The Irony of Humanism: How China's Authoritarianism Works Through the Humanly Mundane

Guangtian Ha, **Department of Anthropology, Columbia University**

Abstract: "We are all human, no?" This is what I heard most often among those who had been detained, harassed, or interrogated by the secret police in China. In the accounts of people who we usually consider to be victims, a reversal of roles is commonplace: the police, instead of being described as perpetrators, instead play the role of victims. This article therefore asks: In what way might this imaginary reversal actually make sense? What are the concrete social conditions that have produced this strange inversion? This article begins by laying out two influential theories of the state, both of which are contrasted with more mainstream liberal-constitutional approaches: Foucault's critique of state phobia and Schmitt's conceptualization of the "total state." This article argues that neither of these theories is adequate in addressing the questions at hand. The article then moves to a structuralist discussion of the "exchange" that happens between the police and the policed. By examining the exchange of words and manners and gifts and favors, this article shows how exchange as a structural relation has rendered "good" police who practice generosity instead of bullying "truly and concretely human," and how the recipient of this generosity would be a "social outcast" (not a political dissident) if he or she refuses to "help." This leads to the key questions of this essay: how can we conceptualize the relationship between the social and the political in contemporary China? And how can we re-situate the authoritarian rule of Chinese Communist Party in light of this relationship?

Keywords: humanism, ideology, police, authoritarianism, politics, China

Introduction

I met Jacob in the heyday of the Arab Spring, at a time when the Chinese police were all out extinguishing sparkles of political dissents fermenting in the face of democratic movements sweeping across the Middle East. Talks of a "Chinese Jasmine Revolution" were pervasive on the web, and updates on non-violent political gatherings secretly circulated via text messages. At such sensitive times, Jacob's small bookshop had to remain closed: he was a Christian, and a well-connected one at that. His bookshop, and the cozy Immanuel Café downstairs, was a place where local Christians, college students and interested Western priests would drop by and enjoy casual socializing. Whenever the atmosphere was tense, he would receive a notice from the local police requesting a temporary close-down. It would be a matter of days, occasionally weeks, before he could re-open his small business.

I was attracted to Jacob's optimism and amazed by his perseverance in spite of crushing adversities in life: struck by poliomyelitis when he was still a toddler, Jacob had to depend upon a wheelchair for daily movements. But he could drive, and he enjoyed driving. He was the headmaster of a lovely kindergarten, located on the same floor with his bookshop. When the weather was good, he would occasionally drive the kids for museum visits or park outings. By the time I met him, he had been experimenting for several months with a new computer software for the teaching of English. "We are doing perfect," he told me with a smile, "way better than

where the public education is now heading." Jacob had a grander plan: he wanted to open his own private school, he wanted to save more innocent souls.

But I was more interested in how he fared with the frequent police visits. Annoying as they are, you have to learn to live with them, alongside them, treat them as a "normal" part of your life—"their presence not exception but rule," as I had been told.

> The police visit my place almost regularly — they used to come every day, and now they drop by two or three times a week. During bad times — for example, when the crackdown on Falung Gong was in full swing — I am often ordered to close down the book store and the café temporarily. They are especially sensitive to the presence of foreigners. And of course, the Christian religion is always a pain in the ass.

He laughed, and then continued,

> There is this man — I think he is specifically in charge of monitoring me. At first, he would come by for interrogation. But when this turned into something regular, there was simply not much to interrogate. So he would drop by, look around, have some casual talks with me, and then left. As time went by, he became tired of the job and somewhat of a friend. And now when he comes, he will say 'I like to hear you speak — you know so much more than I do about what is happening out there. Talk to me, I need a break from the lies.' So I just talk to him, like to a suffering old friend.

He laughed again, laying back in his wheelchair, and then said, with a witty smile, "You know, they know this won't last. They know it better than we do. They are fed up as well. They are human, just like us. We are all human, no?" It is this last comment that forms the core of this essay: What does it mean to treat the police, the oppressive power that has become almost a "normal" component of daily life, as purely and simply human, as people no different from "us" the oppressed? Why does there seem to be an odd reversal of roles, when the police, instead of being perpetrators, start to take up the role of the victim, and this, in the account of those like Jacob whom we usually consider to be victims? Is the concept of oppression or coercion still adequate in explaining such humanizing gesture? Would it be possible to think about the authoritarian Chinese state in a way that treats it neither as a gigantic Leviathan, a huge impersonal machine that feeds upon the flesh of the suppressed, nor as a quantitative collection of institutions, regulations, and "really human" individuals who enforce the rules of the state and represent it to the ruled? What if humanism, i. e. the thought that both the oppressor and the oppressed are equally human, that both are actually existing individuals who have to work their job in order to earn a living for their family, that a warm mutual understanding and an unspoken emotional bonding — however tenuous — is a necessity for human survival and the essence of humanity in general, does not provide an alternative story hidden under the manifest narrative of police violence and brutal suppression as much as bolsters an ideology that works *for* the authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)? How can humanism play the role of an ideology? What will the "state" become when it is perceived through this ideology of humanism?

I will start by laying out two influential theories of the state, both of which are set in contrast to the ordinary liberal constitutional understanding, and both bear a special historical

relation to the politics of "actually existing socialism" and the rethinking of the Marxist tradition in the 20th century: Foucault's critique of state phobia by way of his conceptualization of "governmentality" or "biopolitics," and Carl Schmitt's definition of the state (the "total state") as the institution that condenses the political, and which by definition penetrates the social. But neither, as I will later demonstrate, can offer adequate explanation for the political function fulfilled by the ideology of humanism. By recounting a remarkable scenario from my fieldwork, I will then focus on the structure that produces this humanist ideology, a structure that harks back to the classical anthropological theory of exchange conceptualized — but not "observed" — first by Marcel Mauss, then developed by Lévi-Strauss. I am particularly interested in the often overlooked aspect of "exchange" that happens between the police and the policed: the exchange of words and manners, gifts and favors. We will look at how relations of exchange are meticulously and differentially sustained by both sides; how exchange as a structural relation produces not *hau* that inheres in the object given (see the discussion of Mauss below), but the "generosity" of the man who gives; how the fact that police are supposed to bully (that they are bullies is "normal") has rendered good police "truly and concretely human"; and how one would be a "social outcast" — instead of a political dissident — if one refuses to "help." Are we observing a de-politicization or a different form of politics altogether? How can we re-conceptualize the relationship between the social and the political in an authoritarian regime such as the (post-) socialist China?

Two Theories of State: Michel Foucault and Carl Schmitt

Strictly speaking, Foucault does not have a theory of the state; neither does he subscribe to a one-dimensional definition of politics. He is indeed interested in what he calls "biopolitics," but he has never subsumed all modern forms of politics under the singular category of biopolitics or biopower. In the final session of his lecture on biopolitics on April 4, 1979, he said,

> You can see that in the modern world, in the world we have known since the nineteenth century, a series of governmental rationalities overlap, lean on each other, challenge each other, and struggle with each other: art of government according to truth, art of government according to the rationality of the sovereign state, and art of government according to the rationality of economic agents, and more generally, according to the rationality of the governed themselves. And it is all these different arts of government, all these different types of ways of calculating, rationalizing, and regulating the art of government which, overlapping each other, broadly speaking constitute the object of political debate from the nineteenth century. What is politics, in the end, if not both the interplay of these different arts of government with their different reference points and the debate to which these different arts of government give rise? It seems to me that it is here that politics is born. (Foucault, Senellart, & Collège de France. 2008: 313)

Biopolitics is not simply the placement of biological life under the auspices of politics; it does not emerge at the moment when the state starts to care for the life of its citizen-subjects. Such a general definition misses the crucial point that Foucault highlights in his definition of biopolitics: it is not merely what is cared for that matters, but the particular mode in which care is given and the shape of the cared-for object that emerges because of such mode of care. The object that receives the biopolitical mode of care, or more precisely, the object that is *created* by

such mode of care, is not individual body, nor life defined generally, but the life of the human as a "species," as a *population*.(Foucault, Senellart, Ewald, & Fontana 2007) Statistics, therefore, is *the* science of the state; it is, after all, statist-ics, defined as a "political science" by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Population is not the quantitative sum-total of all people that reside in a country, but a qualitatively distinct object made visible through the lens of the new human sciences. A governmental intervention in the mode of biopolitics does not work directly upon the bodies of the subjects. It works on the population, on the market, on the plane fundamentally different from and above the "ground-level." Foucault's study of the historical rise of bio-power, therefore, cannot be separated from his earlier archeological study of the human sciences in *The Order of Things*[1](Foucault 1973).

Foucault addressed explicitly what he called "state-phobia" on January 31, 1979 in his lecture on biopolitics. After quoting Bernard Berenson's remark that he was more fearful of the invasion of humanity by the state than of the destruction of the world by the atomic bomb, Foucault said,

> This state-phobia runs through many contemporary themes and has undoubtedly been sustained by many sources for a long time: the Soviet experience of the 1920s, the German experience of Nazism, English post-war planning, and so on. The phobia has also had many agents and promoters, from economics professors inspired by Austrian neo-marginalism, to political exiles who, from 1920, 1925 have certainly played a major role in the formation of contemporary political consciousness, and a role that perhaps has not been studied closely. An entire political history of exile could be written, or a history of political exile and its ideological, theoretical, and practical effects. Political exile at the end of the nineteenth century was certainly one of the major agents of the spread of socialism, and I think twentieth century political exile, or political dissidence, has also been a significant agent of the spread of what could be called anti-statism, or state-phobia (Foucault et al. 2008: 76).

Foucault does not counter this state-phobia by proposing a different theory of the state. In fact, he prefers to do "without a theory of the state." He does not deny the presence and actual effects of state mechanism, but he does not start from a "deductive" point of view. He is instead interested in the "identification of the general, piecemeal, but continuous takeover by the state of a number of practices, ways of doing things, and, if you like, governmentalities. The problem of bringing under state control, of 'statification' (*étatisation*) is at the heart of the questions I have tried to address" (Foucault et al. 2008: 77). If state-phobia bears a special historical affinity to the specters of socialism and the accompanying fear, Foucault's interest in the étatisation of a series of practices and "governmentalities" cannot be located within the traditional distinction between capitalism and socialism. That a "socialist governmentality" cannot be deduced from the socialist texts, that it must therefore be invented anew or reformulated from the (neo-)liberal governmentalities, testifies to this (Foucault et al. 2008: 94). For Foucault, the state does not have an essence; it is "not a universal nor in itself an autonomous source of power."

> The state has no heart, as we well know, but not just in the sense that it has no feelings, either good or bad, but it has no heart in the sense that it has no interior. The state is nothing else but the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities (Foucault et al. 2008: 77)

In other words, Foucault argues that state-phobia is an illusion, an anxiety that should be dissipated by seeing the state not as an entity but as a gradual statist collectivization of the new arts of government, of multiple "governmentalities." There is nothing to be feared, nothing sublime, since the Leviathan is nothing but a quantitative collection of ways of doing things, a manual of practical knowledge and a set of mechanisms for operationalizing governmental how-tos. But we should note that Foucault is still not proposing a general theory of state; he is not even arguing that the modern state, the state in the 20th century, is exclusively a regime of multiple governmentalities. He is conceptualizing a primarily new and modern form that the state assumes after the rise of the political economy, and he never denies that sovereignty is still a key feature of modern statehood, that sovereign power still has a role to play in modern politics. In other words, he is not arguing against the view that sovereignty is still one essential — although not exclusive — character of the modern state; he argues for a new dimension that it incorporates in the modern times in addition to the age-old sovereign power. Foucault re-directs the study of the modern state towards what he calls "governmentality," but he does not provide and is not interested in providing a rigorous concept of sovereignty itself.

It is Carl Schmitt who gives back to the concepts of sovereignty and the political their particular conceptual rigor, in a way that is markedly different from the Kantian position of Hannah Arendt. In the same way that Foucault theorizes "govermentality" as a historical formation that the modern state gradually assumed in the age of political economy, Schmitt's definition of the political is equally derived from a historical hindsight. He does not deny the historical validity of the tautological equation "state=politics," but he confines the truthfulness of such a definition within a particular historical epoch: "[T]he general definitions of the political which contain nothing more than additional references to the state are understandable and to that extent also intellectually justifiable for as long as the state is truly a clear and unequivocal entity confronting nonpolitical groups and affairs — in other words, for as long as the state possesses the monopoly on politics. That was the case where the state had either (as in the eighteenth century) not recognized society as an antithetical force or, at least (as in Germany in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth), stood above society as a stable and distinct force."(Schmitt, 1976, pp. 22) In other words, the equation state=politics can no longer hold when it so happens that state and society interpenetrate each other, and when the political is dispersed across the civil society and everything is turned potentially political. The identity of state and society, however, does not mean the dissolution of the state. Quite the contrary, it means a sweeping étatization of society. For Schmitt, there is a critical difference — even a fundamental incompatibility — between liberal constitutionalism and democracy to the extent that a truly democratic state necessarily cannot be a liberal constitutional state of the John-Locke kind.

> Democracy must do away with all the typical distinctions and depoliticizations characteristic of the liberal nineteenth century, also with those corresponding to nineteenth century antitheses and divisions pertaining to the state-society (political against social) contrast… (Schmitt 1976: 23)

The interpenetration of state and society brings about a "total state." A total state is not, as it might sound to be, a "totalitarian state" that depends upon the formation of a "classless society" which is, more precisely, a dissolution of sociality altogether(see also Arendt, 1973). Neither is it a Hegelian universal state characterized by its distinction from and position above society. A total state is a polemical negation of the neutral state, that is, the state whose economy and law

are in themselves non-political. "In actuality, it is the total state which no longer knows anything absolutely non-political, the state which must do away with the depoliticization of the nineteenth century and which in particular puts an end to the principle that the apolitical economy is independent of the state and that the state is apart from the economy."(Schmitt 1976: 25) Taken out of context, especially when one suspends the precise definition of the political that Schmitt would subsequently propose, this quote can well be used to support Foucault's study of the German origin of post-war neoliberalism whose major difference with laissez-faire capitalism is precisely the argument that state intervention in the economic domain is a necessity for the operation of the market itself. In other words, politics (defined still in term of its exclusive relation to the state) is not external to economy, but the intrinsic condition of it.

This apparent analogy, however, comes to the wall the moment we grasp the Schmittian definition of the political which is fundamentally at odds with the Foucauldian notion. For Schmitt, the only properly political distinction to which all political actions and motives can be reduced is the distinction between friend and enemy. According to him, such a distinction is by definition unpredictable and cannot be determined by any ready-made standards or preformed criteria. It denotes "the utmost degree of intensity" of a union or a separation, and "it can exist theoretically and practically, without having simultaneously to draw upon all those moral, aesthetic, economic, or other distinctions." The enemy is a "stranger," and "it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specifically intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party."(Schmitt, 1976, pp. 26-7) An "existential" confrontation is a borderline case, an exceptional conflict that obtains an utmost intensity and a specific concreteness because of its exceptional status. There is no and cannot be a "third party" that presides over a political antagonism; no one, except those who are the actual participants within the confrontation, is on the position to make the correct judgment. In contrast to the moral, the ethical, the religious, or the economic, all of which are supposed to bear a substantial content and can therefore be recognized and identified positively, the political by definition has no substance. It can derive its energy from these different domains, but it is irreducible to each. It has no substance, but only describes the intensity of an association or a dissociation. A religious community, for example, crosses the threshold of the political and becomes a fundamentally political — instead of religious — community at the moment when it wages wars against another religious community. The utmost intensity of the political, in other words, bears a special transformative function that comes close to that observed in alchemy. The class struggle between the capitalists and the wage laborers in the age of industrial capitalism, for instance, is not an economic conflict, but a political antagonism between two existentially contradictory peoples. The state, as long as it is a political entity in the Schmittian sense, is always the decisive entity, since a true decision, an authentic decision that is defined primarily by a pure eventfulness, resides only in the space from which every last residue of positive substance or knowable content is purged. The moment of the political is necessarily the state of exception. The sovereign power of the state — a democratic state in the Schmittian sense — lies in its nature as a fundamentally political entity.

> However one may look at it, in the orientation toward the possible extreme case of an actual battle against a real enemy, the political entity is essential, and it is the decisive entity for the friend-or-enemy grouping; and in this (and not in any kind of absolutist sense), it is sovereign. Otherwise, the political entity is nonexistent (Schmitt 1976: 39).

In other words, the sovereign power of the state is not an absolutist power, nor an authoritarian power. Schmitt does not submit to the commonplace juristic view of the state as "omnipotent," which, according to him, is the product of "superficial secularizations of theological formulas of the omnipotence of God."(Schmitt 1976: 42; see also Schmitt 1985) As a matter of fact, one can even argue that democracy is a necessary condition for the political in the first place, that an authoritarian state is intrinsically excluded from politics. A true state of emergency is by nature revolutionary; a false state of exception declared by an authoritarian regime, on the other hand, is intended precisely to evade the advent of the authentic revolutionary state of emergency. Slavoj Žižek shrewdly seizes upon this critical point in his political commentary in 2002 on the "war on terror:"

> When a state institution proclaims a state of emergency, it does so by definition as part of a desperate strategy to *avoid* the true emergency and return to the 'normal course of things'. It is, you will recall, a feature of all reactionary proclamations of a 'state of emergency' that they were directed against popular unrest ('confusion') and presented as a resolve to restore normalcy. In Argentina, in Brazil, in Greece, in Chile, in Turkey, the military who proclaimed a state of emergency did so in order to curb the 'chaos' of overall politicization. In short, reactionary proclamations of a state of emergency are in actuality a desperate defense against the real state of emergency (Žižek 2002).

Schmitt, therefore, is within the same German philosophical tradition as Hegel and Marx. His concept of the political can be seen as a re-working of the critical notion of negativity. The moment of the political, to use a Hegelian term, is the moment when all other domains — the economic, the religious, the moral, etc. — reach the point of their ultimate objectivity and absolute concreteness. For Schmitt, the Hegelian philosophy in general and his "dialectics of concrete thinking" (the transformation between the quantitative and the qualitative) in particular are political through and through: "Hegel…remains everywhere political in the decisive sense."(Schmitt 1976: 62)

Neither Foucault nor Schmitt provides conceptual tools for thinking about what we usually know by the name of "authoritarianism." And perhaps this is not coincidental. "Authoritarianism" *describes* instead of *conceptualizes* a particular mode in exercising political — more precisely executive or administrative — power. "Authority" is set against "freedom," and this simple contrast makes sense only within the classical liberal constitutional framework. In other words, authoritarianism is conceptually located within liberal constitutionalism and designates a specific "deviation" from the "norm" of classical liberalism. That this term is widely used to depict fundamentally different political regimes (e.g. Turkey and China) only reveals the conceptual void that inheres in it. A political analysis that is based upon such an intrinsically constricting descriptive concept often has to grapple with an ironic fact: that despite all appearances to the contrary, what is usually the case is that one could hardly find within an authoritarian regime a true "source" from which alone power emanates. Facts are always multi-dimensional, power struggles always mutually restrictive. Richard McGregor, for example, aptly showed in his work on the internal politics of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) how an ostentatiously unified and authoritarian Party is internally divided and conflicts between different factions sometimes go beyond simple interest-seeking competitions and elevate into real ideological contradictions[2] (McGregor 2010). One would also have to come to terms with the oft-repeated truism that authoritarianism is always pliant and "adaptive," that it seems to possess

a flexibility hardly matched by more "democratic" regimes whose efficient operation is often obstructed by the separation and mutual restriction of the legislative, the executive and the judiciary powers. The recent work of Elizabeth Perry, a Harvard political scientist, for example, showed that the authoritarian rule of the CCP is much less rigid than previously imagined by political analysts, and that a multitude of "adaptive" measures and special working methods (e.g. controlled experiments and the setting up of exemplary models for emulation) were adopted throughout its history of governance.(Heilmann & Perry 2011) The point is that authoritarianism as a concept is little more than a straw man: it has to presuppose a liberal "norm" and is simply the inverted — hence "distorted" — mirror image of it.

Both Foucault's "governmentality" and Schmitt's "political" are concepts outside the classical liberal framework; both, therefore, obtain their conceptual rigor in a space where "authoritarianism" does not and cannot emerge. The division of state and society, of politics and economy, does not make sense in either, although according to entirely different logics. "Governmentality" presupposes an active state maneuvering which sustains the operation of the market and the reproduction of the society. The Schmittian political, on the other hand, necessarily brings about a decisively "total state," which is a radically democratic state. It's the liberal constitutional state that is in effect more threatened by the degeneration into either a totalitarian or an authoritarian state. A modern state that typifies the Foucauldian govermentality could well be an authoritarian state (e.g. China in its governance of state economy); but an authoritarian state must necessarily evade the moment of the political at all cost. An authoritarian "politics" is not and cannot be a real politics. In other words, in order for an authoritarian rule to reproduce itself, the point where an alchemic transformation happens which elevates the social, the religious, the moral, the cultural, or the economic to the revolutionary boiling point of the political must be avoided; the qualitative must always be reduced to the quantitative. The extraordinary must be returned back to the ordinary, the sublime apparently abated and re-directed to the mundane and the everyday. Put differently, and again to follow Schmitt to the end, it is precisely the everyday, the profane, the apparently banal and non-political that is paradoxically the least recognized location where real politics is fanned out in an authoritarian regime. Perhaps the very secret of authoritarian "politics," its mysterious tenacity, lies not merely in its behind-the-curtain Politburos, classified documents, or awe-inspiring military might. It is also sustained by its capillary manipulations in the commonplace, by the particular way it intervenes in and even parasitizes on the "social." It is to this critical yet inadequately recognized dimension of the authoritarian rule that we now turn.

Good Police, Bad Police: Between Exchange and Coercion

I first met Majun in 2008, when I traveled to China's Yunnan Province for a pre-field visit. He was a newly graduated Ph. D at that time, shortly after receiving his doctoral degree in philosophy from Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. He belongs to the Hui, one of the ten officially recognized Muslim minorities in China. Given the fact that very few Hui—due to either their religious faith or economic marginalization—could actually make it to the top of China's intellectual hierarchy, and that even fewer among those who could major in humanities, his philosophical training immediately earned him respect among Hui Muslim intellectuals. When I met him in Yunnan, he was one of the honorary guest speakers in an Islamic summer school for college students organized entirely by the local Hui and funded by wealthy Muslim businessmen.

I didn't get to meet him again well until I went on fieldwork in China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in 2011. By that time, he was already a tenured professor at Ningxia University and vice chair of the School of Law and Politics. What is even more surprising is the fact that he was at the same time his school's General Secretary of the Party Committee. Three years, from a PhD graduate to an established tenured professor, and a Party chair — this is truly impressive.

We were sitting at a dinner with over ten others, convened by another Hui friend of mine, Junmo, who was at the time writing his dissertation on the Hui to finish up his doctoral study at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. It wasn't long before we got into the topic of politics and the role of the secret police in "maintaining social stability" (*weiwen*), a watchword in contemporary Chinese politics.

> Well, you know what? I don't think it's a problem for them to persist until 2012 is over. But 2013 will be tough. The cost for maintaining social stability has gone up exponentially — they won't be able to carry on in this way, absolutely impossible.

This came from a young Hui who was working in the municipal party school, one in a nation-wide network of party schools with the Central Party School in Beijing at the top of the hierarchy, headed by Hu Jintao at the time. Although obviously an exaggeration, this remark went in line with both rumors and published news reports which claimed that the expense for internal security had exceeded military spending in the government budget.

Everyone at the table knew what this meant. And more than half had the experience of being "invited for tea" (*hecha*) at local police stations or receiving uninvited guests in their homes. Majun was smiling when he heard this — it was more of a "yup, I know the trick" look on his face.

"They make calls, every two or three days, just to say hi and to ask for 'news'," Majun picked up the conversation, "They are pretty kind and polite, they would say 'Hello Professor Majun, how are you? Is everything OK? What have you been working on lately? How is the research going?' I will just be a good guy, a nice person, and talk to them like I do to a friend. You know, just conventional social manners."

"You know Qianmin?" Another friend jumped in, "He received calls every day when he was here, sometimes at midnight."

"Yes, I know him. That's just what they do. You have to learn how to deal with those guys. Qianmin was incapable of doing that. Now he has left." Majun replied, still with a smile on his face.

"No, I cannot fare with that. It's unbearable. I am a scholar, I must be able to sit down and think, without being disturbed. I must have a quiet life. That's just, well, that's just intolerable." Helin said, and his tone revealed clearly that even the thought of being thrown into that kind of situation made him nervous and restless.

"But," Junmo broke into the conversation, "they are human too, right? We are all human, no?" Everyone turned his eyes to Junmo, and Majun was looking at the glass in front of him, still with a light smile.

Junmo continued, "When I came back home from Hong Kong a month ago, the moment I turned on my phone after the flight hit the track, I got a call from them. They said 'Hey Junmo! We are here to pick you up and give you a ride home! Welcome back! Don't worry about the luggage and the traffic! We are here to help!' I was like 'OK...whatever...it's nice to be transported in a limo. At least I don't need to worry about the damned traffic!'" Junmo laughed, sucking his cigar with a witty look.

"What did they say to you on the limo?" someone asked.

"Well, they just said 'Please don't be scared. We will not give you any trouble. We just want to be friends and keep in touch with you. If anything comes up and you need our help, any help, we will be happy to assist you. We are friends.' And, they continued to say 'We would also love to hear more about your research. We are so proud to have someone from our place who can get a Ph.D in Hong Kong!'"

"Then what did you say to them?" another took over the questioning.

"What can I say? I thanked them — you have to be a nice person. They are treating you nicely, and they are extending to you a favor — picking you up at the airport and praising your achievements. Besides, they are just doing their job, aren't they? Everyone has a job, and everyone has to live up to the responsibilities required of him/her by the job. It's just life. Everyone has to make a living — one has to understand this. They are human after all, just like us. They are giving you a favor, expecting that you will pay them back by helping them with their job, upon which their life and their family depend. So what can I say?" Junmo replied calmly, this time, also with a witty smile.

"Exactly!" Majun finally broke his silence and raised his head to gaze through the thick smoke that had accumulated in the room thanks to all the burning cigarettes, "We are all human! Right before this year's Spring Festival, I got a call from them. The man on the phone said in a polite and rejoicing voice: 'Professor Majun? Hi! We are at the door to your building. Could you please come down? We have a gift for you. Happy Spring Festival, Professor!' I hung up the phone and told my wife to go down — I didn't want to see them. My wife went down, and after about five minutes, came up with a bag. 'What's in it?' I asked. 'Tea, and beef.' My wife replied. 'OK' I said." Majun turned his eyes to others on the table, "If it's money, I wouldn't take it. Now it's Halal meat, I said to my wife 'OK, it's beef. Fuck it! Let's eat the damned meat!'" Majun laughed heartily, and everyone else on the table with him.

The story might appear pretty straightforward and unworthy of analysis at first sight: the police of an authoritarian Party-State try to extract information from people they consider a potential threat to the rule of the Party, and they do this not by intimidation, but by a favorable act of gift exchange behind which nonetheless lurks an iron fist. The gift was certainly thoughtful: halal beef for a Chinese Muslim family at the time of the Chinese New Year. The occasion furthermore made rejection utterly impossible: even if you wanted to, you simply *could*

not. Majun could not reject the favor not just because a refusal might elicit violent revenge on the part of the police as representatives of the Party-State. That which he would be at pains to refuse is not a purely economic exchange between intelligence service and monetary remuneration. (Recall that he said "if it's money, I wouldn't take it.") Much more importantly, his refusal would render him deserving the punishment that might ensue: the party he would be rejecting is *not*, or not merely an abstract "State" materialized by the police, but "actually" a concrete man who is "just doing his job." Offering the information requested in this case is not an act of cooperating with the secret service, but a kind and friendly act which returns the favor given by another "concrete" man, a man with blood and flesh, with a real family and a life just like his: "We are all human."

A rhetoric of the everyday is more than obvious. The mundane individual, the "actually" human, is thought to be the most "concrete." How can anything, especially that abstract Leviathan, that immaterial "State" high above and far away, be more visible, more easily recognizable, and more positively undeniable than the most concrete of the concrete, namely, the actually existing human individuals? But where does this intense "concreteness" come from? Isn't its positivist certainty, its vulgar empiricism, its — let's spit out the term — *fetish character* precisely that which demands a conceptual unpacking? It's by no means a theoretical necessity that State fetishism necessarily takes the form of the apparently sublime elicited by overwhelming military might or inescapable omnipresence. It can well assume the manifest form of a mundane humanism.

But how is this fetishistic "concreteness" of the really human produced? What is the structure that entails this fundamentally political ideology of humanism? The stories recounted by Majun and Junmo share a common theme: that of gift exchange. Majun would have refused an offer of monetary recompsense but he *could not* reject outright an extension of friendly social exchange — it was not money that was given. And it could not have been money: a purely economic act of exchange does not entail binding social obligations and one would not be under social accusation in retreating from an economic offer. An exchange of gift, of favors or polite manners, however, is socially binding. One might want to refuse; one might actually prefer to refuse. But one *has to* accept in spite of one's unwillingness to accept. Policing works most effectively, perhaps also most efficiently, precisely by engaging the policed in a socially binding exchange relationship: service is not and must not be paid in monetary terms. Although money is the general equivalent and all gifts are purchased by money and can be converted back into money, the thin line must nevertheless be carefully maintained.

It is, of course, Marcel Mauss who laid the foundation for the anthropological conception of gift exchange. Both the concepts of *mana* and *hau* — "native" notions that describe the obligation both to accept a gift (a rejection is tantamount to a declaration of war) and to reciprocate more — point to a crucial phenomenon that Mauss himself could not fully explain: why does gift exchange appear to be so compelling and where does this force that obligates come from? Lévi-Strauss's astute observation puts us on track: exchange is not and cannot actually be observed at the register of empirical facts. Even for Mauss himself, what can be observed empirically is three separate acts: giving, receiving, returning (Lévi-Strauss, 1987, pp. 46). What *mana* and *hau* indicates, in other words, is an essentially synthetic power which unifies all three acts into a singular whole that transcends the sum-total of all three: the final synthetic outcome, the exchange, is not a simple add-up of three spatially and temporally distinct elements. It is here that we reach the theoretical necessity of the unconscious and the unperceived/unperceivable nature of the totality which is called "exchange." Without this totalizing structural formation, no

empirical act of giving compels receiving and obligates a reciprocating that tops the received gift with a little "extra."

Mana and *hau*, as the "floating signifier"[3], the intuitive grasp and the conscious perception through which the structure of exchange is misrecognized, can certainly be formulated differently, and they could well bear different names and be intuited through different notions. For instance, one might re-construct conceptions of the *mana* type in terms of "marginal cost" in modern economics — the extra that one has to reciprocate in addition to the amount one previously received has to do with the possible profit that could be generated by the commodity if it had been involved in other exchanges and which therefore has been "sacrificed" because of this particular exchange relationship. The point, in other words, is that I have given up the potential that inheres in the exchangeability of my commodity and I should get paid precisely because of my decision to freeze this potential within the spatially and temporally restricted exchange with *you*.[4] A yet another reconceptualization that takes cue from this view of "marginal cost" is to attribute *mana/hau* to the generosity of the giver, in the sense that "I can give this gift to anyone, but it is specifically *you* who has received it." It is not a question of "intention," of whether I indeed bear the sincere generosity in engaging you in the exchange relationship. That one simply cannot refuse the offer of a gift already indicates that exchange happens before the actual act of giving: exchange logically antecedes the act of giving although empirically the latter might seem to temporally predate the former. It is the very structure of exchange that has made it possible for the act of giving to retrospectively project a "generosity" onto those who give. "Generosity" does not precede exchange, but is retrospectively exhumed by it. The very concreteness of the giver, his/her generosity, warm-heartedness, especially his/her particular favor of *me* in this particular token of exchange, all hinge upon the unconscious totality which is the structure of exchange. Just like *mana* and *hau*, generosity as an essentially "particular" favor extended to *me* instead of to any other, is equally a "floating signifier" with zero value. It's precisely the "concreteness" of the "concrete man" that has replaced the Maussian *mana/hau* in my story. What the structure of exchange has retroactively produced in consciousness is no longer reified in objects, but fetishized in subjects; not in the things given, but in the man who gives.

In the same way that the favor extended in a gift exchange is thought to be "particular" since the same gift could have been given to any other were it not for the special generosity the giver extended to *me*, the exchange relationship that the police initiate by means of polite manners and petty favors institutes its own version of "generosity": both Majun and Junmo keep returning to the facts that the police are "polite", that they "help", that they are "nice" — this implies, of course, that they could have been much worse. That they should be worse is the usual anticipation. Therefore, that they are nice is practically a "particular favor." The possibility of not having been given the gift is replaced by the possibility that one might easily have gotten beaten up with impunity. The stakes that one has to pay in rejecting the exchange is raised much higher, but it remains nonetheless an exchange relationship. The "good police" replace the generous giver. We therefore get a strange attitude on the part of the "victim": the police could have been much worse, and they, bearing almost unrestrained power, could bully, or even should have bullied. But they didn't—instead, they were "polite" and "nice." In other words, even if the police could have bullied, and it is entirely imaginable and "normal" that they bully you, they nonetheless did not bully you. Not only that, they treated you well, they respected you, they gave you favor. Indeed, they are "nice people," entirely contrary to what you usually anticipate from them. Now the fact that there might be other police who bully only points out to you that *this*

particular policeman who treats you nicely might actually be extending a *personal* favor. In other words, as long as there are "good police," as long as they work not by means of direct coercion, a socially binding relationship is immediately established, whether or not one is willing to accept the obligation that ensues. The point is that there is—and always will be—*any least one policeman* who is a bully and who therefore typifies the "normal" police who are intrinsically "bad."

What if the authoritarian CCP works precisely through this logic of good police/bad police? What if the kind of concrete human who extends personal favor in this peculiar exchange relation is precisely the image by which the Party is perceived by the ruled? To phrase it in a slightly different manner, can't we argue that the kind of "good police" who look so familiar to us and have also to earn a wage under the pressure of a "job" just to support their families—in other words, the kind of "good police" who are exactly like "us" and by looking into whom we see nothing else but the reflected image of "ourselves," are precisely the ideological misrecognition which works most effectively for the reproduction of authoritarian power? The Party, therefore, *is* a human being – this proposition is strictly speaking *not* a metaphor; it is given effectivity by the structure of exchange. The police do not *represent* the State; the State *is* the police, as concretely and actually existing human individuals "just like us".

Different from what has been argued by Michael Taussig, the so-called "cultural" or "sociological" constitution of the state does not have to portray the latter as a fetishized "entity," a "thing" that evokes with a single stroke both attraction and repulsion, love and hatred, in the same way as the commodity obtains its fetish character and an "aura" as the inverted representation of the social relations of production. (Taussig, 1992, pp. 111-140) The "thralldom" in which the State holds its subjects can well assume the form of the apparently banal. State fetishism can derive its no less phantasmagoric power from a mundane "humanist religion" which manifests itself not in the form of grandiosity that arrests, nor in the form of a radical otherness that elicits both reverence and terror, but in the form of a concrete and every bit "human" everyday. The Schmittian political is constantly displaced and postponed by this humanist religion: no politics can emerge and no political is worth pondering upon, since they are "illusive" and bound to crumble and pass into oblivion, leaving barefaced the only truth of history, namely, the forever real, concrete, and mundane human individual.

Conclusion

Neither Majun's nor Junmo's reaction to the almost "normal" presence of police in their everyday life is exceptional. For many who share similar experiences, this ideology of humanism comes up sooner or later in my conversation with them. Consider, for example, the words of a Muslim Imam, Yusuf, whom I had a close relationship with in the field,

> I am familiar with all of them—the entire team who supervise my district and often drop by to pass messages relayed from the on high. They will panic if you want to expand your mosque school; they want to keep track of every student you receive. If there are visitors from other mosques, they would be on alert and would occasionally press you to throw them out. They pick on every tiny bone—they are simply nervous, all the time. You see, when you know them for too long, you will well know that they are too uptight. I once told the sergeant, "Relax! Why so sensitive? It's just a job, and no more." He agreed, and later when he had to conduction inspection, he would simply say, "This is just a job, my friend. I have a family to feed." We all know this, we all understand. We are all human.

But not all share the same cool spirit as Yusuf's. Sulayman, another Imam who travels widely across China and writes extensively on Islamic laws and philosophies, complained to me once, "This country is run by a bunch of villains at the grassroots level! No law is followed. They would call you; they might pay a visit. They talk to you, take you dinner, pour you tea. How can you reject them?" There is actually a word for this, a catchphrase: *canxu*, which literally means "talk over a meal." "*Canxu*," Sulayman continued, "this word is used frequently. Politely, they want the food to fill up your mouth—so you cannot talk." An old saying in Chinese: if you eat someone's food, your mouth will be stuffed; if you take someone's money, your arm will be shortened. This is precisely the social power of exchange, the binding obligation that comes with the gift. "*Canxu*," according to Sulayman and many others, is becoming *the* term designating the working method of many in charge of maintaining everyday social stability in China. Recall the gifts Majun received for the 2011 Chinese New Year: tea and halal beef.

Neither Majun and Junmo, nor Yusuf and Sulayman, are political activists engaged in self-conscious political movements resisting the dictatorial rule of the CCP. They are not legal scholars or activist lawyers who spare no effort in pushing for a constitutionally justified civil rights movement. If they had been, one would wonder if they would still be so "lucky" as to enjoy the privilege of being engaged in a socially compelling and therefore mutually binding exchange relationship with the police.[5] In other words, what has been presented and argued in this essay cannot be imprudently expanded to include *all* forms of police operation in contemporary China. Brutal violence, unmediated cruelty, and arbitrary imprisonment do continue to exist. What cannot be denied is that an extensive police regime is indeed gradually taking shape and placing the entire society under its thinly disguised surveillance. The intrusion of the police into daily life is normalized under the banner of maintaining social stability. A regularized police presence is coupled with a "softened" mode of operation instead of or alongside direct coercion, and a politically unmarked and socially rooted exchange relationship increasingly takes center stage. Violent oppression is sidestepped by a socially determined obligation which is defined as something one *has* to do, not something one is *willing* to do. This split that inheres in the structurally binding power of exchange is very much intensified when it comes to an exchange with the police. It is precisely at the moment when you would by all means prefer not to accept a gift that the obligatory power of *hau*, the compelling force of *mana*, reaches its most severe intensity. Dictatorship seems to be absolutely coterminous with the social, which in turn grows daily unbearable. A paradoxical attitude perhaps grips all those who are subject to this peculiar regime: on the one hand, we wish from the bottom of our hearts that it would soon end, that a new age would dawn which could bring about an entirely new form of political life; on the other, there is a strange and tenacious pessimism which holds firmly that however much one hates it, the dictatorial regime will last forever, that history will forever be

stuck here and now, that politics can never be different—the fall of the current CCP will introduce to power another CCP, and we will be back to where we started. As the old saying goes, "all crows under the heaven are of the same black color (*tianxia wuya yi ban hei*)."

Or are they? And why does it seem that the entire forest is filled with only one species of bird? To break from the apparently eternal return to the same, perhaps we should first try for a moment to think without the human, and to fight the inhumane with a revolutionary anti-humanism.

---

[1] The politico-philosophical project in connecting Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, and in elevating the Nazi concentration camp to the status of a prototype in conceptualizing modern human condition, often has to simplify Foucault's complex historical investigation of the various forms of arts in governing human life, not all of which belong in the biopolitical framework. Giorgio Agamben, for example, proposes in his widely read work *Homo Sacer* that "[t]he present inquiry concerns precisely this hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power. What this work has had to record among its likely conclusions is precisely that the two analyses [Arendt's and Foucault's] cannot be separated and that the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.*"(Agamben, 1998, pp. 6, emphasis original) But the Arendtian view on the rise of the social in *The Human Condition* is a much more general story than that covered by the Foucauldian biopolitics: the social is not necessarily the biopolitical, although the biopolitical cannot emerge outside the social.(Arendt, 1958) One wonders, therefore, what analytical power still remains of "biopolitics" in Agamben's project, since it seems that the particular way he deploys it has already drained it of its conceptual rigor given to it by Foucault's meticulous genealogical investigation. The same confusion can be found in his *The Open* in the following sentence: "In our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man. That is to say, in its origin, Western politics is also biopolitics."(Agamben, 2004, pp. 80)

[2] The published journal of Zhao Ziyang, premier of China ousted shortly after the Tiananmen Massacre because of his support of the protesting students and his liberal position in pressing forth political and economic reforms in China, demonstrates with the eye of an insider the often ferocious conflicts within the CCP.(Zhao Ziyang, Bao Pu, Reene Chiang, Adi Ignatius, & MacFarquhar, 2009) That no single figure, no real "strongman," not even Deng Xiaoping, can wield unchallenging power, and that the tactics deployed in these fierce conflicts usually put those apparently in power in a position of being compelled to act in ways entirely opposed to their own will, are facts that can be found perhaps in every so-called "authoritarian" regime.

[3] For a comprehensive and theoretically informed review of the linguistic and psychoanalytic background to this term which Levi-Strauss only briefly touched upon in his discussion of Mauss, see (Mehlman, 1972).

[4] Compare this with Marshall Sahlins' argument that "profit" instead of "spirit" might be a better rendition of *hau* in English. His primary focus is the fact that the significance of *hau* arises only when that which is supposed to bear *hau* is passed from the second to the third party, instead of between the first and the second party.(Sahlins, 1972, pp. 160-1) But the "third," in fact, is

simply a different way of saying the "structure." As long as exchange relationship is a structural formation, the "third party" is always already present even when the exchange happens only between two empirically observable parties.

[5] Most of those who have the admirable courage to take up these roles have experiences with the police which are markedly different from those recounted in this essay. For a valuable collection of some of these highly dramatic and meanwhile informative stories, see (Xu & Hua, 2012).

References

Agamben, Giorgio
1998. *Homo sacer : sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio
2004. *The open : man and animal*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Arendt, Hannah
1958. *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
1973. *The origins of totalitarianism. New ed. with added prefaces*. New York,: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Foucault, Michel
1973. *The order of things; an archaeology of the human sciences*. New York,: Vintage Books.

Foucault, Michel, Senellart, Michel, & Collège de France.
2008. *The birth of biopolitics : lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*. Basingstoke England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, Michel, Senellart, Michel, Ewald, François, & Fontana, Alessandro
2007. *Security, territory, population : lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. Basingstoke ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan : République Française.

Heilmann, Sebastian, & Perry, Elizabeth J.
2011. *Mao's invisible hand : the political foundations of adaptive governance in China*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center : Distributed by Harvard University Press.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude
1987. *Introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

McGregor, Richard
2010. *The party : the secretive world of China's communist rulers*. London: Allen Lane.

Mehlman, Jeffrey
1972. The "Floating Signifier": From Lévi-Strauss to Lacan. *Yale French Studies*(48), 10-37. doi: 10.2307/2929621

Sahlins, Marshall David
1972. *Stone age economics*. Chicago,: Aldine-Atherton.

Schmitt, Carl.
1976. *The concept of the political*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
1985. *Political theology : four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Taussig, Michael T.
1992. *The nervous system*. New York: Routledge.

Xu, Youyu, & Hua, Ze
2012. *Zao yu jing cha (Close encounters with the Chinese PSB)*. Xianggang: Kai fang chu ban she.

Zhao Ziyang, Bao Pu, Reene Chiang, Adi Ignatius, & MacFarquhar, Roderick
2009. *Prisoner of the state : the secret journal of Zhao Ziyang* (1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.

Žižek, Slavoj
2002. "Are we in a war? Do we have an enemy?" *London Review of Books, 24*(10), 3-6.