

Listening to Our CPC Comrades on the Nature of China's Socialist Path

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I would like to make a small contribution to a topic of discussion and debate in a number of Communist parties in the world today, including the CPA. It concerns the nature of socialism in China, or what is also known as Socialism with Chinese Characteristics – better translated as “socialism in light of China's conditions.” My contribution arises from more than a dozen years of experience in China. I would like to do so in three main parts: what our comrades in Communist Party of China say about their own system; what insights the Marxist-Leninist method provides; and how Chinese communists see the economic development of China from 1949 through to today. The assumption in what follows is that discussions such as this are undertaken in a comradely manner. I hope that what is provided here can aid our discussion in some ways.

Listening to Our CPC Comrades

The CPC is a fraternal party with the CPA, so it would be helpful to listen carefully to what our CPC comrades say about the nature of their system. There are a number of ways we can do so. As for me, I prefer engaging in person-to-person discussion with members of the CPC. This has meant that over the last 12 years of my engagement with China (living and working there for up to 6 months a year), I have learnt the language and researched in depth Chinese Marxism and its socio-economic system. I have spoken with CPC cadres at many levels of the party, in the city and in the countryside, at major meetings and at local party branches. We have discussed many, many topics concerning the Marxist method and the difficult tasks of constructing socialism.

Another approach is to keep up with the many developments via CPC sources. Given the size of the party and its close involvement at all levels of Chinese society, there are very many of these sources. The following comprise only a small sample: the Central Committee journal *Qiushi*,¹ which comes out twice a month (www.qstheory.cn) – note that English translations lag by a few months (<http://en.qstheory.cn>) and not all of the articles on the Chinese site are translated into English; *Red Flag* (www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwg/2021-07/09/c_1127638960).

¹ *Qiushi* means “Seeking Truth,” which is one part of a four-character saying: “seek truth from facts [shishi qiushi].” It was first mentioned by Mao Zedong in Yan'an in the 1930s, and promoted widely by Deng Xiaoping.

<http://cpc.people.com.cn>); CPC news (<http://cpc.people.com.cn>); the party history site (<http://dangshi.people.cn>); the party's newspaper, *Renmin ribao* (www.people.com.cn), and so on. If you need to use an online translator, it would better to use more reliable ones, such as fanyi.youdao.com or fanyi.baidu.com (google translate is not reliable). Of course, there are even more local party sites and social media apps for local branch members. After all, the CPC has almost 100 million members.

What have I found out over the last 12 years? (You can also find material such as this in the sources mentioned above):

1. Marxist philosophy is China's honed or “special skill [*kanjia benling*]” for guiding the country, and Marxist philosophy is defined as dialectical and historical materialism, a definition that comes straight out of the Marxist-Leninist tradition.
2. The guide for China's economic development is Marxist political economy.
3. Socialism with Chinese characteristics means the use of the Marxist-Leninist method to solve specific problems arising from a specific location, with its own history and conditions. In other words, the basic principles of Marxism need to be applied to specific problems in light of local conditions, which in turn leads to a deepening of the basic principles.
4. They prefer to speak of socialist construction and the socialist road, since it is an ongoing project with many twists and turns. And they prefer to speak of a socialist system, since it is the many components – economic, political, social, cultural, educational – of the overall system that make it socialist.
5. The core human right in China is the right to socio-economic well-being – a right that was already articulated in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.
6. China has a maturing socialist democratic system, with seven components: a) electoral democracy (in the five levels of people's congresses, with direct and indirect elections every year); b) consultative democracy (with a history going back to pre-Liberation times and embodied in the many levels of people's political consultative conferences); c) widespread practices of base-level, or grass-roots democracy; d) minority nationalities preferential policies; e) socialist rule of law; f) promotion of

Chinese Marxist human rights; g) and leadership of the Communist Party.

7. The political model for country-wide governance is democratic centralism, in which the relationship between “people are masters of the country” and the leadership of the Communist Party are dialectically related and enhance one another.

8. But what system does China have? Let me quote from a very well-known statement from 2013:

Socialism with Chinese characteristics is socialism and not some other -ism. The basic principles of scientific socialism should not be abandoned; if we abandon them, we will not have socialism. Our party has always emphasised that socialism with Chinese characteristics not only adheres to the basic principles of scientific socialism, but also endows it with distinctive Chinese characteristics according to the conditions of the times. That is to say, socialism with Chinese characteristics is socialism, and not some other -ism ...

It was Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought that led the Chinese people out of the long night and established a new China, and it was socialism with Chinese characteristics that made China develop rapidly ... History and reality tell us that only socialism can save China and only socialism with Chinese characteristics can develop China. This is the conclusion of history and the choice of the people.

In recent years, some people at home and abroad have questioned whether China is still pursuing socialism at all. Some say it is “capitalist socialism,” while others say it is “state capitalism” and “new bureaucratic capitalism.” These opinions are completely wrong. We say that socialism with Chinese characteristics is socialism.

This quotation comes from May Day in 2013, in the early days of Xi Jinping’s tenure as General Secretary of the CPC. You can find an initial shorter version in the first volume of *The Governance of China*, and a fuller text in issue 7 of *Qiushi*, in March 2019 (http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2019-03/31/c_1124302776.htm). It is a well-known and much studied speech in China, originally given as part of the discussion in the regular Central Committee study sessions. The speech also includes some detail on what the socialist system means in China, how we should understand the periods of New China’s history (pre-1978 and post-1978), and has a clear assessment of what happened in the Soviet Union. I would also recommend that you read the full text of the speech given at

the celebration of 200th anniversary of Marx’s birth, on 4 May, 2018. It is available on many sites, and it is the most extensive engagement with the texts of Marx, Engels, and Lenin for the sake of socialist development (<http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0504/c1024-29966121.html>).

But why quote this part of the text here? If you say, for example, that China has some version of capitalism, then you face a problem: when the General Secretary of the CPC says that China does not have some version of capitalism but has a socialist system, is he lying? When almost 100 million members of the CPC assume that China is following the socialist road, are they lying? Or do you assume that they do not really know what is going on, so that foreigners in some Western countries “know better” than Chinese Communists? Are CPC cadres “hiding something” when they speak of “Chinese characteristics”? I suggest it would be better to listen to our CPC comrades.

Marxist-Leninist Background

Since Marxism-Leninism has already been mentioned above, in this second part I will give a brief analysis in light of this approach. Again, I do so on the basis of what Chinese Communists have researched and studied in great depth. There are many potential topics (see the list above), but let us focus on the core socio-economic question. No better place to begin is with the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, where Marx and Engels write:

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 as rapidly as possible.

There are two main parts in this sentence. The first concerns the gradual – by degrees – seizure of capital after a successful proletarian revolution and the centralisation of all the instruments or means of production in the hands of a proletariat that now controls the reigns of power in terms of the state. In short, this is the centralised ownership of the means of production by the proletariat. The second part concerns the accelerated increase of productive forces, or what we may call the liberation of productive forces. Clearly, for Marx and Engels both ownership and liberation of productive forces are needed for the process of socialist construction. This pairing of ownership and liberation is not an isolated occurrence in their texts (see, for example, Engels’s texts “Karl Marx” and *Anti-Dühring*).

Three points arise from this text. First, the statement is brief (as are the others on the same line) and it opens up various possible interpretations. What is the time frame?

2 Note carefully: Mao Zedong Thought and not “Maoism,” which is a Western concept.

Is there a causal relationship between the liberation and ownership of productive forces? How will the dialectic of liberation and ownership of the productive forces unfold over the long process of socialist construction? We should remember that Marx and Engels were very careful to note that they had no experience of the construction of socialism, with a Communist Party in power, so they stressed that the actual results could be determined only from experience and “only scientifically” (“Critique of the Gotha Program” from 1875). The earliest answers would come from the Soviet Union, in light of the actual experience of constructing socialism (see more below).

Second, it is clear that Marx and Engels are speaking of the time after a proletarian revolution, when a Communist Party is in power. A simple point perhaps, but much turns on it. As Lenin observes, gaining power through a proletarian revolution is the relatively easy part; setting out on the long road of socialist construction is way more difficult. In short, everything changes when a Communist Party is in power: this is the perspective of our Chinese comrades. It can be quite difficult for us in a capitalist context to understand what this means.

Third, what are the implications for the definition of socialism in economic terms. Let me put it this way: ask a knowledgeable person, in one of the few highly developed countries in the world, for a definition of socialism. This person will most likely say, “the ownership of the forces of production by the working class.” This is an understandable emphasis in light developed productive forces. But it is also one-sided. Now let us ask a person from a poor developing country, which has suffered colonial exploitation: this person will prefer to say, “the liberation of productive forces.” This has been precisely the emphasis in places like Vietnam, Laos, Cuba, the DPRK, and China. Or rather, they set out to find the best way to liberate the productive forces.

A little earlier, I mentioned that the Soviet Union provided the first on-the-ground experience of how the ownership and liberation of productive forces would unfold during socialist construction. While Lenin came to see that the road of socialist construction is a long and winding one indeed, so as to prepare the ground for communism, it fell to Stalin to provide a comprehensive assessment in his 1952 work, “Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR.”

Stalin pointed out that certain economic laws hold during socialist construction, such as the reality of classes (in non-antagonistic relations), and the contradictions between the forces and relations of production. On the one hand, the radical shift in relations of production – public ownership and collectivisation – had a profound effect on unleashing productive forces after the October Revolution; on the other hand, the dialectic of forces and relations

of production changes in light of specific conditions. In a certain situation, the forces of production lag and become a fetter on production relations, while in another situation the reverse applies. The solution: the laggard needs to be brought up to speed.

Assessment of China’s Economic Development

How is all this relevant for China? Our comrades in the CPC distinguish between three stages of China’s economic development, which can be assessed in light of Marxist-Leninist dialectical analysis (also known as “contradiction analysis” in China).

Stage 1: 1949-1978

The first stage was characterised by an emphasis on radical changes in the ownership (relations of production) so as to liberate productive forces. The logic behind this move was straightforward: drawing from Marx and Engels, they identified the main contradiction of a capitalist system in terms of socialised labour and the private ownership of the forces of production by the bourgeoisie and remnants of the landlord class. Thus, a Communist Party in power should solve the contradiction by socialising the ownership of the forces of production. Other factors made this a necessary move, particularly the need to prevent counter-revolution and instigate the economic structures needed both to overcome the previous system and begin the process of socialist construction—abolition of bourgeois private property, industrialisation in light of “backward” economic conditions, collectivisation of agriculture, and a fully planned economy.

This approach produced what is known as the “first economic miracle” in China. From being one of the poorest countries in the world, there were great improvements in socioeconomic well-being, population growth (in numbers and life expectancy), significant developments in science and technology, an independent industrial and national economic system, development of education, culture and health, and China’s emergence in international affairs, all the way from the UN to increased appeal in and engagement with developing countries.

Stage 2: 1978-2012

Nonetheless, internal contradictions began to mount: the relations of production became a drag on productive forces, since the latter had leapt ahead and the former had not kept pace. Poverty was still a major problem in rural areas and many regional cities, the non-antagonistic contradictions between classes broke out into open struggle in

the second half of the 1960s, the economy was stagnating and creative solutions dwindled.

The response was to seek alternative ways to liberate productive forces, with what is now known as the period of the reform and opening-up. As the life-long Communist, Deng Xiaoping, put it in 1980, the “development of the productive forces ... is the most fundamental revolution from the viewpoint of historical development.” For Deng, “poor socialism” is not socialism; instead, socialism should seek to develop productive forces, improve the country’s strength and the lives of the people. And as Chinese scholars and policy-makers have made very clear, the reform and opening-up had nothing to do with neoliberal policies; instead, the policy arose in response to internal contradictions (as dialectical materialism indicates).

During this period, we found the combination of both planning and market components (the technical term is an “institutional form”) within a socialist system, public ownership as the mainstay and other forms of ownership alongside, incentives to innovate as the way to solve problems, and a resolute emphasis on the socialist principle, “from each according to ability, to each according to work.” As a result, China launched itself on a path that has led to it becoming a global economic power. While nominally the “second largest economy” in terms of GDP, it contributes more than any other country to the global economy (more than 30 per cent), its industrial output and foreign exchange reserves are the highest in the world, it has the largest internal market, it has developed a comprehensive system of quality education, health, and welfare, and it has seen Hong Kong and Macao return.

Stage 3: 2012-Present

However, by the 1990s the reform and opening-up was revealing its own contradictions, due to an at times over-emphasis on liberating productive forces. In the midst of China’s stunning economic success, a spate of well-documented and widely-studied problems became apparent during the “wild 90s,” and even into the early 2000s: declining conditions for workers and consequent unrest; illegal appropriation of collectively owned village lands; a growing gap between rich and poor regions; environmental degradation; ideological disarray, with proposals ranging from the recovery of Confucianism to bourgeois liberalisation; and a rift between the CPC and the common people, leading to corruption, loss of trust, and lack of knowledge of Marxism even by leading cadres.

In light of these new contradictions, two core questions arose. First, were they systemic, as a few too many Western observers assumed, or were they incidental to the overall process of socialist construction? The answer from our CPC comrades comes straight out of Marxist-Leninist

analysis: they were incidental to the larger process of socialist reform. Second, what was to be the solution? Here the answer too is dialectical: the way to solve these internally generated contradictions was to deepen the reform process itself.

One way to consider the results is in terms of public ownership. In light of repeated warnings from scholars and policy advisers concerning a drift away from public ownership as the mainstay, there has been a notable strengthening and reform of state-owned enterprises so that, as efficient hubs of innovation, their role as the backbone of the economy is being enhanced. They now contribute to over 50 percent of China’s total economy. But this is only one perspective, and it risks seeing the shift in emphasis as a type of return to the features of the first stage. Instead, the process of deepening reform is far more comprehensive, covering a full range from the economic base to super-structural components. We can already begin to see clear results: about 800 million rural and urban workers have been lifted out of absolute poverty, with almost 500 million now in a “middle-income” group (and not a “middle class”); a comprehensive welfare system continues to be rolled out for 1.4 billion people; the gap between rich and poor has been decreasing now for about a decade; rural and urban workers are in control of China’s path through the ever-strengthening socialist democratic system; in light of ecological civilisation, China has become a world leader in “green growth”; and the almost 100-million strong CPC is more united, more knowledgeable about Marxism, and more focused on people’s needs and the task ahead than at almost any time in its past.

The formulations of the new stage vary, such as “the great leap from prosperity to strength,” the “third economic miracle,” or “socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.” However, it is best captured with the resolute emphasis on “taking the people as the centre,” or, more simply, a “people-centred” approach. Obviously, the emphasis is on the relations of production. Will new contradictions arise? Of course they will, and they have already been anticipated.

Conclusion

Is China on the socialist road? This is not a question that arises in China so often, since they are clear that the answer is “yes.” There are many other questions we can discuss, such as what the definition of socialist distribution—“from each according to ability, to each according to work”—actually means during socialist construction; the role of trade unions and mass organisations in such construction; how industrial workers (*gongren*) are one category of labourers (*laodong*) and how they control China’s productive forces and path; how the CPC exercises leadership in the socialist democratic system; how the China model works

in relations with other fraternal Communist Parties; and so on. On these matters and more, I suggest that it is important to listen to what our CPC comrades think about their own system, based upon immense amounts of research on the concrete reality in China, and not let bourgeois criticisms and Western imperialist assumptions set the agenda.

One last example of a distinctly Chinese way of speaking about socialist construction. They speak of the “two inevitabilities” and the “two impossibilities.” The first is from the *Communist Manifesto*: “The fall [of the bourgeoisie] and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.” The second is from Marx’s preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (1859): “No social formation is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.” For our Chinese comrades, these two pairs “help us understand why capitalism has not completely died, why socialism still has twists and turns like the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the upheavals in Eastern Europe, and why the communism foreseen by Marxism still needs a long historical development to come true’. In this situation, Marxist dialectical and historical materialism is even more important today, for it enables a sound understanding of historical development, “so that the advantages of the socialist system can continue to be revealed and enriched.”

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