 per round; the 2020 census

reported a population of 578,452—about 43% higher.

3.6 Western Regions

From February 24 to 25, 2021, Dongxing in Guangxi sampled 171,300 individuals in universal testing,⁶⁷ while the 2020 census population of 216,053 was about 26% higher. Ningming County conducted two rounds of universal testing on January 16 and January 21, 2022, sampling 283,566 and 278,386 individuals respectively,^{68,69} with an average of 280,976; the 2020 census population was 319,386—about 14% higher.

Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou Province, conducted universal testing on September 16, 2022, sampling more than 6.20 million individuals—3.6% higher than the 5,987,018 recorded in the 2020 census.⁷⁰ From October 23 to 28, 2021, Zunyi, the second-largest city in Guizhou, conducted three rounds of universal testing in its main urban area (Honghuagang, Huichuan, Bozhou, and Xinpu New Area), sampling 1,677,020, 1,682,076, and 1,750,500 individuals respectively, with an average of 1,703,199 per round.⁷¹ The 2020 census population for this area was 2,360,549—

approximately 39% higher than the average testing figure. Wuchuan Gelao and Miao Autonomous County conducted four rounds of universal testing from March 16 to 20, 2022, sampling 274,053, 276,153, 277,691, and 278,107 individuals respectively;⁷² the 2020 census population was 308,466—about 11% higher.

Jinghong, a border city in Yunnan Province where ethnic minorities account for 70% of the population, conducted two rounds of universal testing from December 27 to 31, 2021, sampling 414,931 and 415,811 individuals respectively;^{73,74} the 2020 census population was 642,737—approximately 55% higher. Hekou Yao Autonomous County conducted universal testing on July 16–17, 2021, sampling 99,471 individuals,⁷⁵ close to the 101,971 recorded in the 2020 census.

Gansu, in northwest China and among the country's poorest provinces, saw its capital Lanzhou conduct three rounds of universal testing from July 19 to 22, 2022, sampling 3.6866 million,⁷⁶ 3.7020 million, and 3.7030 million individuals respectively.⁷⁷ The 2020 census reported Lanzhou's population as 4,359,446—approximately 18% higher than the testing-based figures.

3.7 Aggregate Assessment and Estimated Actual Population

Table 4. Comparison of Universal Testing and 2020 Census Data (thousand)

No.	Province	Jurisdiction	Testing	Census	Census/Testing (%)
1	Hebei	Shijiazhuang City	10,254	11,235	110
2	Jilin	Changchun City	7,387	9,067	123
3	Heilongjiang	Harbin City	8,035	10,010	125
4	Heilongjiang	Nehe City	281	437	156
5	Heilongjiang	Suihua City	3,322	3,756	113
6	Liaoning	Shenyang City	7,802	9,070	116
7	Liaoning	Dalian City	6,815	7,384	108
8	Liaoning	Tieling City	2,388	1,975	83

9	Tianjin	Tianjin City	12,450	13,866	111
10	Shanghai	Shanghai City	25,665	24,871	97
11	Guangdong	Guangzhou City	18,697	18,677	100
12	Guangdong	Qingyuan City	2,371	2,713	114
13	Fujian	Xiamen City	5,310	5,164	97
14	Fujian	Putian City	2,759	3,211	116
15	Zhejiang	Shaoxing City	2,183	2,114	97
16	Zhejiang	Ningbo City	1,342	1,361	101
17	Zhejiang	Yiwu City	2,100	1,859	89
18	Jiangsu	Nanjing City	8,870	9,315	105
19	Shandong	Yantai City	6,509	7,102	109
20	Shandong	Linshu County	470	586	125
21	Henan	Zhengzhou City	11,795	12,601	107
22	Henan	Xin'an County	418	483	116
23	Henan	Tongbai County	272	375	138
24	Hubei	Wuhan City	11,286	12,327	109
25	Hubei	Jingmen City	556	787	142
26	Hubei	Jingzhou City	934	1,258	135
27	Hunan	Changsha County	1,375	1,374	100
28	Hunan	Zhuzhou City	1,561	1,734	111
29	Hunan	Zhangjiajie City	404	578	143
30	Guangxi	Dongxing City	171	216	126
31	Guangxi	Ningming County	281	319	114
32	Guizhou	Guiyang City	6,200	5,987	97
33	Guizhou	Zunyi City	1,703	2,361	139
34	Guizhou	Wuchuan County	277	308	111
35	Yunnan	Jinghong City	415	643	155
36	Yunnan	Hekou County	99	102	103
37	Gansu	Lanzhou City	3,697	4,359	118
		Total	176,454	189,585	107.4
		Average			114.8

Aggregating data from the 37 jurisdictions shows that 176.454 million people were covered by universal testing, compared with a population of 189.585 million recorded in the 2020 census, yielding a census-to-testing ratio of 107.4%. However, the sample is concentrated in large cities and economically developed regions. These areas

generally have stronger fiscal capacity, rely less on intergovernmental fiscal transfers, and experience greater net population inflows, leaving them with relatively little incentive to inflate population figures for fiscal redistribution. The national census-to-testing ratio is therefore likely to be substantially higher than 107.4%.

If the 37 jurisdictions are treated as independent sample units and their census-to-testing ratios are averaged without population weighting, the resulting mean is 114.8%. Unlike the population-weighted estimate, this approach gives equal weight to each jurisdiction and therefore reduces the influence of large-population cities.

Combining the two estimates, the national census-to-testing ratio likely lies between 107.4% and 114.8%, with a central estimate of approximately 111%. On this basis, adjusting the officially reported 1.412 billion population in the 2020 census implies an estimated actual population of about 1.27 billion.

4. Leaked Household Records and BCG Vaccine Data: Two Independent Challenges to the 2020 Census

In June 2022, an anonymous hacker claimed to have obtained personal data on roughly one billion Chinese citizens from the Shanghai Police Department.⁷⁸ The hacker released a sample of about 750,000 records, including household registration records for 250,000 individuals across all age groups.

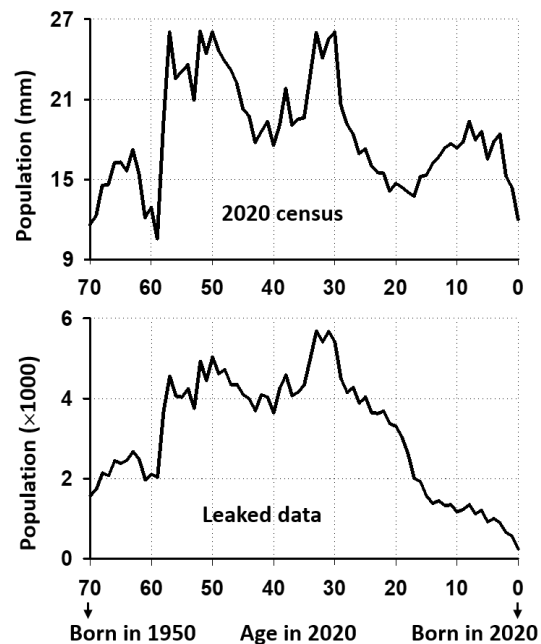
The sample data are highly dispersed and appear to be randomly distributed, covering nearly every county, including remote and sparsely populated areas of Tibet. The distribution of surnames closely matches that reported in the 2010 census, suggesting that the sample is broadly representative.

Although the sampling is not perfectly uniform—and therefore cannot be used to precisely estimate the nationwide size of each age cohort, the age distribution for individuals aged 30 and above closely mirrors that reported in previous censuses.

The greatest discrepancy between the leaked data and the 2020 census lies in the population

under age 30 (i.e., those born after 1990). The leaked data show a steady and continuous decline in births after 1990, whereas the 2020 census reports a dramatic surge in births beginning in 2003.

Figure 2. Comparison of Age Distributions: 2020 Census vs. Leaked Data



This apparent surge is difficult to explain. China introduced a selective two-child policy in 2014 and a universal two-child policy in 2016, yet even the official birth statistics show no corresponding baby boom. These findings cast serious doubt on the reliability of the 2020 census estimates for those born after 1990.

The declining trend in Baidu Index searches for newborn-related products (such as maternity wear, strollers, and cribs)—Baidu Index being the Chinese equivalent of Google Trends—closely tracks the birth trend indicated by the leaked data, but diverges sharply from the birth figures reported in the 2020 population census.

Moreover, Bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG)

vaccination (against tuberculosis) is mandatory in China for every newborn within 24 hours of birth. Each vial of BCG vaccine contains 0.5 mL, while each newborn receives a 0.1 mL dose. However, because some vaccine inevitably adheres to the walls and stopper of the vial, and because the dose cannot be withdrawn with complete precision, a certain amount is lost in practice—meaning that each vial can vaccinate no more than three newborns.

In addition, once a vial is opened, any unused portion must be discarded if it is not used within 30 minutes. As a result, only large hospitals with high birth volumes are typically able to vaccinate two to three newborns per vial, whereas in most small and mid-sized hospitals, a single vial often serves only one newborn. Because BCG vaccine is extremely inexpensive, medical institutions have little economic incentive to conserve it.

As a result, each vial of BCG vaccine can vaccinate only approximately 1.1 to 1.6 newborns on average. In 2010, for example, 11.54 million vials of BCG vaccine were distributed, while the 2010 population census recorded only 13.79 million infants aged 0 (corresponding to 13.99 million births). This implies that each vial was

used for only 1.2 newborns on average.

In Taiwan, the two formulations of BCG vaccine are theoretically sufficient to vaccinate 30 and 20 children per vial, respectively. However, longitudinal data for the entire island from 2005 to 2024 show that, in practice, each vial was used to vaccinate only 1.0–1.1 children on average.^{79,80} A cross-sectional comparison across counties and cities reveals a similar pattern: in most jurisdictions, each vial was used for only 1.0–1.2 children, with even the highest-performing region reaching no more than 1.53 children per vial.

However, the younger age cohorts reported in China's 2020 population census are highly inconsistent with the number of BCG vaccine doses officially distributed. For example, the numbers of BCG vials distributed in 2018, 2019, and 2020 were 6.21 million, 5.73 million, and 5.37 million,⁸¹ respectively. Yet the 2020 census reported populations of 11.99 million, 14.38 million, and 15.27 million for the 0-, 1-, and 2-year-old cohorts—corresponding to those born in 2020, 2019, and 2018, respectively—implying that each vial had been used to vaccinate 2.2, 2.5, and 2.5 newborns, respectively. These figures defy basic medical reality.

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4 The Cyclical Upward Revision of Birth and Education Data

Yi Fuxian

1. 1984-1993: Fiscal Decentralization Improved the Accuracy of Education Data

After 1990, China's estimates of birth numbers relied primarily on primary-school enrollment data. *The China Statistical Yearbook 2024* reports a total of 521.97 million births nationwide from 1991 to 2019, while the cumulative number of first-grade primary-school entrants nationwide from 1997 to 2025 totaled 523.14 million—the two figures are remarkably consistent. If primary-school enrollment data are distorted, then birth estimates and total population figures are unreliable as well.

In China, children typically enter primary school at age six and graduate from middle school at age fifteen. In 2009, for example, 67% of first-grade students were six years old and 29% were seven.¹ The number of seven-year-old entrants roughly offsets the number of six-year-olds who delayed enrollment by a year, so first-grade enrollment can serve as a reasonable proxy for the six-year-old cohort, and middle school graduates as a proxy for the fifteen-year-old cohort. Currently, 97% of regions in China follow a "6+3" structure for nine-year compulsory education—six years of primary school and three years of middle school—while the remaining 3% follow a "5+4" structure, with five years of primary school and four years of middle school.

Because of repeated enrollment, grade repetition, school transfers, and other factors, gross primary enrollment rates in many developing countries reach 120%–130%.² Under

China's political system, however, the reliability of education statistics is further constrained by the fiscal system—which means that reconstructing China's true demographic data requires first understanding the evolution of its fiscal institutions.

Although China launched reform and opening-up in 1978, it initially retained the planned-economy fiscal model of "unified revenue collection and unified expenditure," under which fiscal authority was highly centralized. To give local governments an incentive to grow their economies, China carried out several major fiscal decentralization reforms between 1980 and 1988. The 1980 reform—"dividing revenue and expenditure, assigning responsibility by administrative level"—broke the old "big pot" system and granted local governments greater fiscal autonomy. Yet local governments' share of national fiscal revenue did not rise; instead, it fell, leaving them still heavily dependent on transfers from higher-level governments.

In 1983–1984, China introduced the "profit-to-tax reform"; in 1985, it adopted the system of "dividing tax categories, determining revenue and expenditure, and assigning responsibility by administrative level"; and in 1988, it implemented the "fiscal contracting system." Together, these reforms substantially increased the share of revenue that local governments were allowed to retain.³

To keep the central government from raising their required remittance ratios, local governments began understating fiscal revenue. A 2003 article in Issue 37 of *Outlook* magazine exposed the fiscal

self-interest of Shanghai and Beijing prior to the 1994 tax-sharing reform.⁴ Under a "fixed remittance plus incremental sharing" formula, Shanghai remitted a fixed RMB 10 billion to the central government whenever its fiscal revenue fell below RMB 16.5 billion, with any amount above that threshold split 50-50 with the center. As a result, Shanghai's reported fiscal revenue stayed

suspiciously fixed between RMB 16.3 billion and RMB 16.5 billion for five consecutive years—just enough to avoid triggering revenue sharing. Under an "incremental revenue contracting" formula, Beijing's fiscal revenue growth likewise held precisely at the agreed 4% rate for five consecutive years, and was later found to have concealed RMB 9.8 billion in revenue.

Table 1. Primary-school enrollment, the 1990 census, and the share of local fiscal revenue in national revenue

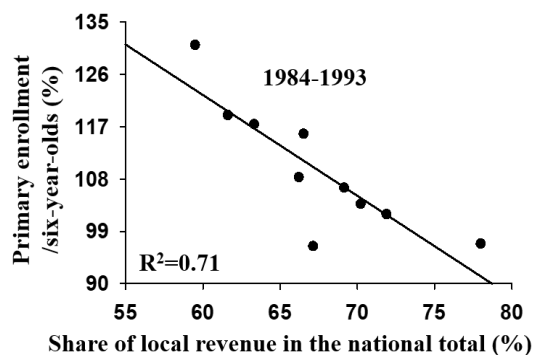
Primary enrollment		1990 census		Enrollment/census	Local fiscal revenue
Year	Students (million) ⁵	Age	Population (million) ⁶	(%)	Share (%) ⁷
1980	29.42	16	23.49	125	75.5
1981	27.49	15	21.64	127	73.5
1982	26.72	14	20.46	131	71.4
1983	25.44	13	19.37	131	64.2
1984	24.73	12	18.86	131	59.5
1985	22.98	11	19.31	119	61.6
1986	22.58	10	19.22	117	63.3
1987	20.95	9	18.09	116	66.5
1988	21.23	8	22.02	96	67.1
1989	21.52	7	20.20	107	69.1
1990	20.64	6	19.06	108	66.2
1991	20.73	5	19.98	104	70.2
1992	21.83	4	21.41	102	71.9
1993	23.54	3	24.29	97	78.0
1994	25.37	2	24.18	105	44.3
1995	25.32	1	23.33	109	47.8
1996	25.25	0	23.22	109	50.6

As fiscal authority was decentralized, transfers from higher levels of government declined, reducing local governments' incentive to inflate school enrollment figures. Table 1 can be illustrated using the 1980 data: that year, primary schools admitted 29.42 million first-grade students. These children were born in 1974 and belonged to

the sixteen-year-old cohort counted in the 1990 census, which recorded only 23.49 million individuals of that age—meaning first-grade enrollment was equivalent to 125% of the census count for the same cohort. That same year, local governments accounted for 75.5% of total national fiscal revenue.

Between 1984 and 1993, the local share of national fiscal revenue rose from 59.5% to 78.0%, while the ratio of first-grade enrollment to the six-year-old population fell from 131% to 97%—the two series exhibit a strong negative correlation.

Figure 1. First-Grade Enrollment and the Local Share of National Fiscal Revenue, 1984–1993



Note: The number of six-year-old children for 1984–1993 is estimated from the corresponding age cohorts in the 1990 census.

In the mid-1980s, China adopted a dual-track pricing system, under which planned prices for basic commodities such as coal, electricity, oil, and steel were set far below market prices. This created widespread opportunities for rent-seeking and resource misallocation, while the central government continued to shoulder massive subsidies. Meanwhile, fiscal decentralization weakened the central government's revenue base. In 1988, Beijing launched a price-unification reform—merging the planned and market price tracks—in an attempt to shed this fiscal burden.

The reform, however, triggered runaway inflation, nationwide panic buying, and bank runs. The government was forced to abruptly call off this "price breakthrough" campaign and instead adopted a policy of "rectification and consolidation," restoring price controls and subsidies. Yet the ensuing tightening caused a

sharp economic slowdown: factories shut down, unemployment rose, and inflation remained stubbornly high, further intensifying social tensions. Public discontent gradually shifted from economic grievances to political ones, as anger over official profiteering, corruption, and privilege spread among intellectuals and students, laying the economic and socio-psychological groundwork for the 1989 Tiananmen protests.

As the crisis escalated, the central government failed to devise an effective response and ultimately resorted to military suppression. While this outcome had multiple causes, the central government's fiscal weakness was one contributing factor, limiting its capacity to pursue alternative solutions. Rather than easing the fiscal burden on the central government, however, the crisis ultimately demanded even greater expenditures on maintaining social stability.

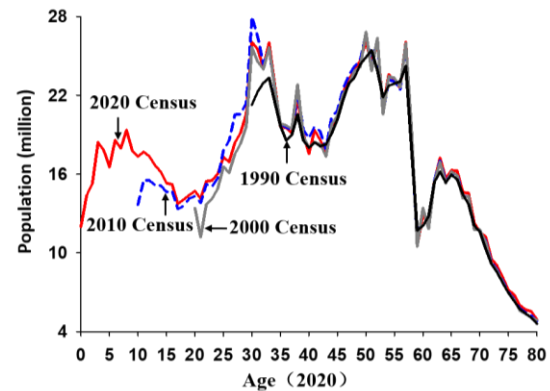
From 1988 to 1993, central government finances were extremely strained, leaving Beijing unable to provide fiscal transfers to local governments. Funding for rural primary and secondary education fell to township and village governments—which in practice meant it was borne directly by farmers. The share of government education expenditure in GDP continued to decline, eliminating local governments' fiscal incentive to inflate student enrollment figures. Under the supervision of grassroots officials and local villagers, schools likewise had little opportunity to obtain additional funding by inflating enrollment. In 1989, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League even launched Project Hope to raise public donations to alleviate education funding shortages in poor areas. Consequently, education data for 1988–1993 were relatively reliable: new entrants into primary schools during this period totaled 129.48 million, closely matching the 126.96 million children aged 3–8 recorded in the 1990 census.

Only during this unique historical period around 1990, shaped by these exceptional economic and political circumstances, were primary-school enrollment data relatively reliable. Nevertheless, statistical officials and demographers such as Zhang Weimin, Cui Hongyan, and Zhai Zhenwu hastily concluded, without adequate evidence, that primary-school enrollment data were the most reliable demographic data. Based on this assumption, the National Bureau of Statistics used primary-school enrollment figures from preceding years as the basis for revising and publishing China's birth statistics.

2. Using Education Data to Evaluate the Accuracy of the 1986–1990 Birth Cohorts in Successive Censuses

The age-group data from the 1990 census were adjusted from the original reference date of July 1 to November 1 to make them comparable with later censuses. Using age-specific survival and migration rates, the corresponding birth cohorts reported in each census were reconstructed to 2020. As shown in Figure 2, the population sizes of those aged 35 and above—that is, those born in 1985 or earlier—are broadly consistent across the four censuses. However, the 2000, 2010, and 2020 censuses reported 11.95 million, 18.59 million, and 20.45 million more people, respectively, than the 1990 census. The largest discrepancy occurred among those aged 30–34, corresponding to the 1986–1990 birth cohorts: the three later censuses reported 11.09 million, 15.56 million, and 13.11 million more people in this cohort, respectively, than the 1990 census.

Figure 2. Comparison of Population Sizes of the Same Birth Cohorts Across the Four National Censuses, 1990–2020



Establishment demographers generally attribute these discrepancies to undercount in the 1990 census, particularly among young children. In reality, individuals living at their place of household registration (*hukou*) were under the close scrutiny of both local officials and census enumerators, making large-scale undercount highly implausible. In 1990, China's urbanization rate was only 26%, and just 2% of the population resided outside their place of household registration.⁸ Even families with above-quota births, despite facing severe penalties such as *qianniu bafang* ("confiscating cattle and demolishing houses"), had nowhere to escape and had no choice but to remain in their registered localities. The floating population totaled only 29.59 million, including about 3 million children aged 0–4. How, then, could tens of millions of people—including more than ten million children aged 0–4—have been missed by the census?

Moreover, the official post-enumeration survey of the 1990 census reported a net undercount rate of just 0.06% for the total population and an undercount rate of 0.103% for newborns.⁹ This corresponds to a net undercount of only about 680,000 people in the total population and about 24,000 newborns.

In China, children normally enter primary school at age six and graduate from middle school at age fifteen. Because educational statistics

around 1990 are relatively reliable, they provide an independent benchmark for evaluating the

accuracy of the 1986–1990 birth cohorts reported in successive censuses.

Table 2. Primary School Entrants and Middle School Graduates

Primary school entrants				Middle school graduates			
	Entrants	GER	Implied Age-6		Graduates	GER	Implied Age-15
Year	(million)	(%)	(million)	Year	(million)	(%)	(million)
1992	21.83	109.4	19.96	2001	17.32	88.7	19.52
1993	23.54	107.3	21.93	2002	19.04	90.0	21.15
1994	25.37	108.7	23.34	2003	20.19	92.7	21.77
1995	25.32	106.6	23.75	2004	20.87	94.1	22.18
1996	25.25	105.7	23.89	2005	21.23	95.0	22.35

For example, children born in 1986 entered first grade in 1992, when primary-school enrollment totaled 21.83 million.¹⁰ With a gross primary enrollment rate (GER) of 109.4%,¹¹ this implies a population of 19.96 million six-year-olds. Projecting this cohort backward using age-specific survival rates yields an estimated 21.11 million births in 1986. These same children graduated

from middle school in 2001, when there were 17.32 million middle-school graduates.¹² With a gross middle-school enrollment rate of 88.7%, this implies a population of 19.52 million fifteen-year-olds, corresponding to an estimated 20.83 million births in 1986 after backward projection using age-specific survival rates.

Table 3. Comparison of Estimated Births in 1986–1990 from Different Data Sources (million)

	Communiqués	Census				Implied Births	
Year	Annual	1990	2000	2010	2020	Entrant-Based	Graduate-Based
1986	21.88	23.56	24.72	24.64	24.93	21.11	20.83
1987	22.52	25.48	27.98	27.88	28.35	23.19	22.56
1988	22.62	25.01	26.14	26.52	26.23	24.68	23.22
1989	23.00	24.23	26.70	28.72	27.70	25.10	23.64
1990	23.75	23.10	27.79	30.26	28.20	25.22	23.80
Total	113.76	121.38	133.33	138.01	135.42	119.30	114.05

Note: "Communiqués" are annual birth totals from Statistical Communiqués. "Census" and "Implied Births" are both reconstructed using age-specific survival rates—the former from census age groups, the latter from the estimated age-6 and age-15 populations in Table 2.

Birth numbers reconstructed from the 1990 census (population aged 0–4) closely match education-based estimates. In contrast, those from the subsequent three censuses would imply implausibly high dropout rates. The 1987 mini-

census reported total fertility rates of 2.37 for 1986 and 2.51 for 1987. Applying these rates to the 1982 census age structure (adjusted from July 1 to November 1 reference date) yields 21.91 million births for 1986 and 24.59 million for 1987—

figures consistent with both education-based estimates and the 1990 census reconstruction. The latter also aligns with the provincial aggregate of 23.89 million births.

The high quality of the 1990 census is corroborated by other demographic indicators: reported deaths align with published life expectancy, and reported fertility rates are consistent with aggregate births. In contrast, all three subsequent censuses exhibit substantial internal inconsistencies. These discrepancies thus point to overenumeration in later censuses rather than an undercount in 1990. The most plausible explanation is that statistical officials and demographers, deeming the fertility level around

1990 to be implausibly low, deliberately inflated the size of the relevant birth cohorts during the census enumeration, post-census verification, and subsequent data revisions.

3. Fiscal Recentralization and Central-Local Bargaining: The Fiscal Logic Behind Inflated School Enrollment

Annual *Statistical Communiqués* reported a total of 366.21 million births between 1991 and 2010, while first-grade primary-school entrants totaled 365.63 million between 1997 and 2016—the two totals are remarkably consistent.

Table 4. Annual Births, Primary-School Entrants, and Middle-School Graduates in China (million)

Communiqués		Primary school		Middle school		Grads. /Entr.
Year	Births	Year	Entrants		Graduates	(%)
1991	22.65	1997	24.62	2006	20.72	84.1
1992	21.25	1998	22.01	2007	19.64	89.2
1993	21.32	1999	20.30	2008	18.68	92.0
1994	21.10	2000	19.47	2009	17.98	92.4
1995	20.63	2001	19.44	2010	17.50	90.0
1996	20.67	2002	19.53	2011	17.37	88.9
1997	20.38	2003	18.29	2012	16.61	90.8
1998	19.91	2004	17.47	2013	15.62	89.4
1999	19.09	2005	16.72	2014	14.14	84.5
2000	17.71	2006	17.29	2015	14.18	82.0
2001	17.02	2007	17.36	2016	14.24	82.0
2002	16.47	2008	16.96	2017	13.97	82.4
2003	15.99	2009	16.38	2018	13.68	83.5
2004	15.93	2010	16.92	2019	14.54	85.9
2005	16.17	2011	17.37	2020	15.35	88.4
2006	15.84	2012	17.15	2021	15.87	92.5
2007	15.94	2013	16.95	2022	16.24	95.8
2008	16.08	2014	16.58	2023	16.24	97.9
2009	16.15	2015	17.29	2024	16.98	98.2
2010	15.92	2016	17.52	2025	17.24	98.4
Total	366.21		365.63		326.77	

However, the total number of middle-school graduates between 2006 and 2025 was only 326.77 million. In particular, the number of middle-school graduates in 2015–2017 amounted to only 82% of the number of first-grade primary-school entrants in 2006–2008. This shortfall cannot be explained by dropout: China had already achieved universal nine-year compulsory education, with a gross enrollment rate exceeding 100%. Moreover, the 2000 census recorded only 159.13 million children aged 0–9, far fewer than either the 195.14 million first-grade entrants between 1997 and 2006 or the 204.72 million births reported by the National Bureau of Statistics for 1991–2000. Making sense of these inconsistencies requires tracing them back to the 1994 tax-sharing reform and the subsequent evolution of intergovernmental education financing.

To strengthen the central government's capacity for macroeconomic management, China carried out the tax-sharing reform in 1994 under the leadership of Vice Premier Zhu Rongji. The reform recentralized fiscal revenue while devolving expenditure responsibilities to lower levels of government. The central government's share of national fiscal revenue surged from 22% in 1993 to 56% in 1994, and thereafter remained within a 45%–55% range. Total fiscal revenue as a share of GDP rose from 12% in 1993 to 22% in 2013, before stabilizing.

At the same time, administrative reforms shifted growing responsibility for education, healthcare, social security, and infrastructure onto local governments. Local governments' share of total fiscal expenditure rose from 70% in 1994 to 85% in 2012, and has remained broadly stable since. This widening gap between revenue authority and expenditure responsibility left local governments increasingly dependent on fiscal transfers and land finance. Many established liaison offices in Beijing whose primary function was to lobby central ministries for larger fiscal

transfers.

In 1993, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council issued the *Outline for China's Education Reform and Development*, setting the goal of universal nine-year compulsory education by 2000. Concerned that township and village governments would be unable to finance basic education after the tax-sharing reform, the State Council's *Implementation Opinions on the Outline for China's Education Reform and Development* (July 1994) established a county-township cost-sharing system, initially placing primary responsibility on townships and later shifting it to counties. Under the township-based system, the fiscal burden fell largely on farmers themselves, leaving local governments with no incentive to inflate enrollment figures. As responsibility shifted to counties, however, county finances became increasingly tied to intergovernmental transfer payments, creating strong incentives to overreport enrollment.

The continued erosion of township fiscal capacity not only deepened the financial burden on rural households but also led to widespread arrears in teachers' salaries, threatening social stability. To ease farmers' burdens, China launched rural tax-and-fee reform in 2000, relieving townships of responsibility for education funding. Against this backdrop, the State Council's *Decision on Basic Education Reform and Development* (2001) formally established a county-based management system for rural compulsory education. Constrained by limited revenue but extensive expenditure responsibilities, county governments grew increasingly dependent on transfers from higher levels of government while also turning to land finance and local government financing vehicles. Between 2001 and 2005, securing education funding became one of counties' principal fiscal responsibilities,¹³ creating strong incentives to overreport enrollment in order to obtain additional funding.

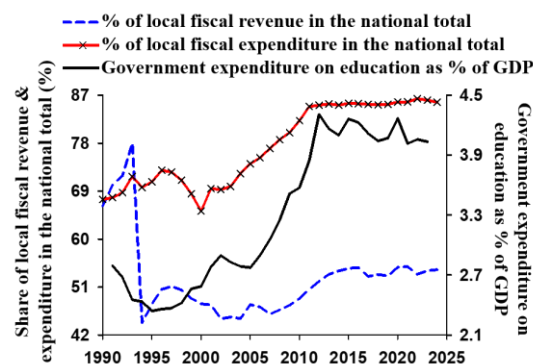
The State Council General Office's *Notice on Improving the Management System for Rural Compulsory Education* (2002) further required township governments to "strictly control student dropout during compulsory education." As a result, township governments' incentives reversed—from preventing over-reporting (to avoid fraudulent funding claims) to preventing under-reporting (to avoid being held accountable for dropout). This divergence in incentives resembles the regional tax system of the Ming dynasty: the central government closely monitored population in northern provinces and cultivated land in southern provinces, resulting in relatively accurate population records but underreported farmland in the north, and relatively accurate land records but underreported population in the south.

In December 2005, the State Council adopted the *Notice on Deepening Reform of the Funding Guarantee Mechanism for Rural Compulsory Education*, establishing an education transfer system in which central and local governments shared different categories of expenditure by fixed proportion, provincial governments coordinated funding, and counties retained primary administrative responsibility. The revised *Compulsory Education Law* (2006) then incorporated compulsory education into the public finance system. For example, central and provincial governments shared the cost of tuition-fee exemptions at ratios of 8:2 in western China and 6:4 in central China, while eastern China's arrangements varied by province according to fiscal capacity.¹⁴

Hebei Province illustrates the resulting complexity. The central government financed 60% of education expenditures, while the remaining 40% was shared among provincial, municipal, and county governments according to county fiscal-capacity rankings: 15%/10%/15% for the top 30 counties, 25%/10%/5% for the bottom 50, and 20%/10%/10% for those in between. In Hunan

Province, the central government financed 80% of expenditures in the Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, with the provincial government bearing the remaining 20%. Elsewhere in the province, the central government financed 60%, while the remaining 40% was shared among provincial, municipal, and county governments according to local fiscal capacity: 8:1:1 for poverty-alleviation counties, 6:1:3 for counties with per-capita fiscal capacity below RMB 20,000, 5:1:4 for counties with per-capita fiscal capacity between RMB 20,000 and 30,000, and full local financing for counties above RMB 30,000.¹⁵

Figure 3. Local Fiscal Revenue and Expenditure, and Government Education Expenditure



Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2024.¹⁷

Government education expenditure rose from 2.3% of GDP in 1995 to 2.8% in 2005 and 4.3% in 2012, remaining broadly stable thereafter.¹⁶ After 2005, the financing structure for compulsory education settled into one in which the central government bore the largest share, provincial governments an intermediate share, and county governments the smallest. As education transfer payments expanded, local governments faced ever stronger incentives to overreport enrollment in pursuit of a larger share of available funding.

Because first-grade enrollment determines the size of subsequent school-age cohorts through a base-cohort effect, overreporting was especially pronounced among first-grade entrants—and the inflated birth figures the National Bureau of Statistics had previously published gave local governments a seemingly reasonable benchmark for inflating enrollment further.

The rising share of government education expenditure in GDP, together with the growing share of local fiscal expenditure in total national fiscal expenditure, created two reinforcing fiscal incentives for local governments to overreport school enrollment in order to secure larger fiscal transfers. This inevitably increased the ratio of primary-school enrollment to the six-year-old population (hereafter, the "enrollment-population ratio"). The six-year-old population is estimated

by applying age-specific survival rates to births six years earlier.

Births for 1991–2010 are estimated under three scenarios:

- (1) Statistical Communiqués—births reported in the annual *Statistical Communiqués*;
- (2) Official fertility rates—birth estimates derived from the 1990 age structure using implausibly high officially published fertility rates; in many years, the first-order fertility rate exceeded one first birth per woman—an obvious demographic impossibility; and
- (3) Census fertility rates—rates for 1991–1993 are taken from the official series, rates for 1995, 2000, and 2010 from the 1995 mini-census and the 2000 and 2010 censuses respectively, and rates for intervening years obtained by linear interpolation.

Figure 4. Local Fiscal Expenditure, Government Education Expenditure, and the Enrollment–Population Ratio, 1997–2016

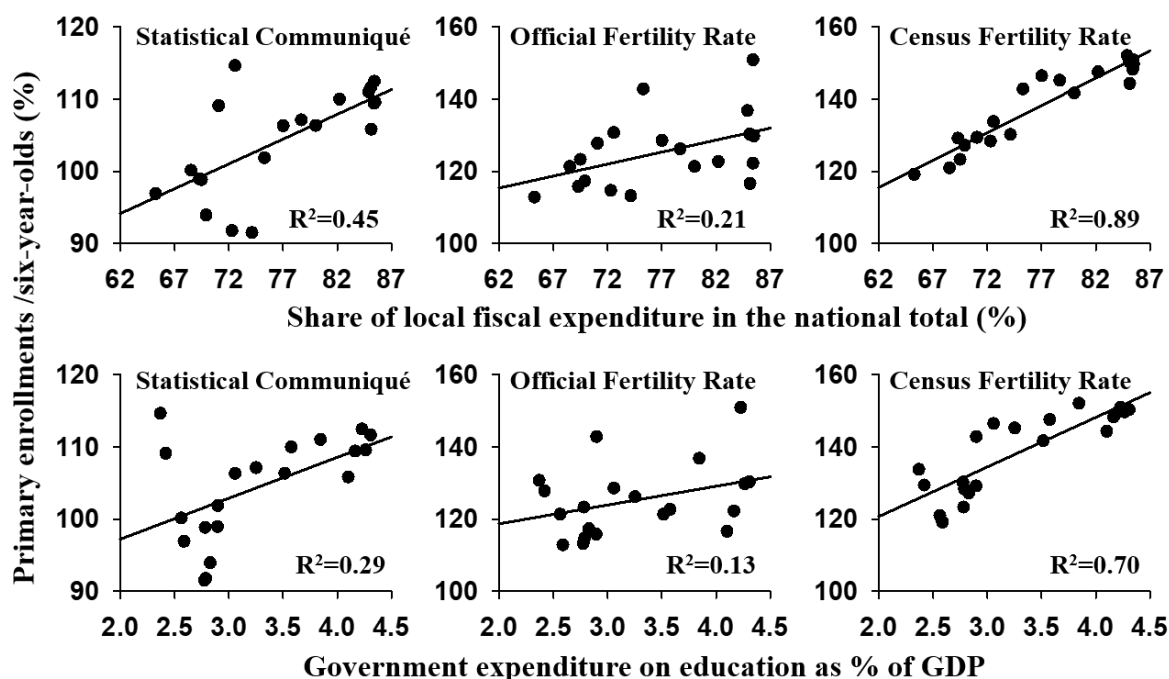


Figure 4 shows that neither the births reported in the *Statistical Communiqués* nor those estimated based on the official fertility rates are consistent with the fiscal incentives created by China's intergovernmental finance system. By contrast, the birth series, estimated based on the census fertility rates closely tracks these incentives. This provides additional evidence that the latter birth series—and the corresponding estimates of total population—are more credible.

The 1994 tax-sharing reform had far-reaching political, economic, and demographic consequences beyond its impact on distorted education statistics.

Politically, the reform concentrated fiscal resources in the central government, strengthening state capacity to manage social and political crises. At the same time, the declining share of household income in GDP weakened society's capacity for sustained collective action, as rapid economic growth did not translate into the emergence of a strong middle class with substantial economic resources and social influence. These changes contributed to the absence of a nationwide political movement comparable to the 1989 Tiananmen protests.

Economically, the declining household income share constrained domestic consumption and contributed to persistent industrial overcapacity. Meanwhile, stronger central fiscal capacity enabled extensive industrial subsidies, particularly to manufacturing, further reinforcing China's investment- and export-oriented growth model. This combination perpetuated structural imbalances, increased China's reliance on manufacturing exports for economic growth and employment, and contributed to distortions in global trade.

Demographically, the declining share of household income weakened families' capacity to raise children, contributing to the fertility decline from 2.3 births per woman in 1990 to 1.22 in 2000

and helping explain the failure of subsequent fertility-boosting initiatives, including the two-child and three-child policies.

4. Media Reports on Inflated Student Enrollment

On July 26, 2007, China News Service reported that the Guangdong Provincial Audit Office found 25 counties had overreported student enrollment by 250,000, fraudulently obtaining RMB 10.28 million in education subsidies.¹⁸ On August 1, 2010, *The Beijing News* reported that the Hunan Provincial Audit Office found 10 schools had obtained more than RMB 11 million in student-aid subsidies by inflating enrollment and other fraudulent means.¹⁹ On October 5, 2010, *Jinghua Times* reported that Youyang Sunshine Technical School in Chongqing had actually enrolled just over 100 students but registered 649 in its official records, thereby obtaining more than RMB 1.4 million in subsidies.²⁰

The overreporting of student enrollment was so widespread that provincial governments and central ministries repeatedly issued notices warning against the practice. On November 10, 2009, Jiangxi Television reported that the Jiangxi Provincial Department of Education had issued a notice prohibiting primary schools, middle schools, and secondary vocational schools from inflating enrollment to obtain fiscal funds.²¹ On December 5, 2011, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, and the National Audit Office jointly issued a notice strictly prohibiting secondary vocational schools from inflating enrollment to obtain national student-aid and tuition-waiver subsidies.²² On October 13, 2010, Xinhua reported that the Hebei Provincial Department of Education had likewise issued a notice banning inflated enrollment figures in compulsory education to obtain state funding.²³

On January 7, 2012, China Central Television reported that Jieshou City, Anhui Province, had reported 51,586 primary-school students on its national forms, whereas the actual number was only 36,234—an inflation of 42% that generated RMB 10.63 million in additional funding.²⁴ The fraud was organized by the municipal Education Bureau, with every school in the city taking part. Schools kept two sets of enrollment records: one submitted to the state, known as the "national form," and one kept for internal use. The names of the fictitious students were fabricated by principals and homeroom teachers. The schools themselves did not retain the resulting funds; the municipal government instead treated them as discretionary surplus.²⁵

On February 27, 2012, the Ministry of Education announced that 17 middle schools in Runan County, Henan Province, had overreported enrollment by 3,547 students, fraudulently obtaining RMB 940,000 in compulsory-education funding.²⁶

According to reports by *China Youth Daily* (June 4, 2012) and *Beijing Youth Daily* (June 7, 2012), schools in Yangxin County, Hubei Province that actually enrolled 2,147, 1,400, 700, and just 4 students reported 5,266, more than 2,200, 3,000, and 202 students, respectively.^{27,28} One school that had already been closed and had no students at all still reported 162; another closed for two years reported 63; and a school abolished more than four years earlier continued to receive education funding. A follow-up report by *People's Daily Online* on September 4, 2012, found that Yangxin County had overreported enrollment by 29,859 students in total, obtaining RMB 16.88 million in compulsory-education funding, which the county finance and education departments then pooled for other expenditures.²⁹

On May 4, 2013, *People's Daily Online* reported allegations that Pengxi County, Sichuan Province, had inflated enrollment by more than

18,000 students across nearly 100 schools, obtaining RMB 4.3 million. The county education bureau subsequently inflated enrollment by another 15,000 students, securing a further RMB 3.6 million.³⁰ On May 21, 2013, Caixin reported that two secondary vocational schools in Jiangxi Province had fraudulently obtained RMB 4.65 million and RMB 18.92 million, respectively, in national student-aid funds through inflated enrollment.³¹

On June 6, 2013, *People's Daily Online* reported that a middle-school teacher in Xiushui County had come across an official county enrollment table by chance and discovered that his school's reported enrollment was twice its actual size. After comparing notes with teachers from other schools, he found that enrollment had been inflated throughout the county, and he decided to expose the practice himself by alerting the media. Reporters found that after receiving informal instructions from the county education bureau to "report more students," school administrators routinely submitted two sets of records: a "national form" with inflated enrollment used to obtain per-student government funding, and an "internal form" recording the true figures—an arrangement resembling the "Yellow Registers" and "White Registers" once kept by local officials in the Ming dynasty. For example, five schools with actual enrollments of 201, 1,182, 889, 1,592, and 510 students reported 356, 1,766, 1,090, 1,776, and 966 students, respectively.³²

On November 22, 2013, China News Service reported that the principal of Xiaoyuan Primary School in Nanbu County, Sichuan Province, had inflated enrollment by 496 students.³³ On January 26, 2014, the website of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection reported that three schools in Baiyin District, Baiyin City, Gansu Province, had overreported enrollment by 4,137 students, obtaining RMB 3.65 million in education funding.³⁴

In summary, inflated student enrollment was not merely the result of individual misconduct by school principals or collective participation by entire schools; in many cases, it was organized or encouraged by county-level and even municipal governments.

5. The Electronic Student Registration System Exposed Inflated Enrollment

In 2013, the Ministry of Education launched a nationwide electronic student-registration system (ESRS) based on each student's national identification number, and the system became fully operational the following year. Its purpose was to eliminate fraudulent and duplicate student records.³⁵ Some local governments mistakenly interpreted the initiative as a campaign by the

central government to crack down on inflated enrollment reporting, and in response substantially reduced their reported enrollment figures.

Shaoyang County, Hunan Province, offers an illustrative case. Education expenditure in the county rose from RMB 85 million in 2003 to RMB 142 million in 2006, and then jumped to RMB 207 million in 2007—creating a growing fiscal incentive to inflate enrollment figures. Under the nine-year compulsory education system (six years of primary school plus three years of middle school), the county's annual *statistical communiqués* reported 71,522 new primary school entrants over the 2008–2012 period. Yet ESRS data, released on November 26, 2013, recorded only 51,253 students in grades 2–6 over the same period—meaning the *communiqué* total exceeded the registration figure by 40%.

Table 5. Comparison of Primary-School Enrollment Reported in Shaoyang County Statistical Communiqués and the 2013 Electronic Student Registration System

Statistical Communiqués			2013 ESRS		Entrants/ESRS
Year	Total primary students	Entrants	Grade	Students	(%)
2015	60,712	9,285			
2014	62,115	9,679			
2013	63,426	12,114	1	12,027	101
2012	71,610	13,605	2	10,696	127
2011	76,753	14,424	3	10,203	141
2010	77,645	14,307	4	10,138	141
2009	79,415	14,332	5	9,982	144
2008	77,473	14,854	6	10,234	145
2008-2012		71,522	2-6	51,253	140

The 2013 *statistical communiqué*, published afterward, accordingly revised the total number of primary-school students downward, from 71,610 in 2012 to 63,426. With 2013 first-grade enrollment reported at 12,114, this implies grades 2–6 contained 51,312 students—virtually identical to the electronic registration figure. Reported primary-school enrollment declined further in the

2014 and 2015 *statistical communiqués*, to 9,679 and 9,285, respectively.

According to the 2010 census, Shaoyang County had a total population of 915,600, including 71,095 children aged 5–9 (roughly matching reported primary enrollment for 2007–2011) and 68,497 aged 0–4. However, the 2013 ESRS recorded only 51,250 students in primary-

school grades 3–6 and middle-school grade 7 combined—of whom 10,693 were in grade 7 and the remaining 40,557 in primary grades 3–6. Likewise, primary-school grades 1–2 in the ESRS, together with first-grade entrants during 2014–2016, totaled just 53,678. These figures imply that the 2010 census may have overcounted the 5–9 and 0–4 age groups by approximately 39% and

28%, respectively.

A similar pattern is observable nationwide: reported middle-school enrollment experienced a sharp decline in 2013. The 2011 grade 7 cohort, for example, numbered 16.37 million; by 2013, when that cohort would have been in grade 9, its reported size had fallen to just 14.24 million.

Table 6. Primary School Entrants (2005–2016) and Grade-wise Enrollment (2009–2016) (millions)

Primary entrants		Enrollment by grade							
Year	Entrants	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
2016	17.52								17.53
2015	17.29							17.30	17.21
2014	16.58						16.60	16.45	16.45
2013	16.95					17.01	16.69	16.61	16.56
2012	17.15				17.28	16.45	16.34	16.25	16.21
2011	17.37			17.51	16.75	15.97	15.84	15.76	15.17
2010	16.92		17.15	16.70	16.15	15.28	15.15	14.56	14.87
2009	16.38	16.63	16.11	16.02	15.43	14.52	13.89	14.12	13.98
2008	16.96	16.57	16.47	16.33	15.80	14.37	14.48	14.28	14.03
2007	17.36	16.94	16.78	16.68	15.54	14.97	14.68	14.30	14.24
2006	17.29	16.82	16.74	16.03	15.73	14.77	14.26	14.18	
2005	16.72	16.83	16.16	16.37	15.67	14.24	14.14		

Note: Each column represents a calendar year, with figures from top to bottom showing enrollment in Grades 1–9, followed by the number of middle school graduates. Each row tracks the same birth cohort.

Take births in 2000 as an example. The raw data from the long-form questionnaire of the 2000 population census showed a total fertility rate of only 1.22. Applying this fertility schedule to the 2000 age distribution of women of reproductive age—obtained by projecting the 1990 female age distribution forward using age-specific survival rates—yields approximately 12.64 million births. However, the census short-form tabulation adjusted the population aged 0 upward to 13.79 million, while the National Bureau of Statistics ultimately reported an even higher figure of 17.71 million births.

Subsequent enrollment data, however, tell a very different story. As this cohort progressed through grades 4–7 between 2009 and 2012, reported enrollment gradually declined to 16.82, 16.74, 16.03, and 15.73 million, respectively. By 2013, reported grade-8 enrollment had fallen abruptly to 14.77 million, followed by a further decline to 14.26 million in grade 9 in 2014. In 2015, the number of middle-school graduates dropped to just 14.18 million—only 82% of the first-grade primary school enrollment in 2006. Using the officially reported gross middle-school enrollment rate of 104%, this implies a population of

approximately 13.63 million 15-year-olds in 2015. Projecting this figure backward using age-specific survival rates yields an estimated population of 13.74 million six-year-olds in 2006, implying an actual birth cohort of roughly 14.35 million in 2000—far below the officially published figure of 17.71 million.

Because only some local governments, such as Shaoyang County, rather than all local governments, misread the central government's intentions—mistakenly believing that the newly introduced electronic student registration system would be used to uncover inflated enrollment figures—and therefore voluntarily reduced their reported enrollments, the officially reported national total of middle-school graduates in 2015 (14.18 million) likely remained overstated.³⁶ The actual number of births in 2000 may therefore have been much closer to the 12.64 million implied by the fertility rate of 1.22 recorded in the 2000 census, corresponding to approximately 12.10 million six-year-olds in 2006. Nevertheless, in November 2016, Zhai Zhenwu continued to argue that primary-school enrollment should be used to revise birth numbers and fertility rates, concluding that "the total fertility rate in 2000 was probably around 1.7."³⁷

Electronic student registration mattered most for the college entrance examination, whereas first-grade primary-school enrollment served as the funding baseline for primary and middle schools over the following nine years. Consequently, after the electronic registration system was introduced in 2013, reported middle-school enrollment—especially the number of graduating students—declined sharply, whereas reported primary-school enrollment remained stable or continued to increase. As a result, the ratio of middle-school graduates to first-grade primary-school enrollment nine years earlier fell from 91% in 2012 to 82% during 2015–2017.

Because education data were closely bound

up with local government interests, using electronic registration records—which covered all grades—as the basis for fiscal allocations would inevitably have encountered strong resistance from local governments. Such a reform would have fundamentally altered the existing fiscal incentive structure and lay well beyond the authority of the Ministry of Education. More importantly, since 1990, officially published birth numbers had themselves been calibrated using primary-school enrollment. Had electronic registration data become the basis for official enrollment statistics, both enrollment and birth figures would have required substantial downward revision, undermining the credibility of decades of official demographic statistics and potentially triggering broader questions about the one-child policy and other government policies. Faced with resistance from both local governments and the statistical system, the electronic student registration system ultimately remained a tool for student record management rather than becoming the basis for allocating education funding. Media reports exposing inflated enrollment also became increasingly rare thereafter.

After several years of relative restraint, local governments resumed—and even intensified—the overreporting of primary and middle school enrollment. Nationally, first-grade primary enrollment increased from 16.58 million in 2014 to 18.78 million in 2023, while seventh-grade (first-year middle school) enrollment rose from 14.11 million in 2015 to 18.53 million in 2025. Meanwhile, the ratio of middle school graduates to first-grade primary enrollment nine years earlier rebounded from 82.0% in 2016 to 88.4% in 2020, and reached 98.4% in 2025 (Table 4).

Using the number of middle-school graduates in 2015 as the benchmark, first-grade primary-school enrollment in 2006 appears to have been overstated by approximately 26%. Relative to the number of births implied by the 2000 census

fertility rate, however, the overstatement reaches 43%.

Between 2006 and 2012, the share of local fiscal expenditure in total government expenditure increased from 75% to 85%, even as local revenue continued to lag behind, making local governments increasingly dependent on central fiscal transfers. During the same period, government education expenditure rose from 2.9% to 4.3% of GDP, substantially expanding the pool of education funding. These dual fiscal incentives strengthened both the motivation and the opportunity to overreport enrollment.

Extrapolating from this trend, an overstatement of roughly 50% (where the reported figures represent 150% of the actual population) in today's reported primary-school enrollment is entirely consistent with China's fiscal incentives. Under this assumption, the officially reported first-grade primary-school enrollments of 18.78 million in 2023, 16.17 million in 2024, and 14.62 million in 2025 likely correspond to only about 12.52 million, 10.78 million, and 9.75 million six-year-olds, respectively.

China's demographic statistical system has

evolved into a self-reinforcing feedback loop. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) uses first-grade primary-school enrollment data as a reference when determining official birth figures, rather than relying solely on contemporaneous demographic data. Six years later, local governments use the birth figures published by the NBS as a baseline and report even higher first-grade enrollment figures. The NBS then uses these inflated enrollment figures to revise its previously published birth figures upward once again. As this cycle repeats, each series serves to validate and inflate the other, pushing both progressively farther from the true values.

For example, fertility rates from the annual sample surveys—which themselves may already be overstated—imply only 83 million births during 2011–2017. Yet the annual *statistical communiqués*, drawing on first-grade enrollment data, reported 117.30 million births for the same period. Reported first-grade enrollments during 2017–2023 subsequently totaled 126.73 million, and the *China Statistical Yearbook 2024* revised the number of births during 2011–2017 upward once again, to 127.34 million.

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5 Distortions in Household Registration, Live Birth, and Mortality Data

Yi Fuxian

1. Household-registration population data are even more inflated than figures reported in the Statistical Communiqués

Using 2015 household-registration (hukou) data, Zhai Zhenwu inferred that China's total fertility rates in 2008, 2009, and 2010 must have been at least 1.66, 1.66, and 1.63, respectively.¹ This study won second prize in the Ministry of Education's Eighth Outstanding Achievement Awards for Scientific Research in Higher Education (Humanities and Social Sciences) in 2020.²

It not only lent further support to the 1.63 fertility rate used by Yu Xuejun and Zhai Zhenwu in their 2011 briefing to the Politburo, but also provided crucial theoretical backing for the formulation of the 2016 universal two-child policy—itsself premised on a pre-policy TFR of 1.63—and served as a key reference for the 2020 population census.

In fact, Ministry of Public Security hukou data are even less reliable than those of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). A research report by the Development Research Center of the State Council noted that more than twenty individual rights are linked to hukou status, covering socioeconomic welfare, political rights, employment, education, family planning, and other areas.³ For the privileged and powerful, multiple hukou registrations can be used to transfer and conceal assets to evade anti-corruption and tax scrutiny, or to exploit multiple identities for illegal business activities, unauthorized financing, or improper lending. Moreover, an additional hukou can provide an

additional passport, facilitating a quick escape during political or economic turmoil. These strong incentives have driven many people to obtain multiple hukou registrations. For example, media reports in 2013 revealed that Gong Aiai, vice president of a rural commercial bank in Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province, illegally held multiple hukou registrations and used them to purchase 41 properties in Beijing.⁴

A considerable proportion of duplicate hukou has also been obtained through legitimate administrative procedures. For example, in Puning City, Guangdong Province, local authorities sought to boost revenue from land development by allowing homebuyers from elsewhere—most of them rural migrants—to obtain local hukou without requiring them to deregister their original hukou.⁵ As China's urbanization rate rose from 26% in 1990 to 36% in 2000, 50% in 2010, and 67% in 2024, similar practices became widespread across the country.

According to successive population censuses, the share of people living separately from their hukou location rose from 11% of the total population in 2000 to 20% in 2010⁶ and reached 35% in 2020.⁷ Meanwhile, the floating population—defined as people who had migrated across county boundaries—increased from 1.1% of the total population in 1982 to 2.6% in 1990, 10% in 2000, 17% in 2010, and 27% in 2020. The continued growth of the population living separately from its hukou location, especially the rapid expansion of the floating population, created growing demand for multiple hukou while placing increasing strain on the hukou management

system.

Take Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan Province, as an example. Its resident population surged from 5.58 million in 1990 to 13.09 million in 2024. Applications to obtain hukou in Zhengzhou's urban core are subject to strict review, whereas obtaining hukou in the surrounding counties is unrestricted, and subsequent transfer of hukou from those counties into the urban core requires no further approval. This loophole gave rise to a thriving market for hukou brokers, who colluded with local police stations and profited handsomely by arranging illegal hukou. For example, Lu Qiuli, an unemployed man, bribed police officers at Diaojia Police Station in Zhongmu County, under Zhengzhou's jurisdiction, with RMB 1.9816 million. In just one year, from March 2010 to March 2011, he obtained 1,980 hukou in Zhengzhou's urban core.⁸

An insider at the Hainan Provincial Public Security Department told reporters, "It's not difficult at all [to obtain a fake hukou]—all it takes is a signature from the municipal or county public security chief, or the deputy chief in charge."⁹ On

April 5, 2016, *People's Daily Online* published an article entitled "People with Duplicate Hukou Are Not Rare, Likely a Result of Long-Term Decentralized Management."¹⁰ Huang Ming, then vice minister of public security, acknowledged that the causes of multiple hukou were complex, including historical factors such as long-term manual record-keeping and decentralized management; social factors such as the influence of personal connections and a sense of privilege; and illegal activities driven by personal gain and collusion between insiders and outsiders.

A light pull of a shotgun's trigger can discharge countless pellets at little cost and with great efficiency. By contrast, removing those pellets one by one through delicate surgery is both extremely expensive and time-consuming. Likewise, creating multiple hukou is easy and inexpensive, whereas eliminating duplicate hukou requires enormous police manpower and financial resources for painstaking cross-regional, case-by-case verification, making it an extremely inefficient process.

Table 1. Comparison of Population Figures from Statistical Communiqués and Hukou Data (million)

Year	Statistical Communiqué		Hukou	
	Population	Increase	Population	Increase
1990	1,143.33		1,132.74	
1991	1,158.23	14.90	1,145.11	12.37
1992	1,171.71	13.48	1,155.63	10.52
1993	1,185.17	13.46	1,165.97	10.34
1994	1,198.50	13.33	1,176.74	10.77
1995	1,211.21	12.71	1,187.88	11.14
1996	1,223.89	12.68	1,198.66	10.78
1997	1,236.26	12.37	1,209.03	10.37
1998	1,248.10	11.84	1,218.18	9.15
1999	1,259.09	10.99	1,224.92	6.73
2000	1,267.43	8.34	1,236.72	11.81
2001	1,276.27	8.84	1,244.30	7.58

2002	1,284.53	8.26	1,252.36	8.05
2003	1,292.27	7.74	1,260.35	8.00
2004	1,299.88	7.61	1,270.38	10.03
2005	1,307.56	7.68	1,278.33	7.95
2006	1,314.48	6.92	1,293.15	14.82
2007	1,321.29	6.81	1,308.32	15.17
2008	1,328.02	6.73	1,321.31	12.99
2009	1,334.74	6.72	1,333.23	11.92
2010	1,340.91	6.17	1,345.31	12.08
2011	1,347.35	6.44	1,355.80	10.48
2012	1,354.04	6.69	1,357.80	2.00
2013	1,360.72	6.68	1,367.26	9.46
2014	1,367.82	7.10	1,376.92	9.66
2015	1,374.62	6.80	1,381.15	4.23
2016	1,382.71	8.09	1,392.13	10.99
2017	1,390.08	7.37	1,395.16	3.03
2018	1,395.38	5.30	1,404.40	9.24
2019	1,400.05	4.67	1,410.39	5.98
2020	1,412.12	12.07	1,413.21	2.82
2021	1,412.60	0.48	1,415.74	2.53
2022	1,411.75	-0.85	1,416.25	0.51
2023	1,409.67	-2.08	1,416.36	0.10
2024	1,408.28	-1.39	1,416.48	0.12

Source: *China Population and Employment Statistics Yearbook and the Statistical Communiqués on National Economic and Social Development*.¹¹

In 1990, the hukou population stood at 1.13274 billion, essentially identical to the 1990 census count of 1.13371 billion. The NBS, however, revised the figure upward to 1.14333 billion. In 2000, the hukou population totaled 1.23672 billion, including an unknown number of duplicate registrations. This figure exceeded the raw count from the 2000 census but remained below the revised census total of 1.24511 billion published. Nevertheless, the NBS reported an even higher total population of 1.26743 billion. As urbanization accelerated, duplicate hukou became increasingly common. Beginning in 2003, the growth rate of the hukou population exceeded that

of the population reported in the *Statistical Communiqués*, and by 2010 the hukou population itself had surpassed it.

Public security authorities have long attempted to eliminate duplicate hukou. For example, between 2013 and 2015, Sichuan Province identified and deregistered more than 1.7 million duplicate or fraudulent hukou,¹² equivalent to 2.1% of its resident population. Between 2014 and 2017, the Ministry of Public Security deregistered 8.93 million hukou nationwide.¹³ Yet these cases represented only the tip of the iceberg. Many fraudulent hukou are registered under different names or dates of birth and are supported

by complete sets of seemingly legitimate documentation, making them extremely difficult to detect and deregister. As the Chinese proverb says, "For every foot the righteous advance, the crafty advance ten." The authorities' ability to eliminate duplicate hukou has consistently lagged far behind the creation of new ones.

For example, between 2003 and 2024, the population reported in the *Statistical Communiqués* increased by 116 million, whereas the hukou population increased by 156 million. In 2018, the NBS reported 15.23 million births, while the *China Health Statistics Yearbook* recorded only 13.62 million live births—and the actual number was likely even lower. The NBS also reported a population increase of 5.30 million, although China's population may in fact already have begun to decline. Yet the hukou population increased by as many as 9.24 million. Although the *Statistical Communiqués* reported that China's population began to decline in 2022, the hukou population continued to grow in 2022, 2023 and 2024. Clearly, changes in the hukou population reflect an ongoing contest between the creation and elimination of fraudulent hukou, rather than underlying demographic reality.

For example, between 2003 and 2024, the population reported in the *Statistical Communiqués* increased by 116 million, while the hukou population grew by 156 million. In 2018, the NBS reported 15.23 million births, whereas the *China Health Statistics Yearbook* recorded only 13.62 million live births—with the actual number likely even lower. The NBS also reported a net population increase of 5.30 million, even though China's population may in fact have already begun to decline. Yet the hukou population surged by as many as 9.24 million that year. Although the *Statistical Communiqués* indicated that China's population began declining in 2022, the hukou population continued to grow through 2022, 2023, and 2024. Clearly, changes in the hukou

population reflect an ongoing contest between falsification and anti-falsification efforts, rather than underlying demographic reality.

2. Why the Young Hukou Population Surged after 2010

Before 2010, hukou registration for young children was tightly controlled to facilitate the collection of fines for unauthorized births. At the time, some children held multiple hukou, while others born in violation of the one-child policy had not yet obtained one. The two groups were roughly comparable in size, leaving the overall hukou data relatively reliable.

To prevent the 2010 census count from falling short of expectations, the Ministry of Public Security launched a nationwide hukou rectification campaign shortly before the census and relaxed hukou registration requirements for young children. Many children exploited this policy loophole to obtain multiple hukou. Because not all duplicate hukou holders were enumerated in the census, the raw census count fell below the hukou count. For example, an internal notice issued by the Fujian Provincial Census Office reported that the preliminary census tally submitted on November 1, 2010, recorded a hukou population of 34.68 million—530,000 fewer than the figure obtained through the hukou rectification campaign—directly confirming this phenomenon.

According to the Sixth National Population Census conducted in 2010, China had 13 million people without hukou (commonly known as "black hukou"), accounting for about 1% of the population.¹⁴ In reality, however, a substantial proportion of these cases consisted of fictitious individuals created by grassroots census enumerators to meet expected population targets but lacking complete identity information, such as national ID numbers. Some people genuinely lacked hukou, primarily children born in violation

of the one-child policy, but their numbers were relatively small. By contrast, people holding multiple hukou constituted a much larger group, potentially spanning all age groups.

In China, living without hukou is extremely difficult, including being unable to attend school. Parents of children born in violation of the one-child policy therefore make every effort—including paying fines or bribing officials—to obtain hukou before their children reach school age. People without hukou actively seek to resolve their situation, making their plight openly visible. By contrast, those holding multiple hukou try to avoid attracting attention. Each year's inflation of the hukou population amounts to only a few per thousand of the total population, making it virtually undetectable to the public. Over several decades, however, these annual increments accumulate to well over 100 million people. Population censuses can readily identify people without hukou but are poorly suited to detecting

duplicate hukou. This asymmetry—one group visible, the other hidden—creates the widespread misconception that people without hukou are numerous while duplicate hukou are rare. In reality, the opposite is true: people holding multiple hukou outnumber those without hukou by roughly an order of magnitude.

The Ministry of Public Security publishes only the annual total hukou population, not its age distribution. Through internal Ministry of Public Security channels, Zhai Zhenwu obtained age-specific hukou data for 2010, 2012, and 2015. In 2010, the hukou population aged 0–19 totaled 280.63 million. Given a total hukou population of 1.34531 billion that year, this implies a population aged 20 and above of 1.06468 billion. By contrast, the *Statistical Communiqués* reported 366.23 million births during 1991–2010 and a total population of 1.34091 billion in 2010, implying a population aged 0–19 of 350.30 million and a population aged 20 and above of 990.61 million.

Table 2. Comparison of China's Population by Broad Age Group, 2010 (millions)

	Hukou	Statistical Communiqués	2010 Census	WPP 2010
Total	1345.31	1340.91	1335.11	1341.34
Ages 0-19	280.63	350.30	321.46	366.31
Ages 20+	1064.68	990.61	1013.65	975.03

The hukou data, the *Statistical Communiqués*, the 2010 population census, and the United Nations' *World Population Prospects 2010* (WPP 2010) all reported remarkably similar estimates of China's total population in 2010, yet their age distributions differed dramatically. If the hukou population is adopted for ages 0–19 and the WPP 2010 estimates are adopted for ages 20 and above, China's total population in 2010 would be only 1.25566 billion.

The 2010 census "identified" 13 million people without hukou, and the media simply assumed that they were all children born in

violation of the one-child policy whose parents had failed to pay the required fines. Public sympathy for the difficulties these children faced—especially their inability to attend school—generated strong public pressure, prompting the Ministry of Public Security to relax hukou registration requirements for young children.¹⁵ The new policy stipulated that anyone without hukou, regardless of when or why they had gone unregistered—including births in violation of the one-child policy—should be registered promptly, and that no further administrative obstacles should be imposed.¹⁶

The policy was like opening a floodgate, triggering a surge in the number of young people with hukou. Take children aged 2–7 as an example. In 2010, the average number in each single-year age group was only 12.59 million, corresponding to a total fertility rate of roughly 1.28. By 2012, the figure had risen to 15.38 million, and by 2015 it had climbed further to 16.96 million. Although the number of live births reported in the health statistics had already become overstated after 2008, the average annual number of live births during 2008–2013 was still only 14.40 million. This implies that a substantial share of the registered hukou population aged 2–7 in 2015 had not been born to mothers at all, but had instead been "born" on statistical records. The 2007 birth cohort illustrates this clearly. The *China Health Statistics Yearbook* reported 12.51 million live births in 2007, and the number of three-year-olds in the hukou data for 2010 was 12.53 million, almost identical. Yet the same cohort had grown to 15.68 million as five-year-olds in the 2012 hukou data and to 16.47 million as eight-year-olds in the 2015 hukou data.

The reason is that young children can acquire multiple hukou far more easily than adults. Adults are constrained by educational records, employment histories, and other administrative records, making additional hukou relatively difficult to obtain. Children, by contrast, have almost no administrative record, making duplicate hukou much harder to detect or verify. As a result, several patterns emerged. First, children who had genuinely remained unregistered because they had been born in violation of the one-child policy were finally granted hukou. Second, some children who had already obtained hukou through informal channels were registered again by claiming that they lacked hukou. Third, even families whose children had never faced hukou problems exploited the policy loophole to obtain additional hukou for children who were already registered.

Because these duplicate hukou were created from scratch, they could easily be supported by a complete set of internally consistent identity documents, making them highly concealed and extremely difficult to identify during subsequent verification.

3. Live Births in the Health Statistics Yearbook Are Highly Unreliable

When justifying the adoption of the universal two-child policy, Chinese authorities also cited hospital-reported live birth data. In November 2016, Zhai Zhenwu argued that "the more than 16 million annual births recently published by the NBS are basically consistent with reality, as confirmed by both the nationwide number of hospital live births and the population of young children in the household-registration system".¹⁷ He further stated: "Since 2010, the number of hospital live births nationwide has exceeded 16 million every year, while the hospital-delivery rate has reached 99%. These figures should be highly reliable because hospital delivery records are more complete. Therefore, there is essentially no basis for questioning that China's annual births have exceeded 16 million in recent years."¹⁸

In 2016, Zhai Zhenwu and his student Li Long coauthored a highly controversial paper whose grossly inflated projections misled the Chinese government into adopting only the universal two-child policy rather than fully abolishing birth restrictions.¹⁹ In 2024, Li Long published a paper in *Scientific Reports* arguing that the 2020 census was the highest-quality census in China's history. One piece of evidence he cited was that the number of hospital-recorded live births reported in the *Health Statistics Yearbook* closely matched the corresponding age-group population recorded in the 2020 census.²⁰

In fact, the live births reported in the *Health Statistics Yearbook* are themselves unreliable. Yet

even these reported figures were well below 16 million in every year except 2016 and 2017,

providing no support for the claim that China's annual births consistently exceeded 16 million.

Table 3. Comparison of Births in Statistical Yearbooks and Live births in the Health Statistics Yearbook (million)

Year	Statistical Yearbooks	Health Statistics Yearbook	
	Births	Live births	Hospital-delivery rate
2000	17.71	10.99	72.90%
2001	17.02	10.69	76.00%
2002	16.47	10.59	78.70%
2003	15.99	10.19	79.40%
2004	15.93	10.89	82.80%
2005	16.17	11.42	85.90%
2006	15.85	11.77	88.40%
2007	15.95	12.51	91.70%
2008	16.08	13.31	94.50%
2009	15.91	13.83	96.30%
2010	15.92	14.22	97.80%
2011	16.04	14.51	98.70%
2012	16.34	15.44	99.20%
2013	16.4	15.11	99.50%
2014	16.88	15.18	99.60%
2015	16.55	14.54	99.70%
2016	17.85	18.47	99.80%
2017	17.23	17.58	99.90%
2018	15.24	15.21	99.90%
2018		13.62	99.90%
2019	14.65	14.55	99.90%

Table 8-4-1 of the 2019 Health Statistics Yearbook reported 15.21 million live births nationwide in 2018, whereas the sum of provincial figures in Table 8-4-2 was only 13.62 million.

The table shows that before 2016, births reported in the *China Statistical Yearbook* consistently exceeded live births reported in the *China Health Statistics Yearbook*. In 2000, for example, the *China Statistical Yearbook* reported 17.71 million births, whereas the *China Health*

Statistics Yearbook recorded only 10.99 million—fewer even than the 12.64 million implied by the 2000 census total fertility rate of 1.22. One reason for this gap was that the hospital-delivery rate was only 72.9% that year. The 8.01 million newborns delivered in hospitals were recorded relatively

accurately, while the 2.98 million home births assisted by midwives were more prone to underreporting. Assuming one-third underreporting, the actual number of births would have been about 12.48 million.

Although censuses and sample surveys showed no increase in fertility, reported live births continued to rise after 2006 for several reasons.

First, changes in childbirth-related reimbursement policies created new incentives for data distortion. Before 2008, childbirth expenses for farmers and some urban residents were largely paid out of pocket, leaving little financial motivation to overreport live births. As a result, reported live birth figures were relatively accurate. In 2003, China began piloting the New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme (NRCMS) in selected areas and achieved near-universal coverage by 2008. Government subsidies for the NRCMS increased from RMB 80 per person per year in 2008 to RMB 380 in 2015, while hospitalization reimbursement rates reached approximately 75%.²¹ In 2016, the government merged the NRCMS with the urban residents' basic medical insurance system to establish a unified urban-rural residents' medical insurance program. The government subsidy per enrollee rose to RMB 700 by 2025, including RMB 560 from the central government.²² Government health expenditure as a share of GDP increased from 0.94% in 2007 to 1.83% in 2016 and remained broadly stable thereafter, except during the COVID-19 pandemic.²³ Subsidies for hospital-reported live births became an important component of the medical insurance system. Because these subsidies were directly linked to reported live birth figures, individuals, hospitals, and local governments all faced incentives to overreport live births in order to obtain additional fiscal support.

Second, births among the floating population increasingly occurred at places of residence rather than places of household registration. Between

2010 and 2020, China's urbanization rate increased from 50% to 64%, while the floating population's share of the total population rose from 17% to 27%. Many migrant-worker families adopted a "one family, two registrations" strategy: one spouse registered in a city to access public benefits, while the other retained rural registration to preserve land and other existing rights. Birth patterns also changed: the share of children born to the floating population at their place of current residence rose from 27.5% in 2010 to 56.6% in 2014.²⁴ Because of cross-regional movement, a single birth could be recorded twice: once at the place of hukou, and again at the location where the delivery took place. Moreover, the linkage between medical insurance and hukou created opportunities for arbitrage: some families paid for childbirth at their place of residence and then colluded with medical institutions in their hometowns to create duplicate birth records and obtain reimbursement.

Third, after 2010, the relaxation of hukou restrictions for younger age groups created opportunities for some parents to obtain multiple birth certificates for the same child through different channels and subsequently acquire multiple hukou. Many sought to obtain both urban and rural hukou for their children. Online searches for "birth certificate trading" revealed widespread evidence of such practices. A *Legal Daily* report on October 27, 2011, described a cross-provincial birth-certificate trafficking case and noted that "fake birth certificates are now almost rampant."²⁵ On September 25, 2016, *Democracy and Law Times* reported that 4,000 blank birth certificates had been stolen from the Maternal and Child Health Station in Mengcheng County, Anhui Province, and sold across multiple provinces.²⁶

On April 30, 2019, the official website of the Chenzhou Supervisory Commission in Hunan Province published an article titled "Birth Certificates from a Thousand Miles Away,"

reporting that directors of two township hospitals in Rucheng County had sold hundreds of blank birth certificates. On October 24, 2019, *China Central Television* reported that hospitals in Sichuan and Hebei had sold birth certificates for RMB 30,000 each.²⁷ On December 8, 2021, *China Youth Daily* reported that as many as 4,885 birth certificates had been stolen from a maternal and child health hospital in Shangqiu, Henan Province, and sold to buyers in multiple provinces.²⁸

On February 16, 2025, *China Business Journal* reported that more than 1,000 birth certificates had been stolen and sold from three maternal and child health hospitals in Hengyang, Hunan Province. Newborn birth certificates, which are difficult for authorities to verify, sold for RMB 25,000–30,000 each, while certificates for older children sold for around RMB 100,000 (approximately \$14,000).²⁹ The chain from birth certificates to hukou is complete, making these multiple hukou extremely difficult to eliminate in the future.

Fourth, beginning in 2013, officials and institutions formerly affiliated with the National Population and Family Planning Commission (NPFPC) assumed control over population statistics reported in health-statistics yearbooks and manipulated figures to align them with policy expectations. In 2013, the Ministry of Health and the NPFPC merged to form the National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC). Key positions, including the ministerial post, were filled by former family-planning officials. Yu Xuejun, formerly director-general of the Development Planning and Information Department of the NPFPC, became director of the General Office of the new commission and concurrently deputy editor-in-chief of the *China Health and Family Planning Statistical Yearbook*, which was compiled under the auspices of the China Population and Development Research Center, an institution affiliated with the former

NPFPC. After the NHFPC was abolished in 2018, the *China Health Yearbook* continued to be compiled under the auspices of the China Population and Development Research Center,³⁰ and Yu Xuejun remained deputy editor-in-chief.

For example, China implemented the universal two-child policy in 2016. To demonstrate policy success at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 and during the 2018 institutional reforms, and to strengthen the political justification for its institutional role, the NHFPC had strong incentives to inflate birth figures to match expectations. On November 26, 2016, Wang Peian, vice minister of the NHFPC, stated: "Based on family-planning statistics, hospital-delivery statistics, and provincial birth and pregnancy data, we estimate that births in 2016 will exceed 17.5 million, broadly consistent with the forecast when the universal two-child policy was introduced."³¹ The subsequently published *China Health and Family Planning Statistical Yearbook 2017* went even further, reporting in Table 8-4-1 ("Maternal Health Care") that live births surged from 14.54 million in 2015 to 18.47 million in 2016, an increase of 27%,³² with Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shandong, Shaanxi, and Ningxia recording increases of 48%, 75%, 56%, 43%, and 56%, respectively. The NBS initially reported 17.86 million births in 2016,³³ but later revised the figure upward to 18.83 million after incorporating health-statistics data. The United Nations World Population Prospects 2024 likewise reported 18.33 million births in China in 2016.

The universal two-child policy took effect on January 1, 2016. Given an average gestation period of approximately 266 days (about 38–40 weeks), the earliest effects on births could only have begun to appear gradually after late September 2016. A large birth surge in 2016 would therefore have been biologically implausible. Moreover, women most likely to have compensatory births were often older mothers.

Had there been a major birth surge, one would have expected a noticeable rise in pregnancy-related complications, including hypertensive disorders of pregnancy, gestational diabetes, low birth weight, and preterm births. However, the relevant data in the *China Health and Family Planning Statistical Yearbook* show no such trend. Sales of infant-related products, including strollers, cribs, diapers, and infant formula, also showed no significant increase. Sample surveys indicate that the total fertility rate in 2016 was only 1.24, implying roughly 13 million actual births—far below the 18.47 million live births reported by health authorities or the 18.83 million births reported by the NBS. Children born in 2016 reached primary-school age in 2022, yet national first-grade enrollment did not increase as expected; instead, it declined by about 5%. Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shandong, Shaanxi, and Ningxia likewise recorded declines of 1–5%.³⁴

During the one-child-policy era, although the Chinese government carried out forced abortions, it also strictly prohibited sex-selective abortion. Nevertheless, driven by financial incentives, some doctors continued to perform sex-selective abortions illicitly, keeping China's sex ratio at birth (boys per 100 girls) around 120 for many years, with some counties reaching 160. After the universal two-child policy, incentives for sex-selective abortion weakened, yet the 2020 census still recorded a national sex ratio at birth of 111.

Sex-selective abortion primarily reflected individual interests and involved a relatively limited set of stakeholders. By contrast, the inflation of live birth statistics after 2008 was driven by a much broader range of interests, including those of individuals, hospitals, local governments, and family-planning officials,

creating a far larger incentive structure. If hospitals could not even prevent profit-driven sex-selective abortions from driving the sex ratio at birth so far above normal, how can their reported live birth figures—subject to far stronger incentives to be inflated—be trusted?

4. Inconsistencies between National and Provincial Live Birth Data

The National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC) claimed that "live birth figures for 2016 and later were derived from national monthly hospital-delivery reports and included live births among both hukou and non-hukou residents, whereas live birth figures for 2015 and earlier were derived from annual national maternal and child health reports and included only live births among hukou residents." In fact, neither the national nor provincial live birth figures published for 2015 and earlier were described as covering only hukou residents, nor were they compiled using such a criterion. Rather, they covered the entire population.

Guangdong is China's largest net in-migration province. According to the 2020 census, it had a resident population of 126.01 million, including 1.61 million out-migrants and 29.62 million in-migrants, yielding net in-migration of 28.01 million, or 22% of its resident population. Xinjiang, Fujian, and Liaoning are also net in-migration provinces, with net inflows equivalent to 11%, 6%, and 2% of their resident populations, respectively. Henan is China's largest net out-migration province, with net out-migration equal to 12% of its resident population; the corresponding figure for Guangxi is 10%.

Table 4. Comparison of Live births in the Health Statistics Yearbook and Births Reported by the NBS (thousand)

	Live births in the Health Statistics Yearbook			Births reported by the NBS		
Year	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015
Guangdong	1,320	1,280	1,286	1,137	1,154	1,199
Xinjiang	379	396	405	356	375	363
Fujian	500	535	547	459	519	531
Liaoning	301	338	272	267	285	271
Guangxi	824	782	772	671	666	671
Henan	1,620	1,557	1,472	1,155	1,206	1,201

Source: Live birth figures are from the annual *China Health Statistics Yearbook*; birth figures are from the *China Population and Employment Statistics Yearbook 2020*.

If live births reported before 2016 had covered only hukou residents, then net in-migration provinces should have reported fewer live births than births among their resident populations, whereas net out-migration provinces should have shown the opposite. The resident-population birth figures published by the NBS are themselves substantially higher than the theoretical births implied by census and mini-census fertility rates, indicating serious overestimation. Yet in every province listed above, reported live births exceeded resident-population births, demonstrating that live birth statistics before 2016 covered the entire population rather than only hukou residents.

To demonstrate the success of the universal two-child policy, the NHFPC reported live births in Guangdong increasing from 1.286 million in 2015 to 1.906 million in 2016, a surge of 48%. In contrast, the Guangdong Bureau of Statistics reported resident-population births increasing only from 1.1995 million to 1.2945 million, or just 7.9%.³⁵

Table 8-4-1 of each annual *Health Statistics Yearbook* reports national live births, whereas Table 8-4-2 reports provincial live births, whose aggregate matches the national total in Table 8-4-1. At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, NHFPC

Minister Li Bin failed to secure promotion to the Politburo, and the commission was abolished the following year. The newly established National Health Commission relaxed its control over population statistics. Although Table 8-4-1 in the *China Health Statistics Yearbook 2019* still reported 15.21 million live births nationwide in 2018—almost exactly matching the NBS figure of 15.23 million births—Table 8-4-2 reported provincial live births totaling only 13.62 million, which the commission explained as covering only hukou residents. This represented a 26% decline from 2016, with Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shandong, Shaanxi, and Ningxia recording declines of 26%, 31%, 36%, 32%, and 36%, respectively.³⁶

After these discrepancies prompted media scrutiny of the data,³⁷ the aggregate provincial figures in Table 8-4-2 once again matched the national total reported in Table 8-4-1 in subsequent editions of the *China Health Statistics Yearbook*, and that national total again remained consistent with the NBS birth figures. Since both the provincial live birth figures in the *China Health Statistics Yearbook* and the provincial birth figures in the *China Statistical Yearbook* cover resident populations, they should in principle be identical. In practice, however, they differ substantially.

Table 5. Comparison of Provincial Live births and Births in 2019 (thousand)

	Live births	Births	Live births/Births
National total	14,551	14,648	0.99
Heilongjiang	155	216	0.72
Hubei	535	672	0.80
Jiangxi	476	586	0.81
Anhui	621	763	0.81
Hunan	621	718	0.87
Sichuan	777	894	0.87
Chongqing	284	326	0.87
Jilin	147	163	0.90
Fujian	464	510	0.91
Shaanxi	445	408	1.09
Gansu	307	280	1.10
Henan	1,175	1,060	1.11
Guangdong	1,658	1,434	1.16
Guizhou	575	493	1.17
Beijing	218	175	1.25

Source: Live birth figures are from the China Health Statistics Yearbook 2020; birth figures are from the China Statistical Yearbook 2020.

Chongqing is one of the few provincial-level jurisdictions that once published monthly delivery reports. The pattern of its monthly data releases strongly suggests that the officially reported live birth figures were adjusted. From January through May 2019, live births to the hukou population totaled 68,351, down 31% from 98,531 during the same period of the previous year. In response to media reports highlighting this sharp decline,³⁸ the Chongqing Municipal Health Commission released the June figures, showing 69,399 live births to the hukou population in that month alone—more than during the preceding five months combined—bringing the first-half total to 137,750, slightly exceeding the corresponding figure for 2018. Live births to the resident

population in June also reached 66,862, nearly matching the combined total of 71,554 recorded during the previous five months (an average of 14,311 per month), bringing the first-half total to 138,416. Live births to the resident population then fell back to just 16,497 in July and 10,939 in August. Possibly because *The Wall Street Journal* reported these unusually large fluctuations in Chongqing's live birth figures,³⁹ public scrutiny may have made it impractical for the Chongqing Municipal Health Commission to concentrate the year's upward adjustment in December, leading it instead to spread the anticipated increase across September through December.⁴⁰

Table 6. Live births in Chongqing, 2019 (persons)

Month	Hukou population	Resident population
Jan-May	68,351	71,554
June	69,399	66,862
July	9,930	16,497
August	10,884	10,939
September	36,079	37,724
October	20,171	20,416
November	26,080	31,700
December	20,817	28,556
Full year	261,711	284,248

Excluding the months with abnormally inflated figures and extrapolating solely from the seven months of January–May and July–August, live births among Chongqing's resident population averaged only 14,141 per month, implying an annual total of approximately 169,697 births—just 60% of the officially reported figure. If Chongqing was representative of the national pattern, actual births in China in 2019 may have been fewer than 9 million, the total population may already have been declining, and the total fertility rate may have fallen below 1.0. Beginning in 2020, Chongqing stopped publishing monthly live birth data.

Historically, the *China Health Statistics Yearbook*, compiled by the health authorities, was produced independently of the *China Statistical Yearbook*, published by the NBS, and therefore provided an independent check on official birth figures. Beginning in 2019, however, the two series became nearly identical. From 2019 to 2024, the *China Health Statistics Yearbook* reported 14.55, 12.03, 10.52, 9.59, 8.75, and 9.52 million

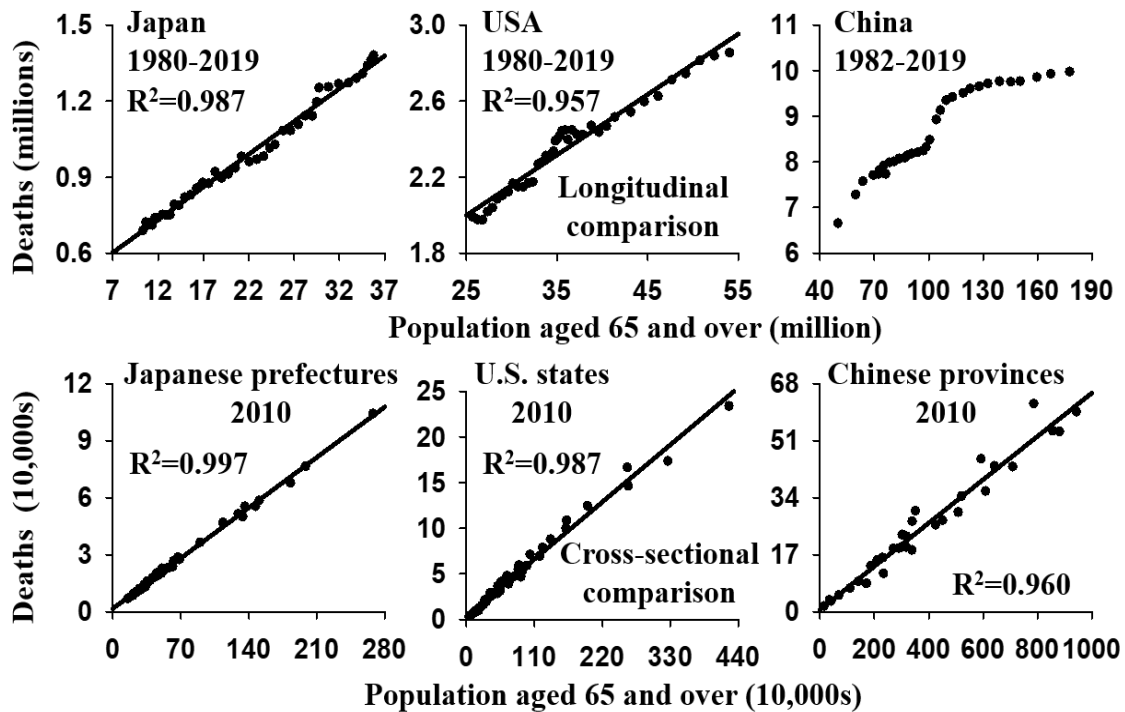
live births, compared with 14.65, 12.02, 10.62, 9.56, 9.02, and 9.54 million births reported in the *China Statistical Yearbook*, respectively. This near identity strongly suggests that the live birth statistics may no longer be compiled independently and therefore can no longer serve as an independent check on the official birth figures.

5. Official Death Data Are Systematically Underreported

Because population data are closely tied to social security, medical insurance, land rights, and other urban-rural welfare benefits, deaths are systematically underreported in China. Shaanxi Province provides a revealing example. Its *Statistical Communiqué* reported 231,000 deaths in 2013,⁴¹ yet in the first seven months of 2014 alone, the province deregistered 105,000 hukou accounts belonging to people who had died but had never been formally removed from the household registration system.⁴²

Under normal circumstances, deaths are concentrated among people aged 65 and above, so the size of the elderly population and the annual number of deaths should exhibit a strong positive correlation. Because the COVID-19 pandemic caused abnormal excess mortality during 2020–2022, Figure 1 compares this relationship only for years up to 2019. The results show an exceptionally strong positive correlation, both in longitudinal comparisons over time in Japan and the United States and in cross-sectional comparisons across Japanese prefectures and U.S. states in 2010. According to China's official population statistics, however, this correlation is much weaker.

Figure 1. Population Aged 65+ and Deaths in Japan, the United States, and China

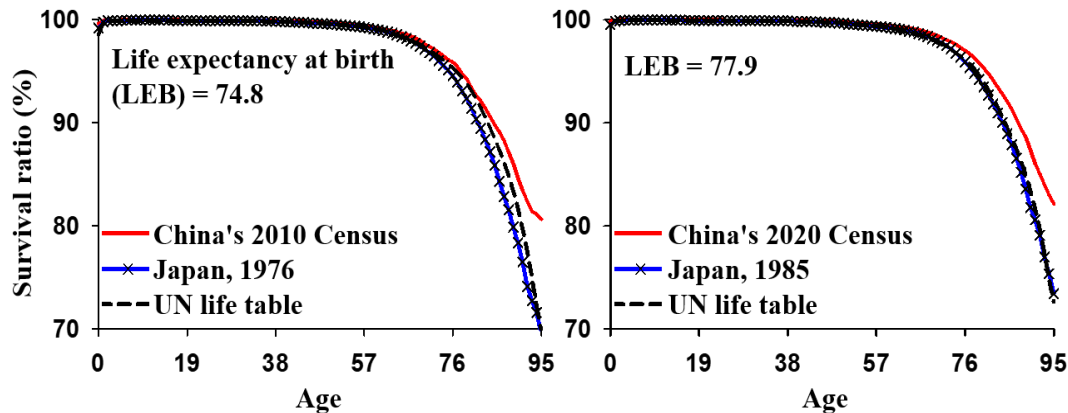


The share of the population aged 65 and above increased from 8.0% to 12.6%. This transition occurred between 2007 and 2019 in China and between 1974 and 1991 in Japan. During these periods, Japan's elderly population grew by 75%, while annual deaths increased by 18%. In mainland China, the elderly population grew by 67%, yet reported annual deaths increased by only 9%.

China's official statistics do not capture the true number of deaths. China's official statistics do not capture the true number of deaths. Although the published death figures remain too low, they already have been adjusted upward from raw figures that were even more severely understated.

Even death data collected through the population census are substantially underreported. After revising the census data, the Chinese authorities reported life expectancy at birth of 74.8 years in 2010 and 77.9 years in 2020,⁴³ roughly equivalent to Japan's levels in 1976 and 1985,⁴⁴ and also close to the values for China in the 2007 and 2018 life tables of the United Nations' World Population Prospects 2024. However, the survival rates above age 60 in life tables constructed from China's 2010 and 2020 census data are substantially higher than the corresponding rates in both the Japanese and UN life tables. This implies serious underreporting of deaths in the Chinese censuses.

Figure 2. Survival Rates in Different Life Tables with the Same Life Expectancy at Birth



The 2010 and 2020 censuses reported only 7.42 million and 7.97 million deaths, respectively. Because these figures were obviously too low, the authorities did not adopt them in the *Statistical Communiqués*, instead revising them upward to 9.51 million and 9.98 million. In reality, the original census death counts were even lower. Fujian Province provides an example. Its annual *Statistical Communiqués* reported 212,300, 213,900, and 219,200 deaths in 2007–2009. However, an internal notice issued by the Fujian Provincial Census Office stated that the preliminary tabulation as of November 1, 2010, recorded only 150,000 deaths—60,000 fewer than in a normal year. The final census reported 184,500 deaths for Fujian and 7.42 million nationwide, whereas the *Statistical Communiqué* reported 189,900 deaths for Fujian and 9.51 million nationwide.

Although the NBS revised the published death totals upward in the *Statistical Communiqués*, many deceased individuals whose deaths went unreported remained counted in each age group, continuing to inflate the total population. In 2022, the Shanghai police database was hacked, exposing the personal information of roughly one billion people across China. In the publicly released sample of 250,000 individuals,

people aged 100 or above accounted for 4.6% of the sample. By comparison, even in Japan, renowned for exceptional longevity, centenarians account for only about 0.07% of the population. Among the leaked records were 109 people from my hometown, Hongjiang, Hunan Province, including seven members of the Yi clan. One member of the Yi clan was recorded as having been born in 1901, which would have made him 121 years old, although he had actually died decades earlier.

These examples indicate that China's hukou system contains numerous fictitious or obsolete records, allowing people who never truly existed—or who died long ago—to remain embedded in the official population statistics. Nevertheless, compared with the gross overstatement of births, death underreporting is much smaller in scale and has a correspondingly limited effect on China's total population estimates.

6. Shandong: China's Foremost Example of Statistical Falsification

Shandong has a distinctive political culture in which official-centered values have deep social roots, and its bureaucracy is known for its strong capacity for policy implementation. More

members of successive Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committees have come from Shandong than from any other province, and today Shandong's young people remain especially enthusiastic about careers in the civil service. Because its statistics are widely perceived as serving political objectives, Shandong has earned the sarcastic nickname "Lu Chui No. 1" ("Shandong, the nation's No. 1 boaster"), implying that it leads the country in statistical exaggeration. In 1958, for example, Shandong officials claimed that grain yields could reach 75-375 tons per hectare. On August 27, *People's Daily* publicized these claims under the headline "How Bold the People Are, How Productive the Land Is," further reinforcing Mao Zedong's determination to pursue the Great Leap Forward, which ultimately resulted in a nationwide famine that claimed tens of millions of lives.

In 1991, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council issued *the Decision on Strengthening Family-Planning Work and Strictly Controlling Population Growth*, which required local governments to implement the "one-vote veto" system. Under this system, failure to meet family-planning targets would override all other performance evaluations. Shandong enforced this policy with particular rigor, and Guan County became one of its most notorious examples. In 1991, the county's Party secretary, Zeng Zhaoqi, launched the infamous "Hundred Childless Days" campaign,⁴⁵ mandating that no child be born anywhere in the county between May 1 and August 10—a clearly unattainable target. Streets were plastered with slogans such as: "Better to end the family line than let the Party worry," "Better to abort than to give birth," and "Policy enforcement must be resolute; extra children are absolutely forbidden."

Some counties implemented the policy even more aggressively than Guan County. The 2000 census revealed a striking break in the age

structure: nationwide, the ratio of the 5–9 age group (born in 1991–1995) to the 10–14 age group (born in 1986–1990) was 72%; in Shandong, it was only 47%, the lowest among all provinces. At the county level, the ratio was 43% in Guan County and only 30%, 27%, 25%, 23%, and 19% in Yinan, Linqi, Dongping, Ningyang, and Feicheng, respectively.

The people of Shandong also proved adept at exploiting policy loopholes. Before the 2010 census, the Ministry of Public Security launched a nationwide hukou rectification campaign that effectively relaxed registration controls for young children, allowing many families to obtain multiple hukou registrations for the same child. Only a few provinces published hukou birth statistics. In Shandong, hukou births surged from 1.03 million in 2009 to 1.50 million in 2010,⁴⁶ while Chongqing's rose from 408,000 to 628,000.⁴⁷ Importantly, these newly hukou-registered children were not all recorded in the age-0 group but were distributed across several young age groups. The 2010 census short-form data confirm this pattern: Shandong recorded 980,000 infants aged 0 and 1.077 million children aged 1, while Chongqing recorded 263,000 and 295,000, respectively.

After the selective two-child policy was introduced in 2014, Shandong alone accounted for 25% of all second-child birth applications nationwide,⁴⁸ despite having only 7% of China's population. Yet the province did not formally implement the policy until May 30, 2014. Given an average gestation period of approximately 266 days, any resulting birth surge should have appeared mainly in 2015 rather than 2014. Nevertheless, the Shandong Statistics Bureau reported that births jumped by 25% in 2014, apparently demonstrating the policy's immediate success, only to decline by 11% in 2015.⁴⁶ This suggests that the surge in second-child applications did not translate into actual births.

Consistent with this interpretation, children supposedly born in 2014 reached primary-school age in 2020, yet first-grade enrollment showed almost no increase.

Even more remarkably, many families also exploited the policy loophole by obtaining duplicate hukou for children born before the policy took effect. As a result, hukou births in Shandong surged from 1.17 million in 2013 to 2.20 million in 2014, with the additional registrations again distributed across multiple young age groups. Using the 2015 hukou data, Zhai Zhenwu concluded that China's total fertility rate in 2008, 2009, and 2010 must have been at least 1.66, 1.66, and 1.63, respectively. Yet the hukou data underlying those estimates contained substantial artificial inflation, as illustrated by the 2010 figures for Shandong and Chongqing and the 2015 figures for Shandong.

Following the introduction of the universal two-child policy in 2016, Shandong's birth

statistics again became exceptionally inflated. Reported live births increased by 56%, while births reported by the statistics bureau rose by 44%. At the same time, many families once again obtained duplicate hukou for children born in earlier years, causing Shandong's hukou births to reach 2.05 million in 2017.

According to the NBS data, national births increased from 16.55 million in 2015 to 17.85 million in 2016, a rise of 1.303 million. Shandong alone accounted for 538,000 of this increase, representing 41% of the national total increase.⁴⁹ In 2017, births in Shandong were 520,000 higher than in 2015, accounting for 76% of the national increase over the same period. In other words, it was Shandong's "contribution" that drove the nationwide increase in births in 2016 and 2017 to 7.9% and 4.1%, respectively, compared with 2015. Excluding Shandong, the increases would have been only 5.0% and 1.1%, respectively.

Table 7. Comparison of Different Data Sources for the Same Birth Cohorts in Shandong (thousand)

Health Statistics		Births in Statistics Yearbook			Primary school	
Year	Live births	Year	Resident population	Hukou population	Year	Enrollment
2011	950	2011	1,100	1,140	2017	1,270
2012	960	2012	1,150	1,130	2018	1,300
2013	920	2013	1,110	1,170	2019	1,280
2014	1,060	2014	1,390	2,200	2020	1,300
2015	1,050	2015	1,240	1,430	2021	1,380
2016	1,640	2016	1,770	1,540	2022	1,310
2017	1,660	2017	1,750	2,050	2023	1,800
2018	1,060	2018	1,330	1,500	2024	1,360
2019	1,140	2019	1,180	1,230		
2020	860	2020	870	1,000		

Sources: Live birth data are from the annual *China Health Statistics Yearbook*;⁵⁰ birth data for the resident population and the hukou population are from *Shandong Statistical Yearbook 2024*; and primary-school enrollment data are from the annual *China Education Statistics Yearbook*.³⁴

According to official live birth data from the health statistics system and birth data reported by Shandong Provincial Statistical authorities, Shandong experienced an apparent surge in births in 2016. Primary-school enrollment in 2022 should therefore have risen sharply, but instead it declined. In 2023, primary-school enrollment inexplicably surged from 1.31 million the previous year to 1.80 million, only to fall back to 1.36 million in 2024. Nationally, primary-school enrollment increased by 1.76 million year-on-year in 2023, with Shandong contributing nearly one-third of that increase. Yet schools across Shandong reported that no "enrollment boom" had actually occurred in 2023.

Shandong's economic data have also been subject to serious inflation. For example, the fourth national economic census verified that Shandong's GDP in 2018 was only RMB 6.6649 trillion, indicating that the figure previously reported by the province, RMB 7.6470 trillion, had been overstated by 15%.⁵¹

History shows that once China's population data become linked to vested interests and incentive structures, they tend to be systematically inflated. Primary-school enrollment before 1994, hospital live birth figures before 2008, and low-age hukou data before 2010 were relatively reliable and can be regarded as "clean data." After such interests and incentives came into play, however, these data were transformed into highly unreliable "contaminated data."

Medical debridement follows the principles of aseptic technique: contaminated wounds are cleansed and disinfected, necrotic and infected tissues and foreign materials are removed, and contaminated wounds are transformed into clean wounds to promote healing. China's population statistics, however, have evolved in the opposite direction. The more contaminated a dataset becomes, the more deeply it becomes embedded in the policymaking process. When education, live

birth, and hukou data were still relatively accurate, their value was overlooked; once distorted, they became the very foundation of policymaking.

This created a "contamination cycle": distorted figures reinforced one another, creating the illusion of independent confirmation while gradually distorting data that had once been reliable and pushing population statistics ever further away from reality. For example, the population census, originally one of the cleanest sources of demographic information, was "adjusted" using already distorted education and hukou data and eventually became contaminated itself. The resulting circular reinforcement of false figures created a self-validating system, resembling the Chinese proverb "three people make a tiger"—meaning that repeated falsehoods can eventually be accepted as truth—and ultimately convinced both policymakers and the public.

Today, the Chinese government has begun vigorously encouraging births. It has introduced various subsidies and directly linked fertility outcomes to officials' performance evaluations. Tianmen City in Hubei Province was among the first local governments to introduce pro-birth policies, and its "Birth-Friendly City Creation Reform Project" was nominated for the Hubei Reform Award.⁵² Under such incentive structures, local governments at all levels will have strong incentives to exaggerate birth figures in order to compete for performance rewards and fiscal resources.

As a result, the Chinese government will find it increasingly difficult to grasp the country's true demographic situation. More and more "newborns" will exist only on statistical ledgers, much like the "dead souls" in Nikolai Gogol's eponymous novel.

Although the central government is unlikely to introduce compulsory pro-birth measures, some local governments in Shandong—long known for

excessively aggressive policy implementation—may resort to such approaches. More likely, however, Shandong's efforts will be limited to

inflating reported birth numbers. The province may once again "create a miracle" in birth-data falsification.

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6 How Manipulated Population Data Misled Beijing and Washington

Yi Fuxian

When analyzing China, international scholars and policymakers often scrutinize its leaders' statements and decisions, but rarely question the demographic data on which those decisions are based.

The Chinese Communist Party's governing philosophy is rooted in Marxism, which holds that the economic base shapes the political and institutional superstructure. Yet the economic base itself ultimately rests on demographic structure—the size and age distribution of the population, which in turn shape the labor force, consumption, savings, fiscal capacity, and long-term growth. When the demographic data underlying that base are manipulated, the strategies built upon them can be distorted as well.

China has experienced the consequences of flawed demographic assumptions before. In 1980, missile scientist Song Jian projected that China's population would exceed 4.26 billion by 2080.¹ That projection helped persuade China's leaders to adopt the one-child policy—even though, absent any population controls, China's population was on track to peak at only about 1.6 billion before declining.²

The same pattern repeated itself. Chinese official data and UN estimates systematically overstated China's population size and demographic trajectory. Based on these inflated demographic data and projections, government economists projected that China's economy would eventually become two to three times larger than that of the United States. Convinced that China's economic base had fundamentally shifted, Beijing shifted from Deng Xiaoping's strategy of "keeping

a low profile" and convergence with the West toward a more assertive foreign policy and greater divergence at home. These projections also fueled strategic anxiety in Washington. Correcting these demographic distortions could help China recalibrate its policies—and help Washington avoid repeating the strategic miscalculations of the past decade.

1. Population Policy Failure

Population policy offers a case in point—and a clear contrast between accurate and flawed forecasting. In publications from 2000 to 2006, I projected that even with the complete abolition of population controls, China's total fertility rate (TFR) would fall from 1.95 births per woman in 2006 to 1.47 by 2023,³ with the population peaking below 1.4 billion. In publications from 2012 to 2015,⁴ I further projected that the universal two-child policy would raise the TFR only temporarily—to 1.4—before falling to 1.0 by 2026.⁵

Instead of adopting my proposal to abolish population controls, the Chinese government introduced the selective two-child policy in 2014, relying on projections by 17 establishment demographers, led by Cai Fang, then Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, that—based on manipulated data—predicted the selective two-child policy would raise the TFR to 2.4, while a universal two-child policy would raise it to 4.4 births per woman, corresponding to about 47 million births annually, and push China's population to a peak of 1.535

billion by 2044.⁶

The 2015 mini-census, however, showed a TFR of only 1.05,⁷ exposing the abject failure of the selective two-child policy. Yet rather than abolishing population controls, the government launched the universal two-child policy in 2016, based on projections by an establishment team of officials and demographers led by Wang Pei'an, Vice Minister of the National Health and Family Planning Commission, that the TFR would peak at 2.09 in 2018 (21.89 million births) before declining to 1.72 by 2050.⁸

In 2017, I argued that China's population figures had been overstated by at least 90 million,⁹ which angered the Chinese government and triggered a months-long investigation into my work. In January 2019, I concluded that China's population had already begun declining in 2018,¹⁰ triggering a fierce official backlash, as Chinese official and UN projections placed the onset of population decline in 2031 and 2032,^{11,12} respectively. The head of the National Bureau of Statistics personally denounced my findings on state media, including *China Central Television* (CCTV) and *People's Daily*,^{13,14} accusing me of fabricating rumors.

On January 3, 2020, *People's Daily Online* ranked my conclusion third among the "Top Ten Rumors of 2019 in China."¹⁵ Coincidentally, on the same day, Dr. Li Wenliang, the COVID-19 whistleblower, was summoned by Wuhan police for allegedly spreading rumors about the virus.¹⁶ His alleged offense was spreading municipal rumors; mine was fabricating national ones.

Official projections were soon disproved. Even after introducing the more permissive three-child policy in 2021, the government acknowledged that population decline began in 2022¹⁷ (while other evidence points to 2018¹⁸), and the total fertility rate fell below 1.0 by 2025. By China's own inflated figures, births in 2018 totaled only 15.23 million,¹⁹ far below the

projected post-universal two-child-policy peak levels of 47 million births in the 2012 projection and 49.95 million in the 2014 projection,²⁰ as well as the 21.89 million births projected for 2018 in 2016.

2. From Demographic Distortion to Strategic Miscalculation

A similar systematic bias extends to international demographic projections. The UN's World Population Prospects revisions²¹ are widely used for policy and business decisions worldwide. Yet every revision has overestimated China's population, without exception. The 1992 revision projected 1.54 billion people by 2025; by 2024, this figure had been revised down to 1.42 billion. For 2050, the projection fell from 1.52 billion in 1996 to 1.42 billion in 2008 and further to 1.26 billion in 2024. Projections for 2100 have also declined sharply—from 1.06 billion in the 2019 revision to 767 million in 2022 and 633 million in 2024. These constant downward revisions have undermined the reliability of UN demographic projections as a basis for understanding China's socioeconomic trajectory. The U.S. Census Bureau's projections of China's population have broadly mirrored those of the United Nations.

The manipulation of demographic data by Chinese official sources, combined with the United Nations' systematic overestimation of China's population, has produced inflated population projections. These projections have not only delayed the abolition of population controls but also distorted China's economic, social, defense, and foreign policymaking, as well as international investment decisions and other countries' policies toward China. Demographic data, in other words, underpin all of these domains.

One of the most consequential effects of these distorted demographic projections was the overestimation of China's future economic

strength, which in turn reshaped the Chinese leadership's strategic thinking. For decades, China adhered to Deng Xiaoping's strategy of concealing capabilities and biding time, engaging with the United States while converging with the West economically and socially. By the late 2000s and early 2010s, however, this strategy was increasingly questioned as optimistic projections of China's future economic dominance, based on inflated demographic assumptions, gained influence.

Justin Yifu Lin of Peking University repeatedly projected China's economy at 1.5–2.5 times the U.S. level by 2030,^{22,23,24} while Li Daokui of Tsinghua University projected it at three times by 2049.²⁵ These projections rested on implausibly high population assumptions, placing China's population at five times that of the United States in 2030 and four times in 2049. The 2008 global financial crisis further reinforced perceptions in China that the balance of power was shifting in China's favor. In 2011, Yao Yang—Lin's former student and then a professor at Peking University—specifically urged China's leadership in an internal report to abandon this long-standing strategy.²⁶

These projections and the strategic arguments they inspired helped foster a broader confidence in China's future trajectory, contributing to an increasingly confident political narrative and subsequent policy shifts. In 2012, then President Hu Jintao introduced the "Three Confidences"—confidence in the path, theory, and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics. In 2016, President Xi Jinping added confidence in culture, forming the "Four Confidences." This period also marked the beginning of a more assertive phase in China's foreign policy.

By 2020, China's economy had reached 71% of the size of the U.S. economy, making overtaking the United States appear within reach. The COVID-19 pandemic further strengthened

this confidence, as China's leaders viewed the country's early containment of the outbreak as evidence of institutional superiority and another factor widening the perceived gap with the West—echoing the impact of the 2008 financial crisis. On August 24, 2020, President Xi Jinping convened a pivotal symposium on economic and social development attended by establishment economists and demographers,²⁷ including Justin Yifu Lin, Yao Yang, and Cai Fang.²⁸ Against the backdrop of their optimistic projections, the Chinese leadership adopted the strategic goal of doubling China's GDP by 2035 relative to its 2020 level—a target premised on overtaking the United States. Buoyed by this optimism, Xi reportedly first articulated the strategic judgment that "the East is rising while the West is declining" during the Fifth Plenum of the 19th CCP Central Committee in October 2020,²⁹ arguing that the world was undergoing "great changes unseen in a century" and that "time and momentum are on our side."³⁰

These exaggerated demographic and economic forecasts also misled the international community, fueling strategic anxiety among U.S. policymakers and China analysts who believed China was on track to overtake the United States and challenge U.S. primacy. Michael Pillsbury projected in *The Hundred-Year Marathon* that China's economy would be twice the size of the U.S. economy by 2030 and three times as large by 2049; John Mearsheimer argued that China's rise would inevitably challenge U.S. hegemony;³¹ and Graham Allison framed the rivalry as a "Thucydides Trap" between a rising China and a declining America.³² Xi Jinping appears to have embraced the "Thucydides Trap" framework, repeatedly invoking the concept since at least 2014, including during U.S. President Donald Trump's 2026 visit to China. Responding on social media, Trump said that Xi had "very elegantly referred to the United States as perhaps being a declining

nation".³³

It is evident that inflated demographic projections produced a geopolitical "butterfly effect," misleading Beijing into strategic overconfidence and U.S. policymakers into strategic anxiety—two mirror-image miscalculations rooted in the same flawed population assumptions. If both Chinese official and UN population projections have proven so inaccurate in retrospect, there is little reason to trust their current estimates of China's population, which rest on the same flawed assumptions and underlying data problems. My own research suggests that China's true population in 2020 was below 1.28 billion.^{34,35} The essays published in this issue of *Contemporary China Review*, under the "Scholar's Monograph" section, provide further supporting evidence for this conclusion.

The distortion of China's demographic data has also obscured the roots of several economic puzzles, including chronically weak domestic demand and persistent overcapacity. The underlying cause is that the country's population of young people—the economy's "super consumers"—is far smaller than officially reported. An exceptionally low share of children reduced families' basic needs and weakened households' bargaining power, contributing to a decline in household disposable income from 62% of GDP in 1983 to about 43% today, well below the international norm of 60–70%. Household consumption likewise declined from 54% to 39% of GDP, compared with roughly 60% internationally.³⁶

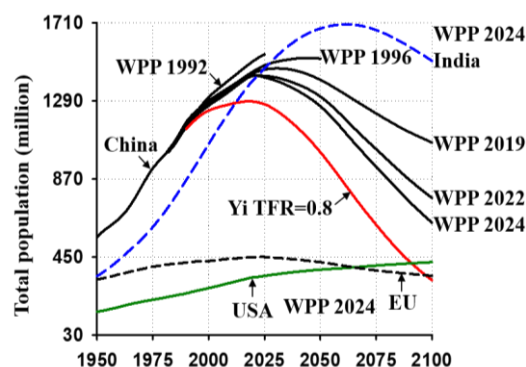
This chronic demand shortfall has left growth and employment heavily dependent on exports, fueling China's outsized manufacturing sector, which has contributed to global trade imbalances and hollowed out manufacturing in countries such as the United States. Because China's birth decline is sustained and irreversible, rebalancing toward the consumption-led growth model typical of

mature economies is becoming increasingly unlikely.

3. Demographic Crisis Unseen in Millennia

What manipulated statistics have long obscured is a demographic reality far graver than official figures suggest. Ethnic Chinese societies now exhibit some of the world's lowest fertility rates. In 2025, the total fertility rate (TFR) was 0.73 in Hong Kong,³⁷ 0.70 among ethnic Chinese populations in Taiwan³⁸ and Singapore,³⁹ and 0.47 in Macau.⁴⁰ Mainland China's TFR has already fallen below 1.0 and is likely to decline further as its level of socioeconomic development converges with theirs.

Figure 1. Population Projections



Even if China's TFR stabilizes at 0.8—still higher than the TFRs already recorded in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Macau—its population would continue to contract dramatically, falling to 1.01 billion by 2050, 620 million by 2075, and just 320 million by 2100. By contrast, according to the United Nations' 2024 revision of *World Population Prospects* (WPP), India is projected to have 1.505 billion people by the end of the century, followed by Pakistan (511 million), Nigeria (477 million), the United States (421 million), and the European Union (348

million)—all exceeding China's projected 320 million.

Population decline is inevitably accompanied by rapid population aging and weakening economic dynamism. Japan provides a clear historical precedent: beginning in 1992, Japan's major demographic indicators became less favorable than those of the United States across the board, and its economic growth has lagged behind that of the United States ever since. Japan's GDP fell from 74% of U.S. GDP in 1995 to just 14% by 2025.

China is now undergoing a similar demographic transition. Between 2029 and 2034, China's major demographic indicators are projected to become less favorable than those of the United States across the board, which will likely translate into persistently weaker economic growth. This makes it all but impossible for China's economy to catch up with the U.S. economy, let alone grow to two or three times its size.

China's current 17% share of global GDP is underpinned by its working-age population (ages 20–64), which still accounts for about 18% of the world's total. As this demographic share declines to an estimated 10% by 2050, China's economic weight in the global economy will inevitably decline as well. Its competitive advantage in global manufacturing will erode in tandem, as a shrinking labor force weakens the demographic foundation that has sustained it.

Nevertheless, a demographic crisis does not necessarily translate into an immediate regime crisis or threaten the survival of the political system. Ancient Rome was already grappling with declining fertility by the late Republican period, yet the Western Roman Empire did not collapse until about five centuries later. Likewise, the Tibetan polity survived for more than a millennium after its population entered a long-term decline beginning in the eighth century.

China's one-child policy has sharply reduced the share of people aged 15–29—typically the demographic most inclined to drive social change—while creating a large elderly population that depends on a strong central government to provide pensions, health care, and public security.⁴¹ Northeast China, the country's oldest region demographically, has experienced prolonged economic stagnation yet remains broadly supportive of the regime. In many respects, its current economic and political trajectory foreshadows China's future. Population aging is likely to generate numerous localized forms of social unrest, but it is unlikely to produce major political upheaval. Even if China were to experience turmoil comparable to that of Russia in the 1990s, its large elderly population would likely favor a Putin-like strongman promising to restore stability through centralized authority and stringent top-down measures.

For China's leadership, the greatest concern should not be regime security, but the long-term continuity of China's population and civilization. China's annual births were 5.8 times those of the United States in 1990. By 2025, that ratio had fallen to just 2.2, comparable to Nigeria's. Within a few years, China's annual births will fall below Pakistan's; by 2045–2050, they will fall below those of the United States; and by 2100, China is projected to have fewer than one-fifth as many births as the United States.

China accounted for only 6% of global births in 2025, a share projected to decline further to 2.8% by 2050 and just 0.6% by 2100. China's share of the global population has already fallen from 32% in 1820 to roughly 22% during 1950–1980 and 16% in 2025. It is projected to decline further to 11% by 2050 and just 3% by 2100. China faces not the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" proclaimed in official rhetoric, but a demographic and civilizational crisis unprecedented in millennia.

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China's Economy in 2026: *A Transformation Crisis Beneath the Growth*

Qiao Shan

Introduction

China's economy in 2026 will present a seemingly contradictory picture: stable growth, stalled transformation.

It is reasonable to expect that in 2026 China's economy will still maintain a growth rate of around 4.5% to 5%. Among the world's major economies, this would still count as a relatively high rate of growth. China's manufacturing sector, especially high-end manufacturing in areas such as new energy vehicles, batteries, solar photovoltaics, and electronic equipment, will continue to show strong global competitiveness, and export growth will also display considerable resilience. Yet from the perspective of the urgently needed transformation of China's growth model, such growth does not mean that the Chinese economy has already emerged from danger. The "investment-manufacturing-export" model that powered China's rapid growth over the past several decades is continuing in a new form. Although the growth momentum of real estate and traditional infrastructure investment has clearly weakened, manufacturing investment, industrial policy, and export expansion are filling the gap. China's old growth model is not being transformed; it is being consolidated in another guise. Its core logic remains the same: sustain growth by expanding productive capacity, rather than achieve structural transformation by expanding household consumption. Beneath the growth, a crisis of transformation is unfolding.

1. China's Economic Outlook in 2026: "Steady with Progress"

Regarding China's economic outlook for 2026, there is broad consensus among the Chinese government as well as international organizations and financial institutions: despite challenges such as the property-market adjustment, population aging, and changes in the external trade environment, China's economy will still maintain relatively stable growth with the support of policy measures and industrial competitiveness.

At China's 2026 "Two Sessions," the government stated in the Government Work Report that "in 2026, supported by pro-growth policies and industrial strengths, China's economy is expected to achieve growth of about 4.5%-5%, while maintaining stable employment, moderate prices, and basic stability in foreign trade." The International Monetary Fund (IMF) also expects China's growth rate in 2026 to remain around 4.5%. Forecasts from the World Bank and the OECD are broadly near this level as well. Several major international investment banks have given slightly higher projections. Goldman Sachs expects China's GDP growth in 2026 could come close to 5%; Morgan Stanley argues in a research report that, supported by manufacturing investment and export growth, China's economy will remain capable of sustaining medium-speed growth over the next two years.

Judging from China's economic data in recent

years, this outlook has some foundation. First, over the past year, China's economy met its roughly 5% growth target in 2025 despite a complicated international environment, demonstrating considerable stability. Although the real estate sector remained under adjustment, manufacturing investment, infrastructure investment, and export growth partially offset the drag from the decline in property investment. This trend is likely to continue in 2026.

Second, Chinese manufacturing still enjoys strong global competitive advantages. China has the world's most complete industrial system and vast industrial clusters, and it has clear strengths in new energy vehicles, batteries, photovoltaics, electronic equipment, and machinery. For example, in 2025 China's output of new energy vehicles exceeded 16.49 million units, accounting for more than 60% of the global market. China's solar module output accounted for more than 80% of the world total. Its huge industrial scale and mature supply chains ensure that China still occupies an important position in global manufacturing competition.

Third, China's foreign trade remains highly resilient. Although protectionism has been rising globally in recent years, Chinese exports have continued to grow. In 2025, China's total foreign trade reached \$6.35 trillion, up 5.5% year on year, allowing it to remain the world's largest trader in goods. Of this total, exports were about \$3.77 trillion, up 6.6%, and became an important pillar of economic growth. In January and February 2026, China's exports totaled \$656.58 billion, up 21.8% year on year in dollar terms, extending last year's stable export growth trend.

Fourth, the Chinese government still has substantial macro-policy room. Strong monetary and fiscal policies have long played an important role in China's macroeconomic management. The People's Bank of China has repeatedly released liquidity into the market through cuts in reserve

requirements and interest rates, while the central government has supported local economic development through special-purpose bonds and fiscal transfer payments. These policy tools provide important support for economic stability.

It is therefore reasonable to expect that the official growth target set by China for 2026 will be achieved.

However, if one looks only at aggregate growth data, one will miss a deeper question: is the economic structure behind the growth undergoing a healthy transformation?

2. China's Transformation Dilemma

Over the past several decades, China's rapid economic growth has been built on a distinctive development model. Through government-led large-scale infrastructure investment, real-estate-driven urbanization, and export-oriented manufacturing, this "China model" delivered long-term high-speed growth. At its core was growth itself, often reduced simply to GDP growth. Everything was for the sake of GDP.

This model played a huge role in China's development. By concentrating resources on infrastructure construction and investment, China rapidly built a modern industrial system. By integrating into the global trading system, Chinese manufacturing gained vast international markets. Through real estate development, China achieved rapid urbanization and stimulated a large number of related industries.

But as the economy has grown larger, the limitations of this model have gradually become apparent. First, the high-investment model has led to declining capital efficiency. Fixed-asset investment has long accounted for more than 40% of China's GDP, whereas in developed countries it is typically around 20%. As marginal returns to capital have fallen, investment efficiency has steadily deteriorated. According to data from the

World Bank and Chinese institutions, China's ICOR (incremental capital-output ratio) was about 3.5 before 2010, but in recent years it has risen above 6, and in some years even higher. Second, the real estate sector expanded excessively. At its peak, real estate and related industries accounted for nearly 30% of GDP. Once the property market entered adjustment, the entire economic system was affected. Third, local government debt has continued to accumulate. In order to maintain investment growth, many local governments borrowed heavily through financing platforms, creating significant fiscal risk. Finally, this model has resulted in a persistently low household-consumption share of GDP. Household consumption in China has long hovered around 38%-40% of GDP, whereas the global average is about 60%. In other words, China's household-consumption share is roughly 20 percentage points below the world average. This means that the huge material wealth China produces is converted more into fixed-asset investment, such as infrastructure, factories, and real estate, and into net exports, rather than directly improving households' current consumption levels. Although the government repeatedly emphasized "consumption-led growth" from 2023 to 2025, this ratio has risen only slowly.

Judging from the experience of developed economies and the bottlenecks in China's own development, it is urgent for China to shift from the old model, centered on investment, production, manufacturing, and exports, to a new model driven mainly by the domestic market and household consumption.

If it continues to rely on the old model, China will face increasingly serious structural risks. Falling investment returns, the property-market adjustment, local debt pressures, and international trade frictions could all exert a lasting drag on growth. International experience shows that once an economy reaches a certain stage of development, it must transition toward

consumption-driven growth. Japan, South Korea, and European economies all went through similar processes in the later stages of industrialization. Consumption-driven growth can not only stabilize the economy but also improve living standards.

Yet after the pandemic, China's economic adjustment has not moved clearly toward a consumption-oriented path. On the contrary, as real-estate investment and traditional infrastructure investment have declined, the economy has become even more reliant on manufacturing investment and export growth. In recent years the Chinese government has promoted the development of "new quality productive forces," vigorously pushing high-end manufacturing industries such as new energy vehicles, photovoltaics, batteries, and artificial intelligence. These industries are indeed highly competitive and have partly offset the pressure created by the property-sector downturn. But this shift still extends the old logic of the Chinese economy: using expanded productive capacity and larger exports to sustain growth.

Clearly, this so-called transformation is merely old roads walked in new shoes. It is not a real transformation. The expansion of manufacturing investment may intensify global overcapacity and trigger more trade frictions. In recent years, Europe and the United States have already launched multiple trade investigations into Chinese new energy vehicles, batteries, and solar products. Overreliance on exports means that China's economy remains vulnerable to fluctuations in external demand. If the global economy enters a recessionary cycle, China's export growth will face significant pressure. A manufacturing-led growth model is also unlikely to significantly raise household income and consumption. As manufacturing becomes increasingly automated, its ability to drive employment and income growth is limited. If household consumption remains weak for an

extended period, the problem of insufficient domestic demand will become increasingly acute. The experience of the United States, Japan, and the European Union shows that for a major country of 1.4 billion people, and for the world's second-largest economy with per capita GDP above \$10,000, failure to complete this transition quickly could lead China into a serious crisis.

3. Why Is China Trapped in This Transformation Dilemma?

The reason China's structural transformation has long been so difficult lies in a form of path lock-in jointly created by its political-economic structure, institutional arrangements, and policy incentive mechanisms.

First, path dependence. Over the past forty years, China's investment-driven, export-oriented development model has achieved tremendous success. This model not only delivered rapid growth but also created a comprehensive industrial system and global competitiveness. Precisely because this model succeeded so dramatically in the past, policymakers and local governments tend, whenever they face economic pressure, to fall back on familiar tools: expanding investment, launching new projects, encouraging manufacturing, and stimulating exports, rather than undertaking difficult structural reforms. Over time, institutional arrangements, industrial structures, and the fiscal system have all been built around this growth model, which makes transformation institutionally costly.

Second, political narrative. Within the narrative of the "China model," the pace of economic growth is not merely a development target; it is also an important symbol of institutional superiority. For decades China maintained a growth rate far above that of Western countries, and this has been treated in official discourse as an important marker of "the East

rising and the West declining." China's world-leading growth rate has effectively become a "GDP totem" of the CCP regime's governing legitimacy. The GDP growth rate has also become one of the main metrics for evaluating the performance of central and local officials. That is why, whenever China's economy encounters difficulties, the government's first priority is always to "stabilize growth." In this context, maintaining a stable, or even relatively high, GDP growth rate is not just an economic objective; it carries obvious political significance. One could say that after more than forty years of reform, the CCP itself has bound economic growth to its governing legitimacy. To "maintain growth" is to "protect Party rule." It is easy to imagine that if, in the name of economic transformation, China's GDP growth rate fell to 2%, 1%, or even 0%, below that of the United States and other Western countries, it would immediately trigger doubts within Chinese society about the legitimacy of CCP rule and cause major political turmoil. Under such political pressure, any deep economic transformation becomes extremely difficult.

Third, the structure of income distribution. For a long time, the distribution of national income among the government, enterprises, and households in China has had a clear pattern: the government and enterprise sectors take a relatively large share, while the household sector takes a relatively small one. China's household disposable income has long accounted for only about 43%-45% of GDP. The OECD average is 60%-70%, and in the United States it is as high as 75%-80%. This structure was conducive to concentrating resources on infrastructure and industrial investment during the investment-driven stage of development, but it has also constrained the growth of household consumption capacity. Raising the share of consumption in the economy would require increasing the share of household income in national income, which in turn would

mean adjusting the existing fiscal system, tax system, and the profit-distribution mechanisms of state-owned enterprises. That makes reform difficult.

Fourth, the social-security system. Consumption growth generally depends on a stable social-security system, because only when people feel secure in such areas as pensions, healthcare, and education will they reduce precautionary savings and consume more. Yet China's social-security system suffers from serious inequality. Those within the system, such as civil servants, public-sector employees, and formally employed workers in state-owned enterprises, enjoy relatively complete and generous protection, while those outside the system, including workers in private firms, flexible workers, and rural residents, receive incomplete protection at a much lower level, sometimes differing by several times or even dozens of times. For most Chinese residents, the system offers low and inadequate protection, which makes them unwilling, and often unable, to spend. At the same time, China is rapidly entering an aging society, and it is facing substantial pension pressures while per capita income is still only at a middle-income level.

Fifth, local governments' development incentives. Local governments play a crucial role in China's economic development, and their fiscal systems have long depended on land-sale revenue and industrial tax receipts. Under such a framework, promoting investment and industrial projects remains the most direct and operational development strategy available to them. By contrast, expanding consumption and developing the service sector usually do not translate into fiscal revenue or GDP growth in the short term, and thus often occupy a secondary position in policy priorities.

Overall, China's transformation predicament

is not simply a matter of one economic policy. It is the result of a growth model, a political narrative, an institutional structure, and a set of policy incentives reinforcing one another. Unless these structural factors change fundamentally, it will be difficult for China to shift from an investment- and production-oriented model to one driven by consumption and domestic demand.

4. Conclusion: A Transformation Crisis Masked by Growth

Therefore, if one looks only at the macro data, China's economy in 2026 may well produce a "passing report card." With the support of government macro policies, achieving a growth rate of around 4.5%-5% will not be difficult. Manufacturing will continue to enjoy global competitive advantages. Some high-tech industries may continue to make breakthroughs. Exports may also maintain stable growth. To many observers, this performance will be enough to prove that the Chinese economy still possesses strong resilience.

But if one considers the issue from the standpoint of economic transformation and China's long-term prosperity, the phrase "steady with progress" in 2026 may conceal another reality: as real estate and the traditional investment model gradually lose momentum, China needs to find new sources of growth. Yet if the new drivers still come mainly from manufacturing expansion and export growth, rather than from a sustained expansion of household consumption, then the Chinese economy is still moving along the track of the old model, while genuine transformation continues to be postponed.

2026 will therefore be another year in which the Chinese authorities use economic growth to mask a crisis of transformation.

China's Economy Faces Major Reform

Guo Yanhua

Yanhua's View: Since reform and opening up, China's cities have developed into a typical modern market economy. The extraordinary prosperity of the real estate sector, and the skylines rising across the country's cities and towns, are brilliant achievements of fifty years of reform and opening up. Our detailed calculations show that China's real estate market does indeed contain a large bubble, but it is not excessive, nor is housing supply actually surplus. Urban floor space per person in China is only about 30%, still roughly 45% lower than the level in Europe and the United States, which stands at about 43%.

Now China's urban real estate sector is accelerating toward collapse, worsening the pressure on domestic consumption and employment. If the government stands by and allows prices to be cut in half, or even to collapse further in panic selling, the glorious achievements of decades of reform and opening up could evaporate overnight, and hundreds of millions of urban middle-class residents could be pushed back into poverty.

In fact, the downturn in Chinese real estate and consumption is only a temporary liquidity crisis. Europe, the United States, Japan, and South Korea have all gone through many real estate bubbles, and bubbles in finance, equities, and high technology have burst even more often. This is simply the kind of market failure that recurs in market economies.

We should respond in accordance with the laws of a modern market economy and launch a large-scale rescue in time:

First, the central bank should release

sufficient liquidity, that is, engage in EQ-style monetary easing, to buy time and create room for adjustment. It should firmly maintain the dynamic stability of current housing prices. Within ten years, as all prices will have more than doubled, Chinese real estate would still be among the cheapest in the world even if nominal prices merely remained where they are today.

Second, China should push forward structural reform by allowing the sale and mortgage of farmland. Over twenty years, this could unlock 200 trillion yuan in "farmland capital," modernize agriculture, achieve grain self-sufficiency, and even allow China, like Russia and Vietnam, to export agricultural products on a large scale. It would make 730 million farmers prosperous. If the household registration system were completely abolished and 300 to 500 million "non-agricultural" farmers were urbanized, China's real estate market would still have more than 50% room for growth.

As a result, China's GDP could gain more than 2 additional percentage points of growth each year. In other words, the Chinese economy could grow at a high rate of 7% to 8% annually. Economic expansion would maximize employment and generate a virtuous cycle of full employment, stronger production, and broader consumption. We must not be misled by shortsighted and mistaken theories, nor stand by while China's real estate sector collapses, repeating Japan's property bust, dragging down related industries and consumption, and producing a subsequent "lost thirty years."

Recently, Ren Zeping's latest article was also

wrong. His claim that housing prices will rise in 20% of China's cities and fall in 80% of them is even less convincing. China still lacks professional knowledge and basic experience in how to manage a market economy and the real estate sector.

Where Is Huang Qifan Wrong?

Mayor Huang Qifan and many other economists, when advising on economic policy, seem not to understand one basic principle of modern economics: a firm's business model, product mix, operating methods, production capacity, inventories, profits, and leverage all belong to the sphere of microeconomics. They are matters for market competition and the independent choices of firms. Government regulation of commerce and industry should focus on creating a transparent legal system for fair competition, and on offering macro-induced guidance through taxation, subsidies, and preferential policies for strategic industries and key firms. It should not, and ought not, directly intervene in microeconomic activity or interfere with lawful business operations. That is the basic principle of maximizing efficiency in a market economy.

In the realm of microeconomics, no matter how correct a government plan or administrative rule may seem, it will create efficiency loss in business operations and market competition. Have you ever seen governments or experts in Europe or the United States, after several hundred years of economics, formulate plans or administrative rules for the daily operations of firms? If they did, it would certainly be wrong. Only successful firms know what works, only the market is truly correct, and only a market economy produces the highest efficiency. Only when firms compete freely and discipline themselves can a healthy and powerful market economy emerge. This is why the central authorities repeatedly emphasize that the market

should play the decisive role in allocating resources.

The major "shortcomings" of China's economy that Mayor Huang and other famous scholars listed at a conference in Shanghai are also mistaken. For example, the claim that "China's logistics efficiency is low" is wrong. In reality, private logistics companies such as SF Express, JD Logistics, Cainiao, and J&T are widely recognized as among the most efficient in the world, and they operate at the largest scale in the world, around 18 trillion yuan. The notion that "technology is poorly transformed into productive forces compared with the West" is also outdated. Today China's private technology firms, including Huawei, BYD, CATL, Tencent, Alibaba, Xiaomi, DeepSeek, DJI, Unitree, and many others, are at the world frontier in AI, quantum technology, brain-computer links, and more. Their technological innovation is advancing with overwhelming force. This is now global common knowledge.

But which of these high-tech firms is a central or state-owned enterprise? Which successful firm was created by government planning? None, and none ever will be. Therefore, we must stop blindly pursuing policies such as "cutting capacity, cutting inventories, and deleveraging." The government should also never directly invest in "high-tech enterprises," because inefficiency and corruption would only lead to a complete loss of capital.

What Should Government and Officials Manage?

During my eight years studying economics at Columbia University, SIPA offered a master's program in public administration. That degree is about teaching governments how to manage administration and economic policy. Several hundred years of Western economic experience tell us that the government's point of intervention

should only be macroeconomics, meaning the toolkit used by the Federal Reserve: interest rates, reserve requirements, the balance sheet, expansion and contraction of that balance sheet, quantitative easing, and cash transfers to households.

All of these measures are based on professional data collected by the Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank, including CPI, PPI, unemployment rates, and inflation rates. They are calculated through specialized data models, not improvised by governments or officials. Therefore, everyone, including economists, may criticize economic policy, but presidents and governments in Europe and the United States have no right to interfere in the monetary decisions of the Federal Reserve or the European Central Bank, because those decisions are the product of professional data analysis and should not be distorted by the politics of a particular moment.

In line with the laws of a market economy and an open and transparent legal order, China should establish a long-term macroeconomic environment that is stable, fair in competition, and capable of sustainable development. That, precisely, is the real shortcoming China lacks and most urgently needs to address. (China Forum) As for products, only strong products in core cities and prime locations can help one endure the cycle.

If you are buying for basic living needs, I suggest choosing a good home in a core city and a prime location. If the property you hold is in a core city and a core district, you may wait and see rather than rush to sell. Over the long term, such properties remain core Chinese assets and a hard currency of sorts, because those places still have population inflows, industry, and demand. Housing prices there may gradually stabilize and may even rise again in the future. But if your property is in an area with population outflows, accelerating aging, high inventory, and no industrial support, I suggest dealing with it as early as possible and not clinging to illusions, because

such areas may face a market with quoted prices but no real transactions, followed by long-term decline.

Economic Outlook: From Comparative Advantage to Absolute Advantage

In 1998, Jiang Zemin personally approved my launch of the "Strong Nation Forum" on People's Daily Online. Drawing on the modern economics I studied at Columbia University, I pioneered "online deliberation" on the People's Daily website. I advocated that China use its vast and inexpensive labor force to develop export manufacturing, form a comparative advantage, join the WTO, and participate in global competition. See my book from that period, *China's Development Strategy*, at https://chinaforum.com/home/news/china_research/. In 1999, when U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky came to Beijing for negotiations, I wrote directly to Jiang and Zhu and pushed, against opposing views, for an agreement with the United States on China's WTO accession. After China entered the WTO, export manufacturing grew by more than 30% annually and drove overall economic growth at roughly 10%, allowing China to surpass one major Western economy after another and become the world's second-largest economy within little more than a decade.

Lin Yifu's "New Structural Economics" Is Outdated

In 2010, when Lin Yifu was serving as a World Bank vice president, he first proposed "new structural economics": developing countries should use their own comparative advantages, namely inexpensive labor and natural resources, within the three elements of a market economy, capital, resources, and talent, to form their own distinctive economic structure, namely export

manufacturing. In other words, Lin's "new structural economics" was simply market economics built on comparative advantage, plus an "effective" government that would support private firms through macro policy, taxation, subsidies, and similar measures.

After the 2020s, however, China's economic structure and the global environment changed fundamentally. Western markets have been strained by China's export manufacturing. China's old comparative advantage has eroded as labor costs have risen, making it unable to compete with lower-cost labor in India, South Asia, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia. China now faces manufacturing relocation, trade wars with Europe and the United States, and tariff-based containment.

China's Economic Transformation: Absolute Advantage

More than a decade ago, I was the first to propose that China had to transform its economy from comparative advantage to absolute advantage. See my economics book *China's Crisis in Agriculture, Rural Areas, and Farmers*. This is also the model now seen in Europe and the United States, where capital- and technology-intensive enterprises form an absolute or independent economic structure. The model of absolute advantage no longer depends on export manufacturing based on low labor costs. Instead, it uses financial investment to drive technological innovation and create competitive strength; it relies primarily on domestic consumption, accounting for more than 70% of the economy, while global financial investment, technological innovation, and services play supporting roles; and high-tech manufacturing continues to lead growth.

Professor Lin later also suggested that "new structural economics" should adapt to the new environment and complete the transition in time.

But he never explained how that transition should happen, what model China should move toward, or what kind of "advantage" the new structure should rely on.

Especially now, with China's real estate market and consumption both sliding, the economics community should be innovating in theory and breaking through the current impasse. Yet Professor Lin, like many economists within the system, only gestures in the general direction. He says that China should achieve economic transformation and seek a theoretical breakthrough in monetarism, yet nobody is willing to spell out concrete, professional, and operational policies that might be judged politically inconvenient. Here, I am willing to once again put forward a strategy for breaking the deadlock in China.

The Urgent Task: Measures to Rescue the Market

Yanhua's View: To stop the collapse of real estate, promote consumption, and increase employment, five rescue measures must be implemented resolutely:

First, the People's Bank of China should publicly announce that it will release liquidity into the market in unlimited amounts until three goals are achieved: restoring high-speed economic growth, maximizing employment with unemployment below 4%, and pushing inflation above 2%. That requires four effective steps:

1. Large-scale cuts to reserve requirements and interest rates, even to the point of zero reserve requirements and zero interest rates.

2. Large-scale cash purchases of "junk bonds" trapped in the bond market, stock market, real estate market, and related financial institutions, initially on the order of several trillion yuan or more.

3. Large-scale cash purchases of central government bonds, local government bonds, and

the bonds and stocks of pillar industries, on the order of tens of trillions of yuan or more.

4. A commitment to market confidence: publicly promise society that the state will inject sufficient liquidity into the market in unlimited amounts, with no upper ceiling.

Second, the state should distribute several thousand yuan per month to each of China's 1.4 billion citizens, amounting to at least several trillion yuan in cash. This is absolutely not "waste," not "welfare," and it would not produce debt or losses. It is the best medicine for rescuing the market. The Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and other bodies could carry this out, while the central bank would pay for it by expanding its balance sheet. Once 1.4 billion people have enough cash in hand, they will spend boldly, which would powerfully stimulate production and employment and precisely revive China's real estate and consumer markets, setting every sector into a positive cycle.

Third, the government should use the unique strength of central and state-owned enterprises, as assets belonging to the whole people, to comprehensively acquire and revitalize unfinished housing projects across the country, allowing the wreckage left behind by collapsing developers to be brought back to life. These "unfinished buildings," for which people paid money, took on debt, and still failed to receive homes, are festering sores in Chinese cities and the most hated outcome for homebuyers. In the future, once China's real estate market returns to normal, central and state-owned enterprises will make substantial profits

from this as well.

Fourth, the government should improve universal social welfare, provide a basic safety net for the elderly, the weak, the sick, and the disabled, and extend medical insurance to as much of the population as possible. People must be able to consume with confidence, borrow without fear, and invest, innovate, and start businesses boldly.

Fifth, structural reform must be pushed forward. To solve, once and for all, the structural problems of real estate and the leading sectors of the economy, China must firmly deepen reform in agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. Allowing farmland to be sold and mortgaged would release 200 trillion yuan in "farmland capital" over the next ten years. This measure alone would add another 2 percentage points to annual economic growth. Rural China would develop large-scale, mechanized, and high-tech professional farms. China's grain supply would not only become self-sufficient, but could be exported on a large scale. Some 730 million farmers would become more prosperous, and the urbanization of 300 to 500 million farmers would absorb housing inventory in cities while sustaining new real estate demand. China's real estate sector still has more than 50% room for development.

Finally, the household registration system must be completely abolished and replaced with equal citizenship and free urbanization for all. That is the fundamental path to integrating urban and rural China and achieving the country's full modernization.

Is the 15th Five-Year Plan China's 'Catch-Up-with-America' Plan?

Deng Yuwen

The proposal on the 15th Five-Year Plan adopted at the Fourth Plenary Session sets out ambitious development goals for the next five years, aiming to make decisive progress toward basically realizing Chinese-style modernization by 2035. In interpreting the plan, some Chinese scholars have elevated it to the level of "catching up with the U.S.," calling it a "catch-up-with-America" plan.

This view draws on a remark by Mao Zedong. In the 1950s Mao proposed a time scale: for China to catch up with the United States, it would take at least fifty years, perhaps seventy-five. "Seventy-five years," he said, "means fifteen five-year plans."

At a time when China was weak and poor, such a judgment inevitably carried an idealistic tint. Mao had also proposed surpassing Britain in fifteen years and launched the Great Leap Forward for that purpose, only to fail. But today China's national strength has long since comprehensively surpassed Britain's and is pressing close to that of the United States. Seen from today, Mao's remark also inadvertently reflected a certain insight into the cycle of industrial modernization: the rise of a great power depends on long accumulation, structural advantages, and perseverance.

China has reached the end of its 14th Five-Year Plan and is about to begin the cycle of the 15th. When outside observers revisit Mao's words, that timeline no longer feels remote. In recent years some Chinese scholars have repeatedly

proposed concepts such as a "window period for catching up with the U.S." and a "critical century-long zone of overtaking," arguing that China completed the basic framework of industrial modernization over the past decade-plus, and that during the 14th Five-Year Plan it accelerated import substitution and supply-chain autonomy under external pressure. On that view, the 15th Five-Year Plan may become the key stage in which China and the United States begin to enter a period of intersecting power.

These views are not isolated noise in public opinion. They reflect the deeper direction of China's strategic discourse. Although the Chinese government has not used this expression, perhaps because of international ramifications, and the proposal for the 15th Five-Year Plan does not state it explicitly, the plan itself was formulated against a backdrop of Sino-American competition and confrontation. The document alludes to this in restrained language: "relations among major powers affect the international situation," and "great-power rivalry has become more complex and intense." In reality, many of the development goals it sets, especially in industry and technology, have a clear referent: the United States.

Stripping away the institutional phrasing of the policy document, the core logic of the proposal can be summarized as follows. First, through greater autonomy and upgrading in science, technology, and industry, reduce dependence on the West for critical technologies. Second, by

expanding domestic demand and improving factor efficiency, create conditions for steady growth in economic scale. Third, through defense modernization, the building of maritime and air power, and the development of strategic software capabilities, ensure that national strategic security is not subject to others. Fourth, by shaping rules and order, gradually reconstruct the landscape of international economic and technological cooperation.

These goals are not publicly written out in a single phrase such as "catching up with the U.S.," but the direction is already clear enough, and it carries a determination toward structural transformation. Whether China can enter a track of catching up with the U.S. during the 15th Five-Year Plan can be judged from three dimensions: economic scale, key technologies, and military power. Economic scale is the basic indicator by which catching up is generally understood. Key technology is the core indicator of substantively catching up. If China also catches up militarily alongside the first two indicators, then it becomes another new center of power besides the United States.

Let us start with the economy. In 2021 China's GDP once reached 77 percent of the U.S. level, but last year that ratio slipped back to 64 percent. During that period China's growth rate was still faster than America's. The main reason the ratio fell was sharp swings in prices and exchange rates: in 2021 the dollar traded at 6.35 yuan; last year it reached 7.29. As for prices, the United States experienced sustained high inflation while China fell into deflation. Yet if measured in renminbi or in purchasing power parity, China's total economic output has already surpassed that of the United States; under PPP it is even 1.5 times as large. Nevertheless, since international comparisons still mainly use nominal exchange rates, China's economy remains far behind America's in size. Assuming prices, exchange rates,

and growth on both sides remain stable at current levels, China would need about thirteen years for its GDP to catch up with the U.S., roughly between 2035 and 2038. If U.S. growth slows during that period, or if the renminbi rises against the dollar, a very real possibility, given that it is already up 1.6 percent this year over last year, the timeline would move forward. Conversely, China's catching up would be delayed, and it cannot be ruled out that it may never catch up.

Over the next five years, using the above assumptions, the gap in nominal GDP between China and the United States would narrow to less than 20 percent. By the end of the 15th Five-Year Plan, China's GDP would amount to more than 80 percent of America's, which still appears to leave a visible gap. Yet in gross industrial output, manufacturing scale, total exports, number of engineers and engineering capabilities, scale and efficiency of infrastructure, installation of industrial robots, shipbuilding capacity, and defense-industrial output and munitions-production potential, China has already overtaken the United States. Over the next five years this lead will only strengthen. According to the latest United Nations report, China's share of global manufacturing will rise from the current 30 percent to 40 percent, while the U.S. share will fall from 17 percent to 12 percent. China regards these capabilities as the real foundation of national power.

Now to technology. Perhaps the most noteworthy achievement of the 14th Five-Year Plan has been the emergence of a "domestic industrial base platform." Most of the key milestones of Made in China 2025 have been achieved. In power batteries, photovoltaics, intelligent manufacturing, 5G communications, satellite internet, rail transit, and ultra-high-voltage transmission, China is already in a position of stable leadership or strong parity. The United States still unquestionably holds advantages in

EUV lithography, advanced EDA tools, core materials, and top-tier scientific research. But the laws of technological diffusion and the effects of economies of scale are at work. U.S. technology blockades have not halted China's technological progress. They have only delayed development in a handful of sectors, especially semiconductors and advanced chips, while at the same time forcing China to build an independent R&D and industrial system more rapidly. On a five-year time scale, China's most realistic technological path is not to replace Silicon Valley but to form a technological system that runs in parallel with it, especially in industrial software, independent computing power, advanced manufacturing equipment, advanced materials, and the military-civil fusion technology chain. So long as breakthroughs are made in these underlying capabilities, China's rise in technological strength will be systemic, even if an overall gap with the United States remains.

Finally, military power. The growth of China's military strength is not linear; it is exponential. It is shifting from a regional denial posture to an integrated offense-defense system. Hypersonic strike systems are maturing. An integrated network for sensing across sea, air, and space is taking shape. Nuclear modernization and sea-based capabilities are strengthening. Drone swarms and intelligent warfare systems are being deployed at speed. During the 15th Five-Year Plan, China's third domestically built aircraft carrier will achieve combat capability, and a fourth may also be deployed. Unmanned vessels, drones, and remotely operated combat systems will expand rapidly, and a comprehensive logistics support network is also improving. Given that U.S. shipbuilding capacity already lags far behind China's, the military balance between the two in the first island chain will by then come closer to eye level, perhaps even tilting slightly in China's favor. For the strategic balance of a great power, this matters enormously. It is not about preparing

for war, but about establishing strategic stability and a relationship of deterrent equivalence through the ability to "win without fighting," or, if fighting occurs, to win.

If over the next five years China achieves parity in all three dimensions, or at least enters a zone in which the gap is controllable and capabilities mutually constrain one another, then Mao Zedong's seventy-five-year judgment will come close to fulfillment: an economy standing shoulder to shoulder with America's, technology no longer constrained by America, and military power capable of meeting the United States at eye level. At that point the international system will no longer be one in which "the United States is at the center and China adapts," but one of "dual centers in China and the United States, with system competition and coexistence." Historically, when great powers enter a zone of relative equilibrium, the rebalancing of institutions and monetary systems becomes the next stage. That is the natural result of geopolitical and economic evolution.

Of course, even then it would not mean China had comprehensively surpassed the United States. It would only mean that China had drawn close, while clear gaps would still remain. The United States would still enjoy advantages in per capita GDP and household income structure, control of the global financial system, the dollar's role in reserves and settlement, the global pull of talent in science and technology, original innovation, the ability to set ethical norms, the reach of intelligence and information systems, and narrative power and cultural soft power. China needs time to close those gaps. It needs even more institutional resilience, financial and industrial innovation, and open confidence to reshape them.

Yet the path of great-power rise does not require filling every weakness before moving up. Usually hard power rises first, with soft power following later. In particular, once a country crosses a critical threshold, when the scale of

industry and technology is set, the military has strategic deterrent capacity, and the size of the market becomes irreplaceable, its ability to shape institutions, internationalize its currency, and build security networks naturally rises with it. The United States did not first have dollar hegemony and then acquire manufacturing superiority. Its industrial and military superiority came first, and the dollar system followed as its extension. If China steps onto another level, its financial, cultural, technological, and international-order-shaping capacities will naturally rise with it.

Trump may, by the instincts of a businessman-president, have sensed this development trajectory in China. In a recent interview he called U.S.-China relations a "G2" relationship. This was the first time an American president used that term to describe another country, and that country is also America's strategic rival. Perhaps in Trump's understanding of "G2," China still occupies the number-two position and still is not fully on an equal footing with the United States. But while America is mired in political polarization, budget deadlock, and immigration disputes, and as its strategic energies are drawn inward by domestic politics, China's 15th Five-Year Plan shows another rhythm: strengthening the industrial and technological foundations at home, stabilizing the strategic environment abroad, and seeking structural breakthroughs.

It is unclear whether the United States has realized that the China it faces is no longer merely

a "catch-up player," but also a competitor reshaping the world's industrial logic, technological pathways, and power structure, though to a large extent this is a compelled response to America's attempt to contain China. From the perspective of U.S.-China strategic competition, the next five years will be a critical period, and they will determine changes in the global power structure. In other words, the coming five years will also be the key five years in the transformation of the world's power structure. The 15th Five-Year Plan sits precisely at this historical moment. Whether Chinese-style modernization can turn ambition into reality, the 15th Five-Year Plan is the dividing line.

The liberalism-oriented phase of globalization has given way to a "new realism" stage defined by great-power competition. Power and structure, more than narrative and ideology, will determine the future. Once a civilization-state that combines a modern industrial system, an engineer dividend, policy execution capacity, and national mobilization capability decides to climb upward, the kind of endogenous energy it can unleash will of course require time to verify. But outside observers and researchers should be careful not to confine it within a particular set of values. On the time scale of the future, the 15th Five-Year Plan may indeed, as some Chinese scholars say, be a "plan to catch up with the U.S." Its success or failure will determine whether the threshold of Chinese-style modernization is crossed or delayed.

Does an Authoritarian System Really Limit China's Capacity for Breakthroughs in Technological Innovation?

Deng Yuwen

In the current technology competition between the United States and China, one question Americans must confront is this: in the not too distant future, will China surpass America in the leading sectors of technology? Outside observers can see that at the CCP Fourth Plenum, to be convened in a month, technology industries led by "AI Plus" will undoubtedly be a central priority in the regime's comprehensive five-year plan for national development. Earlier, the Chinese authorities formulated the "Made in China 2025" strategy. By most assessments, the majority of its goals have already been achieved. Only a small number remain constrained by U.S. technology sanctions, such as semiconductors. Yet even in semiconductors, China has in recent years been pouring in more resources and pressing hard to catch up.

In responding to the above question, although some anxiety has surfaced in American strategic and policy circles, most people still hold a relatively optimistic view. They believe the United States need not worry about being overtaken technologically by China, because America enjoys an institutional advantage, namely a free and open system and social environment. This view is common in discussions about innovation and political systems: an authoritarian country like China, it is said, cannot produce original innovation or major scientific and technological breakthroughs. On this view, original innovation depends on a critical spirit and freedom of thought,

while authoritarian systems naturally suppress freedom. Their innovation, therefore, can rise no higher than imitation, importation, or incremental improvement. They cannot break through the boundaries of human knowledge or generate disruptive scientific and technological achievements. This idea is popular not only in the United States and the broader West. It is also widely shared among Chinese liberals, many of whom believe that China's advances in technology industries today merely reflect the release of a "latecomer advantage," not a new civilizational driving force.

Yet this view, simple and intuitive as it may appear, is also obviously one-sided. Whether China can achieve breakthroughs in original technological innovation is affected by multiple factors, not determined by the political system alone, important as that system is. Before we understand the complexity of the relationship between the two, we should remain cautious about any categorical claim that China cannot achieve original technological breakthroughs and that the United States is certain to win the technology competition.

In my view, the reason so many people make such a judgment is that the prevailing understanding of "original innovation" itself is somewhat misleading. We are accustomed to equating it with paradigm-shifting breakthroughs in basic science, such as relativity, quantum mechanics, or the discovery of the DNA double

helix. Innovations of that kind reveal new laws of nature, expand the frontiers of human knowledge, and become the source of all subsequent applications. But if we use only this standard to judge whether a country possesses the capacity for original innovation, we are likely to reach hasty conclusions, because such breakthroughs are extraordinarily rare under any system and in any country, and usually depend on intergenerational accumulation together with the occasional appearance of exceptional genius.

In fact, "original innovation" is not a single-dimensional concept. We should broaden our understanding of what it means. Historically, many innovations that truly changed society did not arise from the discovery of new natural laws, but from major breakthroughs in applied technology. Watt's improvement of the steam engine, the spread of electrification, the commercialization of the internet, and the popularization of the smartphone often did not involve the discovery of entirely new scientific principles, yet they were still enough to trigger revolutionary changes in social structure and industrial organization. In this sense, original innovation should be divided into at least two categories. One is fundamental discovery in basic science. The other is major breakthrough in applied technology. The former does indeed require an open academic environment and cross-border exchange. The latter depends far more on the level of industrialization, the structure of the industrial system, and the size of the market, and in some cases may even emerge faster because of the concentrated mobilization of national resources. Only by distinguishing these two forms of breakthrough can we grasp the diversity of technological development more realistically and, within that framework, assess China's innovative potential more accurately.

In this latest wave of industrialization, China has in fact already demonstrated immense

innovative capacity in technological application. Whether measured by R&D investment by the state and enterprises, patent filings, the number of published papers and their citation rates, or major recent scientific and technological achievements, the growth has been striking, and in many areas China has already caught up with or even overtaken the United States. Consider just a few examples. By the OECD standard, China's growth in R&D spending in 2023 reached 8.7 percent, far above America's 1.7 percent and the European Union's 1.6 percent. China's share of global output in science and engineering papers has risen to 27 percent, ranking first in the world. In the three-year rolling share of the world's top 1 percent most-cited papers, based on 2018 to 2020, China reached 27.2 percent, surpassing America's 24.9 percent and taking first place for the first time. In 2024, China contributed roughly one quarter of all international patent applications, making it the world's largest source of patent filings. In generative AI patents in particular, China accumulated more than 38,000 over the past decade, about six times the U.S. total. It is true that China's R&D spending involves waste, that patent conversion rates are not high, and that domestic self-citation in highly cited papers is relatively elevated. Still, whatever the shortcomings, these figures already show that China's research system cannot be ignored in either scale or, to a certain degree, quality.

Moreover, when we discuss original innovation and major scientific or technological invention in the abstract, we often overemphasize the role of freedom of thought while long underestimating the relationship between original innovation and industrialization. Yet the historical experience, including that of the United States, shows exactly the opposite. Large-scale industrialization is not only the stage on which applied innovation plays out. It is also the catalyst and soil for original innovation. Without the

mechanization and electrification of nineteenth-century Europe, the systematic breakthroughs of thermodynamics and electromagnetism would have been impossible. Without the massive U.S. military-industrial system of the twentieth century, there would have been no birth of the computer or the internet. Industrialization provides two key conditions. First, it creates the ability to engineer and commercialize research results quickly, generating demand pull and pressure from real-world problems. Second, it accumulates vast numbers of industrial workers and engineers, forming the soil for the continuous iteration of applied innovation. From this perspective, China possesses even more advantages and favorable conditions than the United States for pressing ahead in technological innovation.

American industry has long since hollowed out, while China's industrial capacity now exceeds that of the seven most developed Western countries combined. From high-speed rail to new energy, from 5G to e-commerce, most of China's technological innovations have not stemmed from paradigm shifts in natural science. Rather, they have been breakthroughs in applied technology generated by a vast industrial system, a super-large market, and a policy framework capable of concentrating resources. They belong to paradigm innovation in engineering integration and application scenarios. Mobile payments are a good example. The underlying technology was not invented by China, yet China was the first to realize a seamless, society-wide application model. The originality here came from industrialization and market scale, not simply from freedom of thought.

I want to stress that acknowledging the role of industrialization does not mean we can ignore the constraints imposed by an authoritarian system. It only means those constraints take different forms in different disciplines. In the social sciences, institutional restriction is especially

severe because research directly touches political order and value systems. Space for criticism is extremely limited, leading to intellectual poverty and a lack of originality. In the natural sciences and engineering, the situation is more complicated. Scientific research does require critical thinking, but that critical stance is expressed more in questioning existing theories and experimental results. It does not necessarily require complete political freedom. Many of history's great thinkers and scientists, whether Plato, Galileo, or Sima Qian, matured in environments that were far from fully free and in some cases frankly autocratic. Their critical spirit did not vanish because of that.

In China's actual circumstances, the humanities and social sciences are much more constrained by the system than the natural sciences and engineering are. In the former, the authorities do encourage "innovation," but only within an official ideological framework, backed by strict disciplinary controls. Under such conditions, genuine innovation is impossible. Even if occasional sparks of intellectual originality appear, they are not permitted or are quickly extinguished. What university professors and researchers end up doing is merely providing interpretation for the regime's ideology. In the latter sphere, however, natural science and engineering do not in themselves carry an ideological color. Especially in the context of strategic competition with the United States, the authorities know that if they impose too many restrictions on researchers, including restrictions on thought, innovation will suffer. In addition, unlike the research institutions in the humanities and social sciences, which are largely monopolized by the state, many of the institutions doing research in natural science, applied technology, and engineering are located in enterprises, where incentives are tied to performance rather than ideology. Thus, what truly constrains China's technological innovation is the bureaucratization, short-termism, and

utilitarianism of the research system. The way research resources are allocated, the evaluation system's excessive emphasis on quantity, and the limitations on cross-border collaboration are the real reasons basic scientific breakthroughs are hard to achieve, not the simplistic claim that the country merely lacks "freedom of thought."

From this, we can propose a broader framework for explaining whether "authoritarian countries can produce original innovation." First, original innovation should be divided into two categories: breakthroughs in basic science and breakthroughs in applied technology. The former depends heavily on freedom of thought and on an international academic community. Under authoritarian rule, the probability is low. The latter depends far more on industrial capacity and market scale, and under authoritarian rule may actually be accelerated by the concentration of resources. Second, industrialization is a key variable in original innovation. The reason China has been able to catch up or even move ahead in a number of fields is precisely that it has the world's most complete industrial system and the world's largest market, creating a distinctive advantage in applied technological innovation. Third, the negative effect of authoritarianism lies in the rigidity of the science and technology system. It should not be exaggerated into a total destruction of critical spirit. In the social sciences, the constraint is more direct and more lethal. In the natural sciences and engineering, it appears more as a loss of efficiency and a weakening of institutional mechanisms.

Only in the past few years, through reflecting on China's rapid technological advance, have I come to realize that the proposition "an authoritarian country cannot produce original innovation" is an overly narrow conclusion. It ignores the diversity of original innovation and the role of industrialization. It also confuses technological innovation with innovation in the

social sciences. A more reasonable statement would be this: an authoritarian system does indeed constrain breakthroughs in basic science, but it does not rule out major innovation in applied technology. Industrialization and market scale can, under certain conditions, compensate for deficits in freedom of thought. And critical spirit does not exist solely by virtue of free institutions.

From this framework, we can make a more cautious judgment about China's future innovative potential. Judging from the possible strategic deployment of the Fourth Plenum, China could very well make new breakthroughs over the next five years in new energy, aerospace, AI applications, quantum communication, and other fields, even without an academic atmosphere as free as America's, because these fields depend heavily on industrial capacity and state strategic investment. Especially as the United States continues to intensify its technological containment of China, China's system of concentrating resources may further stimulate innovation in areas where it faces choke-point vulnerabilities. But the sustained emergence of disruptive results at the frontiers of basic science remains extremely difficult, because that requires not only investment, but also long-cycle academic accumulation and an institutionalized environment of freedom. On this front, the constraints of China's system remain a heavy burden.

The Chinese leadership has long regarded technological competition as the core battlefield in Sino-American rivalry. The Fourth Plenum will certainly formulate a technology development plan similar to "Made in China 2025," although, to avoid provoking the United States, it may not give it an explicit name. For the United States, perhaps the fortunate part is that China's leadership itself may not fully understand the degree to which its authoritarian system constrains technological innovation, especially original innovation. That makes it unrealistic for China to comprehensively

surpass the United States in the technology competition. But if the United States underestimates China's capacity for technological breakthrough, it could make a fatal mistake. The technology ambitions of the Fourth Plenum will be a concentrated expression of the strengths and weaknesses of China's system. That system can generate many breakthroughs, but whether those can be transformed into a systematic innovation

advantage still depends on whether the system itself is capable of reform. China's future technological trajectory will most likely be the product of point-by-point breakthroughs intertwined with institutional limits. Understanding that is more useful for grasping the direction of U.S.-China technology competition than mechanically applying a linear relationship between freedom and innovation.

The End of China's "Old Grandees"

—Why Party Elders Cannot Save China Under Xi Jinping

Deng Yuwen

Over the past year, all kinds of rumors about Chinese leader Xi Jinping have continued to circulate in Beijing. Some insiders have claimed privately that Xi has already lost real power and been pushed to the margins. Others have whispered that his health has deteriorated and that the man appearing in public is only a "double," while the real decisions are being made by a group of venerable party elders. Still other stories imagine rare political alignments, for example, once-powerful liberal reformers joining forces with conservative PLA generals to lecture Xi, or even replace him.

In an authoritarian system, such lurid rumors are not unusual, especially ahead of major political events such as this year's Fourth Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee in October. The plenum has now taken place, and its resolutions are widely seen as shaping China's direction for the next five years. In a system that offers almost no clear signals, where it is hard to tell who really holds influence and how decisions are actually made, Beijing's corridors of power naturally become fertile ground for political speculation. These rumors share one common thread: the belief that there remains a powerful force of party "elders," retired leaders and senior cadres who still wield influence behind the scenes, possess inside information, and retain enough leverage to overrule Xi and reshape China's political course.

This idea remains so widespread partly because, in the history of the CCP, this kind of

"elder politics" really did once play a central role. People disappointed by Xi's rule still hold out hope that some hidden group of backstage "arbitrators" might intervene at a critical moment, just as Deng Xiaoping did in the late 1970s, pulling China back from radical politics, or as he did again in the 1990s, overruling more conservative leaders to push forward market-oriented economic reform. "Elder politics" has thus become a convenient interpretive framework for understanding the opaque internal workings of the CCP's top elite.

But in today's China, party elders have, to a large extent, already lost their power. Xi has systematically dismantled the channels through which they once exercised influence, including their personnel leverage over senior appointments and their relationship networks inside the military. In addition, the current generation of elders no longer possesses the moral authority of the first generation of revolutionary veterans, the legitimacy that came from having personally taken part in the communist revolution. The institutionalized checks that replaced elder politics cannot effectively restrain an incumbent leader the way the elders once could. That leaves Xi with very limited real constraints as he remakes the party and the state.

The era when the old guard ruled

During the first thirty years of CCP rule, Mao Zedong possessed unmatched revolutionary prestige. He tightly controlled the military and the

propaganda system and dominated the party hierarchy. He was the supreme "state elder." But after Mao died in 1976, the party immediately faced a leadership vacuum. Cadres who had gone through war and political upheaval with Mao, yet had been purged or sidelined during the Cultural Revolution, returned to the center of politics. They included Deng Xiaoping, veteran economic planner Chen Yun, and Marshal Ye Jianying, one of the founders of the People's Liberation Army.

The authority of these political figures came both from seniority and from their direct contribution to the communist revolution. They were not merely leaders. They were founders of the state itself. They commanded powerful patronage networks, including deep ties in the military. As guardians of party history, they could also define the party's official narrative and use it to frame why, and how, the party should pursue a particular policy line at a given moment.

To formalize the role of the elders, party leaders established the Central Advisory Commission in the early 1980s at Deng Xiaoping's initiative. In some respects it resembled an upper chamber, giving party elders an institutional platform from which to influence major personnel and policy decisions. The top party leadership decided who could enter the body, and membership was restricted to veteran officials with long records of service.

Yet the elders' real power did not rest in those formal institutions themselves. It rested in how they used their unquestioned authority in other informal spaces within the Chinese political system. They communicated privately with top party leaders, senior military officers, and high-ranking bureaucrats, offering guidance and, when necessary, voicing dissatisfaction. They also exerted influence by making public speeches or statements at key moments, intervening in major debates over who should lead the CCP and what policy course it should take. In 1979, the first

generation of party elders, including Deng Xiaoping, used dissatisfaction in both society and the party with Hua Guofeng's adherence to Mao's political line to push out Mao's designated successor from the core of power. Ten years later, the same group of elders supported the use of military force against protesters in Tiananmen Square. These were not ceremonial gestures. They were acts of real power.

The final decline

The very conditions that gave elders their power also eventually led to their marginalization. They were granted a role in order to maintain a balance of power during the transition from Mao's personal rule to a more collective style of leadership. During that transition, roughly from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, the elders stabilized Chinese politics by limiting the power of the top leader. They could halt dangerous policy experiments or remove leaders who, in their view, had their priorities wrong or failed to recognize shifts in the political winds.

As the revolutionary generation of the CCP gradually aged and died, no new elders could inherit the same historical prestige and military influence. The next generations of party elders, what might broadly be called the second and third generations, were mainly administrative officials. Their authority came from the offices they had held, not from revolutionary credentials. The Central Advisory Commission was quietly abolished in 1992. At the same time, party leaders established clearer term limits and mandatory retirement ages, narrowing the political space for leaders who hoped to retain influence after leaving office.

Changes in the military further weakened the elders' influence. Many early communist revolutionaries had emerged from the armed forces and had personally cultivated their own

successors. But administrative reforms, such as the large-scale troop cuts of 1985, weakened the networks those elders had built inside the military over many years. Then in 2015 Xi Jinping launched another sweeping round of military reform. By reorganizing the armed forces into a number of theater commands, he effectively cut off the possibility that any senior officer could build an internal faction of his own. At the same time, Xi concentrated power even more tightly in the Central Military Commission under his direct control.

What truly ended elder politics, however, was Xi Jinping's systematic assault on personal networks. Soon after taking over the party in 2012, Xi launched an anti-corruption campaign that severed the informal ties that had long linked serving and retired elites. Step by step, he dismantled potential centers of power in the security apparatus, the military, and key sectors such as energy and finance. At the same time, he tightened supervision over retired senior cadres, introducing new rules that barred them from publicly commenting on state leaders and their policies. Xi even reclassified dinner gatherings among retired party veterans as matters of "political security," which meant they could no longer visit each other as freely as before. If the elders still wish to influence Xi, almost all the channels through which they once did so have now been blocked.

In Xi's era, party elders have not completely disappeared from public life. They still appear at major state ceremonies, sit in the front rows at important meetings, make harmless remarks when needed, and receive briefings in closed-door sessions. But they no longer possess substantive power. With Xi's consolidation of authority and with the broader evolution of China's political system, the elders can no longer mobilize the sort of coalition they once could, one combining personnel resources, military influence,

procedural experience, and moral authority, to impose a real check on the current top leadership.

No perfect substitute

In the absence of strong elders, China's party-state has had to rely on other mechanisms to constrain the top leader. A more institutionalized bureaucracy can slow decision-making through lengthy formal procedures, thereby offsetting the personal will of any one leader. Some universities and research institutes, for example, have resisted Xi's plan to relocate them wholesale to Xiong'an, the newly planned "city of the future" about seventy-five miles from Beijing. As a result, the project has moved far more slowly than official plans originally envisioned. Elite groups also still have a strong instinct for self-preservation, meaning they often avoid making risky decisions that could endanger their own futures. External shocks that reshape the domestic political environment, such as financial pressure or trade coercion, can also constrain the top leader's policy choices to some extent. But none of these checks is as direct, as fast, or as effective as elder intervention once was.

The key difference lies in the logic of power parity. In the earlier period, elders and incumbent leaders often stood at roughly comparable levels of power. The admonitions of the first generation of revolutionaries carried the weight of elders speaking to juniors, or superiors speaking to subordinates. Even the second generation of elders could still check an incumbent general secretary. In 2002, after Jiang Zemin handed party power to Hu Jintao, he continued to wield influence behind the scenes. By expanding the Politburo Standing Committee from seven members to nine and placing several of his own allies in key positions, Jiang effectively diluted Hu's authority while consolidating his own.

The new arrangement that has taken shape

under Xi rests on the premise that no true rival exists. The regime's stability no longer depends on horizontal checks. It depends on a one-way chain of authority running from top to bottom. The bureaucracy can delay Xi's directives, but it cannot veto them. Economic officials can advise him, but they cannot force him to change course. Military commanders may express concern, but they cannot voice open dissent. What were once relatively equal discussions now look more like one-way conduits: information flows upward, commands flow downward. Elder politics was opaque and personalistic, but its underlying parity of power at least made it possible for other elites to speak to the top leader on something like equal footing and candidly point out the problems facing the party.

China's difficulties in handling the COVID pandemic exposed the risks of this new arrangement. A group of powerful elders might not have prevented the outbreak, but they could have reduced the damage by improving the channels through which information moved upward. When the virus began to spread in early 2020, they might have pushed the leadership to take the early warning signs more seriously. When the pandemic dragged into its second and third years, they might have forced Xi to relax harsh control measures sooner. The presence of elders would have opened some political space at the top of the party for internal discussion during a crisis and given more professionals a channel through which to convey their views to the top leader.

Among the mechanisms now replacing the elders' stabilizing role, the only force that has significantly constrained Xi's power is pressure from outside, especially the impact of strategic competition and confrontation with the United States. Aggressive tariffs and export controls have

forced Xi to adjust his economic strategy. On one hand, he has moved to diversify China's trade partners and reduce dependence on any single market. On the other, he has had to make a limited effort to draw some politically loyal private technology firms back into the fold in order to achieve his goal of technological self-reliance. Domestic pressures, such as high unemployment and financial fragility, also limit the room Xi has to advance his agenda. So far, however, those pressures have only slowed policy implementation rather than brought it to a halt. Overall, Xi increasingly relies on a small circle of loyalists to make decisions, and that raises the risk of misjudgment: challenges that might otherwise have remained manageable can be magnified into systemic risks.

Although many outside observers recognize that the elders have lost power, they often treat that fact as merely a footnote to Xi's concentration of authority. In reality, the end of elder politics is far more important than that. A system that relies on rigid bureaucratic rules combined with strongman leadership is much more fragile than one built on unwritten balances of power, because it lacks any substantive mechanism for checking the leader. Even in a post-Xi era, even if a new leader emerges who is willing to return to a more collective style of rule, party elders will still lack the prestige and network resources necessary to impose any real constraint on that person's authority.

China, now far removed from the historical stage of the revolutionary era, can only place its hopes in these imperfect substitute mechanisms, and to some extent in luck, to limit Xi's power and prevent avoidable crises from spinning fully out of control.

Xi Jinping Has Become the Greatest Burden on the Country's

Development

New Highland

Editor's Note: *Industrial development needs good soil. In a country where even holding up a blank sheet of paper is treated as a crime and freedom of speech is restricted, where can innovation and confidence come from? The old saying "a dog cannot stop eating filth" is vulgar, but it captures Xi's stubbornness. After more than a decade of high pressure, he has drained the state coffers dry. Now the government is short of money and wants to pivot back to the economy.*

At the 2026 meeting of the Communist Party's Politburo, Xi Jinping once again stressed "taking economic development as the central task," trying to set a positive tone for the opening of the Fifteenth Five-Year Plan. In reality, however, this shift lacks credibility. Xi's record is too long, and public trust has been too badly exhausted. When he now calls for a return to putting the economy at the center, he has no credibility left. If he had done this ten years ago, it might have worked. But now China's economy is already mired in debt, foreign capital is fleeing, and the private sector is languishing. There is a Chinese saying: "A dog cannot stop eating filth." So what does Xi still have with which to restore market confidence? Can a country that jails people for holding up a blank sheet of paper, or even for uttering a politically offensive sentence, really run a healthy economy? According to theories of industrial development, the environment for industrial growth — political, social, natural, cultural, international, legal, and industrial-supporting conditions — is like water. If the water is poisoned, meaning the investment climate has become toxic, then even the most vigorous fish,

even the largest investors, will quickly die or flee once they enter it.

In the course of industrial development, the top leader of a country or a locality either becomes the greatest asset of development or its greatest cost.

Xi is plainly the latter. In practice, the top leader determines the allocation of resources, the policy orientation, and the business environment. His personal style and decision-making preferences directly shape the entire ecosystem. A good leader is unquestionably the greatest asset: by emancipating minds, protecting property rights, simplifying approvals, and tolerating trial and error, he can attract capital, technology, and talent, create a positive cycle, and propel industry forward. By contrast, when the top leader becomes the greatest cost — through high-pressure control, abrupt policy reversals, prioritizing political loyalty over economic rationality, and repeatedly launching rectification campaigns and movement-style governance — he creates uncertainty, stifles innovation, and drives away vitality, forcing the entire system to bear a heavy price. China's rapid growth over the past forty years took place when

local leaders dared to act flexibly and push bold reforms. Today, however, the nationwide concentration of power in the hands of one top leader has made local officials focus more on avoiding mistakes than on producing results, while private entrepreneurs would rather lie flat or move overseas than take risks and invest.

After more than a decade in power, Xi Jinping should have presided over a golden era of economic takeoff. Instead, through high-pressure policies and a centralized governing style, he has pushed China to the edge of a crisis of trust. As early as 2023, some analyses pointed out that Xi's concessions on economic recovery, private-sector development, and foreign relations were unlikely to succeed because his personal credibility had already been badly damaged. Within the Party, across society, among private businesses, and in the international business community, distrust of him follows like a shadow. Policies shift from one day to the next and reverse without warning, so ordinary people no longer comply. Private firms would rather "run" abroad than invest. Foreign capital sees China as a high-risk zone. On X, similar voices appear frequently. One user bluntly wrote: "In Xi Jinping's thirteen years in power, if nothing else, he has completely wrecked China's economy." That is hardly an isolated remark. Many more posts discuss how his policies have aggravated the debt burden and delayed economic recovery.

The collapse of credibility stems from Xi's "prior offenses" — from turning anti-corruption into a purge of rivals, to the abrupt shifts in the zero-COVID campaign, to the crackdown on private enterprise. These "achievements" may have appeared to consolidate the regime, but they did so at the cost of economic vitality. Official media such as the People's Daily try to paint a rosy picture, declaring that the economy's "resilience has increased," yet independent observers point to youth unemployment above 20 percent, a fertility

rate below 0.9, and a housing slump that has left homeowners in despair. Xi once spoke of the "Tacitus Trap" — when public power loses trust, everything it says is received negatively — yet he has never reflected on himself. Commentaries in 2023 already warned that his governance had fallen into exactly this trap and that public trust in the government was close to collapse. Today, grassroots officials are demoralized, local governments are buried in debt, and the courts have become fiscal tools. The rumor that one out of every three bosses has been labeled "dishonest," while exaggerated, still reflects the deterioration of the business environment. In 2025 and 2026, this trap has fully erupted: no matter how positive policy signals may sound, they are widely seen as just another round of empty talk or stability-maintenance theater. The game between officials and society has reached a deadlock. Ordinary people scramble to become the biggest beneficiaries of any "policy dividend," yet almost no one truly believes those promises will be fulfilled.

What is even more ironic is that Xi is trying to restore confidence under the slogan of "seeking progress while maintaining stability," while ignoring the fact that the environment has long since been poisoned and that he himself is the one who poisoned it. It is like pouring poison into the water while still hoping to raise fish in it. In industrial development theory, the environment is like water: political repression, social instability, the absence of the rule of law, and international isolation drive foreign capital away like fish fleeing poisoned water. Since 2025, the net outflow of foreign capital has accelerated, and elites have continued moving their wealth abroad. That is the toxic-water effect in action.

Industrial development needs good soil. In a country where holding up a blank sheet of paper is treated as a crime and freedom of speech is restricted, where can innovation and confidence

come from? The old saying "a dog cannot stop eating filth" is crude, but it captures Xi's stubbornness. After more than a decade of high-pressure rule, he has drained the national treasury dry. Now the government is short of money and wants to turn back toward the economy, but that is nothing more than empty talk. Having lost all

public credibility, he has already become the greatest burden on the country's development. In short, unless China's political system changes, and unless Xi Jinping dies or leaves power, China's economy will find it very difficult to return to a normal development path.

Xi Wants to Build a Rival Power Center;

Trump Makes an Example of Others

New Heights

Editor's Note: *Trump has shifted from tariffs to military action, cutting away China's outer pillars, seizing control of strategic resources, and defending dollar hegemony. Once the dollar's position starts to wobble, "America First" will face a systemic crisis. The April summit in China will no longer be a routine diplomatic courtesy call; it will bring Iran and the bloody turmoil of the Middle East to the negotiating table in a much harsher form.*

At the start of 2026, the United States delivered two heavy blows that struck directly at the global energy and financial order: in January, U.S. forces raided the Venezuelan presidential palace and arrested Nicolás Maduro and his wife; in February, the United States and Israel jointly "decapitated" Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his core leadership circle. On the surface, these actions targeted narcotics, nuclear threats, and terrorism. Strategically, however, their essence was obvious: kill the chicken to warn the monkeys. Through precise military strikes on China's key peripheral energy partners, Washington sought to intimidate and contain China's push for renminbi internationalization and its attempt to "set up a rival center of power," while defending the dollar's hegemonic position in global settlement and resource trade.

At first, Trump hoped to defend dollar hegemony through high tariffs: in 2025, the average effective tariff rate jumped from 2.4 percent to 18.6 percent, the highest level since 1933, and in 2026 it was further adjusted to 10 to 15 percent worldwide. The intention was to force countries back into the dollar system through trade barriers and to curb de-dollarization. But the effect was minimal, and even counterproductive. Tariffs pushed U.S. import prices up by more than 11 percent, with consumers and businesses bearing 94

percent of the burden, while the dollar depreciated instead. Allied backlash intensified, BRICS countries and emerging markets accelerated non-dollar settlement, and the renminbi's share in global trade kept rising. In 2025–2026, the share of China's goods trade settled in renminbi approached 30 percent, and cross-border receipts and payments reached 1.49 trillion yuan in January 2026. Tariffs failed to reverse the trend and instead pushed more countries to seek alternative paths.

Once it became obvious that economic measures would not work, only force remained. Trump therefore turned to more aggressive military means. Both operations struck directly at China's energy lifelines. Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves, and China has long imported Venezuelan crude; at one point, more than 60 percent of Venezuela's trade with China was settled in renminbi, and China accounted for 50 to 89 percent of its exports. Iran is China's largest source of crude oil in the Middle East. In the first half of 2025, China imported an average of 1.38 million barrels per day from Iran, accounting for more than 80 percent of Iran's exports, with about 80 to 90 percent settled in renminbi. The consequences were immediate: the United States took control of nearly 2 million barrels of Venezuelan oil, Iran's regime was thrown into a power vacuum, and China's energy corridors in the

Middle East and Latin America came under instant pressure. Trump publicly called it a "demonstration of justice" and warned others not to challenge the United States. This was an unmistakable escalation of intimidation against de-dollarization.

Energy is where the push has advanced the fastest: more than 90 percent of Sino-Russian trade is now settled in local currencies, with trade volume around \$245 billion and the dollar all but gone; Brazil's trade with China settled in renminbi has risen to 41 percent, as soybeans, iron ore, and oil are increasingly transacted in renminbi; and the share of Saudi oil trade with China settled in renminbi has been steadily rising, with some agreements already reaching 18 to 20 percent. Trump's strategy has been precisely layered: toward Russia he has leaned toward accommodation, to prevent China and Russia from locking into a full embrace; toward Saudi Arabia he has continued to deepen ties, including defense and investment agreements worth tens of billions of dollars in 2025, to keep it from tilting fully toward renminbi settlement.

Brazil faces even greater risks. The Lula government has shown clear pro-China tendencies. U.S. Secretary of State Rubio has repeatedly accused Brazil publicly of a "collapse of the rule of law" and "political persecution." On September 12, 2025, after Bolsonaro was sentenced to 27 years in prison, Rubio called it a "witch hunt" and promised that the United States would "respond accordingly," including through tariffs, visa revocations, and potential sanctions. If Brazil does not pivot quickly, by reducing its dependence on renminbi trade with China and aligning itself more closely with the United States, the economic and political pressure it faces will be far greater than Saudi Arabia's. It is more likely to be the next target of military or extreme economic intervention.

More dangerous still, China has recently been engaging frequently with major European countries, especially Germany and France, as well

as the United Kingdom and Canada. British Prime Minister Starmer visited China in January, reinforcing London's role as an offshore renminbi center. Canadian Prime Minister Carney visited China, renewed the currency swap agreement, and expanded the use of renminbi in the agricultural sector. The European Union accepted price commitments from Chinese automakers to ease friction over EV tariffs. Yet Trump has continued to offend these allies, threatening 10 to 25 percent tariffs, publicly insulting European leaders, and questioning allied sovereignty. If China were to reach large-scale non-dollar settlement arrangements with the European Union, particularly the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, and with countries such as Canada, the consequences for the United States would be severe: the dollar's share in developed-economy trade would be sharply compressed, accelerating a multipolar currency order; U.S. exports would be hindered, inflation would worsen, and borrowing costs would soar; and cracks within NATO and the Five Eyes would deepen, creating a demonstration effect for de-dollarization and accelerating the decline of U.S. global leadership.

Xi wants to build a rival power center, so Trump makes an example of others. Trump has moved from tariffs to military action, pruning away China's outer pillars, controlling strategic resources, and defending dollar hegemony. Once the dollar's position is shaken, "America First" will face a systemic crisis. The April summit in China will no longer be a ceremonial diplomatic visit; it will bring Iran and the bloody turmoil of the Middle East to the negotiating table in a hard-edged form.

This contest has only just begun. Will resource countries and developed allies continue to deepen non-dollar cooperation, or will they return to the dollar system under pressure? Will China accelerate de-dollarization, or compromise under external squeeze? The balance has already begun to tilt. We wait and watch.

Why Has Xi Jinping Never Truly Managed to Get the Military Under

Control?

New Heights

Editor's Note: Truly great commanders understand that loyalty is sustained by institutions, battlefield performance, and fairness, not by fear and personality cults. Xi Jinping has pushed 'absolute loyalty' to the point of demanding loyalty to himself alone, only to find that loyalty cannot be tested or quantified. In the end, it can be 'proven' only through endless purges.

Xi Jinping has controlled the Central Military Commission for more than thirteen years, and under his so-called dream of building a strong military, the purge of the armed forces has entered an extreme phase. According to the latest report released by CSIS on February 24, since 2022 the number of senior PLA officers, at the full-general or lieutenant-general level, who have been formally purged or have disappeared and are suspected of being purged has reached 101. Of these, 36 generals have been officially confirmed as targets of purge, while another 65 generals and lieutenant generals have either vanished or are believed to be under investigation. Among the PLA's 176 key top-level positions, 52 percent have been affected, counting posts that were hit more than once. The New York Times, CNN, Reuters, and other major media outlets have also reported that the Central Military Commission, which had seven members in 2022, has now been reduced to only Xi Jinping and discipline chief Zhang Shengmin, the smallest number since the Mao era. Even generals personally promoted by Xi, including He Weidong and Zhang Youxia, have fallen in succession, and the rate at which his own loyalists have gone down has been remarkably high.

If one measures this against the core

requirements of a commander in chief, combining the classical five virtues of wisdom, trustworthiness, benevolence, courage, and discipline with modern demands such as strategic coordination, mastery of emerging domains, and crisis stability, the structural defects exposed by Xi's military reforms become ever clearer. These defects directly explain why the pattern of the more he fights corruption, the more corruption appears, and the harder he tries to impose control, the greater the chaos, has become his destiny.

Wisdom: Strategic insight and judgment in selecting and using personnel have systemically collapsed

Sunzi placed wisdom first. A commander must know both the enemy and himself and calculate carefully before acting. Xi Jinping did perceive that corruption inside the military, especially in areas such as the Rocket Force and equipment procurement, had become a poison corroding combat effectiveness. Yet his solution relied overwhelmingly on screening for personal loyalty rather than on an institutionalized, capability-based system for identifying and promoting talent. The result has been disastrous. Of the military leaders elevated after the Twentieth

Party Congress in 2022, most of those personally promoted into the Central Military Commission, including He Weidong, Zhang Youxia, Miao Hua, Li Shangfu, and Liu Zhenli, have already been removed. CSIS data likewise show that fast-rising officers from Xi's era, including He Weidong, have become major purge targets. The repeated pattern of promoting one batch and then toppling one batch proves that Xi has a fatal blind spot in both strategic foresight and the evaluation of personnel. Modern war demands a commander who understands integrated operations across cyber, space, electronic, and cognitive domains. Yet the large-scale vacuum at the top has fractured the chain of command, interrupted the transfer of experience, and severely damaged the continuity of combat readiness.

Trust: Credibility and trust across the armed forces have completely eroded

Trust means using people without constant suspicion. If the supreme commander cannot even trust his own confidants, how can the military possess cohesion? Zhang Youxia, a princeling with long-standing personal ties to Xi and once regarded as one of his closest allies, was investigated together with Liu Zhenli on January 24, 2026. The official charge was that they had seriously trampled on and undermined the system of responsibility under the chairman of the Central Military Commission and had gravely endangered the Party's absolute leadership over the military. This amounted to a public declaration that even the commander's most trusted elder-brother figure could no longer be considered reliable. Officers and soldiers watched supposed models of loyalty turn one after another into serious violators of discipline and law. The institutional basis of trust has therefore collapsed. Everyone lives in fear, avoids responsibility, and says as little as possible. What emerges is not iron discipline but collective

silence and inefficiency under a chilling effect.

Discipline: Pushed to the extreme, it has mutated into fear and paralysis

Xi Jinping governs the military with what he calls zero tolerance and extremely harsh punishment. But the classical idea of discipline requires that rewards and punishments be reliable and that orders be carried out, not that purges continue forever as a political campaign. When purging becomes normalized, and even vice-chairman-level loyalists cannot escape, discipline is transformed into a balance of terror. Commanders no longer dare to make decisions or take responsibility. They seek only to avoid mistakes. In strategic core units such as the Rocket Force, the leadership has been all but wiped out. Key positions have remained vacant for long periods, while training, equipment acceptance, and planning for joint operations have fallen into systematic voids. This is not military strengthening. It is self-inflicted mutilation.

Modern core capabilities have broken down across the board

1. Coordination of joint operations and command of emerging domains. The break in senior-level experience has become severe. Many of those still in place rose because of political loyalty rather than real competence or operational record. The continuity of exercises around Taiwan and the continuity of joint command have both been disrupted.

2. Psychological stability in crisis and the capacity to inspire. The commander himself keeps generating internal crises. If a real war were to come, how could he possibly stabilize the armed forces?

3. Cross-domain integration of resources. The military is consumed by political fear, with

everyone trying to pass ideological scrutiny and protect himself. Under such conditions, who has the energy to integrate technology, industry, and intelligence into a coherent warfighting system?

The most fatal deficit of character

Great commanders have always understood that loyalty is sustained by institutions, performance, and fairness, not by fear and the worship of one individual. Xi Jinping has absolutized the idea of absolute loyalty until it means loyalty to him alone. Yet he has discovered that loyalty can neither be verified nor quantified. In the end, he can only demand that it be proven through endless purges. That, in turn, exposes his deepest weakness: a lack of profound understanding of human nature, organizational life, and durable institutional mechanisms, and an equal lack of strategic patience. The result is that, on the surface, military power has become more centralized than ever, with the chairman alone making the final call. In substance, however, combat capability, cohesion, and mutual trust have

been hollowed out to an extreme degree.

In short, Xi Jinping's control over the military has reached its peak in appearance, yet in terms of actual combat power and internal ecology it has become more fragile than ever before. This is not an accidental failure to get the military under control. It is the inevitable outcome of his command logic. Once personal absolute authority fully replaces institutional loyalty, merit-based selection, and mechanisms of trust, the cycle becomes irreversible: the more corruption he claims to fight, the more decay emerges, and the more he tightens his grip, the emptier the system becomes.

History has already supplied its own footnote. A leader determined to build a strong military has spent thirteen years turning the military's upper ranks into a sieve. This is not military strengthening. It is the demolition of his own great wall. A leader who truly commands the armed forces never rules by cutting off heads to inspire fear. He leads in a way that makes soldiers willingly give their lives for him. Xi Jinping will never be capable of that.

How did the left-wing struggle destroy the Weimar Republic?

Rong Jian

*Abstract: The Weimar Republic, by the nature of its ruling party, was undoubtedly the first socialist republic in the world to be peacefully elected, as both its president and chancellor came from the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). After embarking on the parliamentary path in 1875, the party, through decades of legal struggle, finally became the largest party in the Reichstag before World War I, achieving a crucial political breakthrough amid the dual transformations of war and revolution and winning political dominance in the Weimar Republic. However, within the SPD, significant differences in understanding of war, revolution, and regime led to the emergence of three distinct political factions, ultimately splitting into three severely opposing left-wing parties. It was precisely this "left-wing struggle" that continuously triggered political crises and turmoil in Weimar, causing the republic to constantly shift from left to right, ultimately being replaced by the Nazi regime. In this sense, the SPD bears primary responsibility for the collapse of the Weimar Republic. This article is Chapter Two of the book *The Weimar Question in Imperial Transformation*, divided into four parts. A lengthy and professional discussion; reading it in its entirety will undoubtedly yield valuable insights.*

The Social Democratic Party's Parliamentary Path

The collapse of the German Empire precipitated the establishment of a republic in Germany, along with a Social Democratic government. When Wilhelm II abdicated, Social Democratic leader Ebert did not actually intend to abolish the monarchy. He was highly displeased with Scheidemann's hasty declaration of a republic. According to his vision, Germany should continue along the path of constitutional monarchy, expanding parliamentary democracy and gradually realizing the political demands outlined in the "Erfurt Program": "On the one hand,

deriving the historical tasks of the Social Democratic Party and the ultimate goals of the proletarian class movement from the historical development of modern bourgeois society; on the other hand, marking out the party's actual path on this social basis... This class must struggle under the current realities." ¹ In terms of the Social Democratic Party's "political maturity," on the eve of the November 1918 revolution, the party was neither ideologically nor organizationally prepared for revolution, let alone fully prepared to seize state power. Germany's revolutionary transformation from a constitutional monarchy with limited parliamentary participation to a modern republic received the support of the

Notes in this article:

- 1 See Franz Mehring. History of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Volume 4, translated by Qing Zaifan, SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1966, p. 326.

majority of Germans; however, not all were willing to accept a government led by the Social Democratic Party. The revolutionary situation favored the Social Democratic Party because, in the power vacuum created by the collapse of the empire, it held far more seats in Parliament than any other party. By 1912, the Social Democratic Party had become the largest party in Parliament, holding 27.7% of the seats and, under the law, the legal right to form a government. However, this power had been shelved during the reign of William the Conqueror. With the dramatic shift in the revolutionary situation, when Albert realized that the Social Democratic Party's opportunity to govern was imminent, he decisively decided to seize it.

On November 7, 1918, Ebert and Scheidemann, representing the Social Democratic Party, issued an ultimatum to Prince von Baden, the last Chancellor of the Wilhelmine dynasty. Demanding the Emperor's abdication and the relinquishment of power by the cabinet. They believed that only the Social Democratic Party could control Germany's fate in the revolutionary movement. On November 9, Wilhelm II abdicated. Sensing the approaching large-scale revolution, the Social Democratic Party resolved to negotiate with the independent Social Democrats and ultimately decided: "If necessary, we will advance alongside the workers and soldiers; the Social Democratic Party should seize the government, but avoid bloodshed as much as possible."² At 12:35 PM that same day, Prince Baden announced the transfer of cabinet power to the Social Democratic Party, with Ebert becoming the Chancellor of the transitional government. In handing over power, Prince Baden asked Ebert to "take good care of Germany," to which Ebert replied: "I have lost two sons for this country."³

The Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) peacefully and legally seized power in the first government of the Weimar Republic. Given the nature of the ruling party, this was undoubtedly the world's first government led by a socialist party. This significant political achievement marked a crucial breakthrough for the German proletarian movement since 1848, following various paths and choices that culminated in the parliamentary route. Germany is the birthplace of Marx, whose fundamental principles for the German workers' movement were: a protracted and irreconcilable class struggle against the bourgeoisie; the overthrow of bourgeois rule through violent revolution; the establishment of a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat after the revolution's success; and, finally, the transition to a communist society. However, the German workers' movement did not fully accept Marx's theoretical framework regarding class struggle, revolution, and dictatorship. In 1863, Ferdinand Lassalle helped establish the "General German Workers' Federation," whose aim was to achieve the liberation of the working class through equal, universal suffrage, thereby affirming the social-democratic reformism of the nation-state and distinguishing it from the international revolutionary socialism proposed by Marx. In 1869, August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht founded the German Social Democratic Labour Party (the Eisenach Party) in Eisenach. The party's platform called for the elimination of class rule and the "establishment of a free people's state," demanded universal, equal, and direct suffrage, regarded political freedom as a prerequisite for the "economic liberation of the working class," advocated participation in the Reichstag elections, and viewed the parliament as the main venue for the working class to participate in political

2 See Horst Müller. *Weimar Germany: From Republic to Nazi*, p. 13.

3 See [Switzerland] Erich Eck. *History of the Weimar Republic*, Volume 1, page 51.

struggles. Based on their shared fundamental political ideals, Germany's two major workers' parties merged in 1875 to form the "German Social Democratic Workers' Party." They adopted the Gotha Programme, drafted under the direction of Liebknecht, which, "although seriously deviating from the theories of his friends Marx and Engels, received unanimous approval from the congress."

⁴ Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Programme," almost verbatim, critically annotated the merged program, emphasizing that "we have absolutely nothing to do with the aforementioned principled program, nothing to do with it." His basic assessment of Bismarck's regime was: "a military despot disguised as a parliament, mixed with feudal remnants, already influenced by the bourgeoisie, composed of bureaucratic structures, and protected by a police force." The working class could not solemnly guarantee that this state would win democracy "by legal means." Marx still demanded that the German Workers' Party wage a "final battle" in the class struggle within this last form of bourgeois society. ⁵In response to Marx's harsh criticism, the German Social Democratic Labour Party (SDP) shelved the critical manuscripts until 1891. At this time, the SDP held its congress in Erfurt, which decided to change its name to the "German Social Democratic Party," removing the term "workers" from the name. This indicated that the SDP leaders no longer viewed the party as purely proletarian but rather as a "party of the people." The Erfurt Program, adopted at the congress, retained Marx's brief analysis of the "economic development of bourgeois society" and its inevitable conclusions in **Capital** in its theoretical section. Its practical policy section proposed a series of demands regarding the

democratization of the state and society, and the improvement of the working class's social status: universal and equal proportional representation in elections for all levels of parliament, state institutions, and self-governing bodies; equal rights for women; secularization of schools; judicial independence; free healthcare; changes in tax and economic policies; the establishment of a labor bureau; guarantees of freedom of speech, assembly, and association; worker participation in workers' insurance institutions; and the implementation of an eight-hour workday, among other things. According to Engels' assessment, the Erfurt Program was a significant improvement over the Gotha Program. It was a program for the peaceful "growth into socialism," believing that the German Social Democratic Party could only "achieve dominance in the form of a democratic republic."⁶

Since the unification of the Eisenach faction and the General German Workers' Union in 1875, the German Social Democratic movement had grown rapidly and increasingly powerful along the parliamentary path. Two years after the Gotha Congress, the German Social Democratic Workers' Party won 9.1% of the vote in the Reichstag elections. In 1878, Bismarck, citing two assassination attempts against Emperor Wilhelm I as a pretext, used the incidents to suppress the Social Democrats, thereby forcibly passing the "Law Against Social Democratic Attempts to Endanger Public Order" (commonly known as the "Anti-Socialist Law") in the Reichstag. Originally valid for three years, the law was extended three times before its repeal on September 30, 1890. During the 12 years of its implementation, nearly 900 Social Democrats, along with their 1,500

4 [German] Susan Müller and Heinrich Pothoff. *A Brief History of the Social Democratic Party of Germany: 1848–1983*, p. 31.

5 *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, Volume 3, People's Publishing House, 1995, pp. 295, 315.

6 See *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 4, People's Publishing House, 1995, pp. 411–412.

family members, were expelled from their homes; 153 associations and 175 newspapers were shut down; and trade unions close to the Social Democrats were dissolved. The only legal activity permitted to Social Democrats was participation in elections to the Reichstag and state parliaments. Despite the Bismarck government's repression, the Social Democratic Party still garnered 437,000 votes in the 1878 Reichstag elections. After the "Anti-Socialist Law" was repealed in 1890, the Social Democratic Party's votes surged to 1,427,000, making it the largest party in the Reichstag. In his later years (1895), Engels, based on the significant progress made by the German Social Democratic Party in the parliamentary elections, believed that "a completely new form of struggle for the proletariat" had begun to be adopted. He considered the German socialist party's "major contribution" to the working class's cause to be teaching workers how to effectively utilize universal suffrage—"one of the sharpest weapons"—and acknowledged that Marx and his earlier ideas about the proletariat seizing power through violent revolution "were merely a fantasy." He categorically stated that "the methods of struggle of 1848 are now obsolete in every respect."⁷ By 1912, the German Social Democratic Party had won 34.8% of the vote in the Reichstag elections, holding 110 seats and becoming the most powerful parliamentary group.

The further the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) goes down the parliamentary path, the further it deviates from the path of violent revolution that Marx envisioned for the German working class, and the more it demonstrates through its actions that the parliamentary path is the only correct path, more in line with the working class's realization of its political rights and economic interests. The apparent

contradiction between Marxist theory and German social democratic practice, while not fundamentally shaking Marxism's dominant ideological position within the party, has triggered significant divisions, giving rise to three factions: "orthodox Marxism" (centrist) represented by Kautsky, "revisionism" (right-wing) represented by Bernstein, and "radical Marxism" (left-wing) represented by Rosa Luxemburg. The main difference among the three factions lies in this: Kautsky sought to pursue the parliamentary path while adhering to the basic tenets of Marxism, viewing the shift from violent revolution to peaceful struggle as an inherent part of Marxism, and invoking Engels' later ideological shift to endorse the SPD's parliamentary path. Bernstein advocated a radical revision of Marxism, critically reflecting on its three theoretical components. He asserted that utopian communism, which offered a menu for the "restaurant of the future," was bankrupt, and explicitly advanced the slogan, "The ends are nothing; the movement is everything." Luxemburg, on the other hand, stood with Kautsky in upholding the fundamental tenets of Marxism. Both opposed Bernstein's revisionist line, but Luxemburg placed greater emphasis on upholding Marxist revolutionary theory than Kautsky. In her own words, the party must "persist in its ultimate goal, persist in seizing power to abolish capitalism ... It harbors no illusions about social reform and the gradual, unnoticed transition to socialism; on the contrary, it anticipates social and political catastrophe, and it firmly desires to demonstrate its increasing competence in this task and emerge as the dominant force in the situation; finally, it will not only refrain from further concessions to the existing state but will also carry the struggle through to the end."⁸

The differing interpretations of Marxist

⁷ Ibid., page 510.

⁸ Edited by the Research Office of the History of the International Communist Movement, Central Compilation and

revolutionary theory by the left, center, and proper factions within the Social Democratic Party, as well as their disagreements on the party's basic program, strategy, and tactics, did not prevent them from reaching some necessary consensus. They all adhered to the fundamental principles of "social democracy," fully recognized the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, and human rights, advocated a peaceful parliamentary path, and opposed seizing state power through violent revolution. Regarding Lenin's October Revolution and the establishment of Soviet power, the leaders of the German Social Democratic Party held a skeptical and critical attitude from the outset. Even figures like Luxemburg, who sympathized with and understood Lenin's revolution, resolutely could not accept the totalitarian nature of the Soviet regime created by the revolution, believing it to be merely the dictatorship of a small group of politicians, a dictatorship in the sense of Jacobin rule. Therefore, when the German Revolution broke out, the Social Democrats, led by Ebert, initially believed that it must not follow the path of the Russian Revolution. Establishing a republic was a crucial step toward realizing socialism, and the Social Democratic Party could seize state power only through legal and peaceful means. The problem was that the rapid development of the revolutionary situation led to a regime change in a very short time. The revolution not only created a confusing political future but also further exacerbated the previously theoretical divisions within the Social Democratic Party. The Weimar Republic, founded by the Social Democratic Party, initially experienced internal strife within its left wing due to the war, the revolution, and the question of regime. Social Democrats progressed

from ideological differences to organizational splits, military conflict, and ultimately, a complete break. This internal political crisis within the Social Democratic movement initiated and intensified a series of political upheavals in the Weimar Republic.

Divided by war

The Social Democratic Party's shift from ideological differences to organizational divisions began with divergent perceptions of the 1914 war. The German Social Democratic Party, like socialist parties in other belligerent European countries, quickly abandoned the "internationalist" line established by the Second International, adopting a nationalist stance and supporting its own country's war policy. Luxemburg, a thoroughgoing internationalist, felt deep despair when she witnessed the proletariat and their parties in the belligerent European countries choosing to stand with their own governments after the outbreak of war: "This is the first time a chasm has appeared between the need for international proletarian solidarity and the interests of the freedom and national survival of all nations; this is the first time we have discovered that the independence and freedom of each nation urgently require proletarians speaking their own languages to kill and exterminate each other." She thus viewed the actions of the European proletariat and their parties in supporting their own countries' war as "a matter of life and death for international socialism."⁹ Sharing Luxemburg's view was Karl Liebknecht, the son of Wilhelm Liebknecht, the first leader of the Social Democratic Party. He initially held an anti-war position, but the course

Translation Bureau: *The Debate of the German Social Democratic Party on the Bernstein Question*, SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1981, p. 57.

9 See Rosa Luxemburg. "The Crisis of Social Democracy," in Li Zongyu (ed.), *Selected Works of Luxemburg*, People's Publishing House, 2012, p. 326.

of the war quickly changed his stance, and he came to support the imperial war policy. Social Democrats generally believed that such action was consistent with the party's traditional views. They cited Marx and Engels's recognition of a war of self-defense and reiterated August Bebel's statement that he would "take up arms" should Russia launch an attack. Therefore, in the early stages of the war, a consensus formed within the German Social Democratic Party: to defend against the territorial claims of the Russian Tsar, British imperialism, and France to Alsace-Lorraine, and to safeguard the "achievements" of the Social Democratic Party and trade unions, as well as the "material wealth" of their organizations, the German workers' movement must take Wilhelmine Germany as its place of survival and activity.¹⁰ "Defending the Fatherland" became the supreme national interest, superseding the interests of the party and the working class. A majority of the Social Democratic parliamentary group voted in the Reichstag to approve the government's request for war funding, including Karl Liebknecht. Nevertheless, 14 members voted against it, including party chairman Hugo Haze. Arguing that the world war was essentially a war of imperialist plunder, and the Social Democratic Party must continue to play the role of a traditional opposition party.

Within the Social Democratic Party, those opposing war appropriations constituted a minority, and due to the discipline of parliamentary groups, individual dissent could not influence or interfere with collective decisions. However, this tradition was broken by differing stances on the war. The minority within the party, increasingly at odds with the majority regarding the nature of the war, quickly led to a split. Karl Liebknecht was the first to break with the

discipline of the Social Democratic parliamentary group, voting publicly against the second war appropriation proposal in the Reichstag on December 2, 1914. During the vote on the third war appropriation proposal, more Social Democratic members began voting against it or leaving the Reichstag early. By December 1915, 20 members had issued statements accusing the Reich Chancellor of condoning the German army's annexation of foreign territories and voting against war appropriations in the Reichstag. In 1916, when the majority of the Social Democratic parliamentary group favored the emergency budget, while the minority, led by party chairman Haze, rejected it on the basis of the party's 1910 Magdeburg Resolution, the party finally split. The majority within the party considered the minority's deviation from the parliamentary group's resolution not only a "violation of discipline" but also an act of "treason." The Social Democratic Party's parliamentary group, with 58 votes in favor and 33 against, expelled these 20 dissident members from its ranks. Subsequently, these 20 minority members, expelled from the parliamentary group by the majority, formed an independent parliamentary group known as the "Social Democratic Working Committee." In January 1917, the party split further, with the opposition holding a national conference and planning the establishment of what the majority accused of being an "anti-party special organization." From April 6th to 7th of the same year, at the People's House in Gotha, the "Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany" (USPD) was formally established. The Social Democratic Party evolved from factional strife into a party conflict, with one left-wing party splitting into two opposing left-wing parties.

The Social Democratic Party of Germany

10 See Susan Müller and Heinrich Pothoff. *A Brief History of the Social Democratic Party of Germany: 1848–1983*, pp. 68–69.

(SPD) went from ideological differences to an organizational split, completely shattering the traditional pattern of factional struggles within the party. According to party elder Richard Fischer, ideological, programmatic, and political oppositions had always existed within the party: "As long as the party exists, we will have disagreements and will not hide them... But as long as the party exists, its fundamental principle is to maintain unity externally."¹¹ This "struggle without breaking down" pattern within the party ceased to exist due to significant differences in understanding of war policy. Externally, the party was no longer a unified whole but openly split into two opposing parties. As a result, the party's split rewrote the traditional standards for dividing the party into left, center, and right. Former centrist, right-wing, and left-wing ideological leaders—Kautsky, Bernstein, and Luxemburg—all joined the Independent Social Democratic Party (ISP), which claimed to be the true successors of the "old" Social Democratic Party of Marx, Engels, Lassalle, and Bebel. It declared its commitment to fighting against war and social ills, and for peace, democracy, and socialism, free from all compromises. On January 1, 1916, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg founded an "international group" centered around themselves, named the "Spartacus Group" after their published "Spartacus Letters." Initially, this group joined the Independent Social Democratic Party (SPD), but soon broke away to form the Communist Party of Germany on December 30, 1918. At this point, the SPD had split into three parties. Looking at the left-wing political spectrum, the majority SPD, represented by Ebert and Scheidemann, was center-left (right-wing within the party); the minority Independent SPD, represented by Haze,

was left-wing (center-wing within the party); and the Spartacus faction, represented by Liebknecht and Luxemburg, was far-left (left-wing within the party). In terms of political stance and inclination, the majority Social Democratic Party belongs to the moderate reformists, advocating cooperation with other bourgeois left-wing parties to build the Weimar Republic jointly; the Spartacus belongs to the radical revolutionaries, supporting the establishment of a purely socialist republic through revolution; the Independent Social Democratic Party is somewhere in between, with its political stance being closer to that of the Spartacus in most cases.

Franz Walter, an expert on the history of the German Social Democratic Movement. Argues that the establishment of the Independent Social Democratic Party (ISPD) led to a long-term division within the German workers' movement, a consequence of the war. Before 1914, the Social Democratic Party consisted of two fundamental factions: the reformists and the revolutionaries, and there was a persistent and heated debate about revisionism. The party's "dual nature" never led to a split, and the issue of leaving the party was never seriously debated. "It wasn't until 1917, propelled by the war, that the two hearts of the German workers' movement began to seek different political bodies—although the IPD cannot be simply seen as an organizational continuation of the pre-war left wing."¹² The war ended in November 1918, and logically, there was no longer any reason to maintain the division within the Social Democratic Party. A party composed of war critics and pacifists seemed superfluous after the surrender of the German Reich's leaders. Bernstein shared this view. He rejoined the majority Social Democratic Party after the war, but his actions did

¹¹ Quoted from the same book, page 71.

¹² Franz Walter. *The Social Democratic Party of Germany: From the Proletariat to the New Middle*, translated by Zhang Wenhong, Chongqing Publishing House, 2008, p. 30.

not alter the party's division. The IPD did not reunify with the majority of the Social Democratic Party; instead, it adopted a more confrontational stance. This situation can still be attributed to the war: "Because the war touched the social process and gave rise to new forms of protest among the proletariat, it deepened and ultimately solidified what initially appeared to be a temporary split within the Social Democratic Party."¹³ According to Walter's assessment, the Independent Social Democratic Party (ISD) was less like a political party and more like an alternative, emotional, somewhat chaotic protest movement primarily composed of young workers who desperately wanted an immediate and radical change to the abhorrent status quo, despising the majority Social Democratic Party as cowards and traitors for failing to seize the capitalists' money and factories. The radical sentiment and participation of the young workers led to an unprecedented increase in the number of ISD members in the history of the German workers' movement, growing from 300,000 to 700,000 between March and November 1919. During this process, several Social Democratic Party elders, including Karl Kautsky, Hugo Haze, Rudolf Hilferding, and even Bernstein, were swept up in the tide of the young proletarian protest movement. To summarize in Walter's words: "The Independent Social Democratic Party has become clearly extreme and increasingly broken with the traditions of Bebel's Social Democratic Party. They no longer value universal suffrage, parliamentarism, the separation of powers, and democratic constitutions—they regard all of these as bourgeois trickery."¹⁴

Albert Ebert, leader of the majority Social Democratic Party, was a political successor to

August Bebel. As a member of the party's second generation, he represented the activist faction and never succumbed to Marxist dogma. As Horst Müller said, in leading the Social Democratic Party steadfastly toward a republic, "he felt neither fear nor the profound historical and philosophical hope of social democracy, neither the trauma of Bismarckian socialist law nor the future expectations of Marxism."¹⁵ Ebert was clearly a politician who did not get overly entangled in ideological struggles. His long parliamentary experience cultivated his democratic consciousness and instinct, making him keenly aware that the German Revolution could not replicate the Russian Revolution and that the government must gain legitimacy through democratic procedures, namely, through elections. It was precisely based on this political consciousness of parliamentary democracy that, from the very first day of its rule, the majority Social Democratic Party not only sought compromise and cooperation with the independent Social Democratic Party but also committed itself to cooperation with other bourgeois parties. Another party leader is Max Cohen. Made it clear at the Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies Congress held in mid-December 1918 that Germany could only progress if the entire nation united; the middle class must also be led toward socialism, and only a freely elected national constituent assembly could achieve this goal, not the Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies Congress.¹⁶

The Social Democratic Party of Germany split into three left-wing parties due to differing stances on the war. Instead of developing a strategic cooperative relationship, or at least a quasi-alliance, based on their shared Marxist

13 Same as above.

14 Ibid., pp. 31-32.

15 Horst Müller. *Weimar Germany: From Republic to Nazi*, p. 8.

16 See Eric Weitz. *Weimar Germany: Hope and Tragedy*, p. 26.

ideology, they harbored a far deeper animosity toward each other than toward bourgeois parties, stemming from their differing understandings of Marxism. Since the establishment of the first Social Democratic government in the Weimar Republic, its most direct challenge came not from bourgeois parties, but from the independent Social Democratic Party and the Spartacus, which had emerged from the Social Democratic Party's parent body. The political war in the early Weimar Republic was an internal conflict within the socialist left, or rather, a war of left against left.

Conflict due to the revolution

This outbreak broke out in November 1918, destroyed the German Empire in a brief period, ushering in the era of a republic. For the first time in history, the Social Democratic Party seized state power through peaceful parliamentary authorization. Historians consider the November Revolution one of the most successful revolutions of 1917-1923.¹⁷ The revolution caused neither large-scale bloodshed nor the emergence of a totalitarian regime such as the Soviet Union. The revolution was like a beautiful dream; when people awoke the next morning, they found a new republic born from the ruins of the empire, readily accepted by the majority. Philosopher Ernst Troeltsch commented on November 10th:

*"After a night of great hardship, the morning paper presented a clear picture: the emperor was in Holland, the revolution had triumphed in most cities... no one had died for the emperor or the empire! All civil servants were now working for the new government! The state was still fulfilling all its duties, and there had been no bank runs."*¹⁸

From the French Revolution to the Russian

October Revolution, the inherent terror, barbarity, slaughter, and destruction of revolution seemed to vanish entirely in the German Revolution. This can be attributed to the fundamental shift in the German Social Democratic Party's understanding of Marxist revolutionary thought. From the Gotha Programme to the Erfurt Programme, the Social Democratic Party's ideological line of striving for state power through peaceful and legal means remained consistent, achieving a broad consensus across the left, center, and right. Therefore, when the revolution broke out, the majority Social Democratic Party, led by Ebert, initially sought to end the revolution as quickly as possible after the overthrow of the monarchy, to avoid bloodshed, maintain social peace and order, and rapidly propel Germany onto a constitutional path toward rebuilding state power through democracy.

From the very first day of the revolution, the independent Social Democrats sought to steer the revolutionary process in accordance with their ideals, viewing the military collapse of the German Empire as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to establish a socialist state governed by workers' and soldiers' councils. They did not entirely endorse the Bolshevik Revolution led by Lenin; rather, they sought a more radical political and social revolution to dismantle imperial conventions and hierarchical structures fundamentally. Karl Liebknecht, preempting Scheidemann, declared the establishment of the "Soviet Socialist Republic" from the balcony of the Berlin City Palace, aiming to create a fait accompli: the German revolution had opened up a socialist political space for the German working class, and only after consolidating the revolutionary gains could a Constituent Assembly be considered. For most Social Democrats, while the revolution was a significant step towards

17 See Robert Gwath. November 1918: The German Revolution, p. 3.

18 See the same book, page 14.

socialism, the republic established by the revolution belonged to all the German people—as Scheidemann declared, it was the "German Republic"—and its legitimacy required confirmation through a new constitution and elections in the National Council. Faced with the choice between "indulging in the radicalization of revolution" and "quickly ending the revolution through a parliamentary democratic republic," Ebert's majority Social Democratic Party resolutely chose the latter. They prioritized maintaining social order as their primary responsibility, viewing the establishment of a new government as the first step toward a national system in which people could freely elect representatives and shape their future. They acknowledged that "Germany should be a socialist republic," and that "this requirement is our political goal." However, they emphasized that "the people must decide related matters through the Constituent Assembly." Horst Müller believed that "an orderly, phased march towards social democracy" was Ebert's plan.¹⁹

The Social Democratic Party, already divided over views on the war, was further fractured by disagreements over the revolution's methods and goals. This situation led leaders of all factions to recognize the necessity of finding an effective path to resolve their differences and achieve maximal ideological and practical unity among the socialist left-wing parties. On November 10, 1918, the first meeting of the "Workers' and Soldiers' Committee" was held at the Bush Circus in Berlin, attended by more than 300 delegates, including representatives of the Social Democratic Party, the Independent Social Democratic Party, the Spartacus, and bourgeois liberal parties. The majority of Workers' and Soldiers' Committee members strongly favored cooperation among the

various factions of the Social Democratic Party. Ebert announced that the majority Social Democratic Party and the Independent Social Democratic Party had agreed to cooperate, which was warmly welcomed. Subsequently, an Executive Committee was elected, comprising six members from the majority Social Democratic Party and six from the Independent Social Democratic Party. Before the convening of the National Assembly, the Executive Committee held supreme power in Germany. It confirmed the election of six members already in office to form a new government: Ebert, Schödemann, and Landsberg from the majority Social Democratic Party, and Haze, Dietmann, and Barthes from the Independent Social Democratic Party. Karl Liebknecht refused to join the new government, and the congress rejected his proposal to establish Soviet power in Germany.

Unexpectedly, the honeymoon period of cooperation between the majority Social Democrats and the Independent Social Democrats lasted only a few days before new disputes arose, with the latter launching another attack on the former. On November 14, 1918, the Independent Social Democratic Party issued an order signed by Dietmann and Haze declaring the Workers' and Soldiers' Council the highest political authority in Germany and stating that the Social Democratic Party had no right to launch a revolution. Subsequently, some members of the Independent Social Democratic Party accused the Social Democratic Party of supporting von Hindenburg's military power and of planning to convene a National Assembly. The Independent Social Democratic Party declared: "If the Berlin government raises the clarion call, the class-conscious proletariat will take up arms to sweep away the obstacles to revolution."²⁰ In response to

19 See Horst Müller. *Weimar Germany: From Republic to Nazi*, p. 29, p. 7.

20 See Ralph Haswell Lutz. *The German Revolution: 1918–1919*, p. 113.

the emergence of new contradictions, on November 19, 1918, the Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Council held its second meeting. In his opening address, Chairman Müller stated: "We will not establish a democratic republic, but a socialist republic. I swear to oppose the path to a Constituent Assembly."²¹ Scheidemann explained the current situation in Germany at the meeting, noting that convening a National Assembly was not intended to legitimize the German revolution but to lay a permanent foundation for the future state. November 22. The Scheidemann government and the Workers' and Soldiers' Committee reached an agreement on the distribution of power, with the former holding executive power and the latter holding legislative power. On November 25, the Scheidemann government convened a conference of representatives from the federal states to discuss the country's reconstruction. The representatives recognized the necessity of an armistice, the restructuring of industry and commerce, and the drafting of a German Republican Constitution. The conference ultimately decided that German unity must be maintained and a National Assembly should be convened as soon as possible. On December 16, the first congress of the All-German Workers' and Soldiers' Committee was held in Berlin. This was the most important meeting since the outbreak of the November Revolution; the representatives had to decide whether to continue the revolution that began on November 9, 1918, and develop it into a socialist revolution of the German proletariat. In the first two days of the conference, the representatives debated fiercely. Miller, a representative of the Independent Social Democratic Party, argued that the primary issue of the congress was whether the proletariat should exercise dictatorship before the end of the

revolution. Albert, the representative of the majority Social Democratic Party, believed that the sole legal basis for establishing a government was the will of the German people. The state's goal was to establish a rule-of-law nation. The victorious proletariat would first overcome political class differences and economic inequality to achieve complete equality. Democracy would become the cornerstone on which the working class would build Germany's future. Meanwhile, the Spartacus representatives reiterated the necessity of revolution, confident that communism would inevitably prevail. Large numbers of striking workers gathered outside the Chamber of Deputies in support of the representatives determined to carry the revolution to its conclusion. Karl Liebknecht addressed the striking workers, condemning the new government's proposal to convene a National Assembly, demanding the disarmament of the German army and counter-revolutionary forces, and advocating the arming of the working class participating in the revolution. He shouted to the assembled workers, "Voting for the new government's National Assembly is tantamount to opposing the working class."²² On the third day of the meeting, a significant turning point occurred. Cohen, the representative of the majority Social Democratic Party, proposed that the National Assembly elections be held on January 19, 1919. He gave a brief speech on this, emphasizing:

"Only a strong government based on the solid will of the German people can save the nation. No central authority can gain authority at home or abroad without the support of the majority of the German people. The only organization that can truly carry out the will of the people is the German National Council, where every citizen can vote."

21 See the same book, page 113.

22 See the same book, page 118.

The Workers' and Soldiers' Council can never represent the will of the entire population."²³

After a heated debate, the majority of delegates attending the First Congress of the All-German Workers' and Soldiers' Council agreed that a National Assembly was necessary. Despite fierce criticism from leaders of the Independent Social Democratic Party (ISD) and the Spartacus faction, they could not prevail over the majority will. Finally, the Congress voted on the proposal to convene a National Assembly, passing it by 400 votes to 75. The ISD's proposal to make the council system the basis of the constitution was rejected by 344 votes to 48. Another party proposal, which would have granted the Central Committee the power to veto or approve all laws before the constitution's promulgation, also failed to pass. Unable to prevent the convening of a National Assembly, the ISD delegates left the congress, announcing their withdrawal from the Scheidemann government and their non-participation in the National Assembly elections. Ralf Haswell Lutz aptly assessed the significance of this congress: "The Congress of the All-German Workers' and Soldiers' Council demonstrated the strength of the Social Democratic Party and the German people's expectation for democratic policies. The German proletariat, through voting, agreed to convene a National Assembly, establishing the principle that democracy is superior to class rule."²⁴

Unable to achieve their goals at the meeting, the Independent Social Democrats decided to mobilize on the streets, primarily through demonstrations and strikes, to exert maximal pressure on the new government. They chanted, "We want to speak for ourselves again! We want to

take to the streets again!" The Spartacus, on the other hand, decided to emulate the Russian Bolsheviks and seize power through armed uprising. They believed that the German Revolution had not yet achieved its goal of establishing a socialist republic. Rosa Luxemburg told the armed Spartacus fighters, "The abolition of capitalist rule and the establishment of a socialist social order are the important tasks of this revolution. The world proletarian revolutionary movement is also the foundation of the German revolution."²⁵ On December 29, 1918, Independent Social Democratic representatives Haze, Dietmann, and Barthe announced their withdrawal from the provisional government formed with the majority Social Democratic Party. Before they made this decision, bloody street fighting had already begun in Berlin. Spartacus organized 1,800 armed sailors who, under the pretext of demanding payment of their wages by the government, occupied the Berlin Royal Palace and arrested Berlin's military commanders, Wells. Ebert and Landsberg were trapped in the Chancellor's residence by the mutinous sailors. Three socialist left-wing parties were at a standoff. The Spartacus Central Secretariat demanded that the Independent Social Democratic Party convene a party conference by the end of December 1918 and immediately take revolutionary measures. The latter wavered on this demand but ultimately rejected it, insisting that it was necessary to campaign actively for seats in the National Assembly. Therefore, Spartacus decided to act alone. On December 30, the Spartacus held a meeting in Berlin, secretly attended by Soviet Russian leader and propagandist Radek, who announced that he would support the German Civil War if necessary to establish a proletarian

23 See the same book, page 120.

24 Same as above, number 121.

25 Quoted from the same book, page 122.

dictatorship. Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, and Paul Levy supported an immediate new revolution and drafted a party program outlining 24 military, political, social, and economic reforms. The preamble to the party's platform explicitly stated: "Society faces a choice: either to perpetuate capitalism through new wars, chaos, and anarchy, or to fully implement socialism as the only way to save humanity."²⁶ It is said that Liebknecht and Luxemburg, at the last moment before deciding on the armed uprising, expressed doubts about the success of a civil war. However, following the voting, most delegates opposed participating in the National Assembly elections. They believed that if a National Assembly were convened, their plan would fail, the revolution would end, and only through a civil war could a proletarian dictatorship be established, as in Russia under the Bolsheviks. On January 5, 1919, the Spartacus launched an uprising in Berlin. Initially, it progressed smoothly; many government troops and police laid down their arms without resistance. The insurgents occupied Berlin's leading newspapers, government buildings, and the Brandenburg Palace. Liebknecht prepared to follow Lenin and Trotsky's example and declare the establishment of a Socialist Soviet Republic. Although the Independent Social Democratic Party did not participate in the Spartacus-led armed uprising, it called for demonstrations on Victory Avenue through its newspaper to oppose the Social Democratic government.

Faced with the Spartacus-led armed uprising and the street protests launched by the Independent Social Democratic Party, the Social Democratic government led by Ebert and Scheidemann had no choice but to deploy the military to suppress them.

They first appointed Gustav Noske, a former basket weaver, as Minister of Defense, authorizing him to take all measures to quell the unrest. Noske displayed heroic qualities in this crisis, declaring himself a willing henchman for the new government and decisively issuing the order: "If anyone is found carrying a weapon against government troops, shoot them immediately." Churchill later praised him as "a son of the people, fearlessly acting for the public good amidst widespread chaos."²⁷ It was under Noske's strong leadership that a large number of demobilized soldiers were quickly mobilized. Organized into the "Free Legion" and thrown into the suppression of the Spartacus armed uprising, achieving swift success. By January 19th, the day of the National Assembly elections, the situation in Berlin was largely stable; no one dared to interfere with the voting, and the armed personnel involved in the uprising had dispersed. Spartacus paid a heavy price for the rebellion. Liebknecht and Luxemburg were captured and executed by soldiers of the Free Legion on January 16th. Most Berlin residents welcomed their unexpected deaths as a relief from great danger, without considering their potential impact on the future political evolution of the Weimar Republic. As Erich Ecker commented:

"People have had enough of the bloody violence of Liebknecht and his comrades in Luxembourg, so they are not particularly outraged by their fate. But this evil also has consequences: it undermines the aversion to crime and respect for human life. It makes people accustomed to using bloody violence as a means of domestic political struggle."²⁸

The Social Democratic Party split over the

²⁶ See the same book, page 125.

²⁷ See [Switzerland] Erich Ecker. History of the Weimar Republic, Volume 1, page 59.

²⁸ Ibid., page 60.

war and clashed over the revolution. The nature of these conflicts resembled the infighting among left-wing parties during the French Revolution, and also the Bolshevik uprising against the Provisional Government during the Russian October Revolution. Unlike the Girondins or the moderate left-wing parties in Russia, the majority of Social Democrats did not passively accept defeat. Instead, they promptly used the state's military power to quell the unrest and insisted on convening a National Assembly to quickly put the country's political system on a constitutional track. Upon learning of the killings of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, Scheidemann commented: "I sincerely regret the deaths of these two men. They had consistently called on the German people to take up arms and overthrow the government by force. Now, they have become victims of their own bloody terror."²⁹ The failure of the Spartacus uprising meant that the Russian October Revolution model was unworkable in Germany; it lacked the support of all center-left parties and the military, as well as broad public support. However, the victory of the majority Social Democratic government over Spartacus did not end the left-wing struggle; instead, it further exacerbated division within the left-wing camp. The Independent Social Democrats and the Communist Party of Germany, which originated from Spartacus, were determined to use their respective means, including legal ones, to compete with the Social Democrats for national leadership in the National Council elections.

A rupture due to political power

January 19, 1919, was a historic day: Germany held its National Council elections. This was the first national election to establish the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic, and also the

first fully democratic election in European history. All adults over the age of 20 had the right to vote, and German women, in particular, gained this right for the first time. The Council of People's Representatives issued a decree stipulating that, on the principles of equality, secret ballot, and universal suffrage, and under proportional representation, all men and women over the age of 20 had the right to vote and to be elected. In the election, the Social Democratic Party won 37% of the vote, the German Democratic Party won 18.5%, and the Catholic Centre Party won 19.7%. The three parties of the "Weimar Union" won 76% of the vote, achieving an overwhelming victory and securing three-quarters of the seats in the National Council. The largest opposition party was the right-wing National People's Party of Germany, which received just over 10% of the vote, followed by the Independent Social Democratic Party, which received only 7.6%. The Communist Party of Germany called for a boycott of the election and did not participate. The Social Democratic Party emerged as the largest winner in this election, gaining 3.1% more votes than in the previous 1912 election, despite parting ways with the Independent Social Democratic Party, thereby becoming the undisputed largest party in the Reichstag. The election results indicate that the vast majority of Germans oppose both the Bolshevik-style revolutionary power grab advocated by the Independent Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party, and the political agenda of right-wing nationalist parties attempting to restore the monarchy.

The newly elected National Council held a presidential election on February 11th, with Social Democratic Party leader Ebert winning 277 out of 379 votes. Politically and class-wise, Germany had its first president from the Social Democratic Party and the working class. Upon assuming office,

29 Quoted from Ralph Haswell Lutz. *The German Revolution: 1918–1919*, p. 132.

Ebert issued his first decree, appointing his colleague Philipp Scheidemann as Chancellor, Noske as Minister of Defense, and Landsberg as Minister of Justice. Other cabinet members included Etzberger and Dr. Bell from the Centre Party, and trade union leader Gumbel. Democratic Party member Prouss continued as Minister of the Interior, former Freedom Party member Eugen Schiffer became Minister of Finance, and Göthe was appointed Minister without Portfolio. The Republic's first parliamentary cabinet was a coalition government. The Social Democratic Party, as the largest party in parliament, had the right to form a government. Still lacking a majority of seats, it had to create a governing coalition with a center-left party that shared similar political ideologies. The Weimar Union, comprising the Social Democratic Party, the Catholic Centre Party, and the liberal Democratic Party, received widespread public support, thereby establishing the Weimar Republic's legitimacy.

The rise of Albert Ebert, a man from a humble background working as a saddler, to the highest leadership of the nation was highly symbolic. The direct control of the highest power by the workers had long been an ideal pursued by the Social Democratic movement, and its realization within a democratic system powerfully demonstrated the correctness and effectiveness of the Social Democratic Party's strategy of peaceful democracy growing into socialism. The supportive votes from different classes and parties also indicated that Ebert had won the widespread trust of the German people during the war and the revolutionary period. As Erich Eck stated, "Even his political opponents recognized that this Social Democrat thought not only of his own class but also of the entire nation; he was a patriot who valued thoughtful action over lofty rhetoric..."

Unbiased people welcomed the trade union and political movements for paving a path for the invaluable German proletariat, enabling the talented and strong-willed sons of the people to climb this path."³⁰ After being elected president, Ebert declared, "I volunteer, and will be, the representative of the entire German nation, not the leader of any particular party." This statement won him widespread acclaim. However, he also declared:

*"I must admit that I am the son of the working class... I grew up in the socialist ideology, and I have never wanted to deny my origins or beliefs... Now you have entrusted me with the highest power in the Free State of Germany... You certainly do not want to establish a one-party dictatorship. But by choosing me, you acknowledge the tremendous changes that have taken place in our country, and at the same time, you acknowledge the pivotal role of the working class in its future mission."*³¹

When Ebert made these remarks, he clearly intended to play a dual role: both as the president representing the interests and will of the entire German people and as the leader of the Social Democratic Party and the representative of the working class. He embodied two distinct political personalities within the Social Democratic Party. While maintaining a moderate reformist stance, he inevitably retained Marxist ideological influences and a class consciousness characteristic of the working class. Consequently, during his six years in office (1919-1925), Ebert faced constant attacks from both the extreme left and the extreme right. The extreme right-wing parties considered him, at best, an excellent organizer, far from a suitable political representative of the German people, and argued that his election was a reluctant choice—the lesser of two evils compared with the

30 [Switzerland] Erich Eck. History of the Weimar Republic, Volume 1, pp. 72-73.

31 See Horst Müller. Weimar Germany: From Republic to Nazi, p. 38.

Independent Social Democrats' attempt to establish a Soviet-style regime. The Independent Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party, on the other hand, consistently viewed Ebert as a "traitor to the working class," believing he acted in accordance with democratic principles, was inactive in advancing the socialist cause, and failed to grasp the crucial significance of the proletarian revolution. The more popular Albert was within the center-left political camp, the less favored he was by the extreme left. His expulsion from the German Association of Saddlers, Bricklayers, and Leatherworkers during his lifetime demonstrates the depth of the extreme left's resentment toward him.

The divisions and conflicts within the Social Democratic Party, stemming from disagreements over war and revolution, persisted after the establishment of the Weimar Republic. On the contrary, the three left-wing parties ultimately broke apart based on fundamentally different understandings of the nature of the new state power—organizational reunification into a single party was no longer an option. This was partly because, in the eyes of the Independent Social Democrats and Communists, the armed suppression of the Spartacus uprising, the executions of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, and the stillbirth of the Socialist Soviet Republic were unforgivable crimes of the Ebert and Scheidemann governments. It was also because both parties recognized that winning votes in elections was not their political advantage, and that their existing plans to seize power were impossible to achieve within the electoral mechanisms of parliamentary democracy. Therefore, they sought to emulate the Russian Bolshevik Party by resorting to armed uprisings to achieve social and general political goals that could not be attained through elections. At the Independent Social Democratic Party's congress in March 1919, some delegates supported a parliamentary system, while a faction led by

Ernst Gehr and Clara Zetkin firmly advocated that the Soviet system was a desirable constitutional form, and they were prepared to strive for the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship even without a parliamentary majority. In April, the party chairman, Hugo Haase, was known for his moderate approach and constant efforts to reconcile contradictions. He was stabbed to death by a mentally ill man. This incident further propelled the Independent Social Democratic Party toward radicalization. At the party's Leipzig congress on November 30, the overwhelmingly dominant extreme left adopted a program affirming the proletarian dictatorship in the form of Soviet power, resolutely severing ties with the Second International and entrusting the party's executive committee with negotiations for joining the Third International in Moscow.

The Communist Party of Germany, which evolved from the Spartacus League, exhibited a stronger revolutionary fundamentalism than the Independent Social Democratic Party. Completely subservient to Moscow, they adopted an "all or nothing" strategy, explicitly stating that they could neither cooperate with bourgeois parties nor work with the "Schädemanns" or the "government socialists." They consistently advocated continuous fighting until the existing imperial government and all parliaments were overthrown, and that all power must be in the hands of future workers' and soldiers' committees elected by the "working people," establishing a Soviet socialist republic through armed uprising. Despite several defeats after January 1919, the Spartacus did not abandon its belief in "direct action" and continued to plan a series of fierce attacks on the government in major German industrial cities. The Independent Social Democratic Party supported the Spartacus's plan, favoring the establishment of proletarian regimes throughout Germany. The two parties also jointly organized the Berlin Uprising in March 1919 and the Berlin General Strike in

April. Although these actions ultimately failed, the revolution achieved a brief success in Bavaria. Workers' and soldiers' councils, relying on force, declared a takeover of government power, establishing the "Bavarian Soviet Republic," appointing revolutionary tribunals to try communist enemies, and publicly declaring that they would follow Russia's example and refuse "any cooperation with the despicable Ebert-Schödermann-Nosk-Etzberger government."³² However, to the revolutionaries' surprise, the revolution's comedy quickly turned into a farce. This so-called Soviet government was completely incapable of governing, and power fell into the hands of a few extremists. In less than a month of rule, they not only recklessly abused their newly acquired power but also, on the eve of their collapse, executed ten bourgeois "hostages" they had held without any trial. The brief rise and fall of the "Soviet Republic" further demonstrated to the German people the cruelty of violent revolution and led the extreme left-wing parties into a revolutionary dead end. However, they still firmly believed: "Only we can save Germany, betrayed and destroyed by the Social Democratic Party and the bourgeoisie."³³

Attempts to overthrow a democratically elected government through violent revolution and armed uprising were unacceptable to the Weimar Republic. They would inevitably face opposition from the major political parties that had already formed parliamentary groups. The Scheidemann government, based on the repeated uprisings launched by the Communist Party of Germany (Spartacus), accused the party of rioting and banned it. The party was forced underground, its membership dwindled to less than 50,000, and its public influence plummeted. This new and dire situation led to internal divisions within the

Communist Party. At the party's Second Congress in October 1919, the far-left anti-parliamentary faction, with about half of its members, left the Communist Party of Germany to form a new party—the Communist Workers' Party of Germany. This party continued to participate actively in bloody struggles for the next few years but soon became insignificant. The remaining members, under the leadership of Bauer Levis, adopted the principle of participating in the Reichstag. In June 1920, the Communist Party of Germany participated in the Reichstag elections for the first time, winning 2% of the vote. In November, some radicals within the Independent Social Democratic Party merged with the Communist Party of Germany to form the Communist Party of Germany (CPD). After its legalization, the CPD remained allied with the Independent Social Democratic Party, and together they served as a thorough opposition in parliament, opposing almost all bills proposed by the cabinet. Meanwhile, outside parliament, they frequently undermined the foundations of the republic's rule by launching strikes, demonstrations, and even armed uprisings.

The Independent Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party of Germany, forced by political circumstances, were compelled to transform into parliamentary parties, or at least were willing to participate in parliamentary elections, but neither abandoned their revolutionary stance. The establishment of the Weimar Republic's parliament and government marked only the formal end of the revolution; in reality, the revolutionary situation remained turbulent, with frequent riots and bloodshed that became the primary source of political instability. In March 1921 and October 1923, knowing defeat was inevitable, the Communists launched two

³² See Erich Eck. *History of the Weimar Republic*, Vol. 1, p. 87.

³³ See Ralph Haswell Lutz. *The German Revolution: 1918–1919*, p. 187.

armed uprisings against the government. This can hardly be seen as a desperate political rejection of democracy; instead, it was a manifestation of their persistent revolutionary beliefs. According to Eric Weitz, the workers who participated in Communist-organized rebellions and strikes harbored intense anger and discontent with their reality. They saw hope in the Communist Party's blueprint for a prosperous, equal, and peaceful future, but were largely unmoved by the vague promises made by the republic's founders. Suffering severe economic hardship, they quickly sought to change their situation, and this eagerness was transformed into a surge of revolutionary fervor and reckless action under the Communist Party's mobilization. He thus believed that while the Republic might be able to win over some workers by promoting economic development and providing channels for political participation, the Communist Party and communist-supporting workers were unwinnable. The fundamental reason, he argued, was that "the Communist Party is determined to wage a sustained confrontation with the Republic."³⁴ Among German political parties, the German Communist Party, owing to its unwavering communist ideology, was the most hostile to the Social Democratic Party. It openly denounced the Social Democratic Party as "social fascists," leading to the absurd outcome observed by Erich Eck: "Ultimately, they themselves believed that the danger of fascism came primarily from the Social Democratic Party, while being beneficial and even pleasing to the true fascists."³⁵

While the Independent Social Democratic Party (ISPD) did not view the Social Democratic Party (SPD) as an irreconcilable enemy like the Communists, and its moderates at different times attempted to adjust some of the extreme policies

opposing the SPD government, it generally considered the SPD the biggest obstacle to winning the support of the working class, as the latter garnered more votes from them. In the various parliamentary elections of the Weimar Republic, the ISPD never received more votes than the SPD; its actual role in elections was to divert as many votes as possible from the SPD's support base. This rivalry between the two socialist parties had serious political consequences, severely undermining the SPD's governing base. The National Assembly elections held in June 1920 showed that the ISPD's vote share increased from 7.6% in 1919 to 18%, while the SPD's vote share decreased from 37.9% to 21.6%. If the 2% of votes received by the Communist Party of Germany were added to the ISPD's votes, this would indicate that two nearly evenly matched opposing factions had emerged within the socialist camp. If the two parties cooperated, they would collectively hold up to 40% of the vote, thereby maintaining a significant position in parliament. However, the Independent Social Democratic Party (ISPD) remained uncompromising, rejecting the IPD's proposal to form a coalition after the parliamentary elections. This forced the IPD to withdraw from the government, transferring the power to form a government to the Catholic Centre Party. Since forming the first government of the Weimar Republic in February 1919, the IPD had faced constant political instability, owing to the IPD and the Communist Party's persistent obstruction of revolutionary and armed uprisings. The IPD had two prime ministers and was forced to step down after less than 18 months in power.

Brothers quarreling within their own walls, a fortress is most easily breached from within. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) united with left-

34 See Eric Weitz. *Weimar Germany: Hope and Tragedy*, p. 93.

35 [Switzerland] Erich Eck. *History of the Weimar Republic, Volume II*, translated by Wang Butao and Qian Xiuwen, edited by Song Zhonghuang, Commercial Press, 2021, p. 191.

wing bourgeois parties to form the Weimar Union, yet it couldn't coexist peacefully with working-class parties. From a normal party ethics perspective, this is incomprehensible. Parties from different classes can cooperate—this is a political tradition established by the SPD since the Bebel era. Why couldn't parties from the same class compromise, ultimately fighting to the point of mutual destruction? The left-wing struggles in the early Weimar Republic were the self-destruction of the Social Democratic movement. From division to conflict, and finally to a complete break, none of the three left-wing parties that shared the same socialist foundation emerged as the ultimate

winners in this tragic process. On the contrary, the left-wing struggles not only shook the foundations of the left-wing government but also triggered a battle between left and right parties. After the left-wing struggles destroyed the SPD-led Weimar Union, Germany entered a period of rule by center-right parties, during which Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) movement began to rise. The Social Democratic Party, the Independent Social Democratic Party, and the Communist Party only truly realized on the day Hitler came to power that the struggle on the left wing paved the way for a far-right regime to rule Germany.

The torrent, divergence, and countercurrent of liberalism

Rong Jian

***Note:** This is the final chapter of Volume Three of the first book in the author's ongoing "Critique of the Century Trilogy," titled "From Burke to Berlin: The Ancient and Modern Left-Right Debate of Liberalism." This article is the introduction to that chapter, approximately 20,000 words long. While numerous works on liberalism exist both domestically and internationally, this article, employing a "critical intellectual history" approach, seeks to construct a theoretical framework that differs from existing ones. It does not limit itself to case studies of Burke and Berlin, nor does it define them as the beginning and end points of a specific phase in the history of British liberalism. Instead, it shifts the theoretical perspective from the ancient and modern left-right debate within British liberalism to a broader scope, focusing on the "diversions" and "countercurrents" that have emerged within the torrent of British liberalism: "the French path of liberalism," "the German and Russian dilemma of liberalism," and "the American problem of liberalism." Finally, it points to the ideological debate between liberalism, conservatism, and Marxism in the century-long struggle between liberalism and totalitarianism. This chapter serves as the concluding piece of the critique of the left-wing community. The lengthy introductory narrative serves as a concise outline, and reading it in its entirety requires patience. We look forward to critiques from experts and readers alike.*

Britain is the birthplace of both liberalism and conservatism. Compared to France's historical positioning as a revolutionary nation and a "left-wing country," Britain is undoubtedly a typical "right-wing country," a nation firmly rooted in conservative liberal traditions, and in the "ancient-modern debate," a nation that resists or leads "modern" change with "tradition." Under the immense constraints of its liberal tradition, Britain became the world's first modern capitalist nation, thus becoming the cradle of modern world history. Marx's **Capital**, using Britain as a model, established a complete theory of modern capitalist production and its corresponding relations of production and exchange, predicting that "the

more industrialized countries show only the future of the less industrialized countries."¹

According to Lord John Acton in 1877, the seeds of liberty, sown in Athens 2460 years ago, have been second only to religion as a driving force for good and a common pretext for evil, until they matured and were harvested in England, becoming a refined achievement of a mature civilization. England thus became "the most politically advanced nation," with liberty as its core value, considered "the highest political end."

² The British have reason to believe that their liberal tradition is long and rich, and they consider the publication of the Magna Carta in 1215 the beginning of liberalism. The Magna Carta

Notes in this article:

1 Selected Works of Marx and Engels, Volume II, People's Publishing House, 1995, page 100.

2 See Acton, *The History of Liberty*, translated by Hu Chuansheng et al., Yilin Press, 2001, pp. 3, 196, 20.

provided a new standard of legitimacy, a fundamental law of liberty, "an authorization given to all free men of the kingdom," and "the liberty conveyed by the Magna Carta is the inherent right of the free Englishman." ³F.W. Maitland, the father of English legal history, explicitly stated in his evaluation of the Magna Carta that it was the source of English statutes, "ranking first among statute documents." In the tradition of English common law, "every word of the Magna Carta remains extremely important," and "the charter was a constraint on the king," both a constraint on royal power and a protection of the rights of free citizens. ⁴The English common law tradition, which predates the Magna Carta, is also inherently liberal. Originating in the mid-12th century, English common law differs from continental law, which is primarily based on Roman law, in that it is not the result of rational deduction but rather the gradual accumulation of countless cases; it is empirical rather than abstract. Therefore, Maitland believed that the common law is "traditional law," and that judges have no power to create law; "judges merely announce laws, announcing what has always been law." ⁵The core purpose of common law judicial practice is to protect private rights and freedoms, as summarized by Daniel Hannan: First, it particularly emphasizes private ownership and free contracts; second, it is based on the concept of "what is not prohibited is legal"; third, overseeing national laws is everyone's responsibility; and fourth, the fact that the law

belongs to the state, not the monarch, is confirmed through a court reflecting the will of the people. ⁶The English common law tradition and the Magna Carta mean that freedom is an ancient British tradition, and the "modern" transformation of British liberalism is inextricably linked to this British tradition."

However, many French people believe that the French first defined modern liberalism. It was La Fayette, a leader of the French Revolution, and his friends Madame de Staël and Henri-Benjamin Constant de Rebecque, who first gave liberalism its modern meaning. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson after the Revolution, Lafayette wrote: "France is the political headquarters of liberalism...whether the victory of liberalism in other parts of Europe can be consolidated depends on the liberation of France." ⁷This is indeed true. Under the profound influence of the French Revolution, liberal political ideals, from European countries to the United States, were regarded as quintessentially French, and even Britain was not immune to its influence. In response to the early developments of the French Revolution, Whig leader Charles James Fox hailed it as "the greatest event in world history." In contrast, Tory leader William Pitt the Younger cautioned Edmund Burke against attacking the French constitution, advising him to praise British constitutionalism. ⁸At this time, in reporting on the French Revolution, Britain used "liberal" as a loanword, adding an "e" to the end to create "liberale," or

3 See James C. Holt, *Magna Carta* (2nd edition), translated by Bi Jingyue et al., Peking University Press, 2010, pp. 252, 21.

4 Maitland, *A Constitutional History of England*, translated by Li Honghai, The Commercial Press, 2024, p. 24.

5 Ibid., page 32.

6 See Daniel Hannan, *Inventing Freedom*, translated by Xu Shuang, Kyushu Press, 2020, pp. 97-98.

7 See Helena Rosenblatt, *The Forgotten History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the 21st Century*, translated by Xu Xibai, Social Sciences Academic Press, 2020, p. 69.

8 See Edmund Burke, *The French Revolution Supplement*, translated by Feng Keli, Jiangxi People's Publishing House, 2023, p. 76.

using italics to indicate its novelty and foreignness.⁹ This suggests that most Britons agreed that the French Revolution ushered in a new era of human freedom. Many Germans, Spaniards, and Italians shared this view, and many years after the revolution, its brilliance continued to shine in their minds. In his 1830 lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel still regarded the French Revolution as a "magnificent sunrise" in human history, stating, "All thinking men celebrate this age. A sublime and moving sentiment exists in this age, a spiritual passion resonates throughout the world, and true harmony between spirit and reality seems to have only now arrived."¹⁰ This lavish praise of the French Revolution by the philosopher is based on his concept of historical rationality. It also reveals a universal historical consensus: the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, adopted during the French Revolution, placed liberty at the forefront of human rights for the first time. In the words of Anthony Arblaster, within 20 years of the Revolution, the word "liberty" acquired its modern political connotation: "The French Revolution became the moment and means by which liberalism transformed from a dream, aspiration, and goal into a dominant and driving political force. It was a decisive victory that paved the way for the great achievements of 19th-century liberalism."¹¹

Therefore, many scholars believe that attempting to pinpoint a precise time and place for such a widespread intellectual movement or ideology is absurd. At least in the view of most

historians, 19th-century liberalism took two forms: Britain established the Whig model of liberalism, and France established the Enlightenment model; "European liberalism" is seen as a fusion of the British and French models. Eric Hobsbawm characterized the series of victories associated with liberalism in the 19th century as a pair of "dual revolutions"—the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the Political Revolution in France.

*"It was not merely a great victory for 'industry' itself, but a great victory for capitalist industry; not merely a victory for freedom and equality in the general sense, but a victory for the middle class or bourgeois free society; not merely a victory for the 'modern economy' or the 'modern state,' but a great victory for the economy and the state in a specific region of the world (parts of Europe and a few places in North America)—centered on Britain and France, two neighboring and rival nations. The transformation from 1789 to 1848 was essentially twofold, occurring in both countries. Since then, this transformation has spread throughout the world."*¹²

The liberal tide initiated by the British and French "dual revolutions" extensively impacted the traditional political systems and international order of almost all European countries in the 19th century, triggering an unprecedented "transformation from ancient to modern" in European history. Ancient empires, traditional monarchies, feudal aristocratic manors, and medieval customs that had endured for over a thousand years were subjugated by the tide of

9 See Helena Rosenblatt, *The Forgotten History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the 21st Century*, p. 66.

10 See Michael Stoles, *A History of German Public Law: State Jurisprudence and Administration (1800–1914)**, translated by Lei Yong, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2021, pp. 18–19. A translation can also be found in Hegel, *Philosophy of History**, translated by Wang Zaoshi, Shanghai Bookstore Press, 1999, p. 459.

11 Anthony Abblast, *The Rise and Fall of Western Liberalism*, translated by Cao Haijun et al., Jilin People's Publishing House, 2004, pp. 270–271.

12 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848*, translated by Wang Zhanghui et al., CITIC Press Group, 2017, p. 2.

modern change. However, this powerful liberal tide did not flow continuously along a unified course; instead, owing to its distinct historical and cultural traditions originating in Britain and France, it quickly diverged. The Reign of Terror implemented by the Jacobin dictatorship after the French Revolution, and the revolution's outcome leading to Napoleon's military autocracy, not only prompted the leaders of the British Whig and Tory parties to rethink the meaning of the French Revolution, but also made French liberals such as Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant aware of the "difference between ancient and modern" in liberalism. Madame de Staël asserted, "In France, liberty is classical, while despotism is modern."¹³ Constant distinguished between "the liberty of the ancients" and "the liberty of the moderns." Their general understanding of the "ancient versus modern" difference in liberalism actually stemmed from their fundamental judgments about the different models of liberty in England and France. In the face of the reality that "the French Revolution always went from one extreme to another," Madame de Staël recognized the value of England's "vibrant liberty": "We can imagine how this liberty helped England withstand the backlash of the French Revolution."¹⁴ Volume VI of her historical work, *The French Revolution*, focuses on a range of issues, including English history, the reasons for English prosperity and strength, the English people's liberty and public spirit, English knowledge, religion and morality, English social circles and their various connections with social classes, and English foreign relations. She

concludes that "the primary foundation of any liberty is the protection of the individual. In this respect, nothing does it better than English law." She acknowledges that "because the English people have been influenced by a century of institutions, they have become one of the most pious, virtuous, and civilized nations in Europe, and I see no threat to the prosperity of this country—that is, its liberty."¹⁵ Constant, in his work, also emphasized a view broadly similar to that of Madame de Staël: "Individual liberty is true modern liberty." In contrast, the political liberty pursued by the French is a regression to "the liberty of the ancients," that is, "sacrificing all individual liberty for political liberty."¹⁶ Constant's political goal was to strive for a unity between "the liberty of the ancients" and "the liberty of the moderns."

Clearly, there is a significant difference between "Angloan liberty" and "Gallic liberty," leading to the divergence of liberalism and its different political consequences. In short, the former is "singular liberty," i.e., individual liberty, while the latter is "plural liberty," i.e., political (community) liberty. For historians tracing the origins of "singular liberty," the search inevitably leads back to Athens and the Renaissance. It inevitably considers the Reformation, including the Lutheran Reformation and the rise of Calvinism, because the doctrines of the Reformation exhibited an individualistic tendency. Protestantism's claim to equality for all constituted a significant source of early modern liberalism and radical political thought. However, according to

13 See Guido de Laguiro, *History of European Liberalism*, translated by Yang Jun, edited by Zhang Xiaohui, Jilin People's Publishing House, 2001, p. 1.

14 Madame de Staël, *The French Revolution*, Volumes 1 & 2, translated by Li Xiaoxi, Jilin Publishing Group, 2015, pp. 322-589.

15 Ibid., pages 572 and 626.

16 [French] Bonjaman Constant, *The Freedom of Ancient Man and the Freedom of Modern Man*, translated by Yan Kewen et al., Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2017, p. 87.

British historian Alan Macfarlane, the British liberal tradition originated entirely from the historical process of British individualism. His book, **The Origins of English Individualism**, challenges the long-standing dominant chronology of Max Weber on the origins of British capitalism. Both chronologists, considered authoritative, argued that, until the late 15th century, England was essentially a fully-fledged "peasant" society, similar in nature to other European countries. They believed that modern British individualism emerged in the 15th and 16th centuries from a collectivist, "tradition-oriented" old-fashioned society. McFarlane, however, argues that the origins of British individualism predate the 15th century, at least from the 13th century onwards. He asserts that most commoners in England were already unrestrained individualists: "They were highly mobile geographically and socially, economically 'rational,' market-oriented, and greedily exploitative, and self-centered in kinship and social life."¹⁷ Correspondingly, by the 13th century, English common law had evolved into a legal system centered on individual rights and ownership. It was precisely this whole development of individualism that allowed England to diverge from most European countries before the 16th century. By the 17th century, England had become a highly modern and liberal nation. To illustrate this point, the author cites the views of the Frenchmen Tocqueville and Montesquieu. The former argued that the main institutional difference between England and France lay in the fact that "a kind of individualism that had already taken root in England was absent in France." The latter's assessment of England was that "this nation is passionately devoted to liberty," and that "everyone is independent."¹⁸

The British "singular" liberal tradition originates from its unique history of individualism, as systematically elaborated in the works of the renowned British left-wing thinker Harold J. Laski. He studied the rise of "European liberalism" within a European context, arguing that liberalism, as a new ideology, emerged to meet the demands of the new world. The Age of Discovery, the disintegration of feudal economic relations, the establishment of Protestantism, the Scientific Revolution and technological innovation, the widespread dissemination of culture through the invention of printing, and the birth of nation-states all contributed to the emergence of a new mode of production: capitalism. Liberalism, philosophically speaking, provided legitimacy for the new capitalist practice. In the Middle Ages, the standard of legitimacy for human behavior was externally provided—whether by the state, the church, or guilds; effective social institutions measured people's behavior by standards derived from outside themselves. However, liberal philosophy, grounded in capitalist practice, advocates maximizing individual freedom of action to foster innovation and treats the realization of personal interests as the ultimate measure of social progress. He wrote:

"Medieval social ideas denied what was readily apparent and denied people's right to exploit the resources they possessed, even though the changed economic conditions of the time made such exploitation possible. People discovered that developing new resources required establishing new class relations. However, these new class relations, in turn, required a new philosophy to justify the behavioral habits established by them. The transition from feudalism to capitalism was a

17 Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of British Individualism*, translated by Guan Kenong, The Commercial Press, 2020, p. 263.

18 See the same book, pages 267 and 271.

*shift from an old world to a new: in the old society, individual welfare was understood as a product of social control, whereas in the new society, the good life and social welfare were conceived as the outcome of autonomous individual action."*¹⁹

Individualism, as the source of capitalism, is also the source of liberalism, constituting "the metaphysical and ontological core of liberalism" (in Abalaster's words). Starting from the premise of individualism, the theoretical construction of liberalism can then deduce its arguments regarding freedom, tolerance, private property, and individual rights. The "classical" form of British liberalism, based on the works of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill, while reflecting each author's distinct problems and theoretical concerns, nevertheless adhered to a distinctly individualistic value system. In discussing the "unity of the liberal tradition," John Gray particularly emphasizes the commonalities among the various "variations" of the "classical liberal system of thought": it is individualistic because it advocates the moral priority of the individual's demands on any social collective; it is egalitarian because it grants all people equal moral standing; it is universalist because it affirms the moral unity of the human race; and it is a doctrine of social good because it believes all social institutions and political arrangements are correctable and improveable.²⁰In Gray's view, the first systematic exposition of modern individualism emerged in the 17th century: Hobbes "expounded an uncompromising individualism," thereby marking a complete break between his theory of modernity and the social

philosophy inherited from medieval Christianity by Plato and Aristotle. He cites Leo Strauss's view that Hobbes is the theoretical father of liberalism because Hobbes conceived of liberalism as a political doctrine of human rights rather than human obligations, and as a doctrine of the state's function in protecting or defending the inalienable natural rights of the individual.²¹ By the time Locke wrote his works, the concept of the supremacy of individual rights was no longer confined to the abstract level of natural law or the "state of nature." Still, it was concretely applied to justify the legitimacy and validity of private property rights. This effectively established a fundamental tenet of classical liberalism: the inviolability of private property, and based on this tenet, demanded the establishment of a limited government sufficient to restrict state power. Gray highly praised Locke's theoretical contributions to classical liberalism for this reason.

Locke's thought introduced a theme absent from or rejected by Hobbes and Spinoza: the close connection between individual property ownership and individual liberty. Locke possessed a clear insight not seen by earlier individualists: that individual independence must be predicated on the secure protection of private property rights under the rule of law. After Locke, the view that civil society needs widely distributed individual property rights became an essential theme in the liberal literature, and this insight embodies Locke's most significant contribution to liberalism.²²

The classical liberalism expounded by Hobbes and Locke sought to open the door to

19 Harold J. Lasky, *The Rise of European Liberalism*, translated by Lin Gang and Zheng Zhongyi, edited by Ouyang Jinggen, China Renmin University Press, 2013, p. 13.

20 See John Gray, *Liberalism*, translated by Cao Haijun and Liu Xunlian, Jilin People's Publishing House, 2005, p. 2.

21 See the same book, page 14.

22 Ibid., page 20.

modernity by breaking the political shackles of the Middle Ages. Essentially a modernist ideology, it became a pervasive intellectual phenomenon not only in Britain's modernization process but also in Europe's political transformation. Particularly in France, a generation of thinkers who grew up during the 18th-century Enlightenment, on the intellectual spectrum, closely resembled the classical liberalism that had flourished in Britain in the 17th century. They generally acknowledged and advocated the fundamental values of liberalism. Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire and Montesquieu initially took Britain as their model, and their criticisms of France's centralized, absolutist system were grounded in British constitutional practice. In his **Philosophical Letters**, Voltaire, by contrasting the French autocracy with the British constitutional monarchy, highlighted its progressiveness, enthusiastically praising its constitutional system, religious tolerance, and freedom of thought, extolling the "Great Charter" as the "sacred source of all British liberties," and praising the significant contributions of Bacon, Locke, and Newton to thought and scientific discovery—essentially portraying Britain as an "ideal state" of Europe.²³ In his book **The Spirit of the Laws**, Montesquieu used England as a model to design a system of separation of powers and checks and balances for France to protect individual liberty. He emphasized that the "English system" was "superior to most ancient republics" because of its "separation of powers." He stressed that England had been established as a "free

country" by its laws.²⁴

Although Voltaire and Montesquieu consistently attempted to create a model of British liberalism for France, the French tradition of rationalism since Descartes—which revered reason as supreme authority, pursued absolute certainty in knowledge, emphasized the scientific nature of deductive and mathematical methods, and held that reason itself possessed intrinsic principles transcending experience—stood in stark contrast to British empiricism represented by Locke and Hume. In other words, 17th-century British empiricism and 18th-century French rationalism provided these two neighboring countries with distinct philosophical foundations for liberalism. In the grand narrative of French rationalism, British individualism was ruthlessly submerged under the all-encompassing light of reason. The realization of individual freedom depended on the "political freedom" of the community or, as Rousseau advocated, the "general will" — "Anyone who refuses to obey the general will, the whole will compel him to obey it. This means precisely that the people will compel him to be free."²⁵ According to the Italian scholar Guido de Ruggiero, within the powerful context of the French Enlightenment, Montesquieu and Rousseau, though belonging to the British and French democratic-liberal traditions, respectively, came together during the revolution. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, adopted during the French Revolution, blended two elements of different origins and distinct essences: on the one hand, freedom before

23 See Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, Letters 9, 12, and 14. Translated by Gao Daguan et al., Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1961.

24 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Vol. 1, translated by Zhang Yanshen, Commercial Press, 1959, pp. 194-196.

25 See Ian Hampshire -Monk, **A History of Modern Political Thought: From Hobbes to Marx**, Volume 1, translated by Zhou Baowei et al., Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, p. 245. A similar translation can be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, **The Social Contract**, translated by Li Ping'ou, Commercial Press, 2011, p. 23; the two translations differ slightly.

the political state, and on the other hand, individual participation within the structure of the state. In this "charter of modern liberalism," he found the roots of a new interpretation of liberty and equality: "It values the substance of rights more than their form than the formalism of liberals and democrats. It calls for the right to a fair distribution of social, moral, and economic wealth to counter liberty that leads to hunger; it demands social equality to counter equality merely before the law."²⁶In fact, the French Revolution, from its very beginning, created a tension between liberty and equality, essentially a tension between "Anglo-style liberty" and "Gallic liberty."

In the "state of nature" envisioned by British classical liberalism, "man is born free" and "man is born equal" are almost synonymous. As Locke stated in his **Two Treatises of Government**, within the framework of natural law, "a state of perfect liberty" is "also a state of equality, where all powers and jurisdictions are reciprocal, and no one has more power than another."²⁷However, in Rousseau's writings, equality is placed above or determines freedom: "Without equality, liberty cannot exist."²⁸The French Revolution, nominally a fight for liberty, actually regarded equality as "the core of the republic and democracy." In Robespierre's words, "The monarchy has been abolished, the nobility and the clergy have disappeared, and the rule of equality has begun."²⁹Therefore, the "ancient versus modern" debate between British "classical liberalism" and French "modern liberalism" can be seen as a debate between "liberty" and "equality," or between

"liberty" and "democracy." Lord Acton aptly summarized the different class bases and political consequences of the debate between "liberty" and "equality": "The reason the French Revolution brought such a disaster to liberty was its theory of equality. Liberty was the slogan of the middle class, while equality was the slogan of the lower classes.... Because of this theory of equality, liberty was extinguished in blood, and the French were willing to sacrifice anything else to save their lives and their destiny."³⁰

If the "ancient vs. modern" debate between Britain and France regarding liberalism had remained merely a discussion of empiricism versus rationalism, the question of whether liberty or equality should come first would not have been the reason for their divergence on the path of liberalism. In the early stages of the French Revolution, both Whigs and Tories in Britain generally welcomed this unprecedented political transformation in Europe. The clauses on liberty, equality, and fraternity in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen were precisely the political principles they had always advocated. However, as the revolution increasingly veered towards terror and despotism, they gradually sobered up from the radical storm of French liberalism. They began to re-evaluate the warning issued by their compatriot Edmund Burke at the very beginning of the French Revolution: "It begins with the refusal to acknowledge that one should be subject to the mildest limitations, and ends with the establishment of an unprecedented

26 Guido de Laguiro, *History of European Liberalism*, p. 68.

27 John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, translated by Ye Qifang and Qu Junong, The Commercial Press, 2022, p. 145.

28 [French] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 58.

29 Quoted from Albert Sobel, *History of the French Revolution*, translated by Ma Shengli et al., edited by Zhang Zhi, Beijing Normal University Press, 2015, Preface, p. 184.

30 Acton, *The History of Liberty*, pp. 74-75.

despotism." ³¹ Madame Roland... Roland was executed on November 8, 1793. Her dying words, "Liberty, what crimes in thy name!", powerfully echoed Burke's "Reflections on the French Revolution." The Jacobin tyranny that occurred in France under the guise of a "free nation" became the butcher of liberty, proving that Burke's skepticism and criticism of France's "tyrannical plan of liberty" in the early stages of the revolution was profound and farsighted. The emergence of his groundbreaking theories meant that the two different models of liberalism in Britain and France would go their separate ways, and it also meant the internal split of the British Whig movement—the emergence of a struggle between the old and new Whigs. Burke, as an "old Whig," challenged the "new" Whigs represented by Fox, marking a turning point in conservatism within the intellectual tradition of British liberalism. Laski argues that Edmund Burke represents a significant turning point in British political philosophy, marking his transition to conservatism. Furthermore, the utilitarian foundation of Burke's thought contains elements that can be interpreted from a liberal perspective. When defending the tax exemption for British American colonies and the exemption of the Indian Empire from despotic rule, Burke was a quintessential New Whig; when he was the first in Britain to support party politics and advocate for representative constitutionalism, he was a quintessential liberal; and when he vehemently criticized the French Revolution for overturning all traditional values, he was a quintessential conservative. Burke's multifaceted political identity makes it difficult for later generations to determine his place in intellectual history: was he a conservative or a liberal? Lord

Acton believed that Burke was both a thorough liberal—insisting on freedom of conscience, freedom of property, freedom of trade, and freedom of slavery—and a conservative—due to his understanding of history, his claims to the past, the authority of time, the will of his deceased predecessors, and the continuity of history. This "made Burke the first person to be both a liberal and a conservative." ³² In fact, Burke's fusion of liberalism and conservatism precisely reflects the inherent structure of the British liberal intellectual tradition, with the new and the old indistinguishably unified. The significance of Burke's intellectual transformation, as Abblast summarized, is that "Burke's easy shift from the relatively liberal Whig doctrine to a strong anti-revolutionary conservatism was significant, not only for himself but also for the development of subsequent liberal history."³³

Following Burke, liberalism, represented by figures like Fox's New Whigs, had to confront a series of challenges posed by conservatism. Beyond major issues such as how to uphold British traditions and how to carry out revolutionary reforms within the constraints of those traditions, it also needed to address fundamental questions of French-style liberalism, as exemplified by the French Revolution. For instance, how should the relationship between liberty and equality be understood? What are the differences between ancient and modern liberalism? How should the relationship between individual liberty and political (community) liberty be constructed? These are questions that British liberalism must answer. John Stuart Mill was a 19th-century successor to British classical liberalism who attempted to answer these questions. In his 1859

31 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the French Revolution*, translated by Feng Li, Jiangxi People's Publishing House, 2015, p. 213.

32 Acton, *Freedom and Power*, translated by Hou Jian and Fan Yafeng, Yilin Press, 2011, p. 306.

33 [British] Anthony Abblast, *The Rise and Fall of Western Liberalism*, p. 299.

book, **On Liberty**, the subject matter was no longer "freedom of will" closely related to individualism, but rather "civil liberty" or "social liberty," "that is, to explore the nature and limits of the power that society can legitimately exercise over individuals." In other words, "how should a proper balance be made between the individual's independence from social control?"³⁴ To this end, Mill adhered to the basic principles of Locke's classical liberalism, starting from the position that "the individual is the supreme sovereign," emphasizing that the legitimacy of government derives from the consent and authorization of the majority of free people, that the purpose of establishing government is to protect individual liberty and property, that the government's power to control individual affairs is not unlimited, that government is limited, and that he opposed excessive government interference in individual and social affairs. On the other hand, within Mill's theoretical framework, the government does not merely passively play the role of a "night watchman." He maintains an open attitude toward limited government intervention, acknowledging the legitimacy of such intervention in certain areas (such as education, labor rights, and public services) while upholding economic freedom. Simultaneously, he opposes equating economic competition entirely with freedom, emphasizing a balance between social justice and individual liberty. Under the new conditions of the times, Mill effectively completed three theoretical shifts in

classical liberalism: 1. From natural law to utilitarianism: Rejecting social contract theory and natural rights doctrine, he argued for the value of freedom through utilitarianism, making liberalism more grounded in reality and more targeted, moving away from abstract rights discourse;³⁵ 2. From political freedom to social freedom: Expanding the issue of freedom from government action to the social sphere, especially emphasizing freedom of thought and discussion; 3. From negative freedom to positive development: While protecting the negative freedom of "freedom from interference," he emphasized the positive value of individual growth and self-realization. Mill's liberalism was a crucial theoretical response to political, social, and moral challenges in new historical conditions. As Hobhouse stated, Mill tirelessly combined the principles of liberalism with "new experiences and new ideas, studying how they function and how they should be modified to preserve what is truly healthy and valuable in their content." In this sense³⁶, Mill was a key figure in the transition from classical to modern liberalism in Britain.

In 19th-century Britain, in addition to the theoretical transformation undertaken by Mill, the Whig Party also underwent a political transformation, changing its name to the Liberal Party in 1839. This name change highlighted the awakening of a modern liberal consciousness. A representative figure of the Liberal Party was William Ewart Gladstone, who served as Prime

34 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, translated by Xu Baokui, Commercial Press, 1959, pp. 1-5.

35 John Stuart Mill's contributions to liberal theory are primarily twofold. First, he revised and developed classical liberalism, using the utilitarian theory co-founded by his father, James Mill, and Jeremy Bentham to break through the abstract narratives of classical liberalism regarding "natural rights," "natural law," and "natural rights." Second, he modified utilitarianism's view of happiness with classical liberal values, elevating human happiness from Bentham's simple pleasure to a moral level of self-realization, emphasizing the cultivation of personal virtue and knowledge. This infused utilitarianism with a humanistic dimension, transcending the cold, impersonal image of early utilitarianism. (See Ian Hampshire-Monk, **A History of Modern Political Thought: From Hobbes to Marx**, Volume II, translated by Zhou Baowei et al., Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2022, Chapters 7 and 8.)

36 [England] Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, translated by Zhu Zengwen, Commercial Press, 1996, p. 54.

Minister four times. Under his leadership, the Liberal Party reached its zenith. A quintessential liberal, Gladstone adhered to the "Cobdenism" he had embraced since middle age. He disliked the neoliberal and semi-socialist ideologies that emerged in the late 1880s, as represented by Thomas Hill Green, which advocated state intervention. He opposed state determinism, arguing that the state could justify nothing except what had been proven by human conscience. This shows that the Whig Party's transformation into the Liberal Party did not change the fundamental concepts of the relationship between individual liberty and the state established by classical liberalism. Gladstone, a figure in action, and Mill, a thinker, jointly facilitated the convergence of old and new liberalism, and the 19th century in Britain is widely recognized as the liberal era as a result. However, by the end of the century, in Hobhouse's words, "This great movement had greatly declined. Those who represented liberal thought, both domestically and internationally, suffered devastating defeats."³⁷ This assessment is undoubtedly an exaggeration, but it is undeniable that liberalism faced far more complex challenges in the 20th century than in the 19th. The challenge came from within liberalism itself. Hobhouse represented a further rise of "neoliberalism," a movement that had existed since Greene's time.

³⁸He attempted to drive a wedge between "state intervention" and the theoretical system of classical liberalism, following Greene's new concept of "freedom of contract," articulated in 1880. This involved shifting from a theory of purely free competition to one combining state intervention and free competition, aiming to "liberate liberalism from the shackles of an individualistic concept of freedom and pave the way for contemporary legislation."³⁹ Hobhouse redefined liberalism, transforming it from a doctrine advocating "small government" into one that combined individual freedom with social justice through democratic, interventionist state intervention. He pinned his hopes for the "future of liberalism" on the grand plan of building a "welfare state." The influence of Hobhouse's neoliberalism in the 20th century was profound. Rajiro described Hobhouse as "the best new form of 20th-century British liberalism,"⁴⁰ while Abblast believed that Hobhouse made "significant intellectual and political contributions" to the "great movement" of reviving liberalism. The⁴¹ more widespread Keynesian Revolution and Roosevelt's New Deal liberal movement both have theoretical origins in Hobhouse's writings.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the external world, the rapid expansion of the international communist movement in the 20th

37 [British] Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, p. 109.

38 In the history of liberalism, various definitions of "neoliberalism" have emerged. Besides Hobhouse's "neoliberalism," Roosevelt's liberalism is also referred to as "neoliberalism" or "New Deal liberalism." These are all redefinitions of liberalism from a left-wing perspective, advocating for state intervention in the market and the implementation of a "welfare state" policy. From Hayek to Reagan-Thatcherism, however, a right-wing approach calls for a revival of the basic concepts of classical liberalism, advocating free competition and opposing excessive state intervention in economic and social affairs. Their theories and policies are often referred to as "neoliberalism" by many intellectual historians, or as a reaction against Roosevelt-style neoliberalism, as "neo-neoliberalism." Like liberalism itself, "neoliberalism" faces a confusing conceptual debate, and the subsequent discussions in this book will continuously address various controversies surrounding "neoliberalism."

39 [British] Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, p. 111.

40 Guido de Laguiro, *History of European Liberalism*, p. 146.

41 [British] Anthony Abblast, *The Rise and Fall of Western Liberalism*, p. 380.

century posed a more severe challenge to liberalism. In the 19th century, Marxism forged the most radical theoretical weapon for the working class: advocating the overthrow of the existing capitalist social order through violent revolution and openly calling for the dismantling of the bourgeois state apparatus. This aimed to completely subvert the fundamental theories and values of liberalism, which had been formed over centuries. This is fundamentally different from the various challenges liberalism has faced in the past. Conservatism and neoliberalism, which branched off from the tide of classical liberalism, have not fundamentally changed the basic concepts established by classical liberalism: the supremacy of individual rights, the inviolability of private property, the establishment of constitutional representative systems, and the upholding of freedom of thought and religious tolerance. These concepts are the standard bottom line upheld by liberalism, conservatism, and neoliberalism. However, in **The Communist Manifesto**, Marx and Engels assigned the proletariat the mission of "the communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; unsurprisingly, in its own development it involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas." In these two "ruptures," Marx and Engels unequivocally declared that the elimination of capitalist private property and its ideas "is precisely the elimination of the individuality, independence, and freedom of the bourgeoisie."⁴² This means that, in the grand revolutionary plan and blueprint for future society outlined by Marxism, there is no legitimate space for liberalism, conservatism, or "neoliberalism"; they are, like traditional ideas of private property, to be wholly eradicated in the revolutionary process of the proletariat.

The emergence of Marxism fundamentally

altered the intellectual landscape of Europe, adding a new dimension to the "ancient vs. modern" debate within liberalism: the emergence of radicalism, represented by Marxism, amidst the confrontation between liberalism and conservatism. If the spread of Marxism encountered bottlenecks in the 19th-century liberal era, due to the failure of the Paris Commune and the development of European social democratic movements, then in the 20th century it exerted an increasingly significant and far-reaching influence following the victory of the October Revolution in Russia led by Lenin. In his 1922 book, **Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis**, Ludwig von Mises acknowledged a stark reality: historically, no doctrine had ever been accepted as wholly and rapidly as Marxism; its immense and lasting success was generally underestimated; in Europe east of the Rhine, non-Marxists were few and far between; even in Western Europe and the United States, supporters of Marxism outnumbered opponents; even devout Christians, when attacking Marxist materialism, wished to be called "Christian socialists"; while royalists and nationalists portrayed themselves as "national socialists" and "national socialists." Based on these realities, Mises argued that Marxism had achieved undeniable success.

"Marxism achieved unprecedented success because it promised to fulfill the desires and dreams buried deep within the human soul since ancient times. It promised a paradise on earth, a blissful haven filled with happiness and joy; what made the disheartened in the struggle for survival even happier was that all those who rose to the top would be degraded. Logic and reason were discarded like worn-out shoes, for they would expose the absurdity of these dreams of paradise and revenge. Among the opposition to the

42 Selected Works of Marx and Engels, Volume 1, People's Publishing House, 1995, pp. 293-287.

scientific ideas about life and behavior established by rationalism, Marxism was the most radical. It truly deserves the label 'scientific socialism,' as it has used this reputation to critique the scientific achievements of constructing socialist economics and has achieved undeniable success in constraining people's lives and behaviors."⁴³

The successful spread of Marxism was not merely due to its depiction of a beautiful future society—a dream that humanity has cherished for millennia—as Mises claimed. Instead, it provided a new socio-political philosophy entirely distinct from liberalism: historical materialism. This materialism invokes the fundamental principles that productive forces determine relations of production and that the economic base determines the political superstructure and its ideology to demonstrate the inevitable demise of capitalism and the inevitable victory of socialism and communism—a "historical law." In this grand theoretical narrative, the individual's position is insignificant; the primary force determining historical development is the class, the people, or the masses. The proletariat, as the "chosen class," bears the historical mission of liberating itself and all of humanity. Because of its absolute poverty within the capitalist system of exploitation, this class possesses a natural revolutionary nature; a revolution led by the proletariat will become the locomotive of history. In the Marxist discourse, freedom, equality, and justice are also key terms. The communist society it envisions ultimately aims to eliminate classes, private property, and the state, replacing them with "a union in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."⁴⁴ Marxism's ideal vision

of human freedom and equality, articulated through this distinctive rhetoric, is more persuasive than any liberal definition of a free society. In the words of F.A. Hayek, "the promise of greater freedom has become one of the most effective weapons of socialist propaganda." In his historic work, **The Road to Serfdom**, he frankly admits that socialism, this "great utopia," poses the greatest threat to liberalism.

*"Socialism has replaced liberalism as the creed upheld by the vast majority of progressives, which does not merely mean that people have forgotten the warnings of the great liberal thinkers of the past regarding the consequences of collectivism. This has occurred because they believe the exact opposite of what these thinkers predicted. Surprisingly, the same socialism, previously recognized as the most serious threat to liberty and openly presented from the outset as a reaction against the liberalism of the French Revolution, has gained widespread acceptance under the banner of freedom. Few now remember that socialism was inherently authoritarian from the outset."*⁴⁵

It was precisely because Marxism seized the hegemony of free discourse that the socialist movement's triumphant advance in the first half of the 20th century almost utterly crushed liberalism. Raymond Aron observed a similar political and intellectual phenomenon after both World Wars: in 1936, 18 years after the end of World War I, liberal democracy had vanished in most European countries except for Britain and a few small Flemish and Scandinavian nations; French liberal democracy was in danger, torn apart by right-wing

43 [German] Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, translated by Feng Keli and Cui Shuyi, China Social Sciences Press, 2012, p. 16.

44 *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 1, p. 294.

45 Friedrich August von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, translated by Wang Mingyi and Feng Xingyuan, edited by Feng Xingyuan et al., China Social Sciences Press, 1997, p. 50.

fascism and communist forces; even where liberal democracy was not threatened, the Great Depression led people to endorse Marxist predictions of capitalist economic crises—that the contradiction between the social nature of production and the private nature of ownership would not only impoverish the populace but also inevitably lead to financial collapse. The same situation occurred in the 18 years after World War II. Although the Western world experienced rapid economic growth and liberal democracy was consolidated after the war, it failed to take root in most of the "liberated" countries in Asia and Africa. According to Aron, the real predicament of liberal democracy after the two World Wars demonstrates that, in the confrontation between the three major ideologies of Marxism, liberalism, and conservatism, compared to conservatism's nostalgia for a non-existent order and its emphasis on the illusory or disastrous ambitions of revolutionaries, and compared to liberalism's advocacy of limiting state power in politics and believing in the virtue of individual initiative in economics, Marxism remains "one of the most influential ideologies in the political-historical sphere," combining "a so-called scientific critique of capitalism with a prophecy of an inevitable future and a harbinger of a triumphant tomorrow."

⁴⁶Thus, for most of the 20th century, conservatism, as a "traditional" ideology, and liberalism, as a "modern" ideology, in their opposition to and confrontation with Marxism, as a "future" ideology, never gained the upper hand. People increasingly chose to believe that to escape or transcend the suffering of reality, one could not return to the past but must face the future. In other words, for a better future, one must both abandon the past and be willing to sacrifice the present.

Marxism's beautiful promise of a free and equal society for the future of mankind, free from classes, exploitation, and even states, not only convinced the vast proletariat but also deeply attracted leftists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, including "the last remaining classical liberal thinkers, such as Sir Ernest Ben ⁴⁷ of England, who lamented the decline of liberalism."

It was at the crossroads where conservatism, liberalism, and Marxism pointed to the "past," "present," and "future," respectively, and where a growing number of people were flocking to the path of the future indicated by Marxism, that Isaiah Berlin emerged. His life almost entirely overlapped with the 20th century and with the decline of liberalism and the resurgence of Marxism. In particular, he witnessed firsthand the catastrophic consequences inflicted on this century by the two greatest totalitarian regimes of the 20th century—Nazi Germany under Hitler and the Soviet regime under Stalin. By 1933, Berlin had fully recognized the horrors of Nazism and was keenly aware that peaceful coexistence with it was impossible for civilized nations. However, after the war, he did not offer "any original viewpoints" on Nazi atrocities; instead, he directed his criticism primarily at the Soviet Union. Like Raymond Aron, Berlin believed that, after the fall of Nazi Germany, the principal challenge to liberalism arose from the Soviet system. In Aron's words, "only the Soviet system and liberal democracy remained face to face," and the Soviet system was the "only enemy" that Western liberal democracy had to fight against. ⁴⁸Berlin's Russian background, his childhood memories of the horrors of the Bolshevik dictatorship, and the sympathy for Soviet communism that arose within his small circle of left-leaning intellectuals led him,

46 Raymond Aron, *On Liberty*, translated by Jiang Zhihui, Shanghai Century Press, 2007, pp. 36, 117.

47 See John Gray, **Liberalism**, p. 53.

48 Ibid., page 37.

far more profoundly than Aron, to realize that Soviet-style totalitarianism was the greatest threat to 20th-century human society. As Ignatius Yeltsin, author of **Berlin: A Biography**, stated, "It was Stalin, not Hitler, who committed crimes that provoked the sharpest and most original response in Berlin."⁴⁹ A key theme in these responses is the critique of Marxist utopian ideals. The aim is to demonstrate that the historical teleology and determinism of "sacrificing the present for a possible better future" is one of the most heinous sins humanity can commit. It shifts moral responsibility onto an unpredictable future order, a practice that forces all realistic considerations to yield to future expectations—a "demonic contract against 'human' life." Accompanying this relentless pursuit of a "future paradise" is "the death of millions, from which the real people gain nothing."⁵⁰ Among Berlin's defined enemies of liberalism, the most charismatic and dangerous are those authors who outwardly advocate freedom, even placing it above other values, but ultimately redefine freedom as its opposite. This list includes Rousseau, Fichte, and Hegel, with Marx being their culmination. Although Berlin did not apply the same criticisms of Rousseau—"Rousseau is the most insidious and terrible enemy of freedom in the entire history of modern ideas"⁵¹—to Marx, in his first book, **Marx: A Biography**, he unequivocally revealed the difference between Marx and all other thinkers since the 19th century: "the founder of a new faith in great despotism."

"The 19th century saw the emergence of numerous renowned social critics and revolutionaries, who, compared to Marx, were no less innovative, violent, or stubborn. However,

none possessed his unwavering dedication, his wholehearted commitment to transforming every word and action of his life into a means toward a single, direct, and practical goal. For him, nothing was too sacred to be sacrificed. If some considered his ideas ahead of their time, others would equally consider him a representative of one of the oldest European traditions. His realism, his sensitivity to history, his attack on abstract principles, his demand that any solution be tested by its applicability and results in real-world contexts, and his disdain for compromise or gradualism as a way to evade the necessity of extreme action..." He firmly believed that the masses were easily deceived, and therefore it was necessary to rescue them from the clutches of the scoundrels and fools who oppressed them, at any cost, and if necessary, by force. All of this made him a forerunner of a more severe generation of pragmatic revolutionaries in the next century. However, he also firmly believed in the need for a complete break with the past, and that a completely new social system was required—one that could save individuals from social constraints, enabling them to work together in harmony. But this also required strict social guidance—and it was these principles that placed him among the founders of new beliefs in great despotism, and among those ruthless subversives and reformers who interpreted the world using a single, clear, and passionately held principle, condemning and destroying anything that contradicted it.⁵²

From Burke to Berlin, there seems to be no necessary connection in the nearly two-hundred-year development of British liberalism. However, they are representative figures of liberalism in

49 See Joshua L. Cherness, *A Thought and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought*, translated by Shou Tianyi and Song Wenjia, Yilin Press, 2023, p. 73.

50 See the same book, page 153.

51 Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal*, translated by Zhao Guoxin, Yilin Press, 2019, p. 64.

52 Isaiah Berlin, *Marx: A Biography*, translated by Li Yin, Yilin Press, 2018, p. 21.

their respective eras. This book examines them in connection because from the late 18th to the late 20th century, the torrent of British liberalism, despite various "diversions" and "countercurrents", maintained its "mainstream" status in the process of modernity. Even in the most difficult periods, the traditional intellectual foundations established at its inception remained fundamentally unshaken. Chinese scholar Li Qiang, in his work, cites some popular views among Western scholars: "Western modernity actually has only one ideology, that is, liberalism. Conservatism, in essence, aims to 'conservat' the achievements of liberalism, while radicalism attempts to achieve an extreme form of liberal principles through radical means."⁵³ Abtast, in his work, argues that: "Conservatives and social democrats are clearly sharing liberal assumptions and attitudes, which proves the dominant position of liberalism, but also reveals the limitations of its dominant position." Immanuel Wallerstein,⁵⁴ the founder of the "world-systems" theory... Wallerstein, from his inherent left-wing stance, emphasizes that since 1789 there has only been one ideology—liberalism. He argues that liberalism, conservatism, and socialism all clearly possess liberal characteristics; liberalism reigned supreme between 1848 and 1914; and reached its peak worldwide between 1917 and 1968 (or 1989). Even Leninism, while claiming to be an ideology vehemently opposed to liberalism, is in reality merely an embodiment of it. He explicitly classifies conservatism as right-wing, liberalism as centrist, and socialism as left-wing, according to left-center-right criteria.⁵⁵ If these views hold true, the opposition and conflict between liberalism,

conservatism, and Marxism in the 20th century is nothing more than a "left-right debate" within liberalism itself. Berlin clearly intends to subvert this narrative; his theoretical approach... One of his important missions was to prove that the Soviet socialist practice guided by Marxism fundamentally changed the nature of the "ancient vs. modern" and "left vs. right" debates within liberalism. Marxism, as the "countercurrent" to liberalism, advocated a system of proletarian dictatorship aimed at fundamentally eliminating liberalism. Therefore, if Burke sought to preserve the achievements of liberalism, Berlin aimed to rescue its most important achievement—negative liberty—from the theoretical shackles of absolutism, monism, and determinism; that is, to rescue liberalism from the shackles of totalitarianism. His study of Marxism sought to demonstrate that what had once been a "critical, rationalist Victorian doctrine" had transformed into "an oversimplified, dogmatic fanaticism, relying on the infinite repetition of simple formulas and the worship of visible, inviolable power." He and the Soviet dissident writer Boris Pasternak... His interactions with Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova, and his understanding of "their indescribable living and working conditions and the treatment they suffered," "profoundly influenced and permanently altered" his worldview, even leading him to despair that the Soviet system "inflicted enormous physical and psychological trauma on people that no Western society could save." He held "great respect"⁵⁶ for George Orwell, emphasizing that Orwell's political novel *1984* was "the best warning of

⁵³ Li Qiang, *Liberalism*, Oriental Press, 2015, p. 3.

⁵⁴ [British] Anthony Abtast, *The Rise and Fall of Western Liberalism*, p. 11.

⁵⁵ See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The End of Liberalism*, translated by Hao Mingwei and Zhang Fan, Social Sciences Academic Press, 2002, pp. 89-90, p. 8.

⁵⁶ See Isaiah Berlin, *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture in the Communist Age*, translated by Liu Beicheng and Pan Yongqiang, Yilin Press, 2010, pp. 82, 113.

left-wing tyranny for our time." ⁵⁷ He endorsed Raymond Aron's reaffirmation of the principle of liberty—"the freedom most threatened today is the liberty defended by liberals"—and his warning against totalitarian models of rule—"In our time, the greatest threat is the threat of totalitarianism. In totalitarian systems, a monopolistic organization, the party organization, attempts to extend its power into all aspects of social life." ⁵⁸ "Most importantly, if Burke's reflections on the French Revolution aimed to awaken Britain and even the whole of Europe from the delusion of radical revolution, then Berlin's critique of totalitarianism sought to awaken the entire Western world from the widespread delusion of Marxism. He consistently regarded the critique of totalitarian politics and its ideology as the primary task of liberalism. George Crowder's assessment of Berlin's theoretical contributions is accurate:"

*"Berlin must be considered one of the most critical analysts of 20th-century totalitarianism. Our tracing of the intellectual origins and moral psychology of totalitarian thought presents Berlin's main approach. In this respect, he addressed the most significant moral and political challenges of his time, and Berlin's response was subtle, profound, and highly unique. For him, totalitarian regimes may have originated in part from historical contingencies, economic factors, and the personalities of leaders, but their most important origin lies in ideas. Ideas are powerful; they can create or destroy the lives of millions. Ideas can also be shaped; they can be molded into the principles of free societies or distorted into repressive ideologies."*⁵⁹

This book is not a case study of Burke and Berlin, nor does it establish them as the beginning and end of a certain phase in the history of British liberalism, thereby narrating the important political events, figures, ideological changes, and the impact of their respective thoughts on history in Britain during the two-hundred-year interval between them. From the perspective of Berlin's critique of the history of ideas, in the Western intellectual tradition, from Plato through the Enlightenment to the present day, most thinkers have devoted themselves to constructing a grand narrative, attempting to explain a universally valid system of truth, ultimately providing a single ultimate solution to all the problems facing humanity. In Berlin's words, "Philosophers are all looking for absolute certainty, unquestionable answers, or the absolute reliability of ideas." ⁶⁰ However, neither Burke nor Berlin was a believer in metaphysics, nor were they intoxicated by the wine of universalism. They prioritized experience over abstract principles, whether these principles pointed to the abstract concepts of natural law or natural rights within British classical liberalism, or to the abstract discourse of rationalism within the French Enlightenment. Therefore, presupposing a narrative path from Burke to Berlin is not only about studying the proper place, significance, and influence of their ideas in the history of ideas, but more importantly, about exploring the internal logic and significant problems of the liberal transformation of their eras. In Burke's time, the division between liberalism and conservatism, stemming from different understandings and evaluations of the French

57 See Joshua L. Cherness, *A Thought and Its Time: The Development of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought*, p. 82, footnote 58.

58 Raymond Aron, *On Liberty*, p. 117.

59 George Claude, **Liberty and Pluralism: A Study of the Thought of Isaiah Berlin **, translated by Ying Qi et al., Yilin Press, 2018, p. 217.

60 Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, translated by Hu Zixin and Wei Zhaoling, Yilin Press, 2019, p. 6.

Revolution, was among the most significant developments in European intellectual circles, and Burke was undoubtedly a key figure in this philosophical shift. In Berlin's time, the opposition and conflict between the three major ideologies of liberalism, conservatism, and Marxism fundamentally determined the course of 20th-century world history. This confirms Berlin's basic judgment on the study of the history of ideas: it is the power of ideas, rather than the technological capabilities of humankind as claimed by Marx, that determines the trajectory of conscious human life. As he quoted the German poet Heinrich Heine in his programmatic essay "Two Concepts of Liberty," "Do not underestimate the power of ideas; the philosophical ideas that a professor develops in the quiet of his study can destroy a civilization."

⁶¹This is not an exaggeration. Just as Robespierre in the French Revolution was merely Rousseau's handiwork, his body and soul were created by Rousseau (Heine's words), the magnificent international communist movement of the 20th century was also driven by what Marx called the "specter" in **The Communist Manifesto**. Therefore, Berlin's study of the history of ideas is dedicated to providing explanations, in accordance with liberal principles, of essential concepts that have evolved or been inspired by liberalism over more than two centuries of development. It aims to answer questions such as "Why must I (or anyone) obey others?" "Why can't I live as I wish?" "Must I obey?" "If I don't obey, will I be forced?" "And who forces, to what extent, in what name, and for what purpose?"—⁶² providing answers in accordance with the theoretical principles and historical experience of liberalism. In his view,

although Jefferson, Burke, Thomas Paine, and Mill compiled different lists of individual liberties, their argument against the intrusion of authority remained unchanged. That is to say, the principle of freedom established by classical liberalism, with "negative liberty" at its core, remains uninterrupted within that ever-changing yet always clearly discernible boundary. It is precisely in an era when freedom is being redefined by various, even diametrically opposed, ideas that Berlin's adherence to the fundamental positions and values of liberalism qualifies him to call himself "a soldier fighting for human freedom."

The tide of liberalism originating in England, if counted from the publication of the Magna Carta in 1215, has flowed for over 800 years; if counted from John Locke's **Two Treatises of Government**, which laid the theoretical foundation for liberalism, it has a history of over 300 years. From the death of Burke to the death of Berlin, it is precisely 200 years. In the historical development of British liberalism, Edmund Burke and Isaiah Berlin were not the founders of original liberal theories. Their importance in the history of thought lies in the fact that the former completed the divergence between liberalism and conservatism, initiating the "ancient-modern debate" in liberalism. At the same time, the latter conducted an unprecedented critique of Marxism, which ran counter to the tide of liberalism, ultimately leading the ideological "left-right struggle" into a century-long debate between liberalism and totalitarianism. Although Burke and Berlin lived in different eras and addressed different problems, their common theoretical foundation was a liberalism grounded in

61 Isaiah Berlin, **On Liberty**, translated by Hu Chuansheng, Yilin Press, 2011, p. 168. (See also Isaiah Berlin, **The Power of Ideas**, p. 17, Editor's Preface.) Heine's original text in **On the History of German Religion and Philosophy** is: "Remember, you proud actors! You are merely unconscious assistants to thinkers. These thinkers, often in the most humble tranquility, have very clearly foreshadowed all your actions." Heine, **On the History of German Religion and Philosophy**, translated by Hai An, Commercial Press, 1972, p. 99.

62 Isaiah Berlin, *The Theory of Liberty*, p. 169.

traditional British individual liberty, or negative liberty, regardless of whether this liberalism took a classical or modern form. Throughout their writings, upholding the inviolability of individual rights and freedoms remains a consistent theme. This book's presupposed narrative path, "From Burke to Berlin," employs a "critical intellectual history" method, effectively weaving Berlin's research on the history of ideas throughout. It shifts the theoretical perspective from the ancient-modern, left-right debate within British liberalism

to a broader scope, focusing on "the French path of liberalism," "the German-Russian dilemma of liberalism," and "the American problem of liberalism," ultimately offering a vision for the future of liberalism. As Hayek stated:

"If we have failed in our first attempt to create a world of free men, we must try again. A policy that upholds individual liberty is the only truly progressive policy, and this guiding principle remains valid today, just as it was in the 19th century."⁶³

63 Friedrich August von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, p. 251.

Artistic speculation or political speculation?

—A Critique of Qiu Zhijie's *"Theory of Cultural Aggression by Abstract Art"*

Rong Jian

Recently, Qiu Zhijie, former vice president and dean of the School of Experimental Art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and current president of the Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, made a controversial statement, denouncing abstract art as "a product of American cultural aggression" and an art conspiracy orchestrated by the CIA for the Cold War. These remarks, coming from a so-called "leading figure in Chinese experimental art," are absurd and anti-intellectual, shocking the art world. This trendsetter, who was once nurtured by Western abstract expressionism and used it to climb to the top of Chinese experimental art, has now turned around and denounced the aesthetic matrix that nurtured him as a monstrous threat. A change in artistic philosophy cannot explain this sudden shift; rather, it resembles a meticulously orchestrated political-opportunism drama, whose core logic is to use today's politically correct stance to smear or even deny the artistic opportunistic path that brought him fame yesterday.

Qiu Zhijie's rise to fame in the arts is itself a classic example of artistic speculation. American Abstract Expressionism deeply marks his rapid rise to prominence over the past two decades in both the core of his work and its visual language—Pollock-esque action painting, de Kooning's frenetic brushstrokes, and Rothko's meditative color field all became readily apparent "borrowed" elements in his early works. He keenly sensed the immense potential of the Western contemporary art wave in China and decisively boarded this ship. This kind of "artistic speculation" is essentially the

precise capture and rapid transplantation of dominant cultural symbols; it's a survival strategy of using others' strengths to improve one's own. While it may not be entirely original, it represents a realistic choice for many Chinese artists within a specific historical context.

However, once Qiu Zhijie's artistic capital reached a certain level and the title of "leading figure in experimental art" was firmly secured, his strategy underwent an intriguing shift. The prestige and status accumulated through artistic speculation magically transformed into his ticket and collateral for political maneuvering. His signature move—"joining the Party on the front lines"—and his high-profile introduction of Marxist education and Party lectures at the Central Academy of Fine Arts' Experimental Art Institute clearly outlined a trajectory of actively aligning himself from the art field to the political arena. He understood that in the current cultural power structure, relying solely on the Western-derived label of "experimental" would ultimately limit his upward mobility. Only by actively embracing and pledging allegiance to the mainstream ideological discourse could he climb further on the system's ladder. Thus, the "theory of cultural aggression through abstract art" emerged at the opportune moment, becoming a glamorous political pledge of allegiance.

The paradox and hypocrisy of Qiu Zhijie's remarks lie in their double betrayal. First, he betrayed the abstract art tradition that nurtured his artistic life and its open spirit. Abstract art, as a shared human emotion and formal exploration, is

deeply rooted in the soil of global multiculturalism. Qiu Zhijie's narrow equating of it with "American cultural colonization" is not only an ignorant simplification of art history but also a denial of the essence of artistic exchange. This argument brutally severs the dialogue between Chinese artists and the international art context, attempting to drag Chinese art back into the cage of closed self-talk. Second, he betrayed the honesty and independence that artistic exploration itself should possess. When artistic stances can be switched at will according to the political climate like a chameleon, when the paintbrush becomes a tool for smearing political slogans, the soul of art has already died. Critic Mu Ye's sharp yet essential question—"Has Qiu Zhijie voluntarily been raped and enjoyed by American culture before starting his artistic awakening?"—is precisely aimed at this naked reality of exploitation and betrayal. He attempts to use today's high-profile "anti-colonial" rhetoric to whitewash and cover up the "original sin" of yesterday's imitation and borrowing. This logical break and self-denial reveal the insecurity and utilitarianism of an opportunist.

Qiu Zhijie's "theory of cultural aggression" is essentially the product of a double-dealing of speculation: using the prestige accumulated through artistic speculation as capital to invest in the political speculation market in hopes of exchanging it for higher institutional benefits. His pronouncements are not serious art criticism or cultural reflection, but rather a shrewd calculation serving his personal political advancement. He cleverly exploits the current complex international cultural and political atmosphere and domestic concerns about cultural security, portraying himself as a fighter against "cultural aggression" to conceal the inherent contradictions in his artistic path and attempt to occupy the moral high ground in the new power discourse system.

Looking back at the more than forty-year history of contemporary Chinese art, the influence of Western art has permeated the landscape like air.

From the fervent introduction of Western modernism by the "85 New Wave" to the current fusion and coexistence of diverse contexts, this influence has shaped the language and concepts of countless artists. Qiu Zhijie himself is a direct beneficiary of this historical process. To deny the value of abstract art is tantamount to denying this history itself and denying the sincere exploration and dialogue efforts of countless artists. Qiu Zhijie's absurdity lies in the fact that what he criticizes today is precisely the foundation upon which he built his career yesterday; the ideological forces he clings to today, advocating cultural confidence and prosperity, should have included the inclusiveness and creative transformation of outstanding human artistic achievements, including abstract art, rather than narrow-minded xenophobia and stigmatization.

Qiu Zhijie's case is destined to become a highly symbolic footnote in the history of contemporary Chinese art. It coldly reveals how an artist's individual choices can be distorted under a specific cultural system and power dynamic, and how the avant-garde guise of "experimentation" can degenerate into a utilitarian cloak of "opportunism." When the purity of artistic exploration gives way to shrewd political calculations, and when paintings become stepping stones for advancement within the system, art's most precious independent spirit and critical edge vanish. Qiu Zhijie's "awakening" performance ultimately leaves not the true nature of art, but a mirror reflecting the loss of the soul under the temptation of power. In the entanglement of art and politics, true courage and value always lie in the purity of transcending utilitarianism and upholding the intrinsic value of art, rather than the shrewd calculation of drifting with the tide of speculation. It can be asserted that when artistic creation is manipulated by political scheming, those sophisticated egoists will ultimately lose everything after betting in a political gamble.

**Political confrontations and academic debates
surrounding allegations of bacteriological warfare**
—*One of the studies on bacteriological warfare during the Korean War*

Shen Zhihua

Among the major historical events of the Cold War, the Korean War stands out for its longest period of investigation, most comprehensive content, and most detailed discussion. The declassification and publication of relevant archives and documents from the main participants—the United States, China, and the Soviet Union—while not without its shortcomings, are relatively the most thorough and complete. Therefore, aside from differing interpretations of the decision-making motives of China, the Soviet Union, and North Korea, the basic historical facts of the entire event—including the outbreak of war, China's intervention, the Soviet Union's entry into the war, the armistice negotiations, the end of the war, and issues such as prisoners of war and the atomic bomb—are largely clear. To date, the only crucial historical fact remaining unclear and unresolved in historical research on the Korean War is the issue of bacteriological warfare.

Bacteriological warfare, as the name suggests, refers to the use of biological weapons as a means of attacking the enemy in warfare. Bacteriological

weapons are an early form of biological weapon, primarily consisting of bacterial agents (called war agents when used in warfare), such as anthrax bacilli, plague bacilli, and *Vibrio cholerae*, which are pathogenic bacteria spread to target areas through various means, causing infection and casualties among personnel and livestock. Later, fungi, viruses, rickettsiae, chlamydia, and other organisms were discovered. With the expansion of agent types, bacteriological weapons evolved into biological weapons, now more commonly referred to as biological warfare.¹

Historical records indicate that as early as 600 BC, the Athenians used river pollution as a means of warfare to defeat their opponents. Around 200 BC, the Carthaginians used poisoned wine with anesthetic effects to kill their enemies. In 190 BC, Hannibal won a naval battle by launching pottery jars filled with poisonous snakes. In the mid-14th century, the Mongol Tatars used a plague to conquer the Black Sea port city of Caffa, which is suspected to have triggered the Black Death that swept across Europe from 1348 to 1350.

Notes in this article:

- 1 See Huang Peitang and Shen Beifen (eds.), **Bioterrorism Defense**, Beijing: Science Press, 2006, pp. 4-13; Mark Wheelis, Lajos Rózsa, and Malcolm Dando, "Historical Context and Overview," in Mark Wheelis et al (eds.), **Deadly Cultures: Biological Weapons Since 1945**, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 6-7. The English term for bacteria is generally **Bacteria**, the more professional term is **Bacteriological**, while **Germ** is commonly used in everyday language. The abbreviations for **Bacterial War**, **Bacteriological War**, and **Biological War** are all BW.

Subsequently, during the invasion of the New World and the American Civil War, there are records of French, British, and American armies using bacteria as weapons.² By the early 20th century, with the development of microbiology, the opportunities to use biological weapons increased. During World War I, although no country possessed biological weapons research institutions and there was no large-scale use of biological weapons, the use of bacteria for sabotage did exist. For example, German agents successfully infected American, French, and Romanian military cattle and livestock with glanders and anthrax, and spread plague on the Russian front.³

International trials for germ warfare crimes

The large-scale testing and use of bacteriological weapons occurred during World War II. Documents from the Nuremberg

International Military Tribunal confirm that Nazi Germany conducted bacteriological weapons experiments on human subjects in prisoner-of-war camps and concentration camps, and prepared to use bacteriological weapons against Soviet troops; however, the rapid Soviet offensive thwarted these plans.⁴ While the Nuremberg Trials did not formally charge Germany with bacteriological warfare, the subsequent "Medical Trials" indicted 23 German doctors and SS administrators for "crimes against humanity" for conducting human experiments on prisoners of war and inmates.⁵

Another fascist nation, Japan, not only conducted large-scale, inhumane human experiments during the war but also actually used bacteriological weapons. The infamous Unit 731 and Unit 100, as the core forces of Japan's bacteriological warfare, released bacteria-carrying fleas and rats in Zhejiang, Hunan, and Jiangxi provinces of China, causing epidemics of plague and cholera, resulting in massive casualties among Chinese soldiers and civilians.⁶ These crimes

2 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPR), *The Problem of Chemical and Biological Warfare, Vol. I, The Rise of CB Weapons*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, New York: Humanities Press, 1971, pp. 214-215; Edward M. Eitzen and Ernest T. Takafuji, "Historical Overview of Biological Warfare", in Sidell et al (eds.) *Medical Aspects of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, Washington, DC: Borden Institute Walter Reed Army Medical Center, 1997, pp.416-417.

3 SIPR, *The Problem of Chemical and Biological Warfare, Vol. I*, pp.216-217; Рагинский М.Ю., Розенблюм С.Я., Смирнов Л.Н. Theodor Rosebury, "Some Historical Considerations," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol.16, No.6, June 1960, p.228.

4 Рагинский М.Ю. и др. Бактериологическая война, с.19-24.

5For details of the Nuremberg Medical Trials, see Paul Julian Weindling, *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials: From Medical War Crimes to Informed Consent*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

6 Two English monographs were published in 1989 and 1994 (both translated into Chinese), detailing Japan's bacteriological warfare crimes. See Peter Williams. and David Wallace, *Unit 731: The Japanese Army's Secret of Secrets*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989; Sheldon H. Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-45, and the American Cover-Up*, London: Routledge, 1994. Chinese scholars have conducted long-term and in-depth investigations and research on this trip, the most important result of which is a set of "The True Record of the Crimes of Unit 731 of the Japanese Army in China," published by China Peace Press in 2015. This series is a National Publication Fund project, completed in cooperation between the Museum of Evidence of Crimes Committed by Unit 731 of the Japanese Army in China and the Harbin Academy of Social Sciences. The complete set of books consists of 60 volumes, nearly 10 million words, and includes a large number of valuable documents and academic research results, comprehensively and profoundly exposing the criminal history of the Japanese army, represented by Unit 731, conducting bacteriological warfare and human experiments in China

should have been brought to justice after the war. On April 3, 1946, the Allied Far Eastern Commission resolved to classify violations of the laws and customs of war as war crimes, and the use of bacteriological weapons constituted a serious violation of the laws and customs of war.⁷ The International Military Tribunal for the Far East, established under the Potsdam Declaration and the United Nations, officially opened in Tokyo on May 3, 1946, to conduct an international trial of Japan's main war criminals during World War II, known as the "Tokyo Trials." This trial lasted until November 12, 1948, and all 25 defendants, headed by former Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, were found guilty. However, despite witness testimonies and some documentary evidence presented during the trials, the crimes of Japanese war criminals in bacteriological warfare have not been brought to justice. The main reason is that, to obtain experimental data and technical information on Japanese bacteriological weapons, the United States entered into a secret agreement with Shiro Ishii and other core members of the bacteriological warfare unit, promising them immunity from prosecution. Ultimately, Japan's bacteriological warfare crimes were only briefly mentioned; no formal charges were brought, and

no clear convictions or sentences were imposed on those responsible. This allowed Japan's bacteriological warfare crimes to escape due legal judgment, leaving a regrettable legal vacuum in the international trial of bacteriological warfare.⁸

During the Tokyo Trials in the summer and autumn of 1947, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union completely broke down, precipitating the Cold War. To expose the United States' cover-up and protection of Japan's bacteriological warfare crimes, the Soviet Union decided to hold a separate trial for Japanese bacteriological warfare criminals, known as the "Khabarovsk Trials." From December 25-30, 1949, the Primorsky Military District Military Tribunal of the Soviet Union tried 12 Japanese war criminals, including former Kwantung Army Commander-in-Chief Otozo Yamada, who were imprisoned in the Soviet Union, and sentenced them to prison terms ranging from 2 to 25 years for "preparing and using bacteriological weapons."⁹ This trial filled a gap in this area compared to the Tokyo Trials. Although, from the perspective of international law, the verdict was handed down by a national court rather than an international court¹⁰, and the Soviet trial only covered a small portion of Japan's crimes¹¹, it was nonetheless the first formal

during World War II.

7 Рагинский М.Ю. и др. Бактериологическая война, с.113.

8 For the most detailed study of the U.S.'s deliberate cover-up of Japan's germ warfare crimes at the Tokyo Trial, see Harris, *Factories of Death*; Jeanne Guillemin, *Hidden Atrocities: Japanese Germ Warfare and American Obstruction of Justice at the Tokyo Trial*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

9 For detailed information on the Khabarovsk Trial, see **Materials on the Trial of Former Servicemen of the Japanese Army Charged with Manufacturing and Employing Bacteriological Weapons**, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1950; and **Materials on the Trial of Former Japanese Army Servicemen Charged with Preparing and Using Bacteriological Weapons**, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1950. The full text of the judgment was published in the **People's Daily** (January 4, 1950, page 4).

10 Ann Van Wynen Thomas and A. J. Thomas, Jr., *Development of International Legal Limitations on the Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons*, Prepared for The U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Contract No. ACDA/GC-128, November 1, 1968, Dallas, Texas: Southern Methodist University School of Law, 1968, p. 33.

11 Because the main perpetrators of Japan's bacteriological warfare had fled and destroyed a large amount of evidence before the Soviet army occupied Northeast China (see Shizue Fujii, *Unit 731: The Horror of Japan's Devilish Biological Warfare*, Taipei: Wenyingtang Publishing House, 1997, pp. 340-348), the Khabarovsk Trials were

indictment and legal trial in human history concerning bacteriological warfare crimes.

However, one point needs to be added. The Soviet Union was also very concerned about Japan's biological weapons research during World War II. Soviet scientists were no strangers to Shiro Ishii. As early as 1928, Ishii had visited the Soviet Union, at which time the Red Army had already begun developing biological weapons. In October-November 1934, the Soviet Union's chief biological weapons scientist, I.M. Velikanov, also visited Japan, his main task being to gather intelligence on Japan's biological warfare capabilities.¹² In January 1947, the Soviet prosecutor at the Far East Military Tribunal requested the interrogation of Shiro Ishii, commander of Unit 731, and others who were already in American hands. Due to the lack of a response, on March 7th, the Soviet government sent a note to the United States requesting the transfer of Ishii and others to the Soviet Union so they could be tried as "war criminals against the Soviet Union." The American occupation authorities rejected this new request and continued to delay responding to the Soviet Union's initial demand to interrogate Ishii and his subordinates. Although tensions had arisen between the US and the Soviet Union at that time, they had not yet broken off relations. On March 20th, General MacArthur's headquarters received a telegram from the Joint Chiefs of Staff: the Soviet Union was permitted to interrogate Ishii and others, subject to the conditions set by the Far Eastern

Committee's working group. During May and June, the Soviets were finally allowed to meet and speak with Ishii and others, but officials from the Allied Far East Command's intelligence department (G-2) were always present to supervise. It was rumored that the Soviets revealed to Ishii that approximately 30 Japanese prisoners of war were working at a bacteriological weapons research facility near Moscow. Soviet pressure was also a factor that accelerated the behind-the-scenes deals between the United States and Japanese war criminals like Ishii. However, due to the fact that relevant archival documents remain classified by both the US and the Soviet Union, the content and details of the Soviet interrogations are currently unknown.¹³ Stories about the post-war struggle between US and Soviet intelligence agencies for data and technical intelligence on Japanese bacteriological weapons experiments have long circulated, and documentary literature on this subject has also been published.¹⁴ It is conceivable that if Ishii and other Japanese war criminals had fallen into Soviet hands, and if the US and the Soviet Union had cooperated in sharing Japan's bacteriological weapons secrets, it is questionable whether the Khabarovsk Trials could have continued.

Political confrontation over allegations of germ warfare during the Korean War

What followed occurred during the Korean War. On June 25, 1950, North Korea launched a large-scale military offensive against South Korea,

unable to fully expose and indict Japan's bacteriological warfare crimes.

- 12 Anthony Rimmington, *Stalin's Secret Weapon: The Origins of Soviet Biological Warfare*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp.75-77, 162.
- 13 Shizue Fujii, *Unit 731*, pp. 374-382; Harris, *Factories of Death*, p. 213. US intelligence agencies also disclosed information regarding the 30 captured members of Japan's Unit 731 who participated in the development of biological weapons in the Soviet Union. See Rimmington, *Stalin's Secret Weapon*, p. 172.
- 14 See Minmin Wu, *The Shadow of the Sea Wolf*, Beijing: Masses Publishing House, 2004; Minmin Wu, *The Shadow of the Sea Wolf*, New York: Bouden House, 2025.

quickly capturing the capital, Seoul, and approximately two-thirds of South Korean territory. On September 15, a large number of American troops successfully landed at Incheon, the Korean People's Army collapsed, and UN forces crossed the 38th parallel, reaching the Yalu River. On October 19, the Chinese People's Volunteer Army secretly entered North Korea. After three campaigns, the combined Chinese and North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel and recaptured Seoul. In early 1951, UN forces launched a counter-offensive, driving the combined Chinese and North Korean forces back north of the 38th parallel. The two sides then fought fiercely for several months, resulting in a stalemate near the 38th parallel. In July 1951, both sides began armistice negotiations, which continued until the signing of the armistice agreement in July 1953. During the Fifth Phase Offensive, in May 1951, the North Korean government accused the United States of conducting bacteriological warfare in Korea to the United Nations. Soviet and Chinese newspapers published this news, expressing support for North Korea, but the matter did not escalate and was hastily concluded a few weeks later. In February 1952, the controversy reignited. The North Korean and Chinese governments issued statements accusing the US military of using bacteriological weapons on the Korean battlefield and in Northeast China. The Soviet Union mobilized the entire socialist bloc and left-wing international organizations and groups for a massive propaganda campaign condemning the US's bacteriological warfare crimes. The Soviet Union, representing North Korea and China, demanded a discussion of bacteriological warfare at the United Nations and condemned the US. The US

government completely rejected the accusations, firmly denying the use of bacteriological weapons, considering the accusations a deliberate fabrication and malicious propaganda, and insisted on a UN-led international investigation. Both the North Korean and Chinese governments refused the UN-proposed investigation by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and refused assistance from the World Health Organization (WHO). The International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL, known in China as the International Association of Democratic Lawyers) and the World Peace Council (WPC), both under Soviet control, formed two investigation teams to investigate and collect evidence in North Korea and China, and subsequently concluded that the US had committed bacteriological warfare. The US and Western countries denied the impartiality and scientific validity of these two organizations and their findings, and engaged in heated debates with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, including Poland, at the United Nations. In April 1953, armistice negotiations resumed, and accusations of bacteriological warfare subsided somewhat. However, after the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement in July, repatriated American prisoners of war issued statements denying their testimonies given in Chinese POW camps regarding the US use of bacteriological weapons. The Chinese government subsequently released a large number of new POW testimonies, reigniting accusations against the US. The controversy surrounding bacteriological warfare only subsided in early 1954 with the Berlin Conference of the foreign ministers of the US, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, which aimed to ease international tensions.¹⁵

15 The Berlin Conference decided to convene a meeting of the foreign ministers of five countries, including China, in Geneva in April 1954 to discuss the peaceful resolution of the Korean issue and the restoration of peace in Indochina.

The above is a general overview of the publicly reported events regarding allegations of bacteriological warfare at the time. Of course, this only represents the surface; the actual process and the truth behind it remain a subject of debate, with two opposing positions and perspectives persisting to this day. Politically, the US government has never admitted to using bacteriological weapons in the Korean War, while the positions of the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea have shifted.

1954, neither the Soviet Union nor the Chinese government raised the issue of bacteriological warfare in formal international forums. According to a resolution of the 23rd UN General Assembly, UN Secretary-General U Thant commissioned a group of 14 experts to prepare a report on chemical and biological weapons. The report, submitted in January 1969 and prepared in the name of the UN, stated that since World War II, the possibility of bacteriological (biological) weapons had increased, but "there is no clear evidence that these agents have ever been used as modern military weapons." O.A. Leutov, an academician of the USSR Academy of Sciences and professor of chemistry at Moscow State University, was one of the editors of this report. This indicates that after the Sino¹⁶-Soviet split, the Soviet official position on the issue of bacteriological warfare had fundamentally changed, and it was no longer avoiding the topic.¹⁷

On September 10, 1986, the Second Review

Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention was held in Geneva. Chinese representative Fan Guoxiang, in his speech at the conference, clarified China's position, stating that China had been one of the victims of biological (bacterial) weapons and that China had consistently opposed the research, production, and use of biological weapons.¹⁸ The speech did not specify the countries that used bacteriological weapons and was published on page 6 of the **People's Daily**, indicating that the Chinese government intentionally avoided the issue of bacteriological warfare during the Korean War on the international stage. It is noteworthy that in 2011, the Central Party History Research Office of the Communist Party of China stated: "In early 1952, the Chinese and North Korean sides discovered that the US aggressors, disregarding international law, were using bacteriological weapons on the Korean battlefield and in China's border and coastal defense areas. The Chinese and North Korean armies and the people of both countries launched a comprehensive anti-bacteriological warfare struggle, and progressive public opinion in the world strongly condemned the United States."¹⁹ This manuscript, reviewed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, demonstrates the cautious stance of the Chinese government through this objective description.²⁰ Subsequently, in official documents commemorating the Korean War, the issue of

16 Chemical and bacteriological (biological) weapons and the effects of their possible use, A United Nations Report, No. E.69.I.24, New York: Ballantine Books, 1970, pp. xxi, 3.

17 Some scholars have observed that in the early 1980s, Soviet media occasionally discussed the topic of the United States using biological weapons in the Korean War (Milton). Leitenberg, "New Russian Evidence on the Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations: Background and Analysis", *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issue 11, Winter 1998, p. 191), suggests that the Soviet party and government likely did not issue any official documents on this matter.

18 *People's Daily*, September 11, 1986, page 6.

19 Research Center for Party History of the CPC Central Committee: *History of the Communist Party of China, Volume II (1949-1978)*, Beijing: CPC Party History Press, 2011, p. 84.

20 One of the book's authors told the author that they had researched for a long time before deciding on this wording. This is very similar to the official Chinese account of the cause of the Korean War. The previous account was that

"bacteriological warfare" was only briefly mentioned. However, it is clear that the Chinese Party and government have never issued any formal documents on this issue. Therefore, accusations of US bacteriological warfare still appear from time to time in Chinese newspapers and publications, especially during commemorations of the Korean War and the deterioration of Sino-US relations. For example, in April 2022, the People's Daily published an article stating: "The United States sheltered notorious Japanese Unit 731 leader Shiro Ishii and other war criminals, driving them to develop biological weapons for the United States; on the Korean battlefield, the United States launched indiscriminate bacteriological warfare against Chinese and North Korean soldiers and civilians."²¹

the firmest stance on this issue, not only continuously conducting anti-bacterial warfare propaganda but also reiterating its accusations against the United States of bacteriological warfare at the United Nations after more than forty years. On March 9, 1999, when the Chinese ambassador to the United Nations was the rotating president of the UN Security Council, the North Korean ambassador to the UN sent a letter to the Security Council, reiterating the issue of US bacteriological warfare during the Korean War and requesting the UN to "discuss the US use of biological and chemical weapons, massacres, and

abuse of the UN's name." ²² However, North Korea's proposal received no response from the international community, including China. In 2002-2003, Kim Sung-jun, who served as the director of the Health and Epidemic Prevention Bureau of the Ministry of Health during the Korean War, was interviewed several times by a Japanese civilian research team, detailing the US's bacteriological warfare and North Korea's epidemic prevention efforts, and angrily refuting claims that the bacteriological warfare accusations were false propaganda. ²³ Considering North Korea's current system, this can be seen as a formal statement from the North Korean government. On February 17, 2015, the National Committee for the Maintenance of Peace of North Korea issued a statement accusing the United States of carrying out bacteriological and chemical warfare atrocities in North Korea. The indictment not only reiterates previous accusations of the United States using biological and chemical weapons during the Korean War, but also alleges that the United States continued to conduct biological weapons experiments and biochemical warfare training between 1976 and 2013.²⁴

In May 2015, Pentagon officials revealed that the U.S. Army's Dugway Laboratory in Utah, which researches biological weapons, inadvertently sent live anthrax samples to laboratories in eight states involved in research projects and to Osan Air Base in South Korea. This

the war was launched by American imperialism and South Korea, but since the 1990s, the initiator has been no longer mentioned, and it has been changed to "the Korean War (or civil war) broke out on June 25".

21 People's Daily, April 1, 2022, page 3.

22 UN Security Council, S/1999/251, 9 March 1999.

23 Keimei Nakajima: The Actual Situation of the US Army's Bacterial Warfare Victims in the Korean War - On-site Investigation Report, Asia Pacific Research Center Annual Report, (1) 2003 [Keimei Nakajima: The Actual Situation of the Victims of US Army's Bacterial Warfare in the Korean War - On-site Investigation Report, Asia Pacific Research Center Annual Report, 2003, No. 1], pp. 15-18.

24 김영일, 미제가 조선에서 감행한 Kim Young-il (ed.), The Atrocities of the US Imperialist Bacteriological and Chemical Warfare in Korea, Pyongyang: Pyongyang Publishing House, 2015.

research was in response to several anthrax mail attacks that occurred in the U.S. in September and October 2001; there are as many as 1,500 such laboratories in the United States. The Department of Defense and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are currently investigating and recovering the samples.²⁵ On June 3, a spokesperson for the North Korean National Defense Commission issued a statement condemning the U.S. for introducing anthrax into South Korea. The following day, a North Korean representative conveyed this statement to the UN Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council, strongly demanding that the Security Council address the incident and conduct a "thorough investigation into the U.S. biological warfare program."²⁶ Until recently, the North Korean government's position and practices remained unchanged. On July 2, 2025, the Korean Central News Agency reported that during the Fatherland Liberation War, US imperialism blatantly violated international law and launched "the largest bacteriological warfare in history."²⁷

It seems that, apart from the Soviet Union, the official positions of the United States, China, and North Korea have not fundamentally changed. It's just that, for various reasons, the public debate between the Chinese and American governments on this issue has subsided. However, academic debates on the issue of bacteriological warfare have never stopped, and "scholars' positions are

almost as polarized as national positions."²⁸

Academic debate in Western academia regarding allegations of bacteriological warfare

Early discussions on bacteriological warfare were concentrated in the English-speaking world, primarily the United States, Britain, and Canada. Academic debates within the Cold War context were inevitably heavily influenced by "political correctness," as exemplified by the famous Colin Powell case. American journalist John Powell, who edited and published the English-language journal **The Millard's Review** in Shanghai in the early 1950s, criticizing the United States' bacteriological warfare and other crimes during the Korean War, became a thorn in the side of the US government. In 1953, the journal was forced to cease publication due to a US government ban on mail, and Powell faced political persecution upon returning to the United States. In April 1956, the US government indicted Powell and his wife and assistant on charges of "sedition," and in January 1959, attempted to bring charges of "treason," but failed due to insufficient evidence. The charges were dropped in May²⁹ 1961. Another notable figure was Canadian pastor James Endicott (Chinese name Wen Youzhang), who was in China when the Korean War broke out and was one of the earliest Westerners to publicly confirm and

25 *Washington Post*, 28 May 2015, p. 2, 29 May 2015, p.6; More Labs Are Likely to Have Mistakenly Received Anthrax Samples, Military Says, *New York Times*, 4 June 2015, p.13.

26 UN Security Council, A/69/924, S/2015/408, 5 June 2015.

27 <http://www.kcna.kp/cn/article/q>

28 Albert E. Cowdrey, "'Germ Warfare' and Public Health in the Korean Conflict", *Asian Perspective*, Vol.7, No.2, Fall-Winter 1983, p.210; Martin Furmanski and Mark Wheelis, "Allegations of Biological Weapons Use", in Mark Wheelis et al (eds.), *Deadly Cultures*, p.253.

29 See Williams for details and Wallace, *Unit 731*, pp. 259-262; Geng Huo, "Powell's Trial Reveals the Truth About the US Military's Germ Warfare Against China," *Archives Spring and Autumn*, No. 11, 2011, pp. 53-58; *People's Daily*, October 11, 1956, p. 5; October 20, 1956, p. 6; January 9, 1959, p. 5; February 3, 1959, p. 6; July 19, 1959, p. 4.

promote allegations of US use of bacteriological weapons, for which he received the Stalin International Peace Prize in 1952.³⁰ The Canadian government attempted to prosecute Endicott for treason but later abandoned the case due to lack of evidence.³¹ Nevertheless, throughout the 1950s - 1970s, the conclusions of American scholars regarding bacteriological warfare almost entirely sided with the government, questioning or denying the accusations against the United States. Among internationally influential scholars, the first to question the accusations was the renowned American sinologist John King Fairbank. In his 1957 introduction to the English-language edition of **Documents on Modern Chinese History**, he pointed out that the documents published by the Chinese government accusing the United States of bacteriological warfare were "carefully fabricated 'documents' released in an attempt to spread the lie of bacteriological warfare through academic channels."³² The renowned American microbiologist T. Rosbury held the same view. Similar to J.R. Oppenheimer's role in the US nuclear weapons development during World War II, Rosbury was an organizer and leader of postwar US biological weapons development. His

professional works published in³³ 1947 and 1949 had already attracted international attention. In a 1960 paper discussing bacteriological warfare, Rosbury argued that "a remarkable characteristic of the history of the use or alleged use of biological weapons in war is that, although there are many accusations, none can be fully substantiated. "This" could be fabricated; it could be a naturally occurring disease mistaken for a biological weapon, although this possibility is small; or some could be one, some could be another; or it could be a mixture of both."³⁴ A more extreme view came from American scholar J. Crouse, who believed that the accusations against the US "utilized all the resources of the global communist propaganda machine" and were "the most organized, concentrated, and malicious" "hate propaganda."³⁵

In 1968, the United States admitted to using anti-crop biological and chemical weapons in the Vietnam War, sparking renewed attention to the issue. Scholars and experts from the United States and the United Kingdom held conferences and published books to assess the current level of research and development of chemical and biological weapons, their potential use in warfare, and the feasibility of defense. They also reviewed

30 Endicott to Needham, 20 July 1976, Needham Papers, Vol. 137, Imperial War Museum (IWM), London; Chaddock, *This Must Be the Place*, p. 51; Hu Xiaojin, "Wen Youzhang and the Germ Warfare in the Korean War", *Journal of Shangrao Normal University*, October 2010, Vol. 30, No. 5, pp. 59-63; *People's Daily*, December 22, 1952, p. 1.

31 Stephen Endicott and Edward Hagerman, *The United States and Biological Warfare: Secrets From the Early Cold War and Korea*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, pp.190-191.

32 John K. Fairbank and Mary C. Wright, "Documentary Collections on Modern Chinese History: Introduction", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Nov. 1957, 17(1), ABI/INFORM Collection, p.55. The "Documentary Collections on Modern Chinese History" is a set of document materials published by the People's Publishing House. The first volume was published in September 1949, and dozens of subsequent volumes were published or reprinted through 1981.

33 Theodore Rosebury and Alvin Kabat, "Bacterial Warfare", *Journal of Immunology*, Vol 56, May 1947, pp.7-96; Theodor Rosebury, *Peace or Pestilence: Biological Warfare and How to Avoid It*, New York: Whittlesey House, 1949.

34 Rosebury, "Some Historical Considerations", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol.16, No.6, June 1960, pp. 22 8, 2 31 -23 2.

35 John C. Clews, *Communist Propaganda Techniques*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1964, pp. 179-180.

the status of such weapons under international law and discussed ethical issues, particularly the responsibilities of scientists in the development and use of these weapons. However, almost everyone avoided directly discussing the issue of bacteriological warfare in the Korean War.³⁶ Most researchers defended the United States, arguing that although the capability to conduct biological warfare existed at the time and its effectiveness in military operations was considered, there was no evidence that biological agents had been used as a military means.³⁷ J.P. Robinson, the UK's leading historian of bacteriological warfare and professor at the University of Sussex, also accepted the UN report's assertion that "there is no military experience with the use of bacterial (biological) agents as weapons of war; the feasibility of using them as weapons of war is frequently questioned."³⁸

By the mid- 1970s, with the emergence of the revisionist school in American Cold War

historiography, voices began to question traditional views on bacteriological warfare: "The truth is multi-layered; there are a range of possibilities between accepting accusations and completely denying them."³⁹ Crucially, with the approaching declassification deadlines for historical archives, American historical documents concerning various aspects of the Korean War gradually became available to the public, and a large number of documents were subsequently edited and published. First, the U.S. State Department's *Foreign Relations Papers* began publishing archives related to the Korean War in 1976, with all volumes completed by⁴⁰ 1984. Second, military documents were released; in 1979-1980, microfilm records and resolutions of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were published, with documents concerning UN actions in the Korean War concentrated in the JCS -2155 series, and documents concerning biological warfare concentrated in the JCS-1837 series. Finally⁴¹,

36 Robin Clarke, *The Silent Weapons: The Realities of Chemical and Biological Weapons*, New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1968; Seymour M. Hersh, *Chemical and Biological Warfare: America's Hidden Arsenal*, New York: The Bobbs -Merrill Company, 1968; Steven Rose (ed.), *CBW: Chemical and Biological Warfare*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

37 Thomas, *Development of International Legal Limitations on the Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons*, p. 307.

38 S IPR, *The Problem of Chemical and Biological Warfare, Vol.1*, p.225.

39 John Gittings, "Talks, Bombs and Germs: Another Look at the Korean War", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol.5, No.2, 1975, p. 217.

40 See US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS): Diplomatic Papers, 1950, Vol. 7, Korea*, Washington, DC: GPO, 1976; *FRUS, 1951, Vol. 7, Korea and China*, 1983; *FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol. 15, Korea*, 1984; *FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol. 16, The Geneva Conference: Korea and Indochina*, 1981. In 2003, Chinese scholars translated and edited documents from the US diplomatic archives concerning early postwar US policy toward China and the Korean War into Chinese. See Tao Wenzhao and Niu Jun (eds.), *Collection of US Policy Documents toward China (1949-1972)*, Volume 1, Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2003.

41 For a complete list of documents, see Paul Kesaris (ed.), *A Guide to Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Part II: 1946-1953, The Far East*, Washington, DC: A Microfilm Project of University Publications of America, Inc., 1979; Paul Kesaris (ed.), *A Guide to Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Part II: 1946-1953, Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Maryland: A Microfilm Project of Uni. Publications of America, Inc., 1980. For documents concerning psychological and unconventional warfare, see *Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Part II: 1946-1953, Strategic Issues, Section 2, Rell 1, Psychological and Unconventional Warfare*, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1979. For documents concerning China, see *Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Part II: 1946-53, The Far East, Rell 2, Microfilm*, Washington, DC: University Publications of America, 1979. Documents concerning North Korea can be found in *Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Part II: 1946-53, The Far East, Rell*

documents from the U.S. intelligence system were also released; by 1982-1983, CIA archives concerning activities during the Korean War also began to be published.⁴² Documents related to this period from the National Security Council, the highest decision-making body of the U.S. government, were first released in microfilm in⁴³ 1980, and later related meeting minutes were also published.

With the release of numerous historical archives and the more relaxed political environment in the US and the West following the reconciliation of Sino-US relations, research on bacteriological warfare saw a resurgence. In 1979, Stephen Endicott, a historian at York University in Toronto, published an article arguing that although the "Korean bacteriological warfare case remained unresolved," based on emerging information, "it could be preliminarily determined that the United States conducted biological weapons tests during the Korean War." The author had close ties to the bacteriological warfare issue; his father was⁴⁴ James Endicott, a Canadian pastor well-known to the Chinese. Furthermore, Colin Powell, who had suffered political persecution over bacteriological warfare, published two articles in

⁴⁵ 1980 and 1981, citing extensive historical documents to expose the postwar US government's cover-up of Japanese war crimes and pointing out that its aim was to obtain experimental data from Japanese bacteriological units to accelerate US research into bacteriological weapons. This sparked a new round of discussion in Western academia regarding bacteriological warfare, with many questioning the "innocence of the United States," although they did not fully accept the accusations.⁴⁶

British science journalist McDmower believes that the stories about American and Japanese germ warfare criminals are highly suggestive; however, until direct evidence emerges, "the case of Korean germ warfare remains a mystery, a mystery without a satisfactory answer."⁴⁷ Australian scholar McCormack notes that "indirect evidence leading to guilty verdicts against the United States has gradually increased in recent years," and that earlier conclusions declaring the evidence insufficient were based on a probabilistic weighing that may have changed slightly with the emergence of new evidence.⁴⁸ Renowned American historians Halliday and Cummings also

8, 9, 10, 11, 12, Microfilm, Washington, DC: University Publications of America, 1979.

42 Paul Kesaris (ed.), *CIA Research Reports: China, 1946-1976*, Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1982; Paul Kesaris (ed.), *CIA Research Reports: Japan, Korea, and The Security of Asia, 1946-1976*, Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983.

43 Paul Kesaris (ed.), *Documents of the National Security Council: 1947-1977*, Reel 2, Microfilm, Washington, DC: University Publications of America, 1980; Paul Kesaris (ed.), *Minutes of Meetings of the National Security Council*, First Supplement, Microfilm, Washington, DC: University Publications of America, Inc., 1988.

44 Stephen L. Endicott, "Germ Warfare and 'Plausible Denial': the Korean War, 1952-1953", *Modern China*, Vol.5, No.1, January 1979, p. 101.

45 John W. Powell, "Japan's Germ Warfare: The US Cover-Up of a War Crime", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1980, pp. 2-17; John W. Powell, "A Hidden Chapter in History", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 37, No. 8, 1981, pp. 44-52.

46 Robert KD Peterson, "The Role of Insects as Biological Weapons," The Seminar at the University of Nebraska, 1990, Insects, Disease and History Web site, Entomology Group of Montana State University, <https://www.montana.edu/historybug/insects-as-bioweapons.html>.

47 Jeanne McDermott, *The Killing Winds: The Menace of Biological Warfare*, New York: Arbor House, 1987, p.169.

48 McCormack Gavan, *Cold War, Hot War: An Australian Perspective on the Korean War*, Sydney: Hale &

point out that both sides' arguments have strengths and weaknesses, and both may have lied to some extent. The West strongly denies using germ weapons, but the United States did indeed "lie in some fundamental aspects."⁴⁹In 1989 and 1994, the UK and the US published two highly acclaimed monographs exposing Japanese germ warfare crimes and the behind-the-scenes dealings between the US and Japan. Still, the authors also maintained a cautiously neutral stance on the issue of germ warfare in the Korean War. Williams and Wallace argued: "If neither the accusations nor the denials can be verified strictly, can we examine the claims and rebuttals from a rational perspective? The Communist Party's accusations are reasonable. The United States' denials are also reasonable."⁵⁰Harris, on the other hand, believed: "In any case, it is impossible to end this dispute until the confidential Korean War documents currently held by the parties involved are made public."⁵¹

The questioning of traditional American views by British and American academic circles also resonated in Asia. From the late 1970s to the

mid-1990s, during the democratization movement, many South Korean scholars wrote articles supporting the accusation that the United States conducted bacteriological warfare in Korea.⁵²In 1996, Taiwan's Strait Review monthly also published an article entitled "New Evidence of US Military Bacteriological Warfare in the Korean War."⁵³

Nevertheless, the prevailing view in the Western world during this period remained one of denying the accusations of germ warfare. German scholar Eichen, after discussing the various pieces of evidence supporting the allegations, concluded that "these accusations completely lack scientific basis."⁵⁴The renowned expert on the Korean War, Stiek, while not explicitly addressing the issue of germ warfare, also tended to believe that the accusations were merely propaganda.⁵⁵ Some even pointed out that the globally resounding rumors of germ warfare proved that the allegations of germ warfare "are one of the most successful propaganda hoaxes in history."⁵⁶ However, researchers have made more in-depth observations

Iremonger, 1983, pp.154-56.

49 Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988, pp.184-185; Jon Halliday, "Anti-Communism and the Korean War (1950-1953)", in Ralph Miliband et al. (eds.) *The Socialist Register*, London: The Merlin Press Ltd, 1984, pp.151-153.

50 Williams and Wallace, *Unit 731*, p. 262.

51 Harris, *Factories of Death*, pp.231-232.

52 Such as 강정구, < 한국전쟁과 미국의 See also Kang Jeong-gu, *Dongguk Social Studies *, 1992, Vol.1, pp.159-193. (Kang Jeong-gu: "The Korean War and American Germ Warfare," *Dongguk Social Studies*, 1992, No.1). See also Jo Seong-hoon, *Korean Warfare*. 세균전 논쟁 비판 >, 군사, 2000, No.41, p.349 [Zhao Chenchun: "A Critique of the Theory of Germ Warfare during the Korean War", Military History, No.41, 2000] .

53 Wu Tianwei, "New Evidence of US Bacteriological Warfare in the Korean War," Strait Review, Vol. 65, May 1996, pp. 32-33.

54 Edwar D. M. Eitzen and Ernest T. Takafuji, "Historical Overview of Biological Warfare", in Sidell et al (eds.) *Medical Aspects of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, pp.415-423.

55 William W. Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 275.

56 William B. Breuer, *Shadow Warriors: The Covert War in Korea*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996, pp.203-204.

and offered more diverse analyses. For example, Caudley argues that China's accusations were intended to mobilize public support for a large-scale public health campaign, a point the US used to deny the accusations.⁵⁷ Whelan, drawing parallels to the ongoing armistice negotiations, believes the germ warfare accusations were China's way of pressuring the US during the prisoner repatriation dispute.⁵⁸ Moon firmly believes the US never used germ weapons in the war, but also argues that "once an accusation is made, it cannot be completely refuted, "and" doubts are never completely eliminated."⁵⁹

The disclosure of Russian archives led to significant changes in Western academic research after 1998. On January 8th of that year, the Japanese right-wing newspaper Sankei Shimbun published a startling headline on its front page: its Moscow-based correspondent, Yasuo Naito, had obtained 12 top-secret documents from the Russian presidential archives concerning bacteriological warfare through special channels. These documents confirmed that accusations of the US military using bacteriological weapons during the Korean War were "fabricated by China and North Korea."⁶⁰ These documents are not photocopies of the originals, nor do they have access numbers; they are handwritten typebooks (in Russian) and are currently stored at the

National Security Archive, a non-governmental research institution within the Gellman Library at George Washington University, for researchers to access. The *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* of the Wilson Center for International Scholars published an English translation of these 12 documents in its winter issue that year. The core content was that, in response to an international investigative team's visit, North Korea, with the help of Soviet advisors, fabricated epidemic infection areas and evidence, while the Soviet Ministry of State Security detained reports submitted to Moscow by the North Korean embassy. The bulletin also included commentaries by historian Weathersby and biologist Leitenberg, and welcomed discussion of these new findings.⁶¹

The release of these archives sparked a heated debate in academic circles. The first two published commentaries, along with another paper by Leitenberger, argued that these Russian archives "provided clear and detailed evidence" proving that accusations of American bacteriological warfare were "fabricated and fraudulent." Although the manuscripts lacked seals, signatures, and archival documentation, an examination of the documents' content, format, the people involved, and the dates—details difficult to forge—determined that "the source was credible."

57 Albert E. Cowdrey, "'Germ Warfare' and Public Health in the Korean Conflict", *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, No. 39, April 1984, pp. 153-172.

58 Richard Whelan, *Drawing the Line: The Korean War, 1950-1953*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990, p. 384.

59 John Ellis van Courtland Moon, "Biological Warfare Allegations: The Korean War Case," in Raymond A. Zilinskas (ed.), *The Microbiologist and Biological Defense Research: Ethics, Politics and International Security*, New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1992, pp.53-83.

60 "The US military used bacteriological weapons during the Korean War - this is a fabrication by China and North Korea", Sankei Shimbun, January 8, 1998.

61 Kathryn W eathersby, "Deceiving the Deceivers: Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang, and the Allegations of Bacteriological Weapons Use in Korea", *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issue 11, Winter 1998, pp. 176-185; Leitenberg, "New Russian Evidence on the Korean War Biological Warfare Allegations ", *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issue 11, Winter 1998, pp. 185-200.

Therefore, this new evidence "ended long-standing accusations of American use of bacteriological weapons in Korea." However, in the same year, Canadian historians Endicott and Hagman published a countermonograph, **America and Biological Warfare: Secrets of the Early Cold War**, offering no comment on the new evidence provided by the Russian archives, even though the authors had obtained the documents six months earlier.⁶² However, this did not prevent them from refuting the conclusions of the Russian archives. This book is the first academic work to present a detailed, comprehensive argument against allegations of U.S. bacteriological warfare, and it has had a significant impact on the international scholarly community. The author extensively utilizes archival documents from the United States, Australia, and Canada to examine the development process and policy evolution of US biological weapons, and also cites extensively from Chinese archives (China specially opened archives and military documents from Liaoning Province to the author) to confirm the process by which the United States used bacteriological weapons in Korea and China. The author argues that this process was lengthy and complex, "and could not possibly have been fabricated by the Communist Party for propaganda purposes, as some have claimed." For many years, the arguments and evidence refuting allegations of bacteriological warfare have been "simple and dull," while a wealth of "indirect evidence strongly

supports" the accusations that the United States not only tested but also used bacteriological weapons in the Korean War, and also shows that the US government lied to Congress and the public regarding its relationship with bacteriological warfare.⁶³ In the years that followed, Western academia engaged in a heated debate surrounding the veracity of the allegations of bacteriological warfare.

Scholars supporting the allegations argue that the new evidence from Russian archives is fragmented and fails to resolve the claims of biological warfare in the Korean War; the Soviet documents only state that two infected areas were fabricated, which does not prove that all alleged biological warfare sites were fabricated.⁶⁴ These Russian archives are of dubious origin and are not archival documents in the general academic sense. Even if these documents are authentic, they merely reveal power struggles within the Soviet Party and do not prove that the United States did not use bacteriological weapons.⁶⁵ Pringle praised the book **America and Biological Warfare** as "the most convincing work to date" confirming allegations of US bacteriological warfare, providing the most impressive, expertly researched, and well-supported evidence for the prosecution within the limits of official archives.⁶⁶ Chadok, by revealing numerous cases of the US attempting to cover up its use of biological weapons, demonstrated overwhelming evidence of US bacteriological warfare.⁶⁷ Powell went so

62 Milton Leitenberg, "The Korean War Biological Weapon Allegations: Additional Information and Disclosures ", *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2000, pp.160-161.

63 Endicott and Hagerman, *The United States and Biological Warfare*, pp. xviii-xix, 188-190, 195.

64 Stephen Endicott and Edward Hagerman, "Twelve Newly Released Soviet-era 'Documents' and allegations of US germ warfare during the Korean War", *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2001, p 255; Martin Furmanski and Mark Wheelis, "Allegations of Biological Weapons Use", in Mark Wheelis et al (eds.), *Deadly Cultures*, p.254.

65 Stephen Endicott et al, "Letters: Germ Warfare Was Used", *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July/August, 1999, p.5; Peter Pringle, "Did the US Start germ warfare?" *New Statesman*, 25 October 1999, p.11.

66 Pringle, "Did the US Start germ warfare?" *New Statesman*, 25 October 1999, p.10.

67 Dave Chaddock, *This Must Be the Place: How the US Waged Germ Warfare in the Korean War and Denied It*

far as to suggest that these Russian archives were fabricated by Naito, who presented himself as a "right-wing political commentator" and "messenger to the West."⁶⁸

Scholars who deny the accusations insist that, despite the inadequacy of the Soviet documents—which even "raised more questions than they answered"—they still provided "irrefutable evidence" of the falsity of the accusations.⁶⁹ McCormack argues that the Soviet archives documents "offer a fragmented but persuasive explanation," and that "analysis of these documents almost certainly confirms that North Korea, China, and Russia launched a fierce, complex, meticulously planned, and deceptive international campaign."⁷⁰ Some scholars and scientists have offered negative reviews of

Endicott and Hagman's book: they assert that the United States waged bacteriological warfare without providing any direct evidence, instead relying on hearsay or even fabricated testimonies and data⁷¹; they fail to consider that the epidemic was likely natural due to population movement caused by the war and China's underdeveloped medical science and inadequate sanitation conditions⁷²; they are entirely unfamiliar with the Korean War's air combat process and situation, thus inevitably making misjudgments⁷³; contrary to their claims, while the United States did develop bacteriological weapons at the time, it did not possess the capability to use them, and even if it might have possessed them, it absolutely did not use them.⁷⁴

To promote exchange among scholars,

Ever Since, Seattle: Bennett-Hastings Publishing, 2013, p.19.

- 68 Thomas Powell, "Biological Warfare in Korea: A Review of the Literature," *Socialism and Democracy*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2019.1644588>, p. 39.
- 69 Leitenberg, "The Korean War Biological Weapon Allegations", *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2000, pp.162-163, 170-171; Milton Leitenberg, "Biological Weapons in the Twentieth Century: A Review and Analysis", *Critical Reviews in Microbiology*, 2001, Vol.27, No.4, p.301; Kathryn Weathersby, "The Soviet Role in the Korean War: The State of Historical Knowledge", in William Stueck (ed.), *The Korean War in World History*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004, pp.83-84; Milton Leitenberg, "China's False Allegations of the Use of Biological Weapons by the United States during the Korean War", *CWIHP Working Paper*, #78, March 2016, p.10.
- 70 Gavan McCormack, *Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe*, New York: Nation Books, 2004, p.34.
- 71 Henry Wilde and Richard Johnson, "Review of The United States and Biological Warfare: Secrets From the Early Cold War and Korea", *The Journal of American Medical Association*, Vol.282, No.19, November 17, 1999, pp.1877-1878; Endicott et al, "Letters: Germ Warfare Was Used", *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July/August, 1999, p.71; John Ellis van Courtland Moon, "Dubious Allegations", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol.55, No.3, 1999, pp.70-72.
- 72 Wilde and Johnson, "Review of The United States and Biological Warfare", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol.282, No.19, November 17, 1999, p.1877; Leitenberg, "The Korean War Biological Weapon Allegations ", *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2000, pp.160-162; Robert J. Bunker, "Biological Warfare", in Spencer C. Tucker (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Korean War*, Second Edition, Vol.1, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010, p.77; Stephen Endicott et al, "Letters: Biological Warfare in the 1940s and 1950s", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 284, No.5, August 2, 2000, p. 562.
- 73 Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000, pp.143-54; Conrad C. Crane, "Chemical and Biological Warfare during the Korean War: Rhetoric and Reality", *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 25, No.3, 2001, pp.62-63.
- 74 Stanley Sandler, *The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished*, London: University College London Press, 1999, pp.207-208; Alastair Hay, "Simulants, Stimulants and Diseases: The Evolution of the United States Biological

publications such as *JAMA*, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, and *AsiaWatch* organized special book reviews and debates to discuss some details.⁷⁵ The result was still a clash of perspectives, with some scholars noting that, because neither side's archives were fully open, various possibilities remained regarding the truth.⁷⁶

The debate surrounding bacteriological warfare subsided for several years, but the disclosure of Chinese historical materials quickly reignited it. The November 2013 issue of *Yanhuang Chunqiu* published a posthumous memoir by Wu Zhili, former Minister of Health of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, recalling the issue. The core content was that the Volunteer Army's health department tested insects sent to the front lines, supposedly spread by the US military, but found no pathogenic bacteria; during the international scientific committee's investigation, the Chinese side provided false evidence and testimony.⁷⁷ *Yanhuang Chunqiu* is known for publishing valuable memoirs and oral histories

and has considerable influence in China. In April 2015, the Cold War International History Project website of the Wilson International Center for Scholars published an English version of Wu Zhili's memoir, compiled by Leitenberger.⁷⁸ In 2016, Leitenberger published a series of articles introducing new evidence from China, and included Russian archives, Chinese memoirs, and other historical materials as appendices. The article points out that Wu Zhili called the germ warfare "a false alarm." Although he did not admit that the accusations were deliberate deception and fabrication, combined with the disclosed Soviet documents, it can be further concluded that the allegations of the United States launching germ warfare during the Korean War were false and were "a grand political drama."⁷⁹

However, this assertion was immediately and severely refuted by Thomas Powell, son of John Powell, a veteran of the anti-bacterial warfare movement. Between 2017 and 2019, he published four articles comprehensively refuting various pieces of evidence and arguments against the

Warfare Programme, 1945-60", *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, Vol.15, No.3, July-September 1999, pp.198-214; Albert J. Mauroni, *America's Struggle with Chemical-Biological Warfare*, Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000, pp.22-23; Conrad Crane, "'No Practical Capabilities': American Biological and Chemical Warfare Programs During the Korean War", *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, Vol. 45, №2 (Spring 2002), pp.241 - 24 2.

75 For details, see Endicott et al, "Germ Warfare Was Used", *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July/August, 1999, pp.3-5, 71-76; Wilde and Johnson, "Review of The United States and Biological Warfare", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol.282, No.19, November 17, 1999, pp.1877-1878; Endicott et al, "Letters: Biological Warfare in the 1940s and 1950s", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol.284, No.5, August 2, 2000, pp.561-562; Leitenberg, "The Korean War Biological Weapon Allegations", *Asian Perspective*, Vol.24, No.3, 2000, pp.159-172; Endicott and Hagerman, "Twelve Newly Released Soviet-era 'Documents'", *Asian Perspective*, Vol.25, No.1, 2001, pp 249-257.

76 Ruth Rogaski, "Nature, Annihilation, and Modernity: China's Korean War Germ-Warfare Experience Reconsidered", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 2, May 2002, pp. 383-384, 387; Martin Furmanski and Mark Wheelis, "Allegations of Biological 'Weapons Use'", in Mark Wheelis et al (eds.), *Deadly Cultures*, pp.279-280; Jeffrey A. Lockwood, *Six-Legged Soldiers: Using Insects as Weapons of War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p.159.

77 Wu Zhili, "The 1952 bacteriological warfare was a false alarm," *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, No. 11, 2013, pp. 36-39.

78 <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123080>

79 Leitenberg, "China's False Allegations of the Use of Biological Weapons", *CWIHP Working Paper*, #78, March 2016; Milton Leitenberg, "A Chinese Admission of False Korean War Allegations of Biological Weapon Use by the United States", *Asian Perspective*, Vol.40, №1 (Jan.-Mar.2016), pp.131-146.

allegations. Powell asserted that Leitenberger's claims were based on forged documents, false statements, and fabricated facts. First, Wu Zhili's memoirs were "forged," a carefully embellished work by *Yanhuang Chunqiu*. Second, the Russian archives were of dubious origin and seriously flawed, likely also forged. Finally, Leitenberger, based on these claims, fabricated a conspiracy theory-like scheme and became the leader of the deniers, orchestrating attacks on Endicott and Hagmann. Furthermore, in a commentary, Powell also refuted the leading deniers one by one, calling them Leitenberger's "accomplices."⁸⁰

Discussions on the issue of bacteriological warfare among Soviet, North Korean, and Chinese students

Unlike the heated debates within Western academia, discussions on bacteriological warfare among the Soviet (Russian), North Korean, and Chinese academic circles, as the original accusers,

were relatively singular and generally aligned with the official stance.

Soviet-era academic writings almost entirely avoided the issue of bacteriological warfare during the Korean War. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the educational climate in Russia became more relaxed, and some research addressed the history of bacteriological warfare, albeit only briefly. Some scholars argued that the United States did indeed use bacteriological weapons during the war⁸¹, while others believed that the accusations against the US were fabricated⁸². However, almost no specialized works on the Korean War addressed the issue of bacteriological warfare.⁸³ Overall, Soviet- Russian academia largely avoided the topic of bacteriological warfare during the Korean War.

In contrast to Soviet academia, the issue of bacteriological warfare was a topic of great interest to North Korean historians. Immediately after the armistice of the Korean War, in early 1954, the North Korean government published two collections of documents exposing and

80 Thomas Powell, "On the Biological Warfare 'Hoax' Thesis", *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol.32, No.1, 2018, pp.1-22; Thomas Powell, "On the Biological Warfare 'Hoax' Thesis", *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol.32, No.1, 2018, pp.1-22; Thomas Powell, "Suppressing US War Crimes: The Cold War Denial Machine Lives On, " *Truthout*, June 24, 2018, <http://truthout.org/articles>; Thomas Powell, "Biological Warfare in Korea: A Review of the Literature," *Socialism and Democracy*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2019.1644588>.

81 Ванин Ю.В. (ред.) Война в Корее: 1950-1953 гг., Взгляд через 50 лет, Материалы международной научно-теоретической конференции (Москва, 23 июня 2000 г.), Москва: РРО « Первое Марта», 2 001, с.330-339; Сунотницкий М. В. Биологическая война: Введение в эпидемиологию искусственных эпидемических процессов и биологических поражений, Москва: Кафедра, Русская панорама, 2013, с. 217-238; Сунотницкий М. В. война на Корейском полуострове – технические детали// Вестник войск РХБ защиты, 2020, Т.4, №4, с. 441 - 461.

82 Жирнов Е. Шулатов Я. А. бактериологического оружия во время Корейской войны (1950-1953 гг.) // История медицины, 2018, Т.5, №4, с.328-343.

83 Славинский Б. востока, 1991, №2, с.80-90; Ахалкаци Д.С. Корейская война (1950-1953) и советско-американские отношения // Нежинский Л.Н. (Отв. ред.) Советская внешняя политика в годы "холодной войны" (1945-1985): новое прочтение, Москва: Международные отношения, 1995, с.191-216; Валковский Н.Л.(гла.ред) Война в Корее, 1950-1953, Санкт-Петербург: ПОЛИГОН, 2000; Усов В. Н. Война в Корее 1950-1953гг. : взгляд через 50лет// Проблемы дальнего востока, 2002, №6, с.174-178; Ледовский А.М. Новая и новейшая история, 2005, №5, с.79-113; Ванин Ю.В. Корейская война (1950-1953) и ООН, Москва: ИВИ РАН, 2006; Самохин А.В. Сталина в корейской войне// Власть и управление на Востоке России, 2010, №3, с.102-107.

condemning the crimes of American bacteriological warfare. One collection specifically detailed the atrocities committed by the United States against prisoners of war of the Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, including conducting bacteriological experiments on prisoners. The other collection addressed atrocities related to bacteriological warfare, chemical warfare, and barbaric bombing, including 26 confessions or statements from American prisoners of war regarding the use of bacteriological weapons, numerous reports and investigations on the US military's use of prisoners of war for bacteriological experiments, and full publication of investigation reports on bacteriological warfare from international organizations such as the International Association of Lawyers and the International Scientific Investigation Team.⁸⁴ North Korean historical writings are entirely

consistent with the official stance, consistently recording germ warfare as a war crime of US imperialism. Almost every work on contemporary North Korean history, party history, and the history of the "Fatherland Liberation War" includes a dedicated chapter on germ warfare, albeit in a simplified style with few footnotes.⁸⁵ There are virtually no scholarly works specifically discussing germ warfare in North Korea. I managed to find a 2015 North Korean book titled "Exposing the Atrocities of American Germ Warfare" through a friend in South Korea, but I was greatly disappointed. It was merely a 31-page propaganda booklet containing only photos, newspaper reports, and statements published at the time, utterly devoid of academic value.⁸⁶

In China, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, on the one hand, the humanities could freely discuss issues; on the other hand, documents concerning high-level decision-making in the

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- 84 조선인민군 및 중국인민지원군 포로들에 대한 미국침략자들의 만행에 관한 자료집, 국립출판사, 1954 [Collection of Materials on Atrocities Committed by US Imperialist Aggressors Against Prisoners of War of the Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, Pyongyang: National Publishing House, 1954]; 조선에서 미제침략자들의 만행에 관한 문헌집, 조선로동당출판사, 1954 (《Documents on the Atrocities of the American Imperialist Aggressors in Korea》, Pyongyang: Workers' Party of Korea Publishing House, 1954) .
- 85 Edited by the Institute of History, Academy of Korean Sciences, *History of the Just Fatherland Liberation War of the Korean People*, Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Press, 1961, pp. 246-247; 김희일, 미제는 조선인민의 천천지원수, 조국통일사, 1969, 281-287 [Kim Hee-il, "American Imperialism is the Generational Enemy of the Korean People," Pyongyang: Fatherland Unification Press, 1969]; "American Imperialism is the Culprit Who Launched the Korean War," Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Press, 1977, pp. 218-229; "A Brief History of the Workers' Party of Korea," edited by the Party History Research Institute of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1986 (translated from the 1979 edition); "American Imperialism is the Culprit Who Launched the Korean War," edited by Heo Jong-ho, Kang Seok-hee, and Park Tae-ho, Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Press, 1993, pp. 235-247; 조선사회과학학술집 (441) 혁명력사학편, 『위대한 수령 김일성동지 조국해방전쟁경도자 3』, 평양: 사회과학출판사, 주체 102 (2013) , 325-331 [Korean Social Science Academic Collection (441) Revolutionary History Chapter, Comrade Great Leader Kim Il Sung: Leader of the Fatherland Liberation War (3), Pyongyang: Social Science Press, Juche 102 (2013)] .
- 86 최응준, 권지혜, 미국의 세균전만행을 고발한다, 평양출판사 2015 [Choi Eung-jun and Kwon Ji-hye: Exposing the Atrocities of American Germ Warfare, Pyongyang: Pyongyang Publishing House, 2015] .

Korean War began to emerge—the manuscripts and chronologies of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, compiled by the Central Party Literature Research Office, were published successively from 1987 onwards. Consequently, the number of works on the Korean War and the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea increased dramatically. The issue of bacteriological warfare is a traditional and essential chapter in general historical works on the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea; however, the focus is primarily on anti-bacteriological warfare and epidemic prevention movements, with only a general and straightforward description of the US launching bacteriological warfare and the accusations made by China, North Korea, and the Soviet Union against the US⁸⁷. Of course, some monographs on the Korean War do not address the issue of bacteriological warfare at all.⁸⁸ Specialized research on bacteriological warfare, especially discussions focusing on accusations of US

bacteriological warfare, emerged in the 21st century, following the disclosure of Russian archives on the subject. According to my incomplete statistics, from 1999 to 2025, Chinese newspapers and periodicals will publish more than 60 articles specifically discussing issues related to bacteriological warfare. These articles, without exception, consistently argue for or accuse the United States of germ warfare crimes during the Korean War. Even articles specifically studying anti-germ warfare and social movements are predicated on accepting accusations against the United States.⁸⁹ However, only about 10-20% of these articles truly constitute academic discussion and possess academic or historical value. Qu Aiguo and Qi Dexue extensively cite Chinese military documents to refute the conclusions of Russian archives and the accounts in Wu Zhili's memoirs, providing a detailed argument for the process and rationale behind China's accusations of germ warfare.⁹⁰ Chen Shiwei, through

87 Yao Xu, **From the Yalu River to Panmunjom: The Great War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea**, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1985, pp. 106-108; **Summary of Health Work in the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea: Field Internal Medicine and Epidemic Prevention**, edited by the Health Department of the General Logistics Department of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, Beijing: People's Military Medical Publishing House, 1987, pp. 138-213; **Summary of Health Work in the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea: Health Services**, edited by the Health Department of the General Logistics Department of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, Beijing: People's Military Medical Publishing House, 1988, pp. 15-16; Tan Jingqiao et al., eds., **The War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea**, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1990, pp. 214-223; Qi Dexue, **The Inside Story of the Decision-Making in the Korean War**, Liaoning University Press, 1991, pp. 279-290; Military History Research Department of the Academy of Military Sciences, **History of the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea**, Volume 3, Beijing: Military Science Press, 2000, pp. 199-217.

88 For example, Xu Yan, *The First Confrontation: A Historical Review and Reflection on the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea*, Beijing: China Radio and Television Press, 1990, 1998; Lin Limin, *Containing China: The Korean War and Sino-US Relations*, Beijing: Current Affairs Press, 2000; Pang Xianzhi and Li Jie, *Mao Zedong and the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea*, Beijing: Central Literature Press, 2000; Shen Zhihua, *Mao Zedong, Stalin and the Korean War*, Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House, 2003.

89 The only exception might be Yang Nianqun's perspective in a monograph on the history of Chinese medicine. While the author does not explicitly deny the accusations of bacteriological warfare, his descriptions of the Patriotic Health Campaign reveal skepticism toward them. (Yang Nianqun, **Recreating the "Patient": Spatial Politics in the Conflict Between Traditional Chinese and Western Medicine (1832-1985)**, Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2019, pp. 324-378.)

90 Qu Aiguo, "Was it a crime committed by the US military or a 'lie' by the Chinese and North Korean side? A historical investigation into the anti-bacterial warfare struggle in the Korean War," *Military History*, No. 2, 2008, pp. 1-8; Qi Dexue, "Was the anti-bacterial warfare in the Korean War a fabrication by the Chinese side?"

interpreting Chinese and British archives, recounts the process by which China organized an international investigation team to investigate germ warfare crimes and the social mobilization by Britain to defend the reputation of the United States and the United Nations, launching an attack on Joseph Needham, the organizer of the International Scientific Committee.⁹¹ Zhu Jie examines the authenticity of the evidence and the legal basis for the accusations against the United States from the perspective of international law, proving that the US military's use of germ warfare was an illegal act of warfare.⁹² Zhao Jike makes full use of the archives of the US Psychological Strategy Committee to discuss the various measures taken by the US government to cover up crimes and refute accusations.⁹³

The above review of the history of historiography fully demonstrates that, in the field of history, the emergence of new historical materials is the source and driving force for academic research and debate. Of course, the primary issue is determining the authenticity of the materials themselves, that is, whether the newly disclosed Soviet documents and the memoirs of the Volunteer Army's health minister are genuine.

The judgment on whether the new historical materials are authentic

To clarify the origins of these Soviet documents, I traveled to Tokyo to interview Mr. Yasuo Naito, the person who disclosed them. Naito,

born in 1964 and currently the editor-in-chief of the Sankei Shimbun's online news website, studied and lived in the Soviet Union in his youth. He joined the Sankei Shimbun in 1989, covering Soviet affairs, and became a resident correspondent in Moscow in 1994. In 1998, a friend of his (whose name I wish to remain anonymous) transcribed these 12 documents (without copying the accession numbers) in the reading room of the Russian Presidential Archives, printed them, and gave them to Naito, leading to the Sankei Shimbun's report. These transcribed and typed documents are still preserved in the Sankei Shimbun's headquarters archives, and Naito has given copies to visiting American scholars. Therefore, these documents are not of dubious origin. As for the documents themselves, at least three other documents in Russia's open archives currently corroborate the authenticity of these Soviet documents disclosed by the Japanese journalist. Two of the documents are English translations published on the Wilson Center website: a memorandum of discussions on the agenda of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) from March 13 to April 24, 1953, and the cover of the second batch of folders discussed at the Presidium meeting of the Central Committee of the CPSU on April 24, 1953. Although only the titles and covers are mentioned, it is clear that the meetings discussed the issue of the United States' use of biological weapons in Korea and the Soviet Embassy in Korea.⁹⁴ The third document, copied

Contemporary Chinese History Studies, No. 3, 2010, pp. 81-89.

91 Chen Shiwei, "Three International Political Mobilizations on the Issue of Germ Warfare during the Korean War: An Interpretation Based on Chinese and British Archives," *Historical Research*, No. 6, 2006, pp. 115-137.

92 Zhu Jie, "Basis and Evidence: A Legal Analysis of Germ Warfare in the Korean War," *Journal of Xi'an Political Academy*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (June 2017), pp. 100-106.

93 Zhao Jike, "The U.S. Psychological Strategy Committee's handling of allegations of germ warfare in the Korean War—Focusing on the formulation of PSB D-25b document," *Military History Research*, No. 4, 2020, pp. 14-21.

94 "Memorandum about Sessions of the CPSU CC Presidium from 13 March to 24 April 1953", April 24, 1953, RGANI, F.3, Op.8, D.24, L. 107-108. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123245>; "Cover Sheet for

directly from the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History by the author, is Resolution No. 6 of the Presidium meeting of the Central Committee of the CPSU on April 24, 1953. The resolution contains only one sentence: "Included in special files"—indicating that the issues discussed were highly classified and not to be shown to the public. However, the annotations in the document show that the content discussed was precisely "issues of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs," which is completely consistent with the content of the documents disclosed by Naito.⁹⁵ Although these three documents are not specific to the issue of bacteriological warfare, they are sufficient to prove that the documents disclosed by journalist Naito are authentic. More importantly, a 2010 Russian publication of archives on Sino-Soviet relations revealed seven documents related to the issue of bacteriological warfare, including a more complete document disclosed by a Japanese journalist (a telegram from Mao Zedong to Stalin dated February 21, 1952).⁹⁶ Furthermore, according to Leitenberg, three Soviet officials residing in Moscow in 1990 confirmed the authenticity of these documents, one of whom was the person who wrote one of the original telegrams.⁹⁷ All this evidence supports the authenticity of the Russian archives concerning bacteriological warfare.

To clarify the origins of Wu Zhili's memoir, I contacted Wu Si, the former editor-in-chief of *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, and Wang Haiyin, the

office director. I obtained a copy of Wu Zhili's original manuscript. The situation is as follows: Wu Zhili wrote this memoir in September 1997. When the memoir was published in May 2005, his family considered the content sensitive and therefore excluded it. Upon learning of this, Wang Haiyin commissioned Wu Zhili to contribute. After Wu submitted the manuscript, the magazine's leadership also considered it too sensitive and decided to register it for future publication. In October 2005, Wu Zhili personally went to the magazine to retrieve the original manuscript, but left a copy. Wu passed away in August 2008. In August 2013, the magazine's editorial committee decided to publish the manuscript with slight revisions. Afterward, the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army intervened, and the State Press and Publication Administration also interviewed Wu Si; however, the matter was ultimately dropped.⁹⁸ This demonstrates that Wu's article was indeed written by him and not fabricated by the magazine. Regarding Wu Wen's account, there are clearly some errors in memory (such as the date when China stopped its anti-bacterial warfare propaganda). Still, some core points, namely the failure to detect pathogens, the inability to determine if the enemy had launched bacterial warfare, and the suggestion not to publish the matter in the newspapers, are corroborated by other documents. On February 25, 1952, the Central Military Commission telegraphed Peng

Issue II considered by the CPSU Presidium at its Session on 24 April 1953", April 24, 1953, RGANI, F.3, Op.8, D.24, L.2-2ob. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123246>

95 Протокол №6, заседания Президиума ЦК КПСС от 24 апреля 1953 г., РГАНИ, ф.3, оп.8, д.24, л.77.

96 Мясников В.С.(под ред.) Китайская народная республика в 1950-е годы,Сборник документов, т.2, Друг с союзник нового Китая, Москва: Памятники исторической мысли, 2010, с.132-136, 152, 191.

97 Leitenberg, "China's False Allegations of the Use of Biological Weapons", *CWIHP Working Paper*, #78, March 2016, pp.8-9, 16.

98 The author's telephone interview with Wu Si, January 31, 2025. Wang Haiyin's letter to the author, February 10, 2025.

Dehuai, stating: "The Volunteer Army's Health Department's continued disbelief in the enemy's bacterial warfare is extremely erroneous and harmful. If it is not corrected quickly, it will surely lead to serious consequences in the future."⁹⁹ On February 27, the Central Military Commission telegraphed Gao Gang, Peng Dehuai, and others, mentioning: "Comrade Wu Zhili of the Volunteer Army's Health Department, in his telegrams on the 22nd and 24th, still expressed skepticism (that since no bacteria were detected, further testing was necessary, and that it was highly likely the enemy was deliberately mixing bacteria-free insects with bacteria-containing insects to lull us into a false sense of security), and even suggested that vaccines and disinfectants be controlled within the Volunteer Army's Health Department and not distributed further, and also suggested that the matter not be published in the newspapers for the time being."¹⁰⁰ In his report to Mao Zedong on April 15, Zhou Enlai also mentioned that "at that time, some leaders of the Volunteer Army's health department, as well as later experts who went to Korea, expressed doubts about the enemy's use of bacteriological warfare."¹⁰¹ This evidence supports the authenticity of Wu Zhili's memoirs.

V.N. Razuvaev, the Soviet ambassador to North Korea, and Wu Zhili, the Minister of Health of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, both

mention the same event. According to Russian archives, before the international scientific investigation team arrived in North Korea, the Minister of Health was sent to Beijing to collect plague bacteria as evidence. However, he received nothing in Beijing, only later in Shenyang.

¹⁰² According to Chinese memoirs, around May, the North Korean Vice Minister of Health visited Beijing to request plague bacterial strains. In reality, the Beijing laboratory found no strains, so they sent someone to Shenyang to obtain them and deliver them to the North Koreans. Wu Zhili later said that if this strain were still insufficient to prove that the US military had launched bacteriological warfare, he would inject himself with plague bacteria to create irrefutable evidence.

¹⁰³ Although these two accounts differ in some details, the fact that they mention the same event at different times, in other countries, and in various ways is sufficient to demonstrate that neither historical source is fabricated.

Therefore, these two new historical materials are neither "of dubious origin" nor "forgeries." However, confirming the existence of historical materials does not equate to, nor can it replace, establishing the historical facts they reflect. In other words, the historical scenarios revealed by authentic historical materials are not necessarily actual, a point that is particularly important for

99 Military Academy of Sciences Historical Materials Series Research Group: Documents on the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea (Final Draft), September 2014, Unpublished, pp. 963-964.

100 Editorial Committee of this book: Summary of Logistics Experience in the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea: Selected Materials • Health Category, Beijing: Golden Shield Press, 1986, p. 333.

101 Edited by the Research Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Central Archives, Volume 6 of "Zhou Enlai's Manuscripts Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China", Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2018, pp. 272-281.

102 Razuvaev's letter to Beria, April 18, 1953, handwritten printout from the Russian Presidential Archives, private collection. English translation available in: *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issue 11, Winter 1998, pp. 181-182.

103 Wu Zhili, "The 1952 Bacteriological Warfare Was a False Alarm," **Yanhuang Chunqiu**, No. 11, 2013, p. 38. According to Zhou Enlai's arrangements, China's research center for defense against bacteriological warfare was located in Shenyang; "all the most important and confidential research work was carried out in Shenyang." **Zhou Enlai's Manuscripts Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China**, Vol. 6, pp. 224-226.

historical research.¹⁰⁴ Historical researchers must verify and compare all collected historical materials to determine whether and how they can serve as the basis for historical narratives.

Historical materials, especially primary sources, are the most fundamental element of historical research. It is in this sense, and only in this sense, that we can say that the study of

historical materials is history itself. However, in reality, the study of historical materials cannot replace history. Historical researchers not only need to discover and verify historical materials, but also to apply these materials to historical narratives through logical connections to construct a relatively accurate and objective historical picture.

104 For a detailed discussion of this issue, please see Shen Zhihua, "Motive Judgment and Historical Material Verification: An Analysis of Three Telegrams Between Mao Zedong and Stalin," *Modern History Studies*, No. 5, 2019, pp. 106-122.

Belated Assessment:

The Cruel Truth of the CCP's "War Criminals" and Amnesty Policy*

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Abstract: *This article uses the CCP's own numbers to reveal the cruel truth behind the 'war criminals' policy and amnesty policy. These two policies are highly deceiving because they are wrapped carefully with most beautiful words and claimed to be exemplary of mercy and benevolence. The so-called 'no trial, no sentencing' policy of 'war criminals' essentially disregards modern legal principles by arbitrarily changing the status of prisoners of war (POWs) to the status of 'war criminals' merely based on their ranks in the previous regime, not their actual war criminal records. The so-called grand amnesty policy is a total lie if one learns the following shocking facts: nearly 40% of these POWs was detained for over 26 years; out of that long period their most basic right to communicate with their families was ruthlessly denied for 16 years; as many as 20% of 'war criminals' died in prison before they could be released through so-called amnesty. Through long-term detention and brainwashing, the CCP used freedom (disguised in amnesty) as bait to extract insincere praise and submission from them to achieve its goals of United Front, lending legitimacy to the CCP's autocratic regime. Once the human tragedies caused by these two policies are exposed to the world, like the CCP's other policies such as land reform, anti-rightist campaigns, communalization, and the Cultural Revolution, they will serve as an eternal lesson and warning to the future generations.*

Preface

After 1949, the CCP's made mistakes one after another. Faced with the public's historical questioning, the CCP fears jeopardizing the legitimacy of its governance. To this end, on January 5, 2013, Xi Jinping introduced two undeniable policies: "We cannot use the historical period after reform and opening up to deny the pre-reform and opening-up period, nor use the pre-reform and opening-up period to deny the post-

reform and opening-up period¹." Fortunately, there has already been extensive scrutiny of many brutal and bloody historical events such as land reform, collectivization, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the People's Communes, the Great Famine, and the Cultural Revolution, which have deeply shocked the conscience of the people. Unfortunately, no one has seriously evaluated the two policies of 'war criminals' and the grand amnesty, despite they are so prominent. The CCP

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1 Guo Junkui, "Xi Jinping's 'Two Cannot Denieds' Are the Scientific Assertion for Realizing the 'Chinese Dream'." Communist Party of China News Network, May 10, 2013. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0510/c241220-21441140.html>

also has shown a particular fondness for them, continuing to hype them up, thus causing considerable confusion both domestically and internationally.

For example, shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Ministry of Public Security published a book in 1982 entitled *"The General's Decisive Battle Is Not Just on the Battlefield"* (hereafter referred to as *"The Decisive Battle"*)² to cover the lives of the so-called 'war criminals' in prisons. "War criminals" and amnesty became a subject of curiosity because it involved the succession of old and new regimes; the book's elegant language and lively characters made it feel fresh, and it quickly became a bestseller.

Ten years later, the book's main plot was adapted into the film "After the Final Battle (Juezhuan zhihou)", which became popular both in China and abroad. More than 32 years after the book was first published, it was greatly expanded into two volumes and republished in 2013, with worldwide distribution through Amazon.

Six years after that, in 2019, the enlarged edition of the book inspired another television adaptation, "Amnesty 1959 (Teshi 1959)", a 30-episode series that focuses on the first ten years of the 'war criminals' prison life and, through a few of their voices, praises the Communist Party of China and its policies on 'war criminals' and amnesty.

It is also worth noting that over the past forty years, books and periodicals in mainland China dealing with this topic have consistently presented it as an exemplary case of "revolutionary humanitarianism," "ideological remolding policy," and the "great appeal of Mao Zedong Thought."³

Since that is the case, the origins and development of these two policies, and why the Chinese Communist Party is still promoting them to this day, are worth discussing at length in order to set the record straight. This article first, in light of relevant international conventions, explores the definition of war crimes and examines cases of how prisoners of war were handled in the United States and during the Republic of China period, thereby revealing that the CCP's self-styled policy of treating "war criminals" without trial or judgment is in fact a blatant display of its lawlessness above and beyond legal principle. It then uses three major events in which the CCP itself was directly involved to analyze whether its policy of no trial and no judgment stemmed from ignorance or from some other political purpose. Next, drawing on figures published by the CCP itself, the article exposes the absurdity, cruelty, and deception of the amnesty policy. The article also discusses why the CCP has continued, even after reform and opening up, to repeatedly hype these two policies of amnesty and "war criminals." Finally, it expresses a sincere hope that future rulers will learn a lesson from the CCP.

2 Ding Xiaoyuan, "History and Humanity in the Story of Huang Jiren's Documentary Literature 'The General's Decisive Battle Is Not Won Only on the Battlefield.'" The article observes that Huang Jiren first published the reportage work in the 1980s, under the title "The General's Decisive Battle Is Not Won Only on the Battlefield: The Former Kuomintang Generals' Rebirth on the Mainland. See <https://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2013/2013-07-04/166281.html>

3 For example, 1) Compiled by Ren Haisheng, 'The History of the Republic's Special Pardon for War Criminals.' No. 135 Fuyou Street, Xicheng District, Beijing: Huawen Publishing House, 1995. 2) Zhou Jiping, "Special Citizens: A Record of Beijing Receiving Special Pardons for 'war criminals'." Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2011. 3) Qianlong, compiled and authored, "Special Amnesty Decree - No Detained 'war criminals' in China." Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1995, etc.

A list of 'war criminals' that doesn't live up to its name

On August 15, 1945, Japan surrendered unconditionally. That October, the Nationalist and Communist parties reached the Double Tenth Agreement, stirring eager expectations among the public. Had the agreement been carried out, China would, over time and within a democratic constitutional framework, surely have moved steadily toward becoming a prosperous and developed country.

However, before the ink on the Double Tenth Agreement had dried, the area around Shanhaiguan⁴ was already engulfed in the smoke of war. With Soviet Red Army support and relying on the equipment of the Japanese Kwantung Army as well as the natural defenses of Shanhaiguan, the Communist forces, as a local armed force, actually did everything they could to block the Central Army from passing out of the pass and retaking the lost territories of the Northeast, which was deeply shocking. The land of China, which had briefly been bathed in the light of peace, was once again shrouded in dark clouds. Not long afterward, a full-scale civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communists broke out over control of China.

Fast forward to December 25, 1948. While the world was immersed in Christmas festivities, Xinhua News Agency, in the name of "an authoritative figure in northern Shaanxi," issued a list of 44 "war criminals."⁵ The list not only

included almost all the upper echelons of the Republican government, but also included some other parties and non-partisan individuals surprisingly. At that time, among the three major civil war campaigns, the Communist forces had already won the Liaoshen Campaign and were confident of victory in the Huaihai Campaign. Only the Pingjin Campaign, which was encircled but not attacked Peking and Tianjin, had a predictable outcome. The day the list was released was the day before the birthday of CCP leader Mao Zedong, sparking even more speculation. Clearly, the authorities in northern Shaanxi were already ambitious about seizing the whole country. Revealing the list of 'war criminals' now was not only to humiliate the enemy, but also to celebrate a grand birthday.

A month later, on January 26, 1949, the *People's Daily* published an expanded list of 37 people⁶. Ironically, the famous scholar Hu Shi was also among them. The two lists totaled 81 people⁷. In what follows, let's call it the Christmas Expansion Edition, or simply the Saint Edition. According to the CCP, everyone on the Saint Edition, regardless of whether they belonged to the Republic of China government or directly participated in the battle, were instigators and decision-makers of the civil war.

According to the CCP's account, everyone on the original list, whether they belonged to the Republic of China government and whether they had directly taken part in the fighting, was deemed

4 See Wang Chaoguang, *The Choice Between Peace and War: The Kuomintang's Northeast Policy After the War*, chapter 1, section 5, "The Kuomintang's Advance into the Northeast and the Battle of Shanhaiguan." China Renmin University Press, Zhonghua Historiography Series, September 2016.

5 "An Authoritative Person in Northern Shaanxi Discusses the List of 'war criminals' ." *People's Daily*, December 27, 1948.

6 See "People in the Nationalist-controlled areas warmly welcome Chairman Mao's statement; they are discussing the list of 'war criminals' and believe that many important 'war criminals' have been left out," published in *People's Daily* on January 27, 1949.

7 Ren Haisheng, ed., *The Course of the Republic's Amnesty of War Criminals*. Beijing, Fuyou Street 135, Xicheng District: Huawen Press, 1995, p. 12.

an instigator and decision-maker of the civil war. Ironically, the nature of the list soon changed in subtle ways. First, apart from the three men who were captured—Du Yuming, Huang Wei, and Wang Lingji—the great majority of those named fled the mainland. Second, Cheng Qian and Fu Zuoyi, both on the list, later rose in rebellion and became senior officials in the CCP. Third, Li Zongren, the list's No. 2 "war criminal," returned from the United States to settle in Beijing in 1965. The CCP held him up as a model and urged everyone else on the list to return as soon as possible, promising respectful treatment, important posts, and a peaceful old age. Thus, what had already become an obsolete list turned into a list of honored guests the CCP was eager to win back.

However, the CCP soon identified 856 captured officials and military personnel from the higher ranks of the Republic of China and the Manchukuo regimes and, without trial, upgraded them from prisoners of war to "war criminals."⁸ However, this time the CCP did not publish the list publicly; instead it kept it secret to avoid legal constraints, so the total number of "war criminals" could be increased or decreased at any time because of new arrests, completed sentences, summary executions, or other reasons. The CCP also decided to subject this group to compulsory thought reform without trial; none would be released until their reform was complete. Mao Zedong, invoking public opinion, further

instructed that no amnesty would be granted before the completion of the First Five-Year Plan⁹.

In 1959, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People's Republic of China, Beijing implemented a special amnesty for the first time. Subsequently, in 1960, 1961, 1963, 1964, and 1966, the CCP issued five more minor pardons. On May 16, 1966, the Cultural Revolution broke out, and the amnesty was suspended.

A policy of 'war criminals' without trial or judgment

War criminals, as the term suggests, are people who have committed war crimes. The concept of war crimes emerged in the mid-19th century, for example in the 1864 Geneva Convention and its later revisions, as well as in the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, especially the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the two Additional Protocols of 1977. According to Article 8 of the Rome Statute¹⁰, War crimes refer to serious violations of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and other serious violations of international law, including intentional killing, torture, attacks on civilians, rape, sexual slavery, and the recruitment of children¹¹.

It is therefore clear that whether in a civil war or an international war, 'war criminals' may arise. The key to determining who is a war criminal does not lie in the rank of the military or civilian office

8 Same as above. Page 13.

9 According to the article "New China's Seven Amnesty Measures: No Japanese War Criminals Were Killed," Mao Zedong believed that "amnesty should perhaps not be carried out during the First Five-Year Plan, so as to avoid possible adverse effects (a rise in reactionary arrogance, and public dissatisfaction); after a few more years, the matter could be discussed again. Many democrats also proposed this view. Which option would be preferable? Please consult and report back." Writings of Mao Zedong Since the Founding of the PRC, vol. 5, pp. 133–134. See <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/news/2009/09-23/1880562.shtml>

10 The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, also known as the Statute of the International Criminal Court or the Rome Statute. See [https://legal.un.org/icc/statute/chinese/rome_statute\(c\).pdf](https://legal.un.org/icc/statute/chinese/rome_statute(c).pdf)

11 See the United Nations regulations on war crimes. <https://www.un.org/zh/documents/treaty/ICRC-1949>

held, nor in whether a person directly took part in the fighting, but in whether, after a ceasefire, that person committed the kinds of war crimes described above against enemy soldiers who had laid down their arms or against civilians. Clearly, without indictment, defense, and trial, one cannot establish war-criminal status.

However, the CCP's policy toward "war criminals" was one of no trial and no judgment, and it stressed that the purpose was not punishment but education and reform.¹² From a legal standpoint, depriving a person of liberty is already a punishment. If it is further combined with compulsory education and reform, it becomes a very severe punishment indeed. It is therefore clear that the CCP's policy toward "war criminals," under the pretense of not imposing harsh punishment, denied that these prisoners of war were being subjected to a strict penalty characterized by prolonged deprivation of liberty and forced reform.

Second, from a legal standpoint, the CCP's "war criminal" list is untenable because it blurs the distinction between civil war and foreign war. A civil war does not involve violations of sovereignty or territorial integrity, so one cannot prosecute the opposing side in a civil war as the instigator or planner of an aggressive war. Yet faced with an armed uprising by a local military group, the central government could not simply stand by while social order was destroyed; it had to send troops to restore order. In this case, however, the CCP, as the rebel side, instead prosecuted the upper ranks of the Republic of

China as the instigators and decision-makers of the civil war, a modern version of "history is written by the victors." In a civil war, the relevant charges are rebellion or subversion. Had this civil war ended with a victory for the Republic of China government, the CCP leadership would have been prosecuted and convicted for rebellion or subversion, not labeled as 'war criminals'.

Third, civil war can still produce 'war criminals'. To distinguish prisoners of war from 'war criminals', there must be a court trial. A policy of "war criminals" without trial or judgment deprives prisoners of war, as the accused, of the right to defend themselves, blurs the distinction between indictment and conviction, and inevitably degenerates into simply condemning people on the basis of military or official rank, in serious violation of the definition of a war criminal.

Fourth, because both sides in a war are acting under orders, responsibility for loss of life and property must be shared; otherwise, the principle of judicial fairness is violated. The CCP's prolonged detention of prisoners of war and its demand that they unilaterally confess to war crimes is, in effect, to treat them as hostages or political prisoners.¹³ Thus, the CCP's cancellation of trials necessarily led to: 1) openly denying that prisoners of war had been subjected to severe punishment, and instead portraying prolonged deprivation of liberty, forced indoctrination, and reform as humanitarian measures; 2) blurring the distinction between civil war and foreign war, that is, between the central government's duty to maintain social order and the local armed groups'

12 Ren Haisheng, ed., *The Course of the Republic's Amnesty of War Criminals*. Beijing, Fuyou Street 135, Xicheng District: Huawen Press, 1995, p. 12.

13 See Article 99 of the United Nations Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War: Prisoners of war, whose conduct is not prohibited by the law of the detaining State or international law in force at the time, shall not be tried or punished for such conduct. Prisoners of war must not be subjected to mental or physical coercion to confess guilt of the acts they are accused of. Prisoners of war may not be convicted without the opportunity to present a defense and the assistance of qualified defense counsel or lawyers. <https://www.un.org/zh/documents/treaty/ICRC-1949>

rebellion under the instigation of foreign powers; 3) erasing the distinction between indictment and conviction; and 4) ignoring the profound difference between prisoners of war and war criminals.

Good examples for the CCP to learn from

Do these four major confusions stem from the CCP's ignorance of the law, or are they deliberately committed? The answer is that there were ample precedents for it to consult. For example, the postwar settlement in the United States after its Civil War offers a valuable lesson for all countries. Because of deep disagreements over the survival or abolition of slavery, the North and South fought each other from 1861 to 1865, causing enormous casualties and property destruction. The war ended with Union forces entering the rebel states and General Lee's announcement of surrender. But many white Southerners' discrimination against Black people could not be erased by a single administrative order. Thus, during the Reconstruction of the South, the federal government faced severe challenges.¹⁴ The federal government established a special Bureau for Refugees, Freeman, and Land Disposal, under the Department of War, to help establish public schools, build public housing, and dispose of abandoned farmland, aiming to popularize education among Southern Black populations, improve housing, acquire land, and

encourage them to participate in politics, thereby alleviating postwar chaos and decay in Southern society.

Before the Civil War ended, Johnson issued several amnesty decrees, pardoning surrendered rebel officers and soldiers, but he still reserved pardons for the South's main military and political leaders, as well as the large plantation owners who actively funded the rebellion. Based on this, in 1866, the federal government imprisoned Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate government, and charged him with treason. Public opinion and some popular groups in both the North and South sympathized with him. Even the freed Black free American groups in Mississippi pressured the government for bail, citing his reputation on his plantation for treating slaves well and allowing them autonomy.¹⁵ The court granted his parole in 1867. On Christmas 1868, President Johnson issued another pardon, stating that the reservations listed in previous amnesties were outdated and that he would approve all requests for forgiveness. This amnesty granted Davis complete freedom without a trial.¹⁶ The Confederate Supreme Commander, General Robert Lee, enjoyed personal freedom after surrendering, but like Davis, he faced charges of treason. After President Johnson's pardon, he sought forgiveness. Although he did not receive a direct response from the president, the lawsuit fell through, sparing him from the pain of appearing in court.¹⁷ This shows

14 Andrew F. Lang, "In the Wake of War". Union leader General Grant stated in a letter to President Johnson that Union troops advancing into the Southern states needed to be temporarily stationed locally to ensure the abolition of slavery, prevent conflict between Black and White tribes, rebuild the local civilian government, and ensure the smooth progress of severely damaged railroads, roads, factories, and farms. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 2017. Page 182.

15 Eric Foner, "Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877". New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989, Pages 58-59.

16 Richard W. Murphy, "The Nation Reunited". The Time-Life Books, Virginia: USA, Alexandria, 1987, Page 24.

17 Ibid. The book mentions that he was soon invited to serve as president of Washington College until his death. Just two weeks later, the board renamed the university Washington & Lee University based on his outstanding

that from the very beginning, the Confederate government pardoned Confederate soldiers who no longer resisted and ultimately pardoned the rebel leaders and generals of the South, allowing all Southern soldiers who participated in the rebellion to quickly return to peaceful and free lives. The federal government knows that forced detention, brutal persecution, and the punishment of nine generations will only deepen generational hatred between North and South, as well as between black and white people.

In handling the prisoners of war captured during the Northern Expedition and the war criminals after the Anti-Japanese War, the Republic of China government likewise set a good precedent for the CCP. Take General Liu Yuchun¹⁸ as an example. In July 1926, when the Northern Expedition Revolutionary Army reached Wuchang, he had been ordered to hold out in the face of danger and defended Wuchang City for more than 40 days, until he was captured. When Liu Yuchun was first tried on February 10, 1927, the famous jurist Xu Qian served as a member and chairman of the People's Trial Committee of the Wuhan National Government, and in court he held Liu responsible for the loss of life and property during the fighting. Liu replied: "When two armies fight, guns and artillery are exchanged fire; the responsibility cannot be placed on one side alone." Xu asked: "Why did you not surrender earlier?" Liu answered: "Yuchun is a national general, and it is his duty to defend the territory. If a general in the revolutionary army heard gunfire and surrendered at once, what would you gentlemen think?" Xu then said: "You are a

counterrevolutionary!" Liu replied: "You are mistaken again! I have never joined the revolutionary party, so how can I be called a counterrevolutionary? Of the four hundred million people of China, only a little over two hundred thousand belong to the revolutionary army; are the rest all counterrevolutionaries?"¹⁹ In the end, the court could only hastily end the trial and let it go unresolved.

If the Republican government had subjected Liu Yuchun to prolonged detention in order to wear down his will or had used collective punishment against his whole family—targeting his parents, wife, young children, and close relatives with persecution and abuse to strike at his vulnerabilities—one wonders whether his defiant stance might have softened. Fortunately for Liu Yuchun, even at its most radical moment, the Republican government still maintained the minimum standards of modern law. Xu Qian, though deeply influenced by Soviet Russia, nonetheless thoroughly understood European and American law and upheld a humanitarian baseline; he was not swept away by revolutionary fervor into disregarding the facts and taking human life lightly. In effect, he accepted Liu Yuchun's defense. Liu Yuchun was ultimately acquitted and released.

Another example is the Republican government's handling of Japanese war criminals. After Japan's surrender in August 1945, the Republican government arrested 2,357 Japanese war criminals. Through prosecution and trial by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 149 of the most heinous war criminals were lawfully sentenced to death, 696 Japanese war

contributions. Despite opposition, the name of the school is still in use today. Pages 32-33.

18 Liu Yuchun was a senior general under the Zhili clique warlord Wu Peifu. See Liu Yuchun: "Records of Returning to the Fields After a Hundred Battles," included in the Editorial Department of Modern History Materials, Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Modern History Materials* (No. 82). Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1992, pp. 234-257.

19 Ibid.

criminals were prosecuted and sentenced, and more than 400 Japanese war criminals were given life imprisonment. The trials and sentencing of Japanese war criminals by the Republican government followed serious, open, and transparent procedures, embodying the spirit of the rule of law.

Take the notorious Okamura Yasuji²⁰ as an example. From November 1944 until the end of World War II, he served successively as commander of the China Expeditionary Army, commander of the North China Area Army, and commander of the 11th Army, rising to the rank of Army General, and was therefore listed as a Japanese war criminal for aggression against China. But on January 26, 1949, the military tribunal of the Republic of China decided to declare him "not guilty" and release him, on the grounds that the atrocities committed by the Japanese army in the Nanjing Massacre and in the major battles of Changsha and Xuzhou had all occurred before his tenure and had nothing to do with him. Those responsible had already been separately sentenced and punished. After the Japanese government formally announced its surrender, "the defendant immediately laid down his arms and complied, leading a million troops in obedience to the surrender," and there was "no large-scale killing, rape, looting, or planned conspiracy to launch or support a war of aggression."²¹ Although the Republican government's ruling provoked criticism from the CCP and confusion from some civilians, the court's spirit of seeking truth from facts has stood the test of time.

CCP's Three Times' Major Involvement in POW-handling

The CCP not only had historical precedents to learn from, but also directly participated in three major events that attracted worldwide attention at the time and were directly related to the handling of prisoners of war and war criminals. First, as a victorious nation in World War II, the Republic of China government actively participated in the handling of Japanese prisoners and war criminals. The CCP accepted the reorganization of the Republic of China government and directly participated in the War of Resistance, so naturally it was deeply concerned about the handling of Japanese prisoners and war criminals. Second, as a founding member of the United Nations, the Republic of China government actively participated in the drafting and discussion of the four Geneva Conventions after World War II. As part of the coalition government, the CCP is equally deeply concerned.

Third, the CCP was directly involved in the handling of prisoners of war during the Korean War. With China and North Korea on one side and South Korea on the other, South Korea and the United States on the other, the two sides had deep disagreements over the principles of returning prisoners of war, causing the war to be repeatedly delayed.²² China and North Korea proposed that both sides' prisoners of war should be "all repatriated," while the United States, which leads the United Nations forces, insists on the principle of "voluntary repatriation." In September 1953, under U.S. military pressure and diplomatic

20 Okamura Yasuji (May 15, 1884–September 2, 1966), commander-in-chief of the China Expeditionary Army (November 1944 until the end of World War II), army general. See *Okamura Yasuji Memoirs*, edited by Inaba Masao, Historical Materials on the Republic of China, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1981, pp. 142–159.

21 Ibid.

22 Shen Zhihua, "The Historical Truth of the Korean War." Hong Kong: Chinese Culture Studies, The Chinese University, 21st Century, February 2000 issue.

pressure from the new Soviet leadership after Stalin's death, China and North Korea accepted a ceasefire agreement based on the principle of voluntary repatriation.²³ As a result, not only was there no mention of war criminals, but most captured Chinese prisoners chose to settle in Taiwan or India, which the Chinese side could not stop.

Undoubtedly, these three major events made the CCP alert that, following international and Republican customs, holding public trials and allowing prisoners to defend themselves would make convicting civil war prisoners extremely difficult. Not only would they alarm global public opinion, but they would also face the awkward situation of having to allow them to come and go freely if conviction failed. The CCP is intent on using these war criminals to stage a grand show of how lenient and benevolent it is, while how these senior officials of the old dynasty submit in the face of imperial grace, deceiving the world and winning hearts. Naturally, it is dissatisfied with the possible outcome of acquittal. This is why the CCP decided to forcibly implement a policy of 'war criminals' without trial or judgment, disregarding legal principles.

Wailing souls under the amnesty policy

Amnesty policy was likewise portrayed by the CCP as a model of benevolence and a great success of ideological remolding. But according to *The Course of the Republic's Amnesty of 'war criminals'*, edited by Ren Haisheng,²⁴ "The total number of 'war criminals' was 856. After being held for a full ten years, the first amnesty began in 1959, and by the last amnesty before the Cultural Revolution in March 1966, a cumulative total of 296 men had been released over the seven-year period.²⁵ 1975 saw the release of the last batch of 293 amnestied 'war criminals'.²⁶ The two together add up to 589, which is 267 fewer than the total number of "war criminals." There were two reasons for the shortfall: first, as many as 167 "war criminals" had already died in prison;²⁷ Second, 100 captured "war criminals" were released through means other than amnesty: 65 upon completion of their sentences, 10 through separate handling, and 25 reclassified as rebels, or persons who had taken part in uprisings.²⁸

At this point, the world learned that although the CCP claimed to practice "no trial and no judgment," in fact it also did conduct trials and judgments. Whatever the fairness of those trials,

23 Zhao Xuegong, "The Issue of Prisoner of War Repatriation in the U.S.-China and Korean Armistice Negotiations." *Journal of Sichuan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 2015, Issue 1, No. 1, 2015, Total Issue 196, Sum No. 196. This article stands with the CCP's position but points out that the biggest obstacle to the ceasefire lies in the sharp differences between the warring sides over the principle of repatriation of prisoners of war. Ironically, prisoners who returned to China later faced various forms of discrimination, while those who chose to go to Taiwan became successful figures envied by mainland compatriots when veterans were allowed to visit their hometowns in the late 1980s. See Zhang Chongxiu's "Prisoner of War Revelations," see <https://groups.google.com/g/unlimitedsearch/c/IX9rLPtmamk?pli=1>

24 Ren Haisheng, ed., *The Course of the Republic's Amnesty of War Criminals*. Beijing, Fuyou Street 135, Xicheng District: Huawen Press, 1995. p.103.

25 *ibid.* This is the sum of the number of pardoned people over the years as recorded on pp. 111, 112, 114, 116, 118, 119.

26 *ibid.* p.123.

27 *ibid.* P. 127.

28 *ibid.* pp. 126 and 131.

they at least set clear sentences and could avoid arbitrary delays and the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution. If all "war criminals" had been processed through proper judicial procedures, their imprisonment would not have lasted as long as twenty-six and a half years, and many would not have been left to die in prison. What remains unclear is whether the "war criminals" who died in prison included Nationalist generals who were executed during their detention. For example, in 1951 alone, five Nationalist generals at the Gongdelin 'war criminals' Management Center were executed.²⁹ General Duan Kewen, who later emigrated to the United States, also mentioned in his "Self-Account of a War Criminal" that Ma Shang, a fellow inmate and an alleged agent of the Kuomintang's secret service, was sentenced to seven years in prison but was suddenly executed before completing his sentence³⁰

If the 100 "war criminals" released through

non-amnesty channels are subtracted from the total number of captured "war criminals," then the number of captured "war criminals" who could be released only through amnesty—including those who died before amnesty could be granted—was 756. Using 756 as the denominator, the cumulative number of "war criminals" granted amnesty from 1959 to March 18, 1975, over 15 years, was only 39% (296/756).³¹ The last batch of "war criminals" released through amnesty accounted for 38.8% of the total (293/756), while the "war criminals" who died in prison accounted for 22% (167/756). In other words, by March 19, 1975, as many as 61% of the "war criminals" had either died after prolonged imprisonment or spent more than a quarter of a century in prison before finally regaining freedom. Astonishingly, the CCP also cut the prisoners off completely from the outside world twice, each time for as long as eight years, for a total of 16 years.³²

Table 1: Total number of detained "war criminals," number who died in custody, number granted amnesty, and number released through non-amnesty channels

Total 'War criminals' captured I	Cumulative number of pardoned 'war criminals' before March 1966 II	Number of 'war criminals' granted amnesty in the final batch in 1975 III	Number of 'war criminals' released through non-amnesty channels and after serving their sentences IV	Number of 'war criminals' died in captivity V
856	296	293	100	167

29 Huakaiwutian (花开无田). "In 1951, five Nationalist generals at the Gongdelin War Criminals Management Center were executed. Who were they? " 2024-02-09 10:42 Shandong. According to the author, these five Nationalist generals were Lu Yinji, Yang Haiqing, Deng Zichao, Zhang Zhuo, and Zhang Guoxun. They were executed in 1951. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/TiCT7DG9STQVqlmmZ_Y93A

30 Duan Kewen, "Self-Account of a War Criminal", Part One, p.55. USA, New York, World Journal Press, 1980.

31 Rounding up, we get this number. --Author's note.

32 After his arrest, it took eight years before the author's father, Wen Qiang, was allowed to correspond with his family. In early 1949, the author's mother returned from Taiwan to the mainland to rescue him, searching everywhere in the southern Shandong, northeast Anhui, and northern Jiangsu areas, but because she did not know where he was being held, they never met. After returning to Shanghai, she also inquired about his whereabouts through the relevant government departments, but all to no avail. Because the prisoner of war had lost the right to communicate, his mother had no way of knowing whether his father was alive or dead, what charges he faced, or what sentence had been imposed. In despair and helplessness, she took her own life in 1955, wronged and full of grievance. In 1966, his father was once again deprived of the right to communicate with the outside world, and

Depriving the "war criminals" of their freedom to extract their submission was, after all, cruel and vulgar. To conceal this ugly utilitarian motive, Mao Zedong invoked public opinion, as if the people were resisting amnesty.³³ However, the following passage from Mao Zedong expresses the opposite "public opinion," because it suggests that carrying out amnesty could win over the masses. On September 15, 1959, he invited the heads of the democratic parties, mass organizations, prominent non-party figures, and well-known figures from the cultural and educational sectors to a symposium. There he said, "General amnesty is dangerous. If one keeps granting amnesty, there must be a problem; it must mean the regime is not consolidated and must rely on amnesty to win over the masses. We grant amnesty only to those who have truly reformed, and those who have not yet reformed still have hope."³⁴

Compared with Mao Zedong's rapid release of Japanese prisoners of war, it becomes even clearer how hollow and false his use of "public opinion" as a shield really was. Before granting amnesty to the Japanese war criminals, he had pretended to solicit views from various circles. Yet, as the article "Not a Single Execution" reveals, opposition to early release was quite explicit for these aggressors.³⁵ Facing clear public opinion, Mao Zedong nevertheless released most Japanese war criminals in 1956. The last three Japanese war criminals in Chinese custody were also released and returned to Japan on March 6, 1964. That is

what Mao called "respect for public opinion."

Motives for hyping up the two policies of "war criminals" and amnesty

In fact, the handling of war criminals lacks a legal foundation, violates human rights, and does not align with public opinion. Logically, after implementing reform and opening up, the CCP should be ashamed to mention its war criminal policies and amnesty policies. Unexpectedly, the CCP keeps publishing books, making movies, and TV series, repeatedly hyping up this topic. What motives are there?

First, this was driven by united front objectives. In sharp contrast to the CCP's internal and external difficulties after the Cultural Revolution, Europe, the United States, and Japan were economically prosperous and their people were well off, which made them enviable. If these "war criminals," left over from the Republican era and possessing extensive ties at home and abroad, were willing to help the CCP contact relatives and friends scattered across developed countries in Europe, America, and Japan, speak well of Deng Xiaoping's new policies, and persuade those countries to help China develop its economy, wouldn't that be far more effective?

Taking my father as an example, in 1985, he toured states across the eastern, western, southern, and northern United States, meeting Chinese Americans, Taiwan compatriots, and American friends, and promoting to them Deng Xiaoping's

that right was not restored until eight years later, in 1974. --Author's note.

33 On May 26, 1956, the Party Central Committee issued the "Notice on Soliciting Opinions from Within and Outside the Party on Continuing to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries and Holding Amnesties." When revising the draft notice, Mao Zedong added: "Either not hold a general amnesty during the first Five-Year Plan period to avoid possible adverse effects (such as heightened counterrevolutionary sentiment and public dissatisfaction) and discuss this matter in a few years. Many democrats have also raised this opinion. As for which is most appropriate, please inquire and telegram." *Drafts of Mao Zedong Since the Founding of the PRC*, Volume 5, pp. 133 and 134.

34 *ibid.*

35 *ibid.*

new approaches to domestic and foreign affairs while encouraging them to visit China, engage in exchange, and invest.³⁶

In fact, after 1949, former dignitaries like the author's father became "war criminals," and their families were also subjected to humiliation and persecution. By the end of the Cultural Revolution, they had become social outcasts, neither fully human nor fully ghost-like. If their former dignity was not restored and they were not given the respect they deserved, they could not play the united-front role the CCP urgently needed. That is why the CCP repeatedly hyped the "war criminals" and amnesty policies, repackaging them to accomplish tasks the CCP itself could not complete.

Second, this kind of hype also stemmed from the need to search for political legitimacy. Having come to power through naked violence, the CCP has consistently resisted the global tide of democracy and refused to return power to the people. If some of the once-venerated former officials from the old regime came forward to submit to the CCP and even sing its praises, then for a CCP whose authoritarian face was already becoming increasingly exposed, how could it easily let slip such a demonstration effect of winning over the hearts of the people? The book *Decisive Battle* quotes Du Yuming's lament, which is highly apt: "Being defeated by the enemy can still be recovered from; being defeated by the people can never be recovered from."³⁷

Du Yuming, as a war criminal who was included in the CCP's official list of 'war criminals' and was captured, was both a famous anti-

Japanese general and the father-in-law of Nobel laureate Chen N. Yang. Given his prominent status, he could say this, so it's no wonder the CCP repeatedly hypes it up in its eagerness to legitimize governance, because this is exactly what the CCP dreams of. The CCP does everything possible to make the public forget other historical mistakes but has a particular fondness for 'war criminals' and amnesty policies, using the testimonies of 'war criminals' to silence public criticism of the CCP's lack of legitimacy in governance. No wonder the Ministry of Public Security was so enthusiastic about the little-known Huang Jiren back then, helping him rewrite the first draft and quickly publish it.³⁸

Summary

Nationalist 'war criminals', represented by General Du Yuming, had early careers worthy of respect. They followed Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, trying to forge a new path beyond the millennium of imperial rule and seek a new path for China's political-economic modernization. These patriots later became heroes of the resistance against Japan. Because they followed the Republican government, recognized constitutionalism as a long-term goal, and embraced private ownership and the market economy approach, they became so-called "war criminals." They were forced to waste time in prison, endured endless humiliation, and evoked sympathy.

The policy of treating "war criminals" without trial or judgment completely departed

36 Wen Qiang and Guanzhong James Wen (Co-authored). "Love Triumphed Despite Disasters: Recollections of Long-Prisoned KMT General Wen Qiang and His Son", New York: Boden Book House, October 2025.

37 Huang Jiren, "The General's Decisive Battle Is Not Just on the Battlefield," China Youth Publishing House, Electronic Edition, Part I, First Edition, April 2013. Page 279.

38 Communist Party of China News Network. See <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/n/2013/1219/c85037-23891016.html>

from modern legal principles. The CCP discarded the laws and precedents of the Republic of China, as well as established international convention, and, without any trial, arbitrarily upgraded prisoners of war to the status of "war criminals" based solely on rank and office. This was because the CCP knew that most of them had not committed war crimes and could not be convicted; so it adopted a no-trial, no-judgment policy, using long-term imprisonment, forced "reform," and forced ideological indoctrination to exchange their most precious freedom for submission and praise of Mao Zedong's ultra-left line, thereby draping its dictatorship in a cloak of legitimacy. The CCP even demanded that these "war criminals" express gratitude for such a policy, which is truly laughable.

After Mao Zedong had barely been buried, the CCP admitted that Mao Zedong had committed a series of ultra-leftist mistakes and basically repudiated his line and policies. It was only the "war criminals" who were the pitiable ones: not only did they lose their freedom, they were also played for a huge brainwashing joke. By the time they realized it was a scam, their precious lives had already been squandered. Such was the effect of the so-called unprecedented "war criminal" reform policy. No wonder the author's father, Wen Qiang, titled his final unpublished work *Memories After the Calamity*. He also ended his life story in 1949, refusing to touch on the unspeakable years in prison with self-evident intent.

Many people believe that although the "war criminals" were held for a long time, they were

still fortunate compared with the miserable fate of the tens of millions of landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists in society, the millions of innocent souls brutally suppressed, and even the several hundred senior KMT generals who were directly executed. But this also raises a serious question: under the CCP's terror rule, how much of the submission and praise expressed by the surviving "war criminals" was truly from the heart, and how much was due to fear, or to coercion born of wanting to regain freedom and reunite with their families sooner? How much lasting value, in terms of governing legitimacy, could the submission and praise extracted from the "war criminals" through long-term imprisonment really have?

May the Chinese land never again be torn apart by internal strife in which compatriots kill one another. If, by misfortune, such conflict were ever to happen again, may the two sides never imitate the CCP's "war criminal" policy and amnesty policy: do not turn prisoners of war into political prisoners, do not treat them as valuable hostages, do not confine them for long periods, and do not force ideological reform. If one is confident in one's own justice, then the enemy's prisoners of war should be placed in a completely free, authentic, and durable social environment, so that their views and conduct can change gradually and imperceptibly over time; indeed, they should even be allowed to retain their own political views and positions. If future rulers could act in this way, then the people, the state, the political parties, and all the soldiers would be fortunate.

