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OUR CURRENT FEARS AND EXPECTATIONS

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[Xu Zhangrun (許章潤, b. 1962)], who teaches jurisprudence and constitutional law at Tsinghua University, in the summer of 2018 published an extensive critique of recent political trends in China. While not actually mentioning Xi Jinping by name, Xu rakes the general secretary over the coals, tearing down Xu's program, mocking the "China Dream," and targeting especially the elimination of "term limits" for the head of state. In the decades prior to the 19th Party Congress in 2018, the constitution limited the head of state (State Chairman, nowadays usually translated "President") to two terms of five years each. This was removed in the spring of 2019. China's head of state is pretty much a ceremonial office (the control of government operations is vested in the Premier of the State Council, and the real boss of the regime is the General Secretary of the Communist party, a position Xi Jinping holds as well as his State Chairmanship). The elimination of this term limit is, then, symbolic: it indicates Xi's intention to remain as top boss indefinitely, perhaps for the rest of his life. Xu takes this as indicative of the end of the reform movement that began shortly after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, a sign that China is moving backwards toward a Stalinist-Maoist totalitarian system.

In addition to the elimination of term limits, Xu complains of the lack of any progress toward political reform over the four decades since the onset of reform (he says that the term limitation was really the only tangible move toward political reform, and its main benefit was to assure people that no matter how bad things continued to be, at least

after five or ten years there would be a different tyrant in charge). The regime, he fears, is abandoning economic development as its main policy direction in favor of increased political control. He claims that this ongoing improvement of living standards is the main reason the population has been willing to put up with the regime, and that if life does not continue to improve there will be rebellion). He denounces the promiscuous spending on foreign aid (probably with the One Belt-One Road, a pet project of Xi Jinping's, in mind.): this wastes the wealth the people have built up with their blood and sweat, not for any real national advantage but merely for political glory.

Xu cites "ordinary people" in support of the criticisms he makes, although his position is that typically found among the liberal intellectual elite. This includes the condescension that crowd tends to take toward ordinary people: Thus, the ordinary people will be happy with any political system as long as it lets them live their lives in peace with a modicum of comfort and security (although, on reflection, maybe this is the best any of us can shoot for). He condemns the increasing suppression of free thought, especially for intellectuals—since all progress depends upon that "elite's" ability to think freely. He is an enthusiast for globalization and the free market, and may not take seriously enough the problems those concepts bring in practice: corruption; the collusion between favored economic elites and the dominant political elites (something he, too, explicitly deplores); the damage these abstractions have often wrought upon farmers and blue-collar workers (the "ordinary people" he champions). In effect, while Xi Jinping's line may mark an intensification of tyranny, the dominance of a self-selected oligarchy, and a violation of human liberty and the repression of the human spirit, it is not purely unmotivated malice: there are objective causes for the line's being what it is.

Xu, interestingly, seems to think that the Trump and Xi regimes are reflections of each other. But while Xi's rule, arguably (and there is much here to be argued about) is in part a revival of the Red Guard spirit of the 1960s, it is far-fetched to see Trump's rule as a revival of the 1960s counterculture: that, more aptly, would have been Obama, with Trump representing the "backlash" against that counterculture. Also, in the Xi-Trump era, America and China have in a sense changed sides. Trump's policy, for all his bluster about American military prowess, seems aimed at a stand-down from world leadership, with a preference for bilateral over multilateral relations; whereas Xi has become, for the time being, at least verbally a champion of multilateralism. And global hegemony may without too much of a stretch be considered as an aim of Xi's "China Dream."

Xu's writes in a difficult style, mixing colloquial, even vulgar, expressions with elegant literary ones. He is liberal in his use of sarcasm (advising, for example, that the regime "rehabilitate" the mass democracy movement of 1989, suppressed by military force, on the grounds that once it has been rehabilitated no one will ever think of it again, so eliminating one source of grumbling against the rulers). In places the argument does not seem to run smoothly: is this the fault of the translation? Or does Xu sometimes fall into a kind of stream-of-consciousness, his mind moving faster than his pen? The text below is probably more on the paraphrase than the translation side, and I am not always sure of the accuracy of the English rendition.]

Four Bottom Lines

So: What are the principles defining those four bottom lines?

1. Upholding Basic Public Order, Being Clear About the National Vision. In winding up years and years of "movements," ending the condition of "a monk with an

umbrella: no law, no heaven,”¹ a set of forceful repressive measures including the “strike hard” programs² have prevented the loss of order in society and maintained social peace. At the same time we have sought social harmony and to a large extent have assured the conditions for the ordinary people to live peaceful and orderly lives. This is the result of the work over the last 40 years in achieving the bottom line of building a political system with basic legality. We have also achieved a basic success in a difficult program of reform and opening with the support of tens of thousands of citizens. There do remain inevitable defects, ranging from problems of public order to problems of justice, from full employment to the provision of public goods. Also, as the times and the world change, expectations rise accordingly. However, until the time we will no longer lack high-quality commodities, there still must be bottom-line guarantees. For the ordinary people, who have experienced times of turmoil and hardship, this is always a good thing. After all, among the poorest of the people the ideal of a good life means only that they can live in peace and security, with the expectation of enjoying the minimal comforts of sufficient food and warmth; peace and quiet have top priority in their worldly aspirations. This line of talk has been the path taken by various security bureaus and the “maintaining stability” policies that they have developed;³ but these have bred new problems and have demonstrated that routine political rule is insufficient to address the source of this deadly

¹ 和尚打伞，无法无天： a folk simile (“xiehouyu”): A monk shaves his head, and so he has no hair (fa: homophonous with the word for *law*); and because he is using an umbrella, he can’t see the sky (= Heaven, the source of moral order). The statement refers to a condition of lawless chaos. Chairman Mao, in a conversation with the American writer Edgar Snow, once referred to himself as a monk with an umbrella, but Snow completely misunderstood the allusion.

² A set of programs designed to suppress violent crime, often involving the dealing out of swift summary justice.

³ “Maintaining security”—*weiwen* (維穩) is taken as the precondition for any other kind of progress; but the term has also become associated with a rationalization of arbitrary controls over people and police state methods.

infection. Nonetheless, the policy has been successful and reasonable in providing basic public order.

Yet we cannot be completely easy in that for the past 30 years, especially after the spring of 1992, the ruling party has taken economic construction as its center: “focus our minds and ambitions on seeking development; concentrate our spirit on construction.” This has not changed in over 20 years. This has been the activity of both officials and of the people through all the various rounds; ordinary citizens believe that no matter who rises and who falls, no matter who sings the starring role on the state, no matter what, the basic state policy of fostering economic growth, with full focus on national construction, will never change. The unsavory root of this expectation is that things will remain peaceful no matter what, that all will accept the basic political arrangement: You be the big-shot official and run things, and I’ll live my ordinary life; we will cooperate to see that there is overall social peace. In other words, whether it’s this dream or that dream,⁴ there will be economic and social development, with a concentration on national construction and keeping peace and quiet in society. This bottom line is the starting point for developing a morality focused on development and constitutes the ruling premise accepted by the common people.

2. Limited Respect for Private Ownership, Permission for Citizens to Pursue Wealth. We have gone from eliminating private ownership and declaring that private property is the root of all evils to a limited protection of private property, allowing citizens to pursue personal wealth. Moreover we have written the right to private property into the constitution, unleashing the common human desire to seek after wealth. This

⁴ The allusion here must be to Xi Jinping’s “China dream,” an aspiration to national greatness and the end toward which all his policies and his leadership allegedly aim.

provides a formal political welcome to the common human aspiration to live a good, beautiful life. Under these conditions, not only has the national economy achieved unprecedented growth, but has also expanded the resources available for science, education, culture, health, and national defense; especially it has greatly expanded the revenue of the Party and government. In addition, ordinary citizens have also received benefits, with the standard of living greatly elevated. This is the legal basis for the rapid growth of China's economy. It is also the economic basis for the full acceptance of the legitimacy of the political system by the entire people. After all, no matter what you mess with, don't mess with people's pocket books—an iron law. Indeed, this is a common element in all proper human societies. Our contemporary ideas of property ownership have been brought into accord with universal human nature. “To overcome chaos and return to normality” is the great rationale for “reform and opening,” a prime example of improving things by recognizing our faults.

3. Limited Toleration for the Citizenry to Live as They Choose. For several decades we did not see any growth of civil society and the few daring attempts at it were suppressed. This severely limited the ability of the citizens to acquire any mature political wisdom. There was even less of a shadow of a political society: the political sophistication of the Chinese nation was in a truly threadbare condition. However, with the basic restoration of social morality, economic society and civil society were able to begin to develop. We had civil liberty but not political liberty. Most especially the ability to participate in the market economy became a fact of life. This civil life and civil liberty mean that there are limited rights to choose our way of life in the private sphere, to eat, to drink, to come and go and shoot the breeze much as we wished, especially in matters of

family or personal style of life lacking any political implications—or at least in matters such as fashion or hairstyle that do not require personal interaction with officialdom. In comparison with the iron totalitarian rule under Mr. Mao (毛氏), where even the style of trousers was closely regulated, this allows for some relief from the role of citizen in favor of the satisfaction of daily pleasures, allowing for a return to ordinary life. It cannot be denied that this is one reason that everyone is able to tolerate the current political system. On this, the police can always latch onto any pretext to exercise control over personal life, leading to a universal sense of insecurity. They might get their way in any particular case or instance, but at the cost of the general expectations of the citizenry, so the gain is not worth the loss. Take for example Beijing's drive for municipal beautification, leading to the arbitrary closure of stores and wine shops that had served the convenience of the people, a display of "glorious politics" that is no more than an aesthetically distasteful exercise of power. Hong Kong, London, Paris, all large-scale international cities, are able to tolerate and to regulate trading on the streets. In a market economy where poverty is considered laughable but prostitution is not, where there is a plethora of obscene and stupid amusements, an affectation of coyness, where the rich and powerful can act without virtue, without understanding, without shame, where such things are considered part of the existence of ordinary people and a following of the logic of commodity, cannot but lead to the corruption of the values of ordinary people—a farce today, a cause of conflict tomorrow.

4. Term limits on political office. For the past 30 years and more, if you examine things closely, while there may have been an increase in political toleration and political diversity, there has been no meaningful change whatsoever in the overall political

structure. In its bones it's the same old rotten and cruel system of dictatorship and a fight between us and the enemy, with the addition from outside of the rapacious attitude of grabbing whatever you can. But because the constitution has set term limits on political offices, including that of State Chairman and Premier of the State Council, and has also included provisions for respect for human rights, and since 2003 has established the custom that after 10 years those in office would peacefully step down in favor of others, so that anyone can hold office at most for only two terms or for 10 years—all of this was put down in writing in the constitution and became a constitutional precedent. It has apparently taken hold as part of the general expectations. This has given the citizenry a certain sense of political security. It has also given the impression in international society that China is in the process of becoming a modern political system. One can't help saying that in the thirty years of shouting about political structure reform while the political structure in fact remains what it always was, this has been the only tangible political result. As everyone sees it, no matter who you are, you've got ten years and that's it. Gentlemen, the common people may be worthless, ordinary folk nonentities—crickets and ants—who in ordinary times toil from dawn to dusk, with no more cohesion than a pile of sand,⁵ thinking only of raising their families and having enough to keep body and soul together, basically have no way of resisting organized power. But because there is this 10 year term limit, they have the sense that there may be limits to and controls over the violence of politics, allowing them the opportunity to live normal lives and feed their families.

⁵ Sun Yat-sen famously compared the Chinese people to a pile of sand, a collection of individuals or families without any sense of social cohesion or connection with and responsibility for each other.

In summary, looking at things as a whole, the role of social control is to provide peace and security, a basic collective good in an effective manner. If this is taken to the point of a system of “maintaining stability,” in some areas to the extent of imposing conditions equivalent to martial law, this shows that conditions are already abnormal and that the potential of the system has already been exhausted and that things are awaiting the coming of a new age. The current Chinese-American trade war has exposed the weakness and our national power and the mushiness of our system and enhances the general sense of unease. The current high-sounding declaration, “Legitimate rule is not a once done and over kind of thing,” seems to show some kind of awareness of this crisis, but in recent years there has been a serious lack of sensitivity about this, while there has been a huge expansion of self-confidence. Examples include the “movement to support the poor” and “the movement to smash the black.” There has been a return to the movement style of political action, bringing into doubt once again the stability of the current system of the state. On another hand, the limited protections of private property satisfy, in a limited way, the ordinary citizens’ desire for the opportunity to enrich themselves. This not only promotes economic growth but also raises the standard of living of hundreds of millions of people. This, however, bumped up against the policy that “the state advances, the people retreat,” whereby the encroachment of public power over private property has had a malignant result on people’s actual livelihood. The notion of the sanctity of private property, a demand of the citizenry, is rejected, but the actual logic of this demand is that “power cannot be held privately, property cannot be held publicly,” the recognition of the distinction of between what is public and what belongs to the people themselves. At root, the principle is that there is a clear distinction between

the public and private, and this distinction is necessary for peace and stability. This is a basic political understanding from ancient times to the present. But what frightens people the most is the constitutional revision eliminating terms on tenure in office. This is the equivalent of negating the entire 30 and more years of reform and opening, at one stroke returning China to the terrorism of the Mao era. This has been accompanied by a ridiculous to the extreme worship of the individual leader. This has led to the following occasions for fear.

Eight Worries:

Concerning this, speaking in generalities, people's worries and fears are concentrated into the eight following types.

1. Fears about property. Will people be able to maintain the wealth they have accumulated over the past several decades, no matter how little or how much it is? Will the legal relations of property be able to obtain the proclaimed constitutional protections? Will firms or families be bankrupted because they antagonize this or that person in power (including heads of village committees)? In the past few years, concerns of this sort have become increasingly strong as the defects in the system become more clear. The leading indication of trouble is that the course of reform and opening has produced many rich and successful men, but these are matched and countered by large numbers of migrants. The ordinary person in the lower tiers of the middle class has enough to keep warm and fed, but is made anxious by what will happen in old age or in case of illness or unexpected troubles. He is especially concerned by inflation and the loss of value of money.

Naturally, the problem of the rich and the migrants is complicated. Also, in pursuit of a higher quality of life, there is a money-laundering, with the rich and powerful operating

in indifference to the law while everyone else lacks of a sense of secure property. The biggest winners in reform and opening have been the official businessmen as a powerful privileged class. There are limits to what is revealed in official sources so all sorts of stories circulate among the people. Adding to this, the official media from time to time proclaim that “the ultimate ideal of the Communist party is the elimination of private ownership.” This is accompanied by popular calls to “beat down the local bullies and divide the fields.” All of this adds to a sense of insecurity. In the midst of these fears, the top people call for the collective study of the “Communist Manifesto,” the frivolous work of two young men of genius who themselves could not achieve security in the world, leading to a sense of anxiety by the citizenry as a whole. This is the framework for a true explanation of the situation.

2. The re-emergence of politics takes command, abandoning the basic state policy of giving priority to economic development. For the past few years the smoke of ideological fireworks has grown thicker and thicker. This has been done on the pretext of fighting for the right to speak, but in fact it has served as an instrument to suppress the right to speak, giving rise to a universal sense of fear in intellectual circles. There have been a growing number of self-examinations, leading to obstacles in the publishing industry, to restrictions on anything critical in public expression, and to increased hindrances in interchanges between China and foreign circles. Children have even been urged to act as agents of official propaganda toward their parents, a violation of basic morality, whether traditional or modern. The vivid presence of this sort of totalitarian politics cannot but make people think of those past era of the vicious Cultural Revolution, a genuine memory of crime and barbarism. The result is that university teachers become implicated

in crime for what they say and arouse animosity and distrust for fear of getting into trouble with the mouthpieces for Party and state propaganda or being reported by secret agents among the students. Even worse, local bureaucrats have are afraid to take any kind of action because of political fear. But China's economic growth in fact depends upon local bureaucrats being committed to development and working earnestly toward it. On that side of things, that union of gangsters and the former "three types of persons"⁶ in the universities that propounded the "Chongqing model"⁷ has shaken itself awake and is snowballing into the "new far left," screaming for blood.

Generally, the ordinary citizen remembers the cruel "political movements" as if they happened yesterday. The new generation is immersed in urban life, and has become accustomed to an economy-centered society and an urban life and has no inclination toward or interest in a drummed up "politics takes command" or the logic of totalitarian pan-politicization; nor do they have any concern about it. In fact, for several decades those of high and low estate have been of one mind that the political system that the citizenry can tolerate is one that centers on the country's economic development, one whose whole heart and mind is focused on development, with no more daily movement-style "talking about politics." It is one that ceased to interfere in people's private lives;

⁶ "San zhong ren" (三種人): "leftists" who rose to power during the Cultural Revolution and who were purged from their positions in the early phase of the reform era. The "three kinds" are those who won fame as "rebels," whose thinking was too much influenced by the ideology of the Gang of Four (that is, radical Maoism), and who had been guilty of violence.

⁷ The Chongqing model refers to the program fostered by Bo Xilai (薄熙來) boss of Chongqing municipality from 2007 until his downfall in 2012. In the run-up to the 2012 Party Congress Bo seemed to be positioning himself to challenge Xi for the top leadership. The program was geared toward enhancing the wealth of Chongqing municipality. In pursuit of this, there was a drive to "beat the Black," that is, to crackdown on "black societies" (gangsters, "mafias," corruption generally); this was accompanied by a drive to "sing the Red" (sing "Red" songs from the early days of the revolution—a metaphor for restoring enthusiasm, patriotism, political orthodoxy). The program is also associated with Bo's easy populist style. In a way, the Chongqing model can be seen as a small-scale paradigm for Xi's nation-wide program since 2012, although Xi is not a convincing a populist as Bo.

even less does it proclaim “better the plain grass of socialism than the luxurious growth under capitalism,”⁸ that kind of pernicious nonsense. If we follow this to its end, once “economic development as the center” develops to a certain stage, it must necessarily transform itself into the development of constitutional government, so that politics and economy work together to build a modern nation, giving birth to a modern China. But if we speak of things as they are now, the minimum necessary is to preserve what we already have while planning what to do next; otherwise we are bound to regress.

3. A return to class struggle. For the past few years the official media and the functionaries managing the official ideology have mentioned class struggle a number of times. This has made everyone afraid. The style of politics for the past few years has made people wonder whether there will be revival of the Stalin-Mr. Mao Shaoshan⁹ type of class struggle. At an even deeper level, the ever-developing anti-corruption (movement), with the re-established State Inspection Commission and the limitless expansion of its powers and its incorporation of the whole body of educational functionaries, does nothing to raise people’s sense of security based upon the legal system. On the contrary, people can’t help but be reminded of the scope of powers of the KGB and possibility of a cruel inner-Party struggle, a return to those years and months of terror caused by class struggle. The citizens’ memory of the terrorist style of “struggle, struggle, struggle” makes them wonder whether this will once again become universal over the whole land. The sense of the remoteness of politics increases daily, while any

⁸ A slogan (or caricature of a slogan) used by the radical Maoists in the Cultural Revolution era. Ideological orthodoxy was upheld even at the expense of material gain, with the additional idea that material gain in itself led to corruption.

⁹ Mao Zedong, of course. Shaoshan, Hunan, is Mao’s hometown, but there seems to be no instance of his ever using the name of the town itself as a biaozi or courtesy name. Various liberal writers have in recent years taken to using this from time to time in reference to the late Chairman, although the reason for doing so remains obscure. The same kind of formula is also sometimes used of other recent leaders: Lin Huangguang (=Lin Biao); Deng Guang’an (=Deng Xiaoping), etc.

sense of harmony or happiness diminishes. Originally, the incorporation of the right to private property and to human rights into the Constitution, together with the implementation of a system of voluntary withdrawal (禪讓)¹⁰ within the Party, gave rise to hopes of a gradual approach to the condition of being a normal country. It implied that there was no longer any need to use the word “struggle.” But we have now turned our backs on that way of doing things. Naturally, we are all uneasy in our hearts.

4. Once again we are becoming a closed-off country. We find ourselves at an impasse with the western world, represented by the United States, while we have become heatedly enthusiastic about evil regimes such as North Korea’s. China’s economic maturation and social progress is the self-made progress of Chinese civilization. It follows the internal logic of a half-century’s civilizational transformation as well as the lessons gained by a backward China from the modern world system. It is not something that could have been guided by foreign forces. But on the level of concrete methods, it followed upon the adoption of Reform and Opening and the improvement of relations with the western world toward the direction of progress. The goal was to “get on the same track as the rest of the world,” taking a ride on the express train provided by the globalized market economy. Without “reform pushed by opening” we would not have today’s Chinese economy, society, or culture. Expressing warm enthusiasm for a totalitarian country like [North] Korea where one faction rises as another falls, which turns its back on public opinion and goes against the tide of history, is not wise. When people observe that the sons and daughters of a great many of those engaged in official commerce are sending their jewels and other valuables to the mountains and seas on the

¹⁰ “Chanrang,” the term used when a deposed emperor “voluntarily” ceded rule to his vanquisher.

other shore, they joke that they don't worry that the relations between the two countries will turn bad is because they secretly worry more that this so-called nation of the whole people will suddenly fall into the hands of the actual ordinary people, at which point all their wealth will vanish. This is because the interests of a political party have replaced the interests of the state and that the interests of the state have been distorted into suppression of the interests of the citizenry. There is no thought of making progress, only a concern for self-survival. Sooner or later they will fall behind the tide of the times, and what will be will be.

5. Too much foreign aid means taking the money out of people's pockets. It is said that China now gives out more foreign aid than any other country in the world, handing out cash to the tune of billions or even tens of billion. This by a still developing country with a large population, where not a few localities remain in a pre-modern condition and are unable to be self-reliant. The main reason for this is an exaggerated logic of "political glory"; but it is hard to deny the influence of a princely psychology and a sense of a need to be doing something as well. The wealth of the country, including the trillions in foreign exchange, is the result of the blood and sweat of the generations over a period of 40 years. It is the good fruit born of those working in foreign affairs and the struggles of several generations of the Chinese people. How can we just randomly squander this? We have come to the end of the age of rapid growth. This kind of policy is reminiscent of the unprincipled "support and aid Asia-Africa-Latin America" of years past, which made hundreds of millions of people have to tighten their belts, leading even to famine. We must never have this again. When the current China-US trade war broke out, the official media brought out the slogan, "Together we will overcome the troubles of these times."

This was immediately met with merciless mockery by the ordinary people. “Screw your mother—what kind of crap is that?” This clearly shows where the people’s hearts are; they are no longer so dumbly forbearing as they were in those days.

6. The policy toward intellectuals has taken a leftward turn, promoting thought reform. Although it was said long ago that intellectuals were part of the laboring people, now there is an atmosphere of treating them as outsiders, even as enemies. For those at court this has become the best kind of political parasol, as well as the expression of the low state to which the political system has fallen. The Ministry of Education has announced that it wants to strengthen the political education of teachers, and the very small remnant of the Cultural Revolution-era leftists has jumped out calling for blood. People worry that we are in the verge of a renewed thought reform movement directed at intellectuals, if not of something worse. Accusations of “wild talk” are being wielded like a big stick. Everyone falls quiet as crickets after the frost. What is there left of any freedom of speech? Without free thought and a spirit of independence there can be no exploration of new things and no scholarly progress or creative thinking. Formerly it seemed that after four decades of accumulated struggle and the good work of one or two generations, Chinese civilization would attain of a new peak of thought and scholarship. However, if this kind of policy is continued and things become ever more tense, there is no way for this hope to be realized. The Chinese nation will be a minor state with a minor civilization and spiritually isolated scholars.

7. We are falling into an intense arms race and armed conflicts, including a new cold war. In 10 short years, all of East Asia has fallen into an arms race, while the probability of being able to control the outbreak of war remains at the level it has been. This cannot

be a reason to break off China's normal scale of development, as that will destroy the possibility of achieving the final goal of the great modern transformation. During the past two years this writer has written two essays, "Preventing China From Falling into All-Out Civil War," and "Defending Reform and Opening," arguing that China is gradually adding a "war-readiness system" to the "preserving stability system." They explained the danger this posed and the need to limit their scope. With domestic tightening and intensifying conflicts over foreign trade, the possibility of an economic collapse has become more fearsome. We are moving to greater loss of the ability to control conflict or to limit their scope, pushing us into a condition of war. Whether this is a hot war or a cold war, it is not an imaginary fear (杞人憂天¹¹). The attitude in the workshops makes us aware that the trade conflict between the United States and China should not lead to an ideological conflict; even less should it move on to a conflict over political models. But there is a universal fear that this is just what is going to happen.

8. Reform and opening have come to an end, and full-scale totalitarianism is coming back. *Reform* has become a dirty word and a pretext for some bad policies. But since we are now in the midst of a great transformation that has not yet been completed but yet is waiting on the threshold, with violent tyranny and totalitarianism in retreat, reform remains the most stable and trustworthy road. Maybe reform sometimes changes nothing or is blocked or in retreat. But this is not something found only in the past few years, but has been around for a long time. As this trend continues, whether "reform and opening" come to an end and totalitarianism returns remains to be seen. At this particular time, the greatest worry of the entire citizenry is that this will be the case. During the Hu

¹¹ A proverb, from the *Liezi*: "The man from Qi [an ancient state] fears the sky is falling."

[Jin-tao]-Wen [Jiabao] era [2002-2012] there were already various signs of totalitarian tendencies. This was termed the “omnicompetent [全能] political system in the post-totalitarian era.” But in the past two years there has risen a great fear of the “full-scale return of totalitarianism.” In contemporary Chinese history the 1894 Sino-Japanese war and the War of Resistance which broke out in 1937 caused a break in China’s process of modernization. The effort in pursuit of a normal political system dissipated and China’s task of modernization ran into the wall of a cliff. We are today at the end of two centuries of great transformation, on the threshold of a new era. We cannot allow this to be thwarted by a war. If the process is broken off, there is no way to tell when this historical opportunity will come again.

Eight Expectations

At this juncture, here are eight concrete, timely suggestions. They focus on the domestic political system, not on economics or trade (including large tax cuts); nor do they address the level of democracy and legality.

1. Cut back foreign aid. Throwing away money on unnecessary foreign aid arouses the antipathy of the broad mass of the people. China is still in the early stages of development. We still need to reach basic levels of provision of welfare services. There is massive inequality. The burden is heavy and the road is long. This is not even to mention lack of care for the aged, lack of employment, and poor educational opportunities. The pressures on rural life are mountainous and need to be addressed by public authority. Otherwise, half of China will remain in a pre-modern condition: the modernization of China will remain a half-completed project. How can we talk about any civilizational revival? The China-Arab Forum has declared that 20 billion US dollars will be spent on

“rebuilding specialized planning” for the Arab countries. Also, “there are discussions of budgeting 100 million RMB in order to build capabilities for maintaining state stability.” But we know that the Gulf States are all rich in oil. Where’s the need for China, which has still not emerged from poverty itself, to take the lead in this? People can’t help but feel heartsick at this prospect—what about taking care of our own people? Some of this may have to do with “war preparations,” but it will be hard to avoid becoming mixed in with big-power aspirations for expansion. The battle line here is too far extended and the ambitions are premature. Also, there is absolutely no indication of any kind of planning system. The highest organs of state power set the constitution aside in reaching into the state treasury, with the various bureaucratic levels are deadlocked with each other. This amounts to a declaration of war on the constitution and the laws.

2. Forestall wasteful spending in foreign policy. In convening an ordinary meeting the approach is careless, with no estimate about how to fund it, putting strains on the wealth of the people. This is both useless and shameless. It’s a reach for political glory, or for political results. It is not at all any sort of power politics; nor does it have anything to do with any “excellent tradition of the Chinese people from ancient times on of treating guests with warmth.” It’s an example of scheming for glory without attaining it. Thinking along these lines, the elegant district of New York that hosts the United Nations cannot do without imposing a curfew everyday. Or Paris and Geneva, which have more international organizations than anywhere else, still have to take precautions against fire every night. A country’s structure of self-help must be built upon actual power, but the concern for morality must not be abandoned in the planning for actual power. If there are these two together, the third will appear. The citizenry will benefit and glory will come

without being sought. Without this dimension the hankering for political glory may give our tasks a certain meretricious appearance, but it will exhaust the strength of the people and arouse the contempt of others and the anger of the people. We even give a big welcome to that universally despised fat clod next door.¹² There are said to be plans that show that 1,280,000 yuan were spent at a reception to fill that little mouth with bottles of maotai.¹³ Indeed, at one stroke this alienated the minds of hundreds of millions of people. If this is the China dream—well, you’re dreaming!

3. Eliminate the aristocratic privileges of retired higher cadres. According to the structure of this dynasty, the livelihood, health care, and funeral expenses of higher cadres depend entirely on the state treasury and exceed any provisions for ordinary citizens. These provisions for livelihood, medical care, and recuperation waste the flesh and blood of the people. Everybody has seen this and heard this, but until now no one has dared to say it publicly. This shows just how shameless the whole thing is. This structure is the legacy of the feudal traditions of the “people surnamed Zhu”¹⁴ or the children of the Eight Banners.¹⁵ It violates the revolutionary spirit we used to so vaunt in and even less does it accord with the modern principle of a state based on the citizenry. When we talk about “feudal remnants,” this is a classic case. The people resent this to no end, but have no recourse. It remains as a lingering poison in the system. On this side you have ordinary people unable to get into the hospital, and on that side high cadres lounging around in luxury. Consider how the obvious differences within a single treatment facility

¹² That is, the North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un.

¹³ A high quality, high potency grain liquor, served at fancy parties, including state dinners.

¹⁴ 朱, the surname of the imperial family of the Ming dynasty (1366-1644), which I take to be the reference here.

¹⁵ Hereditary Manchu and Chinese regiments used by the Manchus in their 1644 conquest of China.

give rise to feelings of hatred. The persistence of these feelings of enmity may grow into a great storm shaking the heavens and the earth.

4. Eliminate the system of special provisions. For more than 70 years, indeed ever since the Yan'an period, even in those years when the people were starving and freezing to death, when hundreds of millions of lives were in the balance for lack of daily sustenance or milk for babies, the special provisioning system supplied those higher aristocrats who held political power in the name of the people. Among all the totalitarian systems in the world it would be hard to find anything match this, whether in scope of tyranny or shamelessness. There are different strata in society; it is natural that there should be distinctions in character, intelligence, or wealth. But all that is a consequence of how things work, not a deliberate ignoring of the ideal of the equality of all citizens. Even less should it be a matter of using the national treasury to nurture a small group of nobles. If this is not eliminated, "Rule 34"¹⁶ will prevail as always. If there is no guarantee of food security in China, there is no general security at all.

5. Bring to light the rules concerning officials' wealth. People have been calling for this for many years but nothing has happened. This shows that they include the most crafty, most invisible people there are. The current system governing the presentation of state gifts to the children of functionaries is all under internal control, contained in the dossiers of cadres; ordinary people can know nothing about it—everything is screened by a dense fog. But whether we consider human effort or material force, there are always technical methods and sooner or later these will come to maturity. The internet is such a technique, open to the inspection of 1.4 billion pairs of eyes, building a good basis for the

¹⁶ Apparently an internet meme to the effect that if something exists, there is also pornography based upon it. The application here presumably is explained in the subsequent sentence: if there is no food security, there is no security at all.

exercise of supervision. There are campaigns against corruption but corruption goes on without end, all because it is a matter handled only by insiders, not based upon the public political principle of legality. We lack a sort of sunshine law. If you were pure in heart, all your actions would be done in the broad daylight. If you were sincere about this, you would join with other countries in the international anti-money laundering Egmont Group. Why should it all remain hidden in the mountain fogs, with one billion citizens treated like idiots?

6. It is urgently necessary that the brakes be put on the “cult of the individual.” During the 40 years of reform and opening, it was unthinkable that in the Sacred Land (神州大地) there should be a revival of the cult of individual leaders. No longer would the Party media create gods, a solemnity seen in certain pre-modern totalitarian states. But portraits of the leader once more appear across the Sacred Land, hung up high, worshipped, made the subject of taboos. What’s more, whenever functionaries speak, their text is what the Secretary has written: Not only is he exalted, but he is published everywhere with his smiling face; his picture and words sent across the whole world cost-free, proliferating on sheets of paper—it’s enough to make people puke. At this time it is not enough just to reflect on why these people are so weak in wisdom and impressed by names; it is even more necessary to examine why a great country that has already suffered from this kind of viciousness, including her (as they say¹⁷) “theoreticians” and “researchers,” fails to show any kind of resistance to this—not even counting all the ass-

¹⁷ Uncertain about what is meant here. In modern colloquial Mandarin the pronouns he, she, him, her, and it are all written 他, *ta*. Sometimes a gender difference is indicated by writing *ta* with the “woman” radical, 女—i.e., 她, when a female is meant. And the country is often referred to in this feminine manner—she. I think Xu may simply be making fun of the political correctness, introducing a difference in the written form that would not exist if the sentence were spoken.

lickers. And in the meantime hundreds of millions of people are counted as nothing. How long will they tolerate this big display, patiently bearing with the bigshots reeking of horses' farts? This shows that the so-called enlightenment is a task that has not yet ended. It requires that each generation together openly make use of its rationality. Only then will we be able to make steady progress. Also, this also shows China has not yet fully entered into the world's modern secular culture. This is something we still need to struggle for.

7. Restore term limits for the State Chairman. The constitutional revision at the beginning of this year eliminating political term limits caused a sensation in world public opinion and fear and apprehension in the citizenry, giving rise to the worry that the 40 years of reform and opening could be reversed and we will all be back where we began. This piece of work is tantamount to creating a “transcendent head of state” with no clothes on¹⁸ and without anything to balance him. People cannot help but be anxious and apprehensive. Because of this, this year and next is the appropriate period of time—such as the special fall session of the National People's Congress this year or next March's full session—to pass a new constitutional amendment restoring term limits for the State Chairman, thereby protecting reform and opening and preventing a recurrence of the totalitarian politics of the Cultural Revolution. If there is an established constitution, no matter what kind it is, it should not be easy to amend back and forth. What we have is a temporary constitution for a transitional political system, and it would be best to take the occasion to improve it. Once it has been changed and has taken root, that should be the last time it will be amended.

¹⁸ Alluding to the Andersen tale, “The Emperor's New Clothes.”

8. Rehabilitate the June 4 incident.¹⁹ This year and next mark the 40th anniversary of the Reform and Opening, the 70th anniversary of the May 4 incident, and the 30th anniversary of June 4—a piling up of sensitive anniversaries. The Sino-American trade war will also continue during this time, increasing the sense that things are not settled. On this, the mentality concerning maintaining stability is to “handle politics by keeping things peaceful.” And then “keep politics under control through administrative means” is piled on top of that, rather than having a “politics embracing politics,” our usual way. One year we rehabilitated the April 5 incident. Every April 5 since then there has been no mention of that sensitive anniversary. This is politics embracing politics: there is always a solution to the problem. The result is that everyone gets what he wants and everyone is happy. Therefore, rehabilitating June 4 after the passing of 30 years would be worth it. This year or next would be the appropriate time for the authorities to rehabilitate it. This would not only show the sincerity and wisdom of politics embracing politics, but also in subsequent years it would not be necessary to take big security precautions each June 4. It would clear the account with the citizenry, allowing peaceful coexistence. It would have the advantage of comforting the people and even more toward fostering political legitimacy.

All the above items are part of the conventional understanding of modern politics. They are also the universal appeal of the citizenry. All this “daring to risk death to say what everyone already understands,” the sort of thing found in abundance everywhere in the world. But if I were not to speak like this, and did not have this standpoint, I’d have no way to continue living among the people. Alas that things have to be this way!

¹⁹ On June 4 1989 the Chinese army violently crushed the months’-long student demonstrations in Beijing and other cities calling for a more democratic political system.

The Transitional Period

In the past two years the world has entered into a small cycle of political adjustment. This is nothing to be alarmed about; it is from being a decisive change of era. It is even more necessary now to continue a healthy domestic administrative reform; only thus can we pass the test of maintaining smooth sailing and peaceful development of normal politics on this ship in the great global fleet. Conflict and war have been the tragic normal condition of humanity, but we are at a juncture in which we have the opportunity to prolong this state of affairs or to prevent its recurrence. This is the heaven-ordained role of politics. It is a great test of whether politics will be based on the wisdom of carnivores or whether it will be based on virtue. For human beings are political animals, and politics is the highest form of worldly wisdom. To speak of this particular instant, we have not yet basically transitioned into the general era of “peace and development.” But that is the historical trend, and we have reached a so-called “opportune moment.” Only by wisdom can we hope for a good outcome. We should go beyond resentment of this and resentment of that, turning what is a good hand into a losing hand.

The two great powers on the eastern and western shores of the Pacific Ocean have both entered into a time when the “old Red Guards” control the government.²⁰ This is nothing but a transitional phenomenon. At every time of historical crisis there can be a replay of the chaotic elements of the past. On this shore, those in power have no sense of history or of modern politics. Even less are they based in any sense of the self-aware morality of universal civilization and their responsibility to it. Their concern is solely

²⁰ Xi Jinping and his cronies participated in the Red Guard movement in the 1960s, although not necessarily in one of the violent groups. In the United States the 1960s are associated with the counterculture and its movements, which arguably were somewhat analogous to the Red Guards. Xu seems to think Donald Trump is a veteran of this counterculture, although, aside, perhaps, from his past attitudes towards women, this seems far-fetched.

with power, and they are sunk in the politics of the Cultural Revolution brand, full of empty arrogance toward those beneath them. They are allowed to get away with using unnecessary force, misusing it while heading in the wrong direction. Their only skill is in exercising power with an eye toward staying in office. They lack any ability to govern the country, thrashing around while heading backwards. As for the other shore, a crowd of reactionary souls who desire the old life of the great powers of the past or the politics of the cold war have taken the stage. They lack all sense of history, are short-sighted and eager for gain. They are moving in a mistaken direction, wishing a return to the days of nepotistic capitalist oligarchy and mercantilism, based on self-centered lack of concern for others. It is an arrogant bias toward imperialistic plunder and crude violence, naked lies, unconcerned about exposure. It displays the late-stage pathology of the decadent civilization of desperate empire that has been pushed into a corner. Self-aggrandizing patriotic fanaticism harms the human spirit. The so-called patriotic scoundrel²¹ is nothing new to history, whether Chinese or foreign, ancient or modern. It also shows what happens when bad people grow old. Everyone is the product of his early education and training. Afterwards, if there is no effort or no self-reflection, it becomes difficult to throw off these shackles. When old wisdom is applied to new conditions, and this is combined with overweening self-confidence, then stubborn intransigence is the result. The concepts and policies then are, as Tocqueville says, “mildewed goods.”

At this moment of time, the public attitude in the Chinese cultural sphere is toward on a growing commitment to a self-aware politics based the rationality of citizenship. There is no lack of high-minded public declarations, but few of these are based in a self-aware civilizational understanding of the state. Especially there is no clear and smooth

²¹ Referring, I suppose, to Samuel Johnson’s observation that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.

understanding of how this rationality of citizenship fits in with the rationality of state politics. It is lost in the fog of war, striking to the east and striking to the west, even to the point of admiration for the old Red Guards on the other shore, lowering themselves to the level of rednecks (鐵鏽州紅的脖子們)²². In the famous words of a famous man, it can be called pissing against a tree (土楊土尿泡).²³ At the same time, it shows the political system as unable to move and inspire, leading to lapses or weaknesses in understanding, leading to a sense of disparity between nationality and citizenship. As it is, while the “Great Qing” and “China” are intertwined, they are still not one and the same. If you live by the rivers and mountains and feed yourself by the rivers and mountains—well, the rivers and mountains are facts. But if you want everyone to “overcome together the difficulties of the times” to “protect the rivers and mountains”—isn’t this just chatter? In playing on public emotions some people, in what they say or do, whether they themselves are Chinese or not, are always trying to figure out what the other side thinks. It is really no wonder that this kind of thing undercuts the soft power of nationality that derives from psychological cohesion. What’s more, opening up debates on just what a “Chinese person” is can raise topics on which each side has something to say. The more spirited and self-righteous each side gets, the more it leads to a dead end, with no way of reaching grounds for reconciliation.²⁴ To speak more clearly about this, the political sensibility concerning nationality must be guided and trained by the wisdom of a knowledgeable elite. The

²² Note this is an American idiom, not a Chinese one.

²³ No idea who the famous man is or what he was supposed to be talking about; no confidence, either, that this is the correct translation of the Chinese phrase. 土楊 is a poplar; Google translates 土尿泡 as “earth urinary bladder.” But a 尿泡 is a bubble that appears in a stream or puddle of urine; and 泡尿 means to piss, probably in a splashy, careless manner.

²⁴ This seems to refer to the treatment of ethnic minorities in China, and most specifically to the ongoing persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang.

cultivation of such wisdom requires spiritual freedom. The noise of the crowd enchains the universal moral sense inherent in people's lives and minds. In order to get rid of all things leading to stupidity and arrogance, we must demand that the authorities no longer stop up people's mouths, but return freedom of speech to the educated. And, as the saying goes, Zichan did not destroy the village school.²⁵ Several generations have been continuously honed on the machine tool that is education in Chinese intellectual civilization, so that we are able to protect its utility, strengthen its efficacy, and thus arrive at a clear perspective where we can respond calmly to events and bring enlightenment to the world.

Looking at how things now stand, the authorities have reiterated that they will not change the basic state policy of reform and opening on account of the trade war. Nor will they waver from the need for open exchanges necessary for economic development. They are resolved to cooperate in maintaining the multilateral system. For this to happen, there must be means taken to promote opening, and these are still being implemented. This proves the validity of the Chinese style road to development by "opening forces reform"; but at the same time there seems to be no sign of an actual reform of domestic politics—lots of thunder but little rain. This cannot but lead people to lose hope and to take an uncertain attitude toward the authorities' sincerity and competence. Thus, the above eight items are addressed to the affairs of this time and require further discussion.

Let's say that you are able and willing to accept them; but of these eight items, we will be happy if you only act on one of them. If you act on three of four of them, we will

²⁵ A proverbial saying. Zichan was one of Confucius's disciples. For all his erudition, he did not look down on what could be learned in the village school.

become compliant and obedient. If you act on all of them, there will be a universal celebration in heaven.

At the beginning of the year a high official made a big deal about the celebration this year of the fortieth anniversary of reform and opening. Half a year has gone by, and I hope this will still happen—I'm waiting eagerly.²⁶

Finally, to say a word, the 40 or 50 households in Liangjiahe Village in Shaanxi²⁷ usually total to about 110 people. But they have set up a liaison office and agricultural subsidiary production hall in Shanghai. One look shows this is not the work of common rustics. Rather, it is the result of collusion between business and officialdom, playing along in harmony while each nurtures its own aims and ambitions. Also, the Supreme People's Procuratorate has set up a "12309 Procuratorial Service Center," issuing a high-level invitation to those eight invincible scorpions, together with the Liangjiahe Village branch secretary to come to the unveiling, under the protection of the supervisory system, to use the opportunity of the exhibit shamelessly to kiss ass.²⁸ As for the Shaanxi Provincial Social Science Association's program celebrating the "Great Learning of Liangjiahe," and for the similar programs by so-called social scientists consisting of movements of deification and the cult of the Leader—these are anti-modern, an adverse current, reflecting the thinking of bandits and barbarians, abandoning any sense of shame, contemptible in the eyes of all: no need to discuss these! All of this is too much, has gone

²⁶ As it happens, there was a lot of celebration of the anniversary of reform during November and December 2018. Several times at least, though, the celebrations mentioned the achievements of reform "especially since the 18th [Party] Congress" in 2012—that is, since Xi Jinping took power.

²⁷ During the waning days of the Cultural Revolution, Xi Jinping was "sent down" to the villages to "learn from the poor peasants." His assignment was to Liangjiahe. Today the village is celebrated for its role in the formation of the Leader, and the glory of the Leader reflects back on the village. To underline the obvious, Xu has contempt for this sort of thing.

²⁸ The Chinese phrase is "pat the horse's butt"—an instance where the appropriate English idiom is cruder than the Chinese.

too far, yet keeps going as if there were no limit. Leave those who tremble before that man alone in their own tyrannical world!

That's all I have to say. Life and death are determined by fate; success and failure rest with Heaven.

<http://unirule.cloud/index.php?c=article&id=4625>, for one source of the original text