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In today's China, the 20th-century German philosopher Carl Schmitt is very popular in some academic circles, especially those concerned with political philosophy. Some politically ambitious Chinese scholars and many young students, especially graduate students in elite universities, lean on Schmitt and use and appropriate his thoughts and authority as a way of constructing and spreading their own political ideas and “self-affirmations” (*Selbstbehaugung*, in Heidegger's sense) on political affairs in academic and daily discussion. In light of this, I call this situation an “academic-political reality,” that is: an academic product that has much political ambition.

Carl Schmitt and His Influence in China

Over the years, Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) has become one of the two most important foreign academic authorities and resources used by some Chinese scholars to express political claims—the other being the German-American political philosopher Leo Strauss. The translations of their surnames begin with the same Chinese character: 施 (*Shī*). Some Chinese scholars and students researching Strauss have constructed a close-knit group with obvious political goals, called 施派 (*Shī pài*), mainly meaning “the Straussian faction,” but sometimes also a Schmittian faction, as the beginnings of both their names are pronounced the same way in Chinese.

As far as I know, Schmitt's main works—at least 17 of his books—have been translated into Chinese, including *The Concept of the Political* (2004), *Political Romanticism* (2004), *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (2008), *The Guardian of the Constitution* (2008), *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought* (2012), *Ernst Junger-Carl Schmitt Briefe 1930–1983* (2014), *Legality and Legitimacy* (2015), *Political Theology* (2015), *Constitutional Theory* (2016), *Der Nomos der Erdet* (2017), *Gespraeche über die Macht und den Zugang zum Machthaber* (2023), etc. This robust catalog has been translated rapidly, in the space of no more than 20 years. Only the translations of some of the most famous Western theorists such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, have been so prolifically translated; as for Descartes, he was introduced to Chinese audiences at least 40 years ago, but only four or five of his books were translated, very early on, with nearly no new translations appearing in the last 20 years. Meanwhile, several monographs and collections of papers on Schmitt's thoughts also have been translated.

After this translation frenzy, research into and deployment of Schmitt exploded. One can find at least 143 papers and articles on Schmitt, 39 master's theses, five doctoral dissertations,¹ and several monographs and collections of papers by Chinese scholars.

Scholars of Schmitt are mainly concentrated in the most prestigious universities. Liu Xiaofeng, a professor at Renmin University of China and previously Sun Yat-sen University, born in 1956, with a Ph.D. from the University of Basel, is the most important such figure and the leader of a Schmittian faction in China. Another key figure is Gan Yang, at Tsinghua University and previously Sun Yat-sen University, Liu's friend and ally, who has a similar academic background and influence as Liu. Chen Jianhong, at Sun Yat-sen University, is also a famous researcher on Schmitt. Zhao Xudong, though at New York University, actively writes papers on Schmitt in Chinese and participates in conferences in China.

A young professor, Fang Xu, who was Liu Xiaofeng's doctoral student, wrote his dissertation on Schmitt and obtained his Ph.D. from Chongqing University, where many so-called new leftists in China gathered a decade ago; Fang Xu has also published several papers on Schmitt. Other famous professors have cited, written on, or may agree with Schmitt, such as Wang Hui at Tsinghua University (the leader of the new left), Wang Shaoguang and Qiang Shigong at Peking University, Ding Yun at Fudan University, and Jiang Qing, a leader of Chinese neo-Confucianism. Some early students of Liu Xiaofeng or other old professors mentioned above have become professors themselves and now influence their students with teachings of, and praise for, Schmitt.

Through these networks of interest and influence, we can conclude that several famous and influential professors (and many young students) are interested in Carl Schmitt and that he has a strong influence in Chinese academic circles, especially in elite universities, mostly at Sun Yat-sen and Renmin. Schmitt is used as a key intellectual resource for these Chinese scholars to express and spread their own political thoughts and intentions, a major one of which is statism.

Liu Xiaofeng's Introduction to and Research on Schmitt

Liu Xiaofeng is the intellectual leader in researching Schmitt in China; the academic-political reality mentioned above is the result of his intention and impact. In his preface to the translation of *Carl Schmitt and the Modernity of Politics* (2007), he states that "[Chinese] scholars have come to realize that researching Schmitt is very necessary for understanding the issue of the modernity of China."² In his publications and speeches, the so-called issue of the modernity of China is how to preserve the country's unique political model as different from that of the West, and how to maintain China's great-power status in international competition, especially in its competition with the United States.

In pursuit of these goals, Liu believes that Carl Schmitt can be relied on. He organized the introduction and translation of Schmitt, and is the editor-in-chief of the *Collected Works of Carl Schmitt* (Chinese version), which includes almost all the books mentioned above. Moreover, he has written many articles that use Schmitt's theories or that aim to spread Schmitt's influence. He published a book on

¹ China Knowledge National Infrastructure (CKNI), <https://oversea.cnki.net/>.

² 卡尔·施米特: *施密特与政治的现代性* [Carl Schmitt and the Modernity of Politics], 刘小枫选编, 上海: 华东师范大学出版社, 2007年, p. 2.

Schmitt titled *Homo modernus et ejus hostis*.³ His paper, “Carl Schmitt and the Predicament of Liberal Constitutionalism,” published in 1998, was probably the first introduction of Schmitt in China.⁴ He has his own institutes and great deals of money (mainly derived from individuals and institutions whose identities are unknown). He is the editor in chief of a series of books under the general title of “Classici et Commentarii”; so far, more than 600 books have been published within it, including most of the translations of and on Carl Schmitt.⁵

Liu and his followers have formed a faction in China, with obvious political goals. He influences them through his teaching, usually with some esoteric language, and instructs them to keep a distance from common people and maintain a form of intellectual and moral superiority over the latter. China is an elite-led hierarchical society based on blood, power, education, and other markers of social success. Its institutions are not run according to the principle of equality, but rather are rife with inequality in every social area. People from powerful families, groups, or classes, have absolute advantages when it comes to obtaining political positions and social capital, which ultimately serves to maintain their power, wealth, and status as high-class members of society. Social mobility in China is very low, and there is not much chance for members of the lower classes to be promoted to high-class levels of influence. Liu is keenly aware of another fact: in the near future, young generations, and especially top students graduating from famous universities like his own, will enter policymaking circles and be able to promote their own political objectives.

Political Defense: The Reasons for Liu Xiaofeng’s Appropriation of Schmitt

Many Chinese scholars and students, including some of Liu’s followers, call and describe Liu as a 国师 (*Guó shī*) in Chinese, which means “state preceptor or teacher,” or “emperor’s teacher.” I also like to use the expression of the “State’s Spiritual Führer” (with reference to Martin Heidegger’s ambition of being the spiritual leader in Germany) to translate this Chinese term and to describe his ambitions and his position as the leader of an organized academic-political faction. In Chinese history, the “emperor’s teacher” was not a pure scholar, but always the prime minister in court, usually the highest official under the emperor, and always influenced imperial policies.

There is a strong Chinese tradition, dating from antiquity and continuing to this day, for academics to have ambition for securing a high position in the court, to serve the emperor, and then to carry out their social ideal. In the Chinese tradition, we call this mindset 得君行道 (*dé jūn xíng dào*), which literally means meeting a great emperor (君, *jūn*) to serve and, under his rule, to realize the universal logic or reason (道, *dào*). Of course, other markers of worldly success were also sought after, such as

³ 刘小枫: *现代人及其敌人——公法学家施密特引论* [*Homo modernus et ejus hostis*], 北京: 华夏出版社, 2009年.

⁴ 劉小楓: “施密特與自由主義憲政理論的困境” [“Carl Schmitt and the Predicament of Liberal Constitutionalism”], *二十一世紀*, 1998年6月號, 總第47期, p. 111-118.

⁵ Under the general title “Classici et Commentarii,” Liu Xiaofeng’s institute, the Center for Classical Civilization, publishes two series of books and one journal, and it co-operates with famous presses in China, including the most prestigious, The Commercial Press, and SDX Joint Publishing Company. See the “经典与解释” (“About the Center”) page of the Center for Classical Civilization, directed by Liu Xiaofeng and housed at Renmin University of China: <http://cfcc.ruc.edu.cn/article/?id=18>.

wealth, power, reputation, and beautiful wives and girls. Liu Xiaofeng's behavior is also in keeping with this deep tradition, and Carl Schmitt's political thoughts are a useful tool for his task.

Schmitt's concept of "the political" is seemingly very similar to the ordinary understanding of this concept in China. As a rule, when discussing politics, the state is always included. As Schmitt says, "The decisive question ... concerns the relationship of ... state and politics. A doctrine which began to take shape in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, a doctrine inaugurated by Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, and Thomas Hobbes, endowed the state with an important monopoly: the European state became the sole subject of politics. Both state and politics were linked just as indivisibly as *polis* and politics in Aristotle."⁶ But in theorizing this relationship and defining both, politics and state usually define each other, which usually leads to "an unsatisfactory circle," as Schmitt put it: "In one way or another 'political' is generally juxtaposed to 'state' or at least brought into relationship with it. The state thus appears as something political, the political as something pertaining to the state—obviously an unsatisfactory circle."⁷ He investigates in politics in another way, too. At the beginning of *The Concept of the Political*, he says, "The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political."⁸ By rejecting the equation of politics with the state, he indeed makes politics or the political more fundamental than the state. According to his assertion mentioned above, "the political" stands above "the state" on a theoretical level. We can then say that the political is the fundament of the state, upon which the state with its institutions is built.

At the same time, the state, as a political entity, embodies the political and assumes its function in human society. So, on a practical level, the state is the center of politics. Schmitt says, "The political entity is by its nature the decisive entity ... If it exists, it is the supreme, that is, in the decisive case, the authoritative entity."⁹ Being political means having an essential relationship with and dealing with the state, which indeed defines and limits the reality and possibility of the political. As George Schwab, the translator of the English-language edition of *The Concept of the Political*, correctly points out, "Concretely speaking, only states, and not just any domestic or international associations, are the bearers of politics ... It thus follows that in concrete circumstances it is the prerogative of the state to define the content and course of politics."¹⁰ In this conception, the state is the final decider and arbitrator in the political arena, leaving no space for any other entity, such as religion or the individual, or any outside ideas and principles, such as justice, freedom, or love.

This view of the state is consistent with Chinese tradition and political reality. In China, the state is above all things, and anything done in the name of the state is legitimate by nature: individuals have been required to obey the state, and sacrifice everything for it. So, Schmitt's view of the state is one familiar to most Chinese people, who are used to being invited to state worship.

What is more, different from Schmitt's denial of the equation of the state with the political, a large number of Chinese citizens believe in this equation and consider being political to mean living and behaving in obedience to the government and, ultimately, to the Party's leadership.

⁶ Carl Schmitt, "The Category of the 'Political,'" p. 23–24, in *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 6.

⁷ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 20.

⁸ Schmitt, p. 19.

⁹ Schmitt, p. 44.

¹⁰ George Schwab, ed., "Introduction," in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 6–7.

Like Schmitt, Chairman Mao Zedong also considered combat, both physical and intellectual, to be existential. Mao even had his own version of Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction: "Who is our enemy, and who is our friend, this question is the primary question for the revolution,"¹¹ a phrase repeatedly cited by Chinese people of all kinds. He also had another famous sentence with which the Chinese are familiar, and which they cite and follow: "Whatever the enemy opposes, we will support; whatever the enemy supports, we will oppose."¹² In this sense, the Chinese believe that combat with the enemy is about existence itself, and they describe it as 你死我活 (*nǐ sǐ wǒ huó*, literally meaning "you die, I live"). Thus, it is imperative that the enemy is not just defeated, but *destroyed*. Mao exists in China as something like a god,¹³ and Liu intentionally uses Schmitt—whose political thoughts and discourses resemble Mao's—in order for his own ideas to be accepted more easily. Liu also frequently cites Mao's words and key experiences in lectures and articles, even raising his famous "theory of the state's [founding] father" to give Mao the title and unique position of "The Father of China."¹⁴

Liu usually uses China's invasion of the Korean Peninsula during the Korean War as an ideal-typical and successful case of engaging in combat with a strong enemy to express his deep belief in combat and admiration for Chairman Mao, and to encourage his audience to make ready for battle with all China's enemies. On May 13, 2010, he gave a highly-publicized and controversial lecture on the Korean War at the prestigious Fudan University. He said that, from a political perspective, China did not admit its failure in the Korean War. In contrast (again, from a political perspective), he believed China won the war and listed what China obtained in that war as his reasons. He said that, at that moment, China was facing a challenge to its political and social system amid unprecedented changes in the international order. However, by fighting in the war, China established itself firmly and could participate in the international order, and in the future could compete with the US at the institutional level, with China's political and social system under control. In particular, he appreciated that Chairman Mao showed his international consciousness by fighting in the war, and China showed its inclination to fight with the US.

Schmitt's conservative and authoritarian conception of politics, particularly his theories of sovereignty, exception, and decision-making, are also perfect aids for Liu's political arguments. According to a simplified understanding of Schmitt's theories, a state needs a strong and authoritarian leader with absolute power, one who stands above the people but is also the real and unique representative of the state and its people, making judgements and taking action by his own decision and will on their behalf. He makes laws and rules for the state and the people, but of course he does not have to abide by them himself. So, he is also above the law and beyond its reach, because he is the

¹¹ Author's translation.

¹² Author's translation. These two sentences are very famous and popular in China, so I just cite them and offer the original Chinese versions without giving exact reference. "谁是我们的敌人, 谁是我们的朋友? 这个问题是革命的首要问题。" "凡是敌人反对的, 我们就要拥护; 凡是敌人拥护的, 我们就要反对。"

¹³ Chairman Mao Zedong is respected and worshiped by Chinese people in general as a deity in China, and the place he holds in Chinese society is considered sacrosanct. He is regarded as the incarnation of greatness, benevolence, truth, power, and justice. He is also believed in and appreciated as the savior of China and the Chinese people. Any challenge to or criticism of this status of his is treated as blasphemy, and will be attacked heavily. No other leader of the CCP or China holds such a deified position as he does. But, anyway, in Chinese understanding, this does not mean Chinese people consider him as the creator of the world like the Judeo-Christian conception of Almighty God, or in other monotheistic religions, because usually the idea of creation in our religious life or secular life is not clear or deep, outside of the Judeo-Christian or Abrahamic traditions.

¹⁴ 刘小枫: "如何认识百年共和的历史意义," *开放时代*, 2013年第5期, p. 193.

law *per se*, as the ultimate origin of all laws and rules. He also can change the law and rules at his own will. Any “exception” to the law or rules is just an exception for him: as an authoritarian leader, he has the right to do anything he wants, and there is no demarcation between a normal state of affairs and an exception.

Here also these arguments fit easily into the Chinese political tradition. Sovereignty and exception always justify political leaders’ actions, even exempting them from being subject to the rule of law and respect for human rights. Liu has even proclaimed the necessity and reasonability of dictatorship and despotism, in the name of Schmitt. He has declared, for instance, that:

liberalism begins from protecting individual rights and freedom to determine the nature of the state, which shows it doesn’t know the nature of the state. When know it, it is easy to understand the necessity and reasonability of dictatorship and despotism. Because in the state of exception political decision is only made by an individual who has absolute sovereignty, the political homogeneity and the ruler’s despotism is necessary.¹⁵

Attack on the West

One of Liu’s primary goals is to denigrate and discredit the West. He criticizes Western thoughts and states by using propagandistic terms, frivolous words, and hateful expressions—all meant to induce a hateful consciousness in his readers and audience. He blames the West for the “degraded soul,” “shortage of virtues,” and “hegemony,” terms he repeats frequently. In his preface to the collected papers of Leo Strauss for which he served as editor, *Western Democracy and the Crisis of Civilization: A Leo Strauss Reader*, by putting Strauss’ words in Liu’s own mouth, he criticizes the West again as usual with his usual bag of clichés.¹⁶ The terms and stories he uses in academic papers, courses, and lectures are taught to every Chinese person from kindergarten through primary school, as well as in daily life, through cartoons for children, television, film and literature, education, and even computer games such as *The Eight-Power Allied Forces*, *Burning of the Imperial Palace*, and *Resisting US Aggression and Aiding Korea*.

In this respect, Schmitt’s illiberal position helps Liu Xiaofeng uses it again as a powerful theoretical weapon with which to attack the West. Though the West consists of many different states, nations, populations, traditions, cultures, and languages, every state having its own unique features, and although there are complicated connections, even conflicts, among these dozens of states, in China we indeed use very few terms—“democratic,” “liberal,” “bourgeois,” “parliamentary,” and “capitalist”—to describe the West.¹⁷ Usually, we just say “the libertarian and democratic West” as the simplest and

¹⁵ 刘小枫: “施密特与政治哲学的现代性,” *浙江学刊*, 2001年第3期, p. 22.

¹⁶ 施特劳斯: *西方民主与文明危机: 施特劳斯读本* [*Home modernus et ejus hostis*], 刘小枫选编, 北京: 华夏出版社, 2018年, p. 2.

¹⁷ Chinese people believe that “the West” is and behaves as a single entity. Though it encompasses a set of more than 30 states (and sometimes even Japan and South Korea in the east—though not Russia, since it is an ally of China’s), the West is always seen in Chinese eyes as making decisions and taking action as if it were a single state. All the states in the West are viewed as having the same set of social institutions and just one Western

most general term of reference. Therefore, besides his criticism of democracy, Schmitt's illiberalism becomes Liu's resource for attacking the West—explaining that even Western authors like Schmitt have declared the West's failure. In Liu Xiaofeng's words, as he said in a paper on Strauss, the modern Western political philosophy is actually to debase philosophy itself, along with human development—one reason for which China should maintain a cautious attitude toward the theoretical basis of the Western cultural and educational systems.¹⁸ Therefore, it is not strange to see that he even has attributed responsibility for the Cultural Revolution to the West: “if we want to find out who bears responsibility for the idea of the [Chinese] Cultural Revolution, in the end we will find that the ideas of the Western Enlightenment are to blame for this problem.”¹⁹

The Longevity of Chinese Empire

Finally, behind the use of Schmitt in China one can find the dream of the longevity of Chinese Empire (中华帝国: *zhōng huá dì guó*). A great empire is a strong tradition and real dream today for many Chinese, who are nostalgic for a Chinese Middle Kingdom globally recognized as being the center of the world, with vassal states around it, and setting the rules of the international order.

In the Chinese understanding, “empire” implies universalism (homogeneity and sameness within the empire, for everyone and every activity and in every area, without exception), and it makes rules and laws both for its people and for the world. From this perspective it is easy to understand why China usually does not agree with nor accept international law and the so-called rules-based international order. The key point is that all of the international laws, regulations, rules, and order are established by the West, as the heritage and outcome of the Westphalian system, and China believes it was left out of the process of shaping these.

Empire is very popular in China, both rhetorically as well as in imagery. Many television programs, films, and works of literature on Chinese empire have been produced which not only common people, but also many so-called intellectuals and college students, love very much. Within this tradition and situation, Liu Xiaofeng and several other influential scholars such as Gan Yang (of Tsinghua University), Zhao Tingyang (of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), Li Meng (of Peking University), Jiang Qing (a well-connected, independent neo-Confucian scholar), and Ding Yun (of Fudan University), are eager to develop and express the Chinese Empire Ideal and Dream.

Zhao Tingyang has even developed his own “Theory of the Tianxia (天下) System,” published several books which have been translated into European languages, and given several presentations in Europe. 天下 (*Tiān Xià*) is a typical Chinese word which expresses the imperial ideal. Literally, 天 (*Tiān*) means “heaven” or “sky,” while 下 (*Xià*) means “under”; the compound word 天下 means “the

culture (that is, capitalism), whose specific embodiments are Christianity, democracy and parliamentarism, etc. In particular, the US is the sole leader and decision-maker in the West, and all other Western states are the US's followers and have no independence. In fact, from the perspective of social and political frameworks, Chinese people assume that all Western states relate to each other in the same way as the similar number of provinces of China relate to each other. There is no politically, culturally, and socially essential difference among the 34 provinces in China: all the 34 provinces are supposed to have one united voice—therefore, the nations of the West are expected to be the same, and all Western states to have one and the same voice.

¹⁸ 刘小枫: “施特劳斯与中国: 古典心性的相逢,” *思想战线*, 2009年第2期, 第35卷, p. 63, 65.

¹⁹ 刘小枫: “如何认识百年共和的历史意义,” *开放时代*, 2013年第5期, p. 193.

world,” and in ancient China, Chinese people considered the Chinese Empire to be the center of the world, more civilized than all other nations and countries. These professors are powerful in Chinese academic circles: most of them are or were deans of departments or colleges of philosophy, of religion, of social sciences, or directors of various institutes. They use their teaching, publications, and power to spread the Chinese Empire Ideal and Dream. To paraphrase former US President Donald Trump, one could say that their ideal and dream can be summed up as: “Make China An Empire Again” (MCAEA).

In China today, Carl Schmitt’s popularity is increasing in academic circles and has begun to spread beyond elite universities to reach common universities. This is the result of the pragmatic and political use of Schmitt and his thought by Liu Xiaofeng and other Schmittian scholars. Though not formally appointed by the authorities to such a position, Liu Xiaofeng has nonetheless informally taken on the role of “State Spiritual Führer” and uses Schmitt to promote China as the center of the international system—an empire, and an authoritarian regime that citizens of the world should obey and worship.