

Xi Jinping Thought

Roland Boer

2019

Happenstance would have it that I was in Beijing for the nineteenth congress of the Communist Party of China. Usually, such events barely raise interest outside China, except perhaps for the rare Marxist actually interested in the place or – that ambivalent term – a ‘China hand’. And if some foreign commentator happens to notice, they will trot out some rusty formulae concerning arcane language, obtuse signals and look for signs of a ‘totalitarian’ state – without trying to find out much real information.

Not this time.

Something big was afoot. Everywhere I went in China in the weeks leading up the congress I encountered banners, signs and posters. ‘Welcome to the 19th congress of the CPC’, one said. ‘Study carefully Xi Jinping’s writings’, said another. ‘The 19th congress will lead to a better life [*meihua shenghuo*]’, said a third, invoking an ancient Chinese saying.

Security was tight, very tight. Internet systems were down or slow. Foreigners found themselves asked for passports and even urine samples if they happened to frequent expat bars (I avoid them). Almost one million citizen groups in Beijing were mobilised to keep an eye out for suspicious activity. Let alone the party members in town who had plain-clothes guard duty rosters for the lead-up and duration of the congress. Even social networking was tightened up: you could not change any item on your profile on wechat until the end of October.

In this buzz I zeroed in on the many levels of information available.

On the 18th of October, the congress began, with Xi Jinping slated to give a speech. And what a speech it was: 205 minutes non-stop, or 3 hours and 25 minutes. Clearly, the most important speech in his 63 years.

But what did he say?

Marxism has roared back to the centre of Chinese thought, policy and direction for the future. Not a mean achievement, especially after it seemed to be somewhat soft-pedalled not five years or more ago, before Xi became chairman (*zhuxi*, also translated as ‘president’). Marxism would be – no, is – the guiding light, the beacon to the future.

Marxist political economy is setting the agenda for a very different economic approach. This is called a socialist market economy – and the Chinese are very serious about what is an increasingly clear alternative to a capitalist market economy. The speech outlined five main factors: 1) furthering supply-side structural reform; 2) fostering innovation at all levels to increase China’s global leadership; 3) rural revitalisation; 4) coordinated regional development; 5) further opening up on all fronts. And the institutional mechanisms for each are already established.

But let me emphasise the following dimensions underlying this socialist market economy. The model clearly being followed is an alternative to neo-liberalism, which loves financial speculation and estimates based on short-term profit yields. Instead, the Chinese model takes the long view. Infrastructure is the key, within China and without. Think of the Belt and Road Initiative, already to reshape the world, let alone seeking to reshape the uneven development of China internally (focused on the western parts).

Further, the simplistic opposition between 'public' and 'private' sectors of the economy is now obsolete. For example, any 'private' company of over 100 employees has a core communist party cell. Each multinational company that wishes to engage with China – and so many do – must have a communist cell within it. What do we call this approach? I prefer to call it an 'enmeshed' economy, in which the CPC is interwoven with an equally interwoven 'public' and 'private' sector. What appears initially to be a 'private' economic project is inescapably enmeshed with the CPC, while the 'public' companies (SOEs) are being revitalised by active interaction with the 'private' ones. Even more, the mighty SOEs, revamped and more efficient, are starting to become multi-nationals themselves through many projects. Obviously, this has significant global implications.

But Marxism is much more than economics. Let me give a few examples.

1. The speech calls for an 'ecological civilisation', drawing deeply on cultural assumptions concerning the harmony of nature as '*shanshui*', 'mountain-water', but also modern Marxist approaches.
2. 'Core socialist values' is a key, stressing the fact that ethics is a crucial component of Chinese Marxism, which should permeate all levels of society even more.
3. Strengthening the mechanisms by which the people run the country, which means developing further a distinctly Marxist tradition of socialist democracy.
4. A 'socialist rule of law' (*shehuizhuyi fazhi*), in which everyone is subject to the law. Obviously, this has affinities with a European-derived 'rule of law', although that tradition really means a whole structure developed to buttress capitalism. This is why the speech emphasised a *socialist* rule of law. It is being developed as system to ensure the development of socialism, while at the same making it clear that no-one is above this law within this framework.
5. Bold innovation by artists, writers, journalists, philosophers, social scientists and scientists, so that they not only contribute decisively to the country but also to the world.

Apart from the details in the speech, one of the more fascinating aspects for me was that it followed in its structure a familiar pattern from the Marxist tradition. Look back at Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Deng and others, and you will find that important speeches like this begin with an assessment of achievements (this one since the eighteenth party congress five years ago). While it identifies significant achievements, it also stresses – in the tradition of 'criticism and self-criticism' – where problems have arisen. The next two parts deal with national and international concerns. Xi's speech on this occasion focused more on internal concerns, which is to be expected. But he certainly did not neglect the international picture: the

armed forces would continue to be modernised for the country's own security in an international context and China would continue to pursue the peaceful policy of a 'shared future for humanity'.

In all these speeches, the last part deals with the communist party itself. Xi's tenure began with a strong desire by party leaders that he would deal with significant problems: corruption, factionalism, brewing coups, lack of unity, inadequate theoretical knowledge. On all fronts, Xi has driven through major reforms, so that his statements concerning the party's ability to govern and lead, and the need for full, rigorous and strict governance over the party were certainly not empty phrases. More work obviously needs to be done, which he stressed, but the communist party has begun to emerge as stronger, more disciplined, unified and confident. It will be even more at the centre of power. As Xi put it, the 'defining feature' and 'greatest strength' of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the leadership of the communist party. The party is the 'highest force for political leadership'.

For some time now, Xi Jinping has been emphasising the 'two centenary goals' (2021 and 2049), the 'Chinese dream' and its concrete manifestation in global projects like the Belt and Road Initiative. These were in the speech as well, but with greater clarity. The first centenary goal – of the CPC itself – is still there, of building a *xiaokang shehui*, an old Confucian term infused with Marxist meaning and translated as 'moderately prosperous society in all respects'. Given that this is around the corner, Xi's sights are set further in the future. To achieve the second centenary goal, he laid out two steps.

2020-2035: Full 'socialist modernisation [*shehuizhuyi xiandaihua*]', or more fully a 'socialistically modernised country' [*shehuizhuyi xiandaihua guojia*]. This phrase captures all of the policies outlined in the speech, but it also marks a shift from his earlier pronouncements. He used to speak of socialist modernisation being achieved by the second centenary goal, marking 100 years since the establishment of the people's republic. Now the aim has been brought forward to 2035.

2035-2050: building on the previous achievement and developing China into a 'great modern socialist country'. This country will be strong, prosperous, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful. Only when this has been achieved can China begin moving beyond the 'primary stage' of socialism in which it still finds itself.

A tall and ambitious agenda indeed, but Xi and those around him as 'the core' have a reputation for getting things done. Crucial for understanding this revised plan is the observation, 'based on a comprehensive analysis of the international and domestic environments'. Clearly, the rapidly shifting global situation, with the accelerating decline of the United States and ongoing turmoil and instability in Europe, along with world-shaping projects like the BRI and China's increasing involvement around the world, the time has been judged right for the emergence of a 'great modern socialist country' by the middle of this century. It also means that China would become the most powerful country in the world, and thereby the most powerful socialist country in human history.

This is not to say that road ahead will be easy – far from it!

A crucial part of the speech identified a new primary contradiction: 'What we now face is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for

a better life'. This is straight out of the 'contradiction analysis' approach that Mao first elaborated in Yan'an in 1937, showing that Marxist dialectics in a Chinese frame is still front and centre of government policies. Not only is there a primary or most important contradiction in any situation, but this contradiction may shift in terms of the weight given to either side, or it may become secondary as a new primary contradiction emerges. Thus, the earlier primary contradiction, articulated by Deng Xiaoping, identified a tension between the people's social and cultural needs and the backward economic forces. With China's forty-year reform and opening-up, it has been decided – through careful analysis – that this earlier contradiction has become secondary.

But what does the new primary contradiction mean? Unbalanced and inadequate development signals the complex problems of world-leading development in the more eastern parts of China and the lag in western parts, with resultant gaps between rich and poor, city and countryside. Obviously, the new contradiction targets these issues more directly. And the people's every growing need for a better life – an old Chinese term *meihua shenghuo* – applies to everyone, especially in western parts. Hence the targeted poverty alleviation program that has been accelerated, hence the BRI, hence the focus on the full range of what a 'better life' means. But the need for a better life also identifies with the core idea that socialism is primarily about improving the economic, social and cultural lives of everyone. Until this contradiction is resolved, China clearly remains in the primary stage of socialism.

At the same time, it signals a profoundly new era. This theme came through again and again in the report: China and its socialism have entered a new era. The trick here is to indicate profound continuity with the past, while also taking it all into a new stage. It is not for nothing that it has been called 'Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era [*xindedai zhongguotese shehuizhuyi sixiang*]'. Or 'Xi Jinping Thought' for short.

Only Mao's thought has until now been designated with the description *sixiang*, thought. Even Deng's important but briefer reflections were designated only as *lilun*, theory. Xi Jinping Thought has now been written into the constitution of the Communist Party of China.

At one point, I woke in the middle of the night and realised that this moment, in October 2017, will turn out to be as significant at the moment in Yan'an some 80 years ago when Mao Zedong Thought was first formally identified.

I have spent some time with all of this, not least because foreign 'China watchers' have tended to focus on international relations, the strength of the communist party, and above all Xi's own power. Obviously, this emphasis skews much of what the speech contained, both in terms of continuity with Xi's earlier elaborations and the new directions. I leave aside the silly tropes of 'jargon', 'coded' language, or 'grand theatre' that are routinely trotted out.

But what was the response of people around China? I could mention the millions that watched the speech live, or the flurry of wechat and weibo posts about it. But one experience said it all for me. I decided to go to the local Xinhua bookshop, the official government one. At the front desk, I asked where Xi Jinping's works were kept. The woman at the desk smiled and pointed upstairs.

There before me was a massive table laden with Xi Jinping's publications. And at the forefront were various editions of the speech itself, only days after it was delivered. I struggled to find room to look at the publications, so crowded was the table. Eventually I managed to get hold of one copy, as well as a number of Xi's other publications. For whatever reasons, people were snapping up the printed form of the speech. I simply could not imagine this happening anywhere else.