

What About the Chinese Workers?

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A question I am asked from time to time when talking about Chinese Marxism is: what about the workers?

The short answer is that about 800 million of them have been lifted out of poverty in the last 40 years or more – the time of the Reform and Opening-Up initiated by Deng Xiaoping.

The long answer requires some more detail.

The question with which I began often implies a certain potted narrative that one finds in the eddies and pools of the tributary known as ‘Western’ Marxism: once upon a time, the workers were treated well in China, with the ‘Iron Rice Bowl’ (not originally a Chinese term) providing full employment and cradle-to-grave support. But then everything was turned on its head with the ‘Reform and Opening-Up’. Workers were treated badly, lost their jobs and social security, and the Communist Party morphed into yet another exploiting ruling class.

The problem with this ‘betrayal narrative’ is not so much its mixture of half-truths and distortions, but more its deliberate neglect of crucial facts.

To begin with, it assumes a ‘Eurofied’ Marxism, in which the working class is well-developed in the context of an over-ripe capitalist market economy. Marxism is thus supposed to be all about the working class – the proletariat – and a communist revolution will be driven by them.

The catch is that the successful communist revolutions happened in places that did not have a large or well-developed working class. Instead, they had a vast majority of peasants. What was to be done?

The first real effort can be dated back to Engels’s oft-neglected piece from 1882, ‘The Mark’. Here he recovers the old practice of subsistence survival economics, in which the land was held in common, reallocated on a regular basis, and in which pasture lands and forests were common land. The trace of all this Engels finds in the German ‘mark’. Crucially, he ends the piece with a call to recover at a whole new dialectical level this

version of rural communism. He closes the piece with these words: 'Think well on it, German peasants. Only the *Social-Democrats* can help you'. In other words, the communists are the real friends of the peasants.

Despite this insight, the first successful proletarian revolution in Russia struggled to come to terms with the peasants. The revolution happened in the cities, based on the fledgling working class and it was only with significant struggle and not a little disruption (in the 1930s) that the peasants became collective farm workers in the new class formations under socialism.

How is all this relevant for China?

There too the initial Communist movement focused on the small number of workers, leading to the failed revolution of early 1927. In reply, it was Mao's breakthrough to pick up some of the emphases from Engels, Lenin, and Stalin and focus on the peasants as the core of the Communist movement. While the Nanchang Uprising on 1 August 1927 – the first successful armed insurrection of the Chinese Revolution mounted in response to the Shanghai massacre – was taking place, Mao had already organised a red base with peasants in the nearby Jinggang mountains. The fabled meeting there between him and Zhu De's armed force from Nanchang marks the origin of the Red Army.

Let me push this a little further. For Mao and the others, it was not so much a combination of workers and peasants, but the breakthrough that peasants too are workers, rural workers. As a result, the Communist movement massively expanded its base.

Even so, this is only a beginning. A couple of further issues are important, both of them turning on the definition of socialism. Let us go back to a crucial sentence from the 'Communist Manifesto':

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; *and to increase the total of productive forces [Produktionskräfte] as rapidly as possible.*

There are two aspects of this definition of socialism. The first concerns the ownership of the means of production, which is directly connected with the relations of production (classes, workers and bourgeoisie, and so on). Indeed, if you ask a 'Western'

Marxist, who lives in one of the very few developed countries, what a definition of socialism would be, they would answer: ownership of the forces of production by the working class. This definition makes sense only in a context where the forces of production are already highly developed. At the same time, it is clearly one-sided in light of the quotation from the 'Communist Manifesto'.

This brings me to the second part of the quotation: increasing the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible, or – as a shorthand – liberating the forces of production. This emphasis has been much stronger in places where the productive forces remained 'backward' and undeveloped. In these situations, a one-sided focus on ownership of the means of production would mean 'poor socialism'. Lives would not be improved, socio-economic well-being would never happen, and grinding poverty would be the common lot. Thus, there has been a notable emphasis in these places on the other side of the definition of socialism: liberating productive forces. As we will see in a moment, a one-sided emphasis on this part of the definition can also lead to problems.

This brings me to the historical implications of the definition of socialism. Simply put, successful proletarian revolutions have taken place in contexts where the productive forces were undeveloped and 'backward' – and not in contexts of highly developed productive forces. This means that historical evidence of the process of constructing socialism comes from precisely these contexts, all the way from the Soviet Union to China.

This historical process is instructive, revealing the complex intertwining of both aspects of the definition of socialism. After a successful communist revolution, we find that the first step taken in all places was to take hold of the forces of production, which were managed by the state on behalf of the vast majority. This has turned out to be an absolutely necessary first step, since it was crucial to dispossess the bourgeoisie and old landlord classes of their control of productive forces, as well as deal with the inevitable counter-revolution. This dictatorship of the proletariat (urban and rural workers) was necessary to institute a whole range of new policies, from education, through medical care, to comprehensive workplace reform. Most importantly, in all cases the seizure of the productive forces led to a massive burst of productivity. This means that ownership of the

means of production was needed in order to liberate these productive forces – in the initial phase.

This was also the case in China in the first decade or two. What we find with Mao Zedong is a clearer realisation in the late 1950s and early 1960s is that the key is to liberate productive forces. However, Mao's methods for doing so did not achieve the desired result: he still felt that ownership of the productive forces – that is, the relations of production – was the key. So there were the mistakes of the Great Leap Forward and the disruptive diversion of the 'Cultural Revolution'. In fact, what was happening was that new contradictions had begun to arise in the initial phase of socialist construction. These contradictions turned on primary contradiction between the forces and relations of production: the resolute emphasis on ownership, on the old-style centrally planned economy, was beginning to stifle economic development.

This is precisely the context for Deng Xiaoping's resolute emphasis on liberating the productive forces. New solutions had to be found to overcome the contradictions mentioned above. Deng and his comrades had no time for the 'poor socialism' propagated by the 'Gang of Four'. Thus, we find the massive the project of the Reform and Opening-Up, which was both built on the foundations established in the previous phase and went a step further. The socialist market economy became a component of the overall socialist system, and planning was revamped and leapt to a whole new level.

While understandable in the situation of the 1970s, Deng's emphasis was perhaps too much on the other side of the definition of socialism. This emphasis led to a whole spate of new contradictions in the 'wild 90s': deterioration in the conditions of workers and resultant labour unrest; a growing gap between those who had benefited from the reforms and those who had yet to benefit; a loss of the social security systems embedded in the vast and inefficient state owned enterprises (SOEs); major problems with pollution; a gap between the CPC and the common people, leading to corruption, minimal knowledge of Marxism among even leading cadres, and a lack of trust and legitimacy; ideological divergence, with some proposing Western 'universal values', others a revamped Confucianism, and others a Western-style social democracy. The problems of the 'wild 90s' were indeed substantial, but were they systemic? The Chinese Marxist answer is no:

instead, they were contingent or incidental, characteristics of a distinct phase of the Reform and Opening-Up. What was to be the answer? Was it to be a retreat from the whole process of reform? No. The answer drew directly Marxist dialectical analysis: the answer is to deepen reform.

The results: since 2013 there has been a resolute emphasis on justice and economic equality. This has entailed the following emphases: 'green growth', or ecological civilisation, so much so that China now leads the world on this front; socialist rule of law; further development of socialist democracy: enhanced leadership of the Communist Party; major moves to the full realisation (in the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan) of a social security system, now upon a strong economic foundation; eradication of corruption; a level of Marxist knowledge in the CPC that rivals the time of Mao Zedong; and so on.

For my purposes here, the major result of this deepening of reform has meant ensuring that everyone benefits from China's wealth. Thus a key feature of achieving a moderately well-off, healthy, and peaceful society (a *xiaokang* society) by 2021 has been the last and toughest phase of the poverty alleviation project. Even though hundreds of millions had already been lifted out of poverty, 100 million or so remained. These were in the most remote and difficult areas, and so the task even more daunting. The solution: targeted poverty alleviation, focused on solutions specific to the situation of each village and county. CPC volunteers went to the countryside in their millions, in order to devote themselves to this last and most difficult stage of poverty alleviation.

The result: by early 2021, the last remote county was free from absolute poverty. Let us be clear here, for the Chinese measure of lifting people out of poverty is higher than the level set by international bodies. It concerns not merely the level of one's earnings, but also access to quality road and rail, to digital networks, education, medical care, and – crucially – measures to ensure that people do not fall back into poverty.

As I write in early 2021, about 800 million rural and urban workers have been lifted out of poverty in China (more than 7 out of 10 worldwide). In China, however, they do not rest on their laurels. Instead, they see this as merely a beginning. To be lifted out of poverty is one thing; to achieve the level of a middle-income group is the next thing. Already about 500 million people are now in what is known as the 'middle-income group' (and not, as

some erroneously suggest, a capitalist-style middle class). You can be assured that more will join this group.

Not only has this achievement been widely acclaimed one of the greatest human rights achievements in history, but it is precisely workers – urban and rural – who have benefited.

As they like to say, without the Community Party there would be no new China.