

The Wandering Marx: Vanguard Theory, the Denaturing of Marxism, and the Jewish Question in Chinese Socialist Internationalism

Reflections on Felix Brender [王哲謙], “China after October 7: Selective Neutrality and the Politics of ‘Principle’”

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Abstract

This essay engages Felix Brender’s “China after October 7: Selective Neutrality and the Politics of ‘Principle’” (*Telos Insights*, 2026), which documents China’s asymmetric diplomatic treatment of Israeli and Palestinian claims following the October 7, 2023 Hamas-led attack. The essay acknowledges Brender’s empirical contribution—particularly his semiotic analysis of the term 被扣押人员 [detained persons or hostages, prisoners or detainees, variability of the ambiguous concept *to keep someone in a place so that they cannot leave*]—while arguing that his explanation, grounded in historical continuity and reputational cost-management, opens the door to a broader examination of the theoretical architecture that would explain why the asymmetry is structurally necessary rather than strategically contingent. Drawing on the author’s prior scholarship on Chinese Marxist-Leninist governance, the essay advances three interconnected arguments. First, that China’s posture is a structural requirement of the vanguard-coalition form derived from Mao Zedong’s “On Coalition Government” (1945), which requires both a coalition to be led and an externalized antagonist against which it is organized. Second, that the Sinicization of Marxism involves a “denaturing” of Marxism from its Jewish genealogical origins—a semiotic operation in which the “international Marx” (the diasporic Jewish theorist) must be superseded by the “Chinese Marx” (theory-come-home), rendering Jewish national self-determination structurally obstructive. Third, that Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” (1844), properly read as a critique of all religious recursion rather than a polemic against Jews, exposes the “clay feet” of Sinicization: the project substitutes Chinese civilizational particularity for the religious consciousness Marx argued must be transcended—and, in displacing Jewish particularism, allies itself with Islamic universalism, a rival lebenswelt whose eventual collision with Chinese-style modernization may produce a general contradiction the current theoretical architecture cannot resolve.

Executive Summary: General Readership and Policymakers

Felix Brender's recent essay documents a clear pattern in China's response to the Israel-Hamas war: while maintaining trade and diplomatic relations with Israel, China consistently framed Palestinian claims with historical depth and moral specificity while treating Israeli claims abstractly. Brender concludes that China's claim to neutrality was insincere.

This essay accepts Brender's empirical findings but offers a different explanation for them. Rather than treating China's tilt as a strategic calculation, it argues that the asymmetry is built into the political form through which China conducts foreign policy—the vanguard-coalition model inherited from Mao Zedong and now operationalized through the Belt and Road Initiative. This model requires both a coalition of partners to be led (the Global South) and an antagonist to organize against (the American-imperial order, of which Israel is cast as a regional extension). The tilt is not a choice but a structural necessity.

The essay further argues that China's project of making Marxism indigenous—"Sinicization"—has an underexamined consequence: it effectively displaces the Jewish intellectual origins of Marxist theory and casts Jewish national self-determination as a structural obstacle. However, in erasing the Jewish presence from its theoretical framework, China has allied itself with Islamic civilizational universalism—a force whose own comprehensive claims may ultimately pose a far more fundamental challenge to Chinese leadership than Jewish nationhood ever could. The tension between China's external cultivation of Muslim-majority coalition partners and its internal governance of its own Muslim populations suggests a contradiction whose full implications have not yet surfaced but cannot be permanently deferred.

Executive Summary: Specialists

This essay develops a semiotic-phenomenological critique of Brender's "China after October 7" (*Telos Insights*, 2026), accepting its empirical documentation of asymmetric Chinese diplomatic treatment of Israeli and Palestinian claims while reframing its explanatory architecture at three levels of increasing theoretical depth.

Level 1: Vanguard-coalition structure. Brender's explanation (historical continuity, reputational management) is recast through the lens of Mao's "On Coalition Government" (1945) as applied to the international plane. The three-step logic—constitution of coalition, constitution of antagonist, constitutive (not tactical) character of antagonist-selection—demonstrates that the asymmetry is a structural requirement of the vanguard-coalition form rather than an accumulated diplomatic habit. Israel is assigned the "foreign-fascist-feudal oppressor" position not through cost-benefit calculation but through the semiosis of naming (明名) that constitutes the coalition by constituting its outside.

Level 2: Sinicization as supersessionism. The project of Sinicizing Marxism requires severing Marxism’s genealogical connection to Jewish diasporic intellectualism. Two converging tropes—the Jew as foreign-fascist-feudal oppressor and the Jew as compulsory wanderer (the “international Marx”)—produce a structurally supersessionist disposition toward Jewish nationhood that operates whether or not individual actors intend it.

Level 3: Marx’s “On the Jewish Question” and the clay feet of Sinicization. Marx’s essay, read as a critique of all religious recursion rather than a polemic against Jews, exposes Sinicization as performing the substitution (civilizational particularity claiming universality) that Marx identified as the obstacle to human emancipation. The displacement of Jewish particularism fills the vacated space with Islamic universalism—a rival lebenswelt whose collision with Chinese-style modernization constitutes a latent general contradiction. The essay’s two-track theorization (external coalition-building with Muslim-majority states; internal engagement with Islamic universalism through the Party’s governance of recognized ethnic and religious minorities) identifies a functional separation that cannot constitute a permanent theoretical resolution.

The essay is written in the third person as a methodological performance of critical distantiation; the author is Larry Catá Backer examining his own prior corpus as textual object.

Part I. Summary: Felix Brender, “China after October 7: Selective Neutrality and the Politics of ‘Principle’” (*Telos Insights*, Aug. 4, 2026)¹

Felix Brender’s essay examines the People’s Republic of China’s public posture toward the Israel-Hamas war since October 7, 2023, and argues that China’s self-presentation as a neutral, principled advocate of peace does not withstand scrutiny of the actual categories through which Beijing allocated “agency, victimhood, legitimacy, and responsibility.” The essay’s central claim is that China “preserved pragmatic relations with Israel” while consistently privileging pro-Palestinian framings in its diplomatic and legal interventions, and that this pattern reflects a long-standing investment in the Palestinian national cause and in China’s self-styled role as a leading voice of the Global South, rather than an improvised response to the war.

Brender develops the argument across several linked sections:

A longer history of alignment. China’s post-October-7 posture is traced to its early support for Fatah, the 1965 opening of a PLO office in Beijing, recognition of the State of Palestine in 1988, and the 2023 upgrade of ties to a “strategic partnership.” Brender links this history to China’s cultivated self-image as a “natural member” of the Global South and argues that the Palestinian cause serves Beijing’s broader effort to connect self-determination with opposition to Western hegemony.

Condemning harm without naming its author. Brender examines China’s Foreign Ministry statements from October 9, 2023, noting that Beijing “opposed and condemned ‘acts that harm civilians’” without naming Hamas or endorsing the term “terrorism,” even when directly asked. He treats this as more than diplomatic caution—an act of “exposure management” that allowed Beijing to avoid the costs of openly defending Hamas while still appealing to pro-Palestinian and Arab audiences. He notes this reticence persisted even after four Chinese nationals were killed on October 7, and contrasts it with Beijing’s insistence, in the context of Xinjiang and Hong Kong, that terrorism be named “without ambiguity.”

From atrocity to structure. The essay argues that Chinese officials moved quickly from the specific attack to a “root cause” narrative centered on the unresolved Palestinian question, which Brender argues “relativizes or displaces” Hamas’s agency by reframing the attack as a product of structural injustice rather than an act to be judged on its own terms. He argues that contextualization “did more than withhold sympathy: it elevated that refusal into a token of moral seriousness.”

¹Felix Brender, “China after October 7: Selective Neutrality and the Politics of ‘Principle,’” *Telos Insights* (Aug. 4, 2026).

Vocabulary as policy. Brender analyzes the Chinese term 被扣押人员 (“persons held” or “detained persons”), used by Chinese officials to describe hostages, and argues that this term’s elasticity—covering hostages, POWs, and Palestinian prisoners alike—flattens the distinction between hostage-taking and lawful detention, producing “a degree of equivalence” between categories that are not, in his view, morally or legally interchangeable.

Universal principle, selective application. China’s February 2024 ICJ intervention (delivered by legal adviser Ma Xinmin) and its July 2024 convening of fourteen Palestinian factions culminating in the Beijing Declaration² are read as instances of “strategic universalism”: the invocation of international law, self-determination, and civilian protection in ways that consistently developed Palestinian legal and historical claims while leaving Israeli claims to security and recognition comparatively abstract. Brender also notes that hosting Hamas alongside other factions had the effect of repositioning Hamas “from the perpetrator of October 7 to one political actor among several.”

Selective postcolonialism. Brender highlights what he calls an “unresolved historical selectivity” in China’s anti-colonial framing: Zionism, too, understood itself as a movement of national restoration among a stateless people with roots in Labor Zionism and socialist organization, yet China’s classification of Palestine as colonized and Israel as colonizing power rests, in his account, on “contemporary geopolitical classification” rather than a consistently applied historical principle. He describes this as a “division of function” in which Israel supplies material advantage (trade, technology) and Palestine supplies moral standing (Global South solidarity).

Conclusion. Brender argues that China’s continued relationship with Israel does not vindicate a claim to neutrality but rather “revealed only the limits of the costs Beijing was prepared to incur.” His closing claim is normative: “China’s claim to principle failed because its universalism was universal only where politically convenient.”

Part II. Critique and Analysis

A Note on Authorship and Method

“What follows is written by Larry Catá Backer. The use of third-person voice throughout—“Backer’s analysis suggests,” “Backer’s corpus indicates”—is a deliberate methodological choice rather than an attribution to another hand. The third person serves here as a device of critical distantiation: it permits the author to examine his own prior writing as a textual corpus with its own internal logic, to interrogate that corpus as one would interrogate any other

²Beijing Declaration on Palestinian Reconciliation (July 2024).

scholarly production, and to resist the temptation to settle questions that remain genuinely open by recourse to authorial fiat. The voice enacts, in miniature, the same refusal of premature closure that characterizes the substantive argument. The reader should understand that the “Backer” whose positions are described, extended, and occasionally questioned below is both the author of this text and its object of study—a duality that is itself part of the methodological performance.”

Convergence

Brender and Backer share a starting observation: that China’s diplomatic vocabulary after October 7 performed political work beyond its surface content, and that the term “neutrality” concealed a consistent asymmetry in how Palestinian and Israeli claims were narrated. Backer’s own reading of the November 2023 Wang Yi meeting with Arab-Islamic foreign ministers³ reaches a structurally similar conclusion to Brender’s: that Beijing “consistently gave greater historical and moral specificity” (Brender’s phrase) to Palestinian claims, and that this was “not improvised after October 7” but reflected longer-standing commitments. The empirical overlap is substantial and worth acknowledging before turning to the points of theoretical departure that constitute the principal contribution of this critique.

Brender’s close reading of 被扣押人员 deserves particular recognition as a genuine contribution—an instance of what Backer, drawing on the *Guiguzi*,⁴ calls the political work of 命名 (*míng míng*), or naming: the recognition that the choice of a term is itself a strategic and constitutive act, not a neutral label applied after the fact to settled reality. Brender demonstrates that the elasticity of 被扣押人员—covering hostages, prisoners of war, and Palestinian detainees within a single semantic field—does not merely describe equivalence but produces it, flattening distinctions that international humanitarian law maintains and that moral reasoning requires. This is semiotic analysis of a high order, and it converges with Backer’s own method even where the two analyses diverge in vocabulary and theoretical framing. Brender’s contribution here is to have shown, at the level of a single term, how the apparatus of naming operates in diplomatic practice—a demonstration that vindicates the broader theoretical claim about the constitutive force of nomenclature even as it leaves that broader claim largely implicit.

One might extend the convergence further. Brender’s documentation of what he calls “strategic universalism”—the invocation of international law and civilian protection in ways that consistently develop one set of claims while leaving another comparatively abstract—aligns with

³“Wang Yi Holds Talks with the Delegation of Arab-Islamic Foreign Ministers,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Nov. 20, 2023). Discussed in Backer, “Choosing Sides,” *infra* note 6.

⁴Hui Wu (trans.), *Guiguzi: China’s First Treatise on Rhetoric* (Carbondale: SIU Press, 2016), pp. 59–60.

what Sapir, in his recent essay on the collapse of epistemic latency,⁵ identifies as the broader phenomenon of “symbolic compression”: the reduction of complex realities to recognizable categories (victim, aggressor, liberation, occupation) that acquire public authority before their evidentiary foundations have been fully established. The epistemic architecture that Sapir describes—in which “narratives become publicly coherent before they become epistemically stable”—is precisely the discursive environment within which the patterns Brender documents can operate with such apparent naturalness. That China’s diplomatic vocabulary finds ready uptake in international fora is not merely a testament to its rhetorical skill; it reflects the availability of pre-existing symbolic templates into which such vocabulary can be received. The “moral acceleration” Sapir identifies provides the institutional conditions under which Brender’s “strategic universalism” can succeed.

The Vanguard-Coalition Architecture: A Central Theoretical Departure

Brender’s essay performs an indispensable service: it documents the *what* of Chinese conduct with exemplary empirical care and, in doing so, makes visible patterns that require theoretical explanation at a different level of analysis. The argument developed here does not displace Brender’s contribution but builds upon it, asking what theoretical architecture—what deep structure of the Chinese Marxist-Leninist political form—might explain the *why* that Brender’s careful documentation makes it possible to pose. Brender writes that Beijing’s preference “was not improvised” and “reflected a much longer investment” in Palestinian claims and Global South leadership. This is an argument about historical continuity, about accumulated diplomatic habit and reputational capital. It is not wrong—and its empirical grounding is precisely what permits the further question: why does the pattern take the specific form it does—why, that is, the asymmetry is not merely a tilt but a structural necessity of the political form within which Chinese foreign policy operates?

Backer’s analysis, developed principally in “Choosing Sides, Socialist Internationalism, and the Ideological Signification of China’s Jewish Problem in the International Arena” (November 2023),⁶ offers a different order of explanation. Its central claim is that a vanguard party seeking to lead what was once called the Communist International—and what has now been reconstituted as the institutional apparatus of New Era Socialist Internationalism, with the Belt and Road Initiative as its primary institutional infrastructure—must, as a structural matter and not merely as a tactical preference, accomplish three linked operations:

⁵Eliyahu V. Sapir, “The Collapse of Epistemic Latency: Reflections on Journalism, Judgment, and the Kristof Controversy,” *Telos Insights* (June 10, 2026).

⁶Larry Catá Backer, “Choosing Sides, Socialist Internationalism, and the Ideological Signification of China’s Jewish Problem in the International Arena,” *Law at the End of the Day* (Nov. 21, 2023).

(a) The constitution of the coalition. First, the vanguard must identify and constitute a coalition to be led. This is not merely a matter of finding allies; it is a matter of discursive construction—of constituting a field of actors whose disparate interests can be narrated as a unified project under vanguard leadership. Mao Zedong’s 1945 “On Coalition Government”⁷ established the template: “a united-front democratic alliance based on the overwhelming majority of the people, under the leadership of the working class.” The coalition is not discovered but produced; it comes into existence through the act of naming it and of naming its conditions. On the international plane, this means constituting the “Global South” as a coalition-in-waiting, organized around shared opposition to what is characterized as the residual imperial-feudal order, and available for leadership by the vanguard state-party that can credibly claim to have demonstrated the superiority of its developmental model.

(b) The constitution of the antagonist. Second, and inseparably, the vanguard must identify and constitute an antagonist against which the coalition is organized. This is the crucial move that Brender’s analysis, operating at the level of diplomatic pragmatism, does not reach. The logic of “On Coalition Government” is not merely coalitional; it is dialectical. The coalition requires its constitutive outside—what Mao characterized, in language that carries directly into the contemporary discursive field, as the “foreign-fascist-feudal oppressors.” Without the antagonist, the coalition has no reason to cohere; without the coalition, the vanguard has no one to lead. The two are mutually constitutive. “Just as people’s whole process democracy requires oppositional elements,” Backer writes, “so Communist internationalism requires its foreign-fascist-feudal oppressors.”⁸ The antagonist is not an enemy encountered in the field; it is a discursive position that must be occupied—and, crucially, it must be occupied by someone.

(c) The constitutive character of antagonist-selection. Third—and this is the point at which the analysis moves beyond anything Brender’s essay entertains—the selection of the antagonist is constitutive rather than merely tactical. It is not that China surveyed the geopolitical landscape, identified Israel as a convenient adversary, and chose to oppose it for reasons of cost-benefit calculation. It is rather that the vanguard-coalition form requires an externalized and reified antagonist, and that the selection of who occupies that position is itself a world-making act—an instance of the semiosis of naming (明名) that brings into being the very categories through which international politics is to be organized. “The target is necessarily externalized and reified as forms of behaviors and sectors of international actors that can be excised in order to solidify a united front around the vanguard leadership.”⁹ The choice of Israel—or more precisely, of “Jewish Israel” coded as “a running dog of its American nemesis”—is not a calculation about the

⁷Mao Zedong, “On Coalition Government” (Apr. 24, 1945), in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol. III (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965).

⁸Backer, “Choosing Sides,” *supra* note 6.

⁹Backer, “Choosing Sides,” *supra* note 6.

relative costs of various diplomatic postures. It is a constitutive act that brings the coalition itself into being by giving it something to oppose.

The Americans, on this reading, have become “the pre-1949 Kuomintang in this era of globalization.”¹⁰ The analogy is precise and telling. The Kuomintang was not merely the CCP’s rival for power; it was the constitutive antagonist whose existence gave the united front its reason for being and whose eventual displacement was the narrative telos of the entire revolutionary project. On the contemporary international plane, the United States and its alliance structure occupy exactly this position—they are the “foreign imperial and feudal orders” that the New Era Communist International must “inevitably displace.” And within this framework, Israel functions not as an independent agent to be evaluated on its own terms but as a particular instantiation of the imperial-feudal antagonist: a dependency of the American order whose treatment is determined not by its own conduct but by its structural position within the dialectic.

“This is a fundamentally different order of explanation than Brender offers. His essay asks, in effect, “Why did China choose to support Palestine over Israel?” and answers: because of accumulated historical investment, Global South solidarity, reputational management, and selective application of principle. Backer’s framework asks instead: “What kind of political form produces this kind of posture as a structural necessity rather than a strategic choice?” and answers: the vanguard-coalition form, which requires both a coalition to lead and an antagonist against which to organize it, and which produces the selection of that antagonist not as a rational calculation but as a constitutive semiotic act. Brender documents the pattern—and documents it in a way that makes structural explanation possible rather than merely speculative. Backer’s corpus then explains why the pattern takes the form it does and why it is unlikely to change absent a transformation of the political form itself. The two inquiries are complementary: without Brender’s empirical documentation, the theoretical architecture would lack its evidentiary foundation; without the theoretical architecture, the documentation would describe a pattern without explaining why it is structurally necessary rather than contingent.”

“The institutional manifestation of this architecture deserves emphasis. The Belt and Road Initiative is not merely an economic development program; it is, on Backer’s reading, the institutional infrastructure through which the vanguard-coalition politics of New Era Socialist Internationalism is operationalized. The “sacrifice” of the Jews—to use Backer’s own deliberately provocative language—serves “to increase the probability of attainment of some sort of vanguard leadership in MENA even if not under the banner of the Communist International but rather of the New Era Socialist Internationalism and its Belt & Road institutions, as they morph into whatever suits the times.”¹¹ The institutions are the material substrate of the

¹⁰Backer, “Choosing Sides,” *supra* note 6.

¹¹Backer, “Choosing Sides,” *supra* note 6.

coalition; the discursive construction of the antagonist provides the ideological substrate. Together they constitute what “On Coalition Government” called “New Democracy”—now transposed from the domestic to the international plane, with the MENA states playing the role once occupied by the “bourgeois and landed peasants of another era, useful today on the path to tomorrow.””

“One sees the operationalization of this structure in domains beyond the diplomatic. The Trump Administration’s declarations on Gaza—analyzed elsewhere¹² in terms of their “incantatory” character, in which “the power of the incantation lies in its repetition” and “ambiguity” serves as “the elixir of power”—reveal the performative semiotics of peace discourse from the American side: words assuming “distinct meanings depending on who reads them,” negotiations conducted between powers over the heads of those who are objects rather than subjects of deal-making. The Chinese discursive apparatus and the American incantatory apparatus are, on this reading, not opposed so much as structurally homologous—each operates through performative constitution rather than neutral description, each organizes its world through acts of naming that bring into being the categories they purport merely to describe. The difference is that the Chinese apparatus is embedded within a unified doctrinal architecture—the vanguard-coalition form—while the American apparatus operates across competing and often contradictory theoretical traditions (liberal internationalism, realism, neoconservatism, democratic peace theory) without a single organizing framework. This is not an absence of self-awareness so much as a different structural condition: pluralism of theoretical commitment rather than doctrinal unity. The consequence, however, is that the Chinese apparatus can deploy its categories with a consistency that the American apparatus, precisely because of its internal pluralism, cannot match.”

Principle as Doctrinal Category

“Once the vanguard-coalition architecture is understood as the organizing logic of Chinese international conduct, it becomes possible to extend Brender’s analysis of “principle” into a different analytical plane. His essay tests Chinese conduct against an implicit standard of liberal neutrality—the idea that a “genuinely universal politics” would recognize Palestinian rights “without subordinating Israeli victimhood to another people’s historical narrative.” But the CCP does not claim to operate, and has never claimed to operate, within a liberal conception of universal, symmetrical application of norms. Its own doctrinal architecture—“Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind,” the Belt and Road Initiative’s linkage of development to a reformed conception of rights, and what Backer elsewhere terms “New Era Socialist Internationalism”—is explicitly dialectical and coalitional rather than neutral in the liberal sense.”

¹²Larry Catá Backer, “‘The Trump Declaration for Enduring Peace and Prosperity’ Dialogical Reflections on the Tractability of the Intractable,” *Law at the End of the Day* (Oct. 13, 2025).

“Judged by that self-description, “principle” is not a promise of symmetry; it is a promise of fidelity to a hierarchy of struggle in which some actors are cast as allies to be cultivated and others as “foreign-fascist-feudal oppressors” to be organized against. Brender’s conclusion that China’s “claim to principle failed” therefore risks measuring Chinese conduct against a standard China never actually offered, rather than against the standard it did offer. This is not merely a pedantic correction; it is a reframing that transforms what counts as evidence of failure. If “principle” means fidelity to a dialectical hierarchy, then consistent asymmetry in favor of the coalitional partner and against the constituted antagonist is not a failure of principle but its consistent application.”

The Sinicization of Leninism and the Denaturing of Marx

“There is a dimension of the analysis that neither Brender’s essay nor the original version of this critique developed with sufficient care: the intersection between the vanguard-coalition architecture and the broader project of what Chinese Communist Party doctrine calls the “Sinicization of Marxism”—or, as it might be described from a different analytical vantage, the denaturing of Marxism of its Jewish genealogical origins. This intersection produces a set of discursive effects that bear directly on China’s posture toward Israel and that operate at a level deeper than either diplomatic pragmatism or vanguard-coalition strategy alone can explain.”

“Two converging tropes are at work. The first is the Jew as the postmodern objectification of the foreign-fascist-feudal oppressor—the figure onto whom the antagonist-position required by vanguard-coalition politics can be mapped with apparent ease, drawing on ancient discursive trajectories some borrowed from fascism, others from the institutionalized supersessionism of Christian and Islamic theological traditions. The second is the Jew as compulsory wanderer—“the predicate exemplar of a semiotics of progressive dialectical overcoming toward perfection,” the figure whose permanent displacement signifies the condition of theory-in-exile, not yet arrived at the place of its realization.”

“It is in the convergence of these two tropes that the Sinicization project acquires its specifically anti-Jewish valence—or, to state the matter with the ambiguity it requires, its structurally supersessionist character. Consider: Marx himself is, on this reading, “the skeptical Jew who could find refuge only amongst others.” Marxism was born “as a theory of transcendence of the person of Marx in the body of a Jew”—a theory whose universalist aspiration is inseparable from the diasporic condition of its author, whose claim to transcend all particularisms is grounded in the particular experience of Jewish displacement. The “international Marx” is, in this sense, a transformation of the figure of the “international Jew”: “forced to wander until the perfection of his theory is realized by the Communists.”¹³

¹³Backer, “Choosing Sides,” *supra* note 6. The quoted phrases in this paragraph are drawn from this source.

The Sinicization of Marxism, understood at the level of discursive structure rather than mere doctrinal content, requires severing this genealogical connection. The “international Marx” must become the “Chinese Marx”—Marx’s thought must be received “as something other than a theory bound up in a foreign place and time.” The universalism of Marxist theory must be detached from the diasporic Jewish intellectualism in which it originated and re-grounded in Chinese civilizational continuity. This is not merely a matter of philosophical adaptation; it is a semiotic operation with material consequences. To Sinicize Marxism is to claim that the wandering has ended—that the theory has found its home, its realization, its telos, in the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership. But if the wandering has ended, then the figure of the wanderer—the diasporic Jew who carried the theory westward and eastward in the condition of permanent exile—becomes not merely superfluous but obstructive. The Jew as carrier of universal theory must be superseded by the Chinese vanguard as realizer of universal theory.

The *Ta Kung Pao* material—the articles alleging that a “Jewish interest group” (犹太利益集团) controls American media, finance, and politics—operates within this discursive field as one operative domain of the denaturing project.¹⁴ It is, at one level, simply crude: the recycling of European antisemitic tropes in a Chinese-language outlet with state alignment. But situated within the broader architecture of Sinicization, it performs a specific function: it locates “the Jew” simultaneously in the position of foreign-fascist-feudal oppressor (controlling capital, manipulating media, exercising covert power) and in the position of the displaced carrier of a universalism that properly belongs to China. The “Jewish interest group” is both the enemy to be organized against and the rival claimant to the universalist inheritance that Sinicization means to appropriate.

Whether this convergence of tropes operates consciously—as a deliberate discursive strategy adopted by identifiable actors within the Party-state apparatus—or structurally—as the emergent effect of a theoretical architecture whose internal logic produces these positions without anyone intending them—is a question this analysis deliberately leaves open. It may be that the answer is neither purely one nor purely the other but rather something closer to what Sapir, in a different context, calls the operation of “high prior probabilities within historical discourse networks”¹⁵: the availability of certain representational pathways that lower the threshold for particular interpretations without requiring explicit intention. “Jewish identity has historically functioned as a highly reusable explanatory node within Western symbolic networks”; within Chinese Marxist-Leninist networks, the reusability operates through a different but structurally analogous mechanism—the availability of the Jew-as-wanderer and Jew-as-oppressor tropes as ready-made

¹⁴Ta Kung Pao (大公报), “犹太利益集团势力庞大 美国无底线盲撑以色列” [The Jewish interest groups are powerful and the United States blindly supports Israel without any bottom line] (May 4, 2024). Discussed in Larry Catá Backer, “Bricolage,” *Law at the End of the Day* (May 2024).

¹⁵Sapir, “Collapse of Epistemic Latency,” *supra* note 5.

solutions to the discursive problems generated by Sinicization and vanguard-coalition politics simultaneously.

The genealogy of this semiotic architecture requires, however, a confrontation with what might be called the elephant in the room of any Marxist treatment of Jewish nationhood: Marx's own 1844 essay "On the Jewish Question,"¹⁶ which has generated more interpretive controversy—and more persistent misreadings—than perhaps any other text in the Marxist canon.

The conventional misreading, which one encounters with depressing regularity in popular commentary and which has done incalculable damage to the reception of Marx's broader theoretical project, treats "On the Jewish Question" as an antisemitic polemic—as though Marx, himself of Jewish descent, were simply rehearsing the tropes of European Jew-hatred in philosophical dress. This reading is not merely wrong; it is wrong in a way that obscures precisely what makes the essay dangerous for the Sinicization project. Marx's target is not Jews as such but Judaism as a semiotic exemplar—as the paradigmatic instance of what he takes to be the structural impediment that all religion poses to genuine human emancipation.¹⁷

The essay's argument, stripped to its logical skeleton, proceeds as follows: Bruno Bauer¹⁸ had argued that Jews could achieve political emancipation only by abandoning Judaism—that the secular state required the abolition of religious particularity. Marx's response is that Bauer confuses political emancipation (the liberal state's formal neutrality toward religion) with human emancipation (the actual overcoming of the conditions that produce religious consciousness in the first place). The secular state does not abolish religion; it merely relocates it to civil society, where it continues to function as a form of alienation. Political emancipation is thus real but radically insufficient—it emancipates the state from religion without emancipating human beings from the conditions that generate religious need.¹⁹

The Jews, in this framework, function not as a unique target but as the most analytically transparent instance of a universal problem. Judaism's emphasis on law, particularity, and worldly practice makes it, for Marx, the most visible case of religion's entanglement with material life—and therefore the clearest demonstration of why political emancipation (mere

¹⁶Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question" (1844), in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (Feb. 1844).

¹⁷See, e.g., Arlene Clemesha, "Karl Marx on the Jewish Question," *Science & Society* 89(2) (2025), for a comprehensive review of the interpretive controversy; Yoav Peled, "From Theology to Sociology: Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx on the Question of Jewish Emancipation," *History of Political Thought* 13(3): 463–485 (1992), arguing that Marx shifted the debate from theology to sociology and "chose to ignore [Bauer's] argument, treat Judaism as no different from Christianity."

¹⁸Bruno Bauer, *Die Judenfrage* (Braunschweig, 1843).

¹⁹See also Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction" (1843–44) ("Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.").

tolerance) cannot overcome what only the transformation of material conditions can resolve. The argument applies with equal force to Christianity, to Islam, and—crucially for our purposes—to Confucianism, Daoism, and every other system of thought that Marx would characterize as ideological superstructure masking material relations.

It is here that the Sinicization of Marxism encounters what one might call its clay feet—the paradox that is at once constitutive and potentially fatal. The Sinicization project, as documented above, requires the subordination of all particular cultural and religious traditions to the universal truth-claims of Marxism-Leninism as interpreted through the historical experience of Chinese civilization. But Marx’s own analytical framework, rigorously applied, would identify Sinicization itself as precisely the kind of religious recursion—the reinstantiation of civilizational particularity at the level of universal theory—that “On the Jewish Question” identifies as the obstacle to human emancipation. If Judaism is a semiotic exemplar of religion’s impediment to emancipation, then the elevation of Chinese civilizational categories to the status of universal Marxist truth is structurally identical: it substitutes one form of particularism for another while claiming universality.

The paradox is recursive and, within its own terms, irresolvable. The Sinicization project does not denature religion in Marx’s sense—it does not overcome the conditions that produce religious and civilizational consciousness. Rather, it performs a substitution: Chinese civilizational categories replace other particularisms as the privileged vessel of universal truth, but the structure of the claim—that one particular tradition has unique access to the universal—is formally identical to the religious structure Marx critiqued. The Jew, in this framework, becomes doubly displaced: first as the semiotic exemplar of the religious obstacle that Marxism claims to have overcome, and second as the bearer of a competing particularist universalism (Zionism as Jewish national self-determination) that threatens to expose the substitutive character of Sinicization itself.

This reading connects directly to what Backer has elsewhere described, in the context of modernization theory and its discontents, as the problem of “Lebenswelt”—the lived-world horizon within which theoretical claims acquire their meaning and against which their universalist pretensions must be measured.²⁰ The Sinicization of Marxism is, on this account, not the application of a universal theory to Chinese conditions but the constitution of Chinese conditions as the Lebenswelt within which Marxist universalism acquires its operative meaning—a move that is at once theoretically productive (it generates a genuinely distinctive theoretical framework) and theoretically self-undermining (it reinstates at the level of foundation precisely the civilizational particularity that the theory claims to have superseded).

²⁰Larry Catá Backer, “‘Modernization’ (现代化) and Chinese Constitutionalism’s ‘Lifeworld’: Constitutionalism as the Institutionalized Phenomenology of Modernization” (Working Paper, Aug. 2026).

For the specific question of Chinese posture toward Israel and Jewish nationhood, the implications are substantial. The “Jewish Question” is not, for the Chinese Marxist theoretical apparatus, a question about Jews in particular; it is a question about whether any particularist claim to self-determination can be accommodated within a framework that requires the supersession of all particularisms by the universal—where “the universal” is itself the product of a particular civilizational tradition’s self-elevation. The structural hostility to Jewish sovereignty is thus not antisemitism in the European sense but something potentially more intractable: it is the logical consequence of a theoretical architecture that cannot acknowledge Jewish national self-determination without simultaneously exposing its own foundations as particularist rather than universal.

But the analysis cannot stop here, because the erasure of the Jew from the cognitive universe of Chinese Marxist-Leninism does not leave a vacuum—it produces a substitution whose consequences are potentially more profound than those of the erasure itself. In displacing Jewish particularist nationhood from the category of legitimate self-determination, the Chinese theoretical apparatus does not replace it with nothing; it fills the vacated space with a different universalist-particularist claim—that of the Palestinian national project, and behind it, the far more consequential presence of the Islamic Ummah as a universalist civilizational order with its own *lebenswelt*, its own eschatology, and its own claim to supersede all prior religious and political formations.

This produces a paradox that the current Chinese theoretical position avoids acknowledging but cannot indefinitely suppress. The MENA states that serve, in the language of “On Coalition Government,” as the “bourgeois and landed peasants of another era, useful today on the path to tomorrow,” are not merely secular nationalist formations available for coalition incorporation. They are carriers of a universalist religious civilization—Islam—whose own internal logic of the Ummah is at least as comprehensive in its claims, and at least as resistant to subordination within another framework, as the Chinese-style modernization that seeks to lead the coalition. The Islamic Ummah is itself a *lebenswelt*—a pre-given horizon of meaning within which political action acquires its significance—and it is a *lebenswelt* whose universalist claims are, in many respects, more deeply rooted and more resistant to domestication than anything the Chinese Marxist-Leninist apparatus has yet confronted.

The irony is precise: in the effort to displace the relatively contained particularism of Jewish national self-determination (which claims, after all, only a small territory and a specific people), Chinese Marxist-Leninist internationalism has allied itself with a universalism whose eventual trajectory poses a far more fundamental challenge to the Sinicization project than Zionism ever could. The glimmerings of this contradiction are already visible in the application of Chinese ideological principles and imperatives to the governance of its recognized ethnic and religious minorities—particularly in the Turkic Muslim regions, where the Party-state’s policies reflect an

engagement with Islamic universalism guided by its own theoretical commitments regarding the management of religious expression within the framework of socialist modernization. The delicate balancing act required to cultivate Muslim-majority MENA states as coalition partners externally while applying domestically the ideological imperatives that the Party's own doctrinal architecture requires with respect to religious communities produces a tension whose theoretical implications have not yet been fully elaborated.

This suggests a two-track theorization whose internal tensions have not yet been adequately examined: an external policy grounded in the vanguard-coalition architecture described in this essay, in which Muslim-majority states serve as coalition partners and the Jew serves as externalized antagonist; and a quite different internal policy, in which the implications of Islamic universalism are engaged through the application of the Party's ideological principles and the institutional apparatus of its governance of recognized ethnic and religious minorities. The two tracks are currently maintained in a state of functional separation—the external discourse of solidarity and anti-hegemonic coalition operates on a different plane of analysis from the internal discourse of governance, social stability, and the management of religious expression within the theoretical parameters set by socialist modernization. But this separation can only be understood as temporary, as a pragmatic deferral rather than a theoretical resolution. The coalition's Muslim partners are not secular instrumentalities available for indefinite incorporation without consequence; they are bearers of their own universalist claims, and those claims will eventually press against the boundaries of the vanguard-coalition framework within which they are currently situated.

The eventual collision—between the universalist claims of the Islamic *lebenswelt* and the universalist claims of the Chinese-style modernization *lebenswelt*—will produce what Marxist-Leninist theory would recognize as a general contradiction: not the kind of secondary or tactical contradiction that can be managed through adjustments to the principal contradiction's formulation, but a structural antagonism between two incommensurable claims to civilizational universality, each with its own eschatology, its own developmental teleology, and its own account of the proper relationship between the political order and the transcendent. This is a contradiction that the current Chinese position avoids entirely in its external expression, and engages with internally through the application of its ideological principles and imperatives guided by its policies on the treatment of recognized ethnic and religious minorities. That avoidance cannot last indefinitely. And when the contradiction surfaces—as it must, if the theoretical architecture described here is correct—it will expose the Sinicization project's foundational wager: that Chinese civilizational particularity can permanently sustain a claim to Marxist universality against all comers. The Jewish Question was, in this sense, the easy case; the Islamic Question may prove to be the hard one. But that, too, remains genuinely open.

The question that Marx's essay poses to the Sinicization project—whether a theory that identifies religious particularity as the obstacle to human emancipation can coherently ground itself in civilizational particularity without becoming what it critiques—remains, like much else in this analysis, genuinely open. It is a question that neither Brender's essay nor this critique can resolve, but that both, from their different analytical planes, help to make visible.

The consequences are visible in the performative constitution of what, in another context, has been described as the “bad Jew”²¹—the Jew who refuses supersession, who insists on return rather than permanent wandering, who claims national sovereignty rather than accepting the diasporic condition that the theoretical architecture requires of him. The cognitive rifts in the Israel-Palestine conflict are, on this reading, not merely political disagreements but manifestations of fundamental semiotic contests over whether the Jewish insistence on sovereign return can be accommodated within a theoretical framework that requires Jewish displacement as a structural precondition. The assumption, visible across multiple discursive fields and rarely examined, “that what will be a State of Palestine must be or will be free of Jews”²² is not an incidental policy preference; it is a logical entailment of a framework in which the Jew's proper position is wandering, not sovereignty—theory-in-exile, not theory-come-home.

From Atrocity to Structure: The Act/Structure Problem

“Brender's argument that structural contextualization can function to “relativize or displace” an act's independent moral character takes a clear position in what Backer, in “Debating Genocide,”²³ identifies as an unresolved and actively contested question in contemporary norm-formation: whether the meaning of a mass-casualty event is better understood as a discrete act to be judged on its own terms, or as “the consequential collective rationalization of aggregated events and objects the collection of which produces its meaning.” Backer does not resolve this question in his own writing; he presents it as a genuine methodological fork with consequences for how “genocide” and comparable categories are applied across cases.

“Brender's essay, by contrast, takes a position on this question and treats China's structural reframing as evidence of bad faith rather than as one instance of a broader interpretive practice that is neither unique to China nor without its own internal logic. One observes the same structural interpretive mode in the ICJ proceedings concerning South Africa's genocide

²¹See Larry Catá Backer, “‘They Shoot Horses Don't They?’... The ‘Jewish Problem’ in ‘Palestine’ as Performed by the State Inmates of that Asylum of Politics,” *Law at the End of the Day* (Sept. 27, 2025).

²²Backer, “‘They Shoot Horses Don't They?’,” *supra* note 21.

²³Larry Catá Backer, “Debating Genocide—Shifting Frameworks for Ordering Facts, Theory, Significance, and Consequence,” *Law at the End of the Day* (Aug. 2025).

allegations²⁴—what Backer elsewhere describes as “the cultural instrumentalization of judicial and quasi judicial spaces”—and in the Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund’s divestment decisions, which operationalize structural readings of the conflict through what amounts to “the ritualization of legal invocation to leverage up political decisions.” The act/structure question is not China’s invention; it is the defining methodological contest of the post-October 7 normative environment, and Brender’s essay would be more persuasive if it defended the act-centered reading explicitly rather than assuming it.

Institutional Operationalization: The Norway Example

The vanguard-coalition architecture does not operate solely through diplomatic discourse; it finds institutional expression in the market mechanisms and legal forms through which political decisions are operationalized as economic consequences. The Norwegian Government Pension Fund’s decisions regarding Israeli-linked investments illustrate this with particular clarity.²⁵ Norway’s position aligns “with that of certain elements in China on the global ‘Jewish Question,’” not because Norway is part of China’s coalition—it manifestly is not—but because the structural logic of antagonist-constitution produces convergent effects across otherwise disparate political systems. The “ritualization of legal invocation to leverage up political decisions”—the use of international humanitarian law as the warrant for what are fundamentally political choices about which actors deserve institutional support and which deserve institutional punishment—provides the appearance of neutral, rule-governed decision-making while in fact operationalizing the same antagonist-constitution that the vanguard-coalition architecture requires.

The Bezeq case is illustrative: Norway’s willingness to tolerate Palestinian suffering from loss of telecom services in the service of making settlers’ lives uncomfortable reveals that the governing logic is not humanitarian concern (which would weigh consequences for Palestinian civilians) but structural antagonism (which targets “the settlers” as a reified category regardless of collateral effects). “The Jews have got to go for the preservation of a Jew free Palestine”—this is not Norway’s stated position, naturally, but it is the logical entailment of a framework in which settlements are treated as the fundamental obstacle to peace and their removal as a precondition for all other progress. That this logic produces convergence between Chinese vanguard-coalition politics and Norwegian social-democratic technocracy is not coincidental; it reflects the

²⁴Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), ICJ, Order of 24 May 2024. See also Larry Catá Backer, “(South Africa v. Israel) Order of 24 May 2024,” *Law at the End of the Day* (May 24, 2024).

²⁵See Larry Catá Backer, “Russians, ‘Settlers’, and Corruption: The Norway Pension Fund Global Announces Three Decisions,” *Law at the End of the Day* (Dec. 10, 2024); Larry Catá Backer, “A Transformative Moment for the Politics of Sovereign Investing and Markets-Based Transnational Rule of Law Building: The Norway Pension Fund Global System Temporarily Goes Dark,” *Law at the End of the Day* (Nov. 17, 2025).

availability of a shared antagonist-figure—“the settler” as a particular instantiation of the broader “foreign-fascist-feudal oppressor”—across otherwise incommensurable political traditions.

On Interpretive Closure

Brender’s essay ends in a summary verdict: China’s universalism “was universal only where politically convenient.” Backer’s own practice, across the texts reviewed here, characteristically resists this kind of closure. His treatment of the Wang Yi meeting ends by inviting the reader to judge for themselves (“But you be the judge of that”); his treatment of the genocide debate explicitly declines to adjudicate “whatever one’s position on the underlying theory.” This is a difference in interpretive posture rather than in substantive conclusion: Backer’s method treats the persistence of contested meaning as itself the object of study, whereas Brender’s essay moves from documentation to verdict.

Neither posture is self-evidently superior—an essay published to make a normative case for how China’s conduct should be judged is not obligated to adopt the more open-ended posture of a scholarly gloss—but the difference is worth naming because it shapes what each piece of writing is trying to do: Brender’s essay is an argument; Backer’s method, as displayed across these posts, is closer to a sustained interrogation of how meaning is constructed and by whom. The refusal of closure is not an evasion of judgment; it is a judgment about the conditions under which judgment is possible—a recognition that the discursive structures one is examining are still in motion, still producing effects, still constituting their subjects and objects, and that to arrest that motion prematurely in a verdict is to mistake the analyst’s position for a position outside the field of forces being analyzed.

Summary Assessment

Brender’s essay is carefully sourced with respect to official Chinese diplomatic statements and offers a genuinely useful close reading of terminology—particularly the analysis of 被扣押人员, which stands as a model of semiotic attentiveness to the constitutive force of diplomatic nomenclature. Its central empirical claim—that China’s diplomatic language and convenor diplomacy consistently developed Palestinian claims while leaving Israeli claims comparatively abstract—is documented with specific, dated sources and is not, on the evidence presented, exaggerated. The essay’s documentation of the pattern is a contribution that subsequent analysis, including this one, can build upon.

Its principal limitation, judged against the methodological commitments visible in Backer’s own work, is that it operates largely at the level of diplomatic discourse and normative judgment without situating that discourse within the deeper theoretical architecture—the Marxist-Leninist vanguard-coalition form, New Era Socialist Internationalism and its Belt and Road institutional infrastructure, the Sinicization project and its structural supersessionism, and the specific

ideological genealogy of Chinese Marxist treatments of Jewish nationhood—that would explain why the pattern it documents is not simply strategic opportunism but closer to a structural feature of how a vanguard state-party organizes international coalitions and how the Sinicization of Marxism generates, as a logical entailment, the constitution of the Jew as simultaneous antagonist and superseded predecessor.

Brender's essay documents the *what* with exemplary empirical care, and this documentation is not merely a preliminary to the theoretical inquiry but its necessary condition; this critique has attempted to supply the *why* at a different level of theoretical depth, and to treat the resulting picture as more unresolved—and more embedded in older discursive tropes whose genealogy runs through Marx's own "On the Jewish Question" and through the figure of the wandering Jew repurposed within Chinese Marxist categories—than Brender's concluding verdict allows. The pattern is not a failure of principle; it is principle's consistent application within a theoretical architecture that never promised symmetry and that requires, as a condition of its own coherence, precisely the asymmetry Brender documents. Whether that architecture can sustain itself—whether the contradictions it generates will eventually produce effects its authors cannot control, and in particular whether the "clay feet" of a Sinicization project that reinstates at the level of political ontology the very religious recursion Marx identified as the obstacle to human emancipation will eventually crack under the weight of its own internal logic—is a question that remains, in Backer's characteristic formulation, genuinely open. It is a question that Brender's essay, by documenting the surface patterns with such care, makes it possible to ask at the structural level. But you be the judge of that.

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