

## A Dialectical Leap?

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Is China undergoing a historical dialectical leap?

This question has been at the forefront my thoughts of late, for reasons I am still formulating. It comes from the experience, each time I arrive in China, of stepping into a future society. I have written of that feeling elsewhere, so here I want to analyse the question of the leap itself.

A common perception among many Chinese is that China needs to 'catch up' to other countries deemed more 'advanced'. It matters little what the catching up might mean, whether technology, medicine, social security, scholarship, social morality and so on. The model may be the United States (for reasons that puzzle me), Germany, Scandinavia or even – believe it or not – Australia. True, the perception is less common today, but it used to be pervasive not so many years ago.

But as more and more Chinese go overseas, for travel, work or study, they are beginning to experience a dislocation. If it is one of countries I have mentioned, the bewilderment is due to the sense that the country they perceived as 'advanced' has in many respects slipped 'behind'. Many of the daily realities to which they have become accustomed in China simply do not exist in such places, or if they do, they are piecemeal and disorganised.

As for my own experience, it is quite astonishing to find that so much has changed, so much has become the new normal, so much creativity has burst forth. The way I am beginning to describe it is in terms of a dialectical leap.

Let me make a few philosophical points. The initial idea of the 'leap' comes Lenin's notebooks on Hegel (1914-1915). In response to the crisis of the Second International at the outbreak of the First World War, Lenin retreated to the library in Berne, Switzerland, to rediscover Marx's dialectic. And where did he go? To Hegel! Lenin dug deep into Hegel's *The Science of Logic*. He was wary at first, anticipating an idealist at work, where one would find theology at every turn. Instead, he found a materialist at the core, one that advocated

a dialectic of ruptures, breaks and leaps. At one point, Lenin exclaims in his marginal notes: 'Leaps! Breaks in gradualness. Leaps! Leaps!'

Mao Zedong would take up Hegel's notes later, especially in developing his unique and creative intersection of Marxism and Chinese dialectics on his lectures in Yan'an in 1937, but especially in the essay drawn from the lectures, 'On Contradiction'. In his own way, Mao saw what Lenin saw: the crucial role of the dialectical leap (*bianzhengfa feiyue*).

Both Lenin and Mao had in their sights a communist revolution, which is indeed such a leap. But can this central philosophical idea be applied to China today, especially since the 'reform and opening up' is being described as China's second revolution? (I leave aside the point that after a communist revolution, reform is necessary, but always in light of revolution.)

Perhaps history can help us. In the nineteenth century in Europe, the German states were in many respects the most backward in Europe – economically, politically and culturally. It was precisely in this context that Marx and Engels grew up and developed what became Marxism. But what happened in the German states? Did they 'catch up' to the more 'advanced' states such as France, England and the Netherlands? Not at all, it was precisely the unique backwardness of the German states that enabled a dialectical leap. Germany became and remains the economic, political and, in many respects, intellectual powerhouse of Europe.

My sense is that an analogous process is happening in China today. Of course, the specificities of each situation are different, but my aim to discern a deeper pattern based on Marxist analysis. It seems to me that the dialectical leap is underway as I write. And this is not some leap into a capitalist system, with associated patterns of politics and culture. Not at all, for becoming a 'strong modern socialist country' by 2050 requires a dialectical leap of the sort happening now.