



A Splendid and Timely Analysis of Chinese Marxism and Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

Roland Boer: *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, A Guide for Foreigners, Springer, Singapore, 2021*

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This is an excellent book. It is analytical, thoughtful, well researched and sensitive to the issues that matter. It is timely in its publication, appearing in a year when the need to understand what drives China, its leadership and its politics has never been greater. The knowledge and understanding the author shows are vast, and the sources he has used are extensive and appropriate. Considering the complexity of the subject, the written style is easy to follow. In short, this book has all the hallmarks of good scholarship.

Roland Boer is recognized as a leading scholar of Marxism, especially comparative Marxism, and has written widely on this and allied subjects. He is also a Sinologist in the true sense of the word, namely that he approaches China from the inside, rather than outside. A professor in the School of Marxism Studies, Dalian University of Technology, China, he is the only non-Chinese citizen to be employed in a School of Marxism Studies in China. His reputation for knowledge of Marxism is very high indeed.

The subject of this book is how the Chinese approach Marxism and socialism. There are altogether eleven chapters. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, they cover such subjects as “Reading Deng Xiaoping”, the Chinese Marxist basis to reform and opening up, the Chinese Marxist approach to sovereignty and human rights, socialist democracy and “Xi Jinping on Marx and Engels”. This review cannot cover all of them properly, but will focus attention on just a few of them.

There is a great deal about Marxist theory, as Chinese leaders have interpreted it, and the focus is everywhere on China and the Chinese. The method is also heavily slanted towards China: “Simply put, the method entails a careful reading of texts, both the primary (from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping) and secondary works of Chinese Marxism in relation to socialism with Chinese characteristics” (p. 15). As for

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sources, “by far the majority of sources used in this study are Chinese language sources” (p. 17). Boer has not found much use in the general run of Western commentaries on Chinese socialism, with only a few being valuable enough to cite.

To this reader, his approach is quite rational and justifiable. It has often struck me as strange that writers from Western (and indeed other) countries often seem to quote Chinese sources only to criticize them, apparently with the implication that a view that comes from outside is more valuable than a Chinese one. This strikes me as an arrogant and one-sided approach to scholarship about China.

A closely related issue Boer confronts in the introduction is mindset, in other words, the general attitudes and framework sets scholars use when researching and analysing socialism with Chinese characteristics. He asks why Western scholars so insistently misrepresent China and answers that there are “Western” perspectives that seem to intrude themselves all the time, when the population of those countries that can be classified as “Western” constitute only about 14% of humanity.

Boer writes (p. 14): “A major reason can be found in the fact that all of them are former colonisers and have through such colonial endeavours been able to assert a dominant discourse that arises from Western liberalism”. I think he is basically right. However, I am struck by the fact that Western mindsets are in many ways very similar to each other but in other ways different.

We know that initially trade both in commodities and people (slaves) exercised a profound impact on the economies and views of certain Western countries. Then, the Industrial Revolution, which began in Britain and then spread to the Low Countries, other parts of Europe and the USA, paved the way for colonial power. The whole process made the Western countries, and especially the Anglophone nexus led by the USA and Britain, believe itself naturally superior to everybody else. That included the economy and technology, of course, but it also came to include culture, ideology and morality. There was white supremacy here, but much more. The West assumed that because it was powerful, it must also be more morally virtuous than the rest of humankind.

There is another factor I would like to raise here, since it appears to create to this day a very strong and pernicious impact. I refer to American exceptionalism. In the USA, the ruling elite, and many outside the elite, have convinced themselves that America’s political, economic, cultural, ideological and moral system is so superior that it not only the ultimate form of human order, but the *only legitimate* one. Other countries must be coaxed or forced to follow the USA political order, and certainly, anybody holding a fundamentally different mindset must be blocked and stopped. Those countries following American “liberal democracy” must cooperate with each other under American leadership against those with different political systems.

As I see it, the American are getting more paranoid as their economy weakens. There is something a bit ridiculous about the way they behave, but also something extremely dangerous. American imperialism is in decline, but it is far from dead. I think Boer’s analysis about mindsets is correct. It creates reasons why scholars should take more notice of Chinese points of view, as Boer does, and it also explains why Western/American points of view remain so influential and persistent.

Chapter 2 on Deng Xiaoping sees him as Mao’s Engels who does not get the attention he deserves. Boer writes: “much like Engels in relation to Marx, Deng’s

distinct contributions are often overshadowed by those of Mao Zedong. Or at least this is true outside China” (p. 25). And again: “one struggles to find outside China a careful consideration of his thought” (p. 25). But, for Boer, Deng is extremely important. No doubt he preferred to get down to work than to read volumes of Marxist theory, and he was very modest in his approach, saying “I haven’t read too many books” (cited p. 26). However, he certainly did think issues through and made his own contribution to Chinese Marxism. Indeed, he popularized two extraordinarily important phrases: seeking truth from facts (*shishi qiushi* 实事求是), and socialism with Chinese characteristics, the second of which looms large enough for Boer that he made it the title of the book.

Boer defends this idea through the claim, which I believe correct, that although Marxism as a theory is universal, specific conditions are necessary for its concrete application. Deng was less concerned with defending Mao’s every action and idea than he was with applying socialism to China’s specific conditions and formulating appropriate policies capable of building China. One of these policies, as Boer rightly points out, was applying every effort to making China modern and prosperous. Marxism is not about shared poverty but about shared wealth. Deng thought the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was too redolent of “poor socialism” (p. 42) and was vehemently opposed to the policies pursued at that time.

One general comment appropriate to this book is the mastery the author shows not only of Marxism but of Confucianism and Chinese history. We see this all through the book. One chapter where it is particularly clear is the one on the *xiaokang* 小康 society, Chapter 6. *Xiaokang* means “moderately well off”, but it is loaded with implications, as a result of which Boer leaves it in the original Chinese and does not translate it. The term derives from Confucianism but was adopted by Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, where it became a descriptor for the “four modernizations”, which have transformed China since their introduction in the late 1970s. Boer here shows extraordinary knowledge and understanding of the Chinese classics, the Confucian reformist Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and his ideas, and the way Confucianism continues to impact on the Communist Party of China (CPC) and China as a whole.

There is another general point to emerge from Boer’s discussion of the concept of *xiaokang*. It is that, despite the enormous changes Marxism and socialism have wrought in China, there is still a great deal of the country’s traditional civilization that survives in modern and contemporary society. History still matters and I commend the author for his understanding of China’s classical past.

Given how large the issue of human rights looms in the West’s attempts to isolate China, it will be useful to consider Boer’s treatment of the subject in Chapter 7. His analysis shows him as deeply versed in the history of rights, including the different roots of rights in Western and Chinese civilizations. Western countries, especially the USA, tend strongly to understand human rights in terms of the individual civil and political rights, whereas the core of the Chinese Marxist approach to human rights is the right to socio-economic well-being. There are huge implications in these formulations, since we know that the West, and especially the USA, uses the issue of human rights to condemn China at every turn.

In the last few years, the USA has stepped up criticism of China over its policy and behaviour towards one aspect of human rights, namely that accorded the 55 ethnic minorities. Boer discusses this issue, sensibly and from a Marxist perspective, although not in the detail I would have liked. His view is that overcoming poverty, notoriously endemic in the minority areas, is the best way to advance human rights, and I agree with that. As for Tibet and Xinjiang, he draws attention to the way the problem of poverty “is compounded with the three evils of separatism, extremism and terrorism (aided by foreign forces)” (p. 181). Chinese authorities have had to deal with those problems at the same time as alleviating poverty.

As one who has visited Xinjiang several times, the first time in 1982 and most recently in 2018, I have been very struck by how much the livelihood of the average person has improved over the years. This applies to all ethnic groups, including Han and Uygur. Just as one example, I was amazed at how prosperous the dominantly Uygur city of Kashgar appeared when I went there in 2018. I was also struck by the survival of traditional Uygur performing and other arts. Western commentary on Xinjiang, and other minority areas, fails to take account of these economic matters, because, almost as a matter of faith, they assume repression. In my opinion, this leads to faulty judgments and to unjust and irresponsible policies by Western journalists and governments, especially American.

Chapter 10 is entitled “Xi Jinping on Marx and Engels”. It is not the first chapter to consider aspects of Xi Jinping’s ideas, but its examination of a speech on Marx shows his intensive engagement with Marx and Engels. Here, Boer takes on a topic of great importance in contemporary China, and one that has attracted comparatively little objective and balanced commentary in the West. Boer is rightly convinced of the importance of Xi Jinping’s thought. He adds two perceptive comments on this.

One is that “Xi Jinping and the CPC are absolutely serious about Marxism and that China is not following a capitalist road” (p. 273). China has not replaced Marxism with nationalism, as many in the West claim. Its ideology is still socialist, and the role of Marxism is crucial.

The second is the problem that “virtually no-one in the relatively small number of Western countries takes the thought of a leader seriously—let alone a current leader” (p. 274). Boer is very critical of this gap in Western thinking. He says: “We need to keep reminding ourselves: here is a leader of a major global power, if not the strongest socialist country in human history, quoting and drawing extensively from the founders of the Marxist tradition” (p. 274).

Boer is very impressed both with the emphasis that Xi puts on studying Marx and Engels and with his understanding of Marxism as a “work in progress” and as a contribution to contemporary China and the CPC. In particular, he draws attention to a facet of Xi Jinping’s thinking that does not get enough credit in the West. It is between the West’s model of globalization, with its focus on zero-sum, and China’s model, which allows for win-win. The first is rooted in the capitalist competition that has characterized Western colonialist domination for centuries. Win-win, on the other hand, derives from China’s historical experience and from the non-exploitative egalitarianism that Marxism brings.

It is not until the conclusion (Chapter 11) that Boer explains why he has given the book the subtitle “A Guide for Foreigners”. He argues that some of this

material “is not known as well as it should be outside China, especially the chapters on Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping” (p. 309), both of them discussed above. He suggests that some foreigners woefully distort and misrepresent some aspects of socialism with Chinese characteristics. In particular, he draws attention to the very different understanding of human rights. These points are discussed in earlier paragraphs.

Yet, while I endorse his point of view, I do not regard foreigners as deserving a priority high enough to include them in the subtitle. Yes, foreigners can and should readily be guided by what Boer says. But the core of the book is a general explication and analysis of an important topic rather than a guide for foreigners.

The book ends with a consideration of cultural confidence. It shows how, in the last few years and under Xi Jinping, China has grown in international influence and overcome the sense of inferiority that emerged from the century of humiliation. And as for how this impacts on Marxism, the last sentence says that “we find an increasing confidence that Chinese Marxism is Marxism, that socialism with Chinese characteristics is socialism, so much so that it is part of the mainstream and will be recognized as an original contribution to the development of Marxism” (p. 315). In other words, in this aspect of ideology so important for China, the country is no longer an admirer and follower at the side. It now commands the mainstream.

The book lists references at the end of each chapter, rather than grouped together at the end. It has no index. On the first question, of course, it is a matter of choice and there are valid arguments both ways. But on the second, I think a scholarly book like this needs an index. The reader needs to be able to find the way round the book by being easily able to locate discussion of particular subjects.

The extraordinary achievement of bringing Chinese Marxism to the mainstream of Marxism in general is characteristic of the story that emerges from this book as a whole. It is ultimately a narrative that explains China’s success. It explains the shift in the balance of power from one in which the West’s domination of the world was pretty well total to one in which “the 14 percent of the global population found in Western countries realises belatedly that the whole Western project is in its sunset phase” (p. 314).

The Biden Administration is making a very clear attempt to strengthen the isolation of China that it inherited from Trump and to hold back the advance of China simply because it is rivalling and even overtaking the USA, including in such crucial aspects as technological and economic advance. One wonders if this makes any difference to Boer’s verdict that the Western project is in its sunset phase. My suspicion is that Biden’s policy could delay Western decline and slow China’s advance but will make very little difference in the long term. The metaphor of the “sunset” may exaggerate how far the decline has gone but is pretty near the mark.

So my own interpretation of global processes is very much in line with Boer’s. I admire very much the way he has explained them through his analyses of Marxism and socialism. I strongly commend his knowledge and attitude towards the history of the two great civilizations, Western and Chinese. I applaud the way he is prepared to try and analyse China from the inside, rather than simply standing above and outside to cast negative judgments, as so many Western writers do. Boer’s is a splendid

book that deserves success. It is a real contribution to the literature in an important field.

Declaration

Conflict of interest Roland Boer is a friend of the author's.

Colin Mackerras worked as professor of Asian Studies at Griffith University from 1974 until he retired in 2004. He has worked many times in China, especially at the Beijing Foreign Studies University and Renmin University of China. He has published widely in Chinese history, contemporary politics, ethnic minorities and theatre, especially *Jingju*. He has also written extensively about Western images of China and Marxism in Asia. His main authored books include *Western Perspectives on the People's Republic of China, Politics, Economy and Society* (2015); *China's Ethnic Minorities and Globalisation* (2003); and *China's Minority Cultures: Identities and Integration Since 1912* (1995) and *China's Minorities: Integration and Modernization in the Twentieth Century* (1994).