

# The Global Significance of China's Path to Socialist Modernisation

Roland Boer

Dalian University of Technology, School of Marxism

Communist Party of Australia, Newcastle branch

Presentation for the World Congress of Marxism, Peking University, 2021

China's significant achievement in socialist modernisation and rejuvenation are apparent to everyone, so much so that they are difficult to ignore. From being one of the poorest countries in the world in 1949, it has now overcome absolute poverty. From a semi-colonised country, it has now stepped onto the world stage as a great power. From a country whose voice was ignored, it speaks with a cultural confidence to which everyone now listens. The reality is that no one can now ignore China's modernisation.

But what is the global significance of China's road to socialist modernisation? There are, potentially, a large number of topics one might emphasise. These include the guiding role of Marxism; achievements in poverty alleviation and in ecological civilisation; a *xiaokang* society and the four modernisations; the policy of peaceful coexistence in terms of mutual non-interference in a multi-polar world; the development of a distinct Chinese Marxist approach to human rights as a rooted universal; and so on. These are all worthy topics and I am sure that other contributions at the World Congress on Marxism will emphasise these and other topics.

However, I would like to emphasise three items from a specific context. This context is, firstly, Marxist philosophy, since this is the discipline in which I teach and research at Dalian University of Technology. The second context is my membership of the Communist Party of Australia. In light of these contexts, I will focus on three topics: the revival of Marxist philosophy; Marxism as the guide for constructing socialism in light of historical experience; and the China model in relation to other Communist Parties.

## Revival of Marxist Philosophy

The first point of significance concerns the revival of Marxist philosophy. I do not refer only to academic work, however important it may be, but to Marxist philosophy as China's 看家本领 (*kanjia benling*), the special and honed skill that enables one to take care of the home and thus the country (Xi 2013b, 404; 2020, 5). This emphasis came to the fore particularly in Xi Jinping's now famous 2016 speech on philosophy and the social sciences (Xi 2016), which not only reasserted and indeed reestablished the importance and centrality of Marxist philosophy, but also challenged scholars and students to ensure that

philosophy and the social sciences would not merely become commensurate with China's global status, but actually move into the forefront and lead global developments.

Marxist philosophy, of course, is defined according to the mainstream tradition of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought as both dialectical and historical materialism (Xi 2019; 2020),<sup>1</sup> but I would like to emphasise the international significance of the renewed emphasis on Marxist philosophy. From an international perspective, this is both stunning and timely. Here is a general secretary of the largest political party in the world, and the president of the most powerful socialist country in human history, identifying Marxist philosophy as China's special skill, as the key to China's socialist path. This emphasis appears at many levels, whether the primary contradiction that shapes government policy and five-year plans, in the leadership of the Communist Party and a 'people-centred' philosophy, the diplomatic policy of win-win in contrast to zero-sum, and so on.

But let me ask how this emphasis is significant for philosophy itself at an international level, and for Communist parties. In terms of philosophy, there is a growing awareness that the primary form of philosophy in China is Marxist philosophy. True, there is the long tradition of Chinese philosophy developed in terms of wisdom of the sages, but this has been reshaped in light of the overall Marxist framework. To give one example: a major journal concerning East-West comparative philosophy is at last coming to the awareness that the 'East' in question must take the predominance of Marxist philosophy into account when engaging in the task of comparison.

As for Communist Parties in many countries (however small or large they may be), the reality is that they have always had 'party schools' in order to study Marxist philosophy. In my experience in the Communist Party of Australia, party schools are held at local branches every few months, and at the national level party schools take place regularly at the central office in Sydney. While there are no physical schools, with buildings and teaching staff as in China, the party schools take place over one day or a weekend and include a variety of speakers on a range of topics. Along with other topics, Marxist philosophy has always been a key component in such party schools. But I have noticed more recently that there is an increased interest in Chinese Marxism, especially in how Marxist philosophy is front and centre in China.

---

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the tributary or side-stream of Western Marxism, where we find some asserting in a distorted fashion that only 'historical materialism' pertains to Marxism.

## **Marxism as the Guide for Socialist Modernisation**

The second major point of international significance is that Marxism is the guide for the construction of socialism and indeed for socialist modernisation. Why do I make this point? Unfortunately, in capitalist countries there has been a retreat in the use of the Marxist method: those who use such a method have retreated either to analysing capitalism or even to cultural analysis. Both are, of course, necessary, but they are by no means sufficient. There has been little to no analysis of how Marxism may guide socialist construction.

The lesson from China is timely. Let me put it this way: after a Communist seizure of power through a proletarian revolution, everything changes. As Lenin put it, the struggle leading to the taking power is the relatively easy part; exercising power for the sake of socialist construction is exponentially more difficult. For those involved in the revolutionary struggle for power, Marxism is used to analyse the exploitation and class struggle inherent in capitalism; for those involved in the long path towards constructing socialism and then communism, Marxism must be used to guide the way along the path. More specifically, it is the principles of the Marxist method in all its components that must be deployed in finding solutions to specific problems in socialist construction.

The problems have been and continue to be many: how to liberate the forces of production so as to ensure socio-economic well-being for all; how to ensure that public ownership of the means of production remains the mainstay in the context of multiple forms of ownership; how to combine both development and environmental concerns in 'green development'; how to secure the socialist project against continued attacks by capitalist countries; how to foster innovation in science and technology as productive forces; how to promote socialist culture and values; and so on.

Obviously, there is a qualitative shift in context, from seeking power to exercising power; from the struggle against a capitalist system to constructing a socialist system. Is Marxism then relevant only for the analysis of a capitalist system, or for earlier systems? Unfortunately, it seems as though some in the few Western countries seem to think so. But this is a profound retreat and even a distortion of Marxism. Marxism is even more relevant for providing the method, the special skill for the construction of socialism. This is the lesson of more than 100 years, from the October Revolution in Russia to China of today. Of these 100 years, China has provided more than 70 years of experience. It is a lesson that more and more are beginning to learn outside China, especially those who are members of Communist Parties worldwide.

## The China Model in Relation to Other Communist Parties

The third global implication concerns the ‘China model [中国模式]’ (Zhang and Cheng 2015). The idea, of course, is based upon the five principles for peaceful coexistence: ‘mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence’ (Zhou 1953). It was clearly expressed by Deng Xiaoping when speaking with President Chissane of Mozambique in 1988:

You must always remember one point: suit your own conditions. You may want to refer to other people’s experience, but that can be useful only as background information. The world’s problems cannot all be solved by means of one model. China has its own model, and Mozambique should also have its own model (Deng 1988, 261).

It is embodied in the momentous Belt and Road Initiative, in which each country negotiates as equals and does not seek to interfere in the internal affairs of the other (Xi 2013a), and it is expressed in the ‘win-win [共赢]’ principle of international diplomacy (Hu 2012, 31; Xi 2017; 2021; Boer and Zang 2019).

However, my focus here is on how this non-hegemonic approach applies to relations with other Communist Parties with which the CPC has fraternal relations. I raise this point here, since from time to time I am asked when outside China: when will the CPC take on the leadership of the global communist movement? The question is predicated on the model of the Soviet Union and the Comintern, which was headquartered in Moscow. The Comintern provided invaluable assistance in terms of finance, logistics, leadership, and military support, and it can be credited with playing a significant role in many successful anti-colonial struggles for national independence (Cheng and Yang 2020). However, there was a tendency to direct and at times control the revolutionary paths in other countries, without allowing them to develop in light of local conditions. This was the experience in China in the 1930s, which came to a head in the now famous Zunyi Conference of January 1935, when Mao Zedong and his comrades were elected to a controlling position in the Central Committee.<sup>2</sup>

This experience has led to the resolute principle of non-interference in other Communist Parties throughout the world. If there is a disagreement, it is resolved through

---

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is this experience that led Mao to speak of China’s ‘own laws of development’ and ‘its own national characteristics’, the ‘concrete struggle in the concrete conditions [*juti huanjing*] prevailing in China’, and the need for the ‘sinification of Marxism [*makesizhuyi zhongguohua*]’ so that it is ‘imbued with Chinese characteristics [*Zhongguo de texing*]’ and used ‘according to Chinese peculiarities [*Zhongguo de tedian*]’ (Mao 1938, 658–59; see also 1944, 191–92; Deng 1984).

discussion and negotiation, and not aired in public. Mutual respect, mutual recognition, and also mutual non-interference. Does this preclude the CPC engaging fraternally with other Communist Parties? Not at all. In fact, with the centenary of the CPC in 2021 there was a notable increase in communication and collaboration with other Communist Parties. On a personal note, I have witnessed this process with the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), as well as the Danske Kommunistiske Parti (DKP). While the CPA has focused much attention on China in the last few years, with significant study and debate, the smaller DKP is actively re-establishing connections and participating in fraternal activities. We are, after all, parts of the international communist movement, but not a few of us are still learning what the 'China model' means for fraternal relations between Communist Parties.

## Conclusion

In this presentation, I have emphasised three specific implications of China's socialist modernisation in light of the dual context of philosophy and Communist Parties in other countries. These are the revival of Marxist philosophy, the deployment of Marxism as a guide for socialist construction and modernisation, and the 'China model' in relation to fraternal Communist Parties. My sense is that in some cases the effect is still in its early stages, as the influence of China's modernisation is increasingly felt. This is particularly so for Marxist philosophy and for the implications of the China model. As for understanding the role of Marxism in socialist construction and modernisation, this also requires a conceptual shift, a 'liberation of thought' so as to understand the approach (Deng 1978).

## References

- Boer, Roland, and Zang Fengyu. 2019. 'Renlei mingyun gongtongti de lilun neihan yu xianshi jiazhi'. *Zhongyang shehuizhuyi xueyuan xuebao* 2019 (4): 9–17.
- Cheng, Enfu, and Yang Jun. 2020. 'The Chinese Revolution and the Communist International'. Translated by Zixu Liu. *Third World Quarterly* 41 (8): 1338–52.
- Deng, Xiaoping. 1978. 'Jiefang sixiang, shishiqiushi, tuanjiyizhi xiangqian kan (1978.12.13)'. In *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan*, Vol. 2:140–53. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2008.
- . 1984. 'Jianshe you Zhongguo tese de shehuizhuyi (1984.06.30)'. In *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan*, Vol. 3:62–66. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2008.
- . 1988. 'Jiefang sixiang, duli sikao (1988.05.18)'. In *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan*, Vol. 3:260–61. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2008.

- Hu, Jintao. 2012. *Jianding bu yi yanzhe Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi daolu, qianjin wei quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui er fendou* (2012.11.08). Beijing: Renmin chubanshe.
- Mao, Zedong. 1938. 'Lun xin jieduan (1938.10.12-14)'. In *Zhonggong zhongyang wenjian xuanji*, Vol. 11:557–662. Beijing: Zhonggang zhongyang xuexiao chubanshe, 1991.
- . 1944. Tong Yingguo jizhe Sitanyin de tanhua (1944.07.14)'. In *Mao Zedong wenji*, Vol. 3:182–94. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1996.
- Xi, Jinping. 2013a. 'Hongyang renmin youyi, gong chuang meihao weilai – zai Nazha'erbayefu daxue de yanjiang (2013.09.07)'. *Xinhua wang* 2013: 1–3.
- . 2013b. 'Yikao xuexi zouxiang weilai (2013.03.01)'. In *Tan zhiguolizheng*, Vol. 1:401–8. Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 2014.
- . 2016. *Zai zhaxue shehui kexue zuotanhui shang de jianghua* (2016.05.17). Beijing: Renmin chubanshe.
- . 2017. 'Gongtong goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti (2017.01.18)'. In *Tan zhiguolizheng*, Vol. 2:537–50. Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 2017.
- . 2019. 'Bianzheng weiwuzhuyi shi Zhongguo gongchandangren de shijieguan he fangfalun'. *Qiushi* 2019 (1): 1–3.
- . 2020. 'Jianchi lishi weiwuzhuyi buduan kaipi dangdai Zhongguo makesizhuyi fazhan xin jingjie (2020.01.15)'. *Qiushi* 2020 (2): 1–5.
- . 2021. 'Gongtong goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti'. *Qiushi* 2021 (1): 1–14.
- Zhang, Fujun, and Cheng Enfu. 2015. 'Zai luoshi "si ge quanmian" zhong wanshan Zhongguo daolu yu Zhongguo moshi'. *Sixiang lilun jiaoyu daokan* 2015 (4): 50–54.
- Zhou, Enlai. 1953. 'Heping gongchu wu xiang yuanze (1953.12.31)'. In *Zhou Enlai wenji*, Vol. 2:113. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1980.