

Socialism With Chinese Characteristics: Book Outline

Roland Boer

This book seeks to make available the sophisticated debates and conclusions in China concerning socialism with Chinese characteristics. Thus, the book sets out – reliant on and with copious references to Chinese language material – to provide an in-depth presentation of a topic that is of increasing global importance. It begins with a careful philosophical analysis of Deng Xiaoping's theory, and the implications of his core ideas and practices. This study is the basis of the rest of the book: contradiction analysis; the Marxist philosophy of the Reform and Opening-Up; the basis and nature of the socialist market economy; socialist modernisation; socialist democracy; the multinational state and its implications for international engagement; the Chinese approach to rule of law; sovereignty and a Chinese Marxist approach to human rights; and Xi Jinping's thorough engagement with Marxism in a Chinese situation. The following offers an outline of the book's chapters.

Why undertake such a study? It arises from the awareness of a significant ignorance, leading to misconceptions and mistakes by those outside China concerning socialism with Chinese characteristics. A major reason is that many non-Chinese scholars do not have access to the sophisticated debates that have gone on in China since they are unable to read Chinese sources. Other reasons may be proposed, but I am not interested in polemics, in trying to show why foreign observers and 'Western' Marxists have by and large misunderstood China's socialist project. Instead, my focus is constructive and comprehensive, predicated on the need to understand first and gain trust before engaging in serious debate.

Introduction

The introduction begins by asking readers to 'wash their brains' of previous preconceptions and assumptions. As Mao Zedong observed: 'This brain of mine was washed to become what it is. After I joined the revolution, my brain slowly washed, washed for several decades. What I received before was all bourgeois education, and even some feudal education' (1957). This suggestion indicates the primarily non-Chinese audience for the book, whether Marxists or interested non-Marxists. Why do they need to wash their brains? They have been imbued with assumptions from various traditions, such as that of Western liberalism, and come to see the rest of the world in their own image. To understand Chinese Marxism, one must at least attempt to get rid of these preconceptions, which lead to profound misconceptions and peremptory dismissals. At the same time, I

assume that those who may be interested in this study may well be dissatisfied with the orthodoxies to which they have become accustomed, and may therefore desire to learn more concerning the most significant development in Marxism of the last forty years.

Apart from defining core ideas – such as ‘Chinese characteristics’ – and introducing the contents of the book, the introduction also attempts to explain why there is precious little treatment in non-Chinese material of the Marxist basis of the Reform and Opening-Up, with which ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ has been most closely associated. In order to understand this situation, I elaborate on the distinction between ‘before’ and ‘after’ October. In other words, a crucial divide in analysis appears between those who take the perspective of ‘before October’, before the communist revolution, and those who analyse Marxism ‘after October’, after the revolution and in the complex and difficult period of the construction of socialism. As Lenin and Mao said repeatedly, gaining power in a communist revolution is relatively easy; by contrast, constructing socialism is infinitely more complicated. Obviously, this study is concerned with ‘after October’, with the project of constructing socialism.

Since this work relies primarily on Chinese language Marxist scholarship, the introduction presents the main features of Chinese scholarship on socialism with Chinese characteristics. This material is immense, so I introduce the main resources, journals and themes – with a distinct focus on the philosophical foundations as they are manifested in practice.

Chapter One: Reading Deng Xiaoping

Deng Xiaoping Theory (*lilun*) is a major key to understanding socialism with Chinese characteristics. However, 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. One may find a stray quotation from Deng, usually taken out of context and twisted to say what it does not mean, or one may find often wayward biographies, histories and political assessments (following Western models) of his all-important leadership and legacy, but one struggles to find outside China a careful consideration of his thought. Part of the reason is that Deng was eminently a man of action rather than words. Many of his texts are short, drawn from observations and speeches. Occasionally, he penned a longer piece for a speech at a congress. Yet by and large he preferred to get down to work rather than sit and read heavy tomes of Marxist theory and write long screeds of his own. The advantage of this approach is that Deng’s thoughts arose from practice, seeking solutions to concrete problems, or ‘seeking truth from facts’. One simply cannot disconnect his thoughts from action, developing policies on the basis of actual situations. The

disadvantage is that one must work harder to identify the philosophical basis of his thought. But the philosophy is there, permeating his published texts as a type of ‘applied philosophy [*yingyong zhexue*]’. Deng was through and through a Marxist, and the tradition – Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought – was the horizon of his thought and action.

This chapter focuses on what is regarded in China as the foundation of Deng Xiaoping theory: liberating thought (*jiefang sixiang*) and seeking truth from facts (*shishi qiushi*), articulated above all in a key speech delivered at the beginning of the Reform and Opening-Up. The speech was seen at the time as a clap of ‘spring thunder [*chunlei*]’, waking people from their ideological torpor and promising the nourishing rains of spring, especially after the chaotic aberration of the ‘Cultural Revolution’. The topics that arise from the speech run like a ‘red line [*hongxian*]’ throughout Deng’s works, so they determine the structure of what follows: liberation of thought from its enslavement, liberation for socialism (in terms of the correct theoretical line), the healthy exercise of democratic centralism, seeking truth from facts as an inescapable dimension of liberating thought, and the close connection with liberating the forces of production.

Chapter Two: Contradiction Analysis

While Deng Xiaoping Theory is crucial for understanding socialism with Chinese characteristics, contradiction analysis (*maodun fenxi*) provides the philosophical basis for this approach. Contradiction analysis today runs all the way from government policy to cultural assumptions concerning everyday life. Although already found in the long Chinese cultural and philosophical tradition, contradiction analysis was thoroughly transformed in light of Marxist dialectics – the focus of this chapter. My focus is on dialectical materialism, the philosophical method of Marxism that finds its prime application in historical materialism. The subject matter requires a step back to Lenin’s concise and insightful ‘On the Question of Dialectics’ (1915), which was informed by his in-depth return to Hegel in 1914-1915 through the Marxist lens provided above all by Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*. Lenin and Engels – supplemented by pertinent examples from Marx and Stalin – subsequently provided the pillars for the sophisticated elaboration of dialectical materialism in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. As the most mature and thoroughly developed form of Marxist philosophy at the time, it was to this material that Mao Zedong and his comrades turned for a period of intense study in Yan’an in 1936-1938. This window of time, after the Long March and as the next phase of the Anti-Japanese War was about to begin, enabled Mao to develop the philosophical basis for socialism with Chinese characteristics. I pay close attention to Mao’s reading notes, made

in the margins of Soviet and Chinese works that he studied over 1936-1937. Here we find a creative and active engagement with the material, drawing from it and developing his own unique emphases: non-antagonistic contradictions under socialism; primary and secondary contradictions, along with the primary and secondary aspects of a contradiction; and the importance of qualitative change through self-movement and the qualitative difference of contradictions in distinct contexts. It is especially this final category that enables Mao to develop what he already called in 1937 the 'sinification of Marxism': the universal principles of Marxism need to become concrete in a specific situation, enabling analysis and providing a guide to action. This study, undertaken with key comrades, resulted in the lectures on dialectical materialism, as well as the two foundational essays, 'On Contradiction' and 'On Practice', which were drawn from the lectures and revised. This material, along with the institutional structures that ensured continued study of Marxist philosophy, provided the core materials that would set in train a consistent concern with philosophical matters in the CPC, the revolutionary path to Liberation in 1949, and the subsequent long and arduous task of constructing socialism. In this way, contradiction analysis – forged from Lenin in 1915 to Mao in 1937 – became and remains a centrepiece for the many stages of the Chinese socialist project.

Chapter Three: The Marxist Nature of the Reform and Opening-Up

With the background in contradiction analysis, it is possible to deal directly with the Reform and Opening-Up (from 1978). This project is not a compromise, but a distinctly Marxist project. As Deng Xiaoping pointed out repeatedly, the Reform and Opening-Up provides a distinct path to socialism (and not, as some misguided foreigners suggested, to capitalism). To understand this emphasis, we need initially to go back to Lenin and his insight into the relationship between revolution and reform. Instead of seeing these two terms as an either-or, Lenin argued that reform is absolutely necessary, but it should always be undertaken in light of the communist revolution. During the era of constructing socialism, this means that reform must be undertaken by a Communist Party in power.

Further, it is important to recognise that the Reform and Opening-Up has its own dialectical logic. Thus, the problems that have arisen at various times during the process can only be solved through the further unfolding of the Reform and Opening-Up itself. These problems have, in the past (especially in the 1990s and early 2000s), included corruption, environmental degradation, a growing gap between rich and poor, and a large grey area between the rule of law and actual practice in daily life. The catch with such instances is that many foreign observers have taken these problems as systemic, while the reality is that they are incidental and cyclical. In other words, these problems and others

may have been generated by the process of the Reform and Opening-Up, but they have also been solved by the same process. Today, corruption is a thing of the past, ecological civilisation is assiduously promoted with stunning results, the poverty alleviation project is set to abolish absolute poverty, and the rule of law has been enforced as never before. This is not to say that new problems will not arise, such as a fading West's obsession with a socialist China, but these new problems also fall into the dialectical logical of the socialist project of the Reform and Opening-Up.

Other distinctive features of the Reform and Opening-Up include the unique and oft-misunderstood 'one country, two systems' approach proposed by Deng Xiaoping in relation to Hong Kong and the island of Taiwan, along with tackling the mistakes of radical egalitarianism – 'eating from the one big pot' – that is often mistaken for socialism, the key category of socialism 'from each according to ability, to each according to work', and the unique root of the Reform and Opening-Up in the countryside rather than the city – harking back to Mao Zedong's famous shift in the revolution's focus back in the 1930s.

Chapter Four: China's Socialist Market Economy

With the socialist market economy, we come to a question that was settled in China 25 years ago, but of which foreigners remain noticeably ignorant. After immense debates in the 1980s and early 1990s, the following was seen as the solution. One must begin with the need to de-link a 'market economy' from a capitalist system, as also a 'planned economy' from a socialist system. Even though such a de-linking had already been proposed in the 1930s in Eastern Europe and was largely accepted in that part of the world, it still needs to be reiterated today: a socialist economy is not equivalent to a planned economy, and a capitalist economy is not equivalent to a market economy. Both logical and historical reasons aplenty indicate the reality of such a de-linking. Second, one must deploy contradiction analysis, which enables the identification of the primary contradiction in the context of socialism. Here we find a shift from the focus on ownership of the means of production to the liberation of productive forces, as well as the crucial move that distinguishes between an overall socio-economic system (*zhidu*) and specific institutional forms (*tizhi*) such as planned and market economies. It follows that a socialist system can deploy both institutional forms as components in the socialist system. Third, one must also deploy contradiction analysis at another level, now in terms of universality and particularity. The question now concerns what is common about a market economy and how the particular features of a socioeconomic system determine the nature of a market economy. Thus, each component (*tizhi*) is shaped and determined by the system (*zhidu*) in question. Not only does the overall system determines the nature of its

components – economic, political and social – but also its purpose, whether profit (capitalist system) or social benefit and meeting the needs of all people (*gongtongti fuwu*) as in a socialist system. Finally, this chapter deals with more recent arguments concerning the dialectical transcendence or sublation (*Aufhebung – yangqi*) of planned and market economies, and indeed of the distinction between public and private in the Chinese model.

Chapter Five: Socialist Modernisation: Seeking a *Xiaokang* Society

Since Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, ‘socialist modernisation [*shehuizhuyi xiandaihua*]’ has been a major feature of government policy and action.¹ But what does it mean? Let us begin with Deng Xiaoping’s famous observation in 1979: ‘By achieving the four modernisations, we mean achieving a “moderately well-off family [*xiaokang zhi jia*]” ... a moderately well-off country [*xiaokang de guojia*]’. For Deng, this is modernisation with Chinese characteristics.

To understand this statement, we need to go back and forward in the Chinese tradition. Deng was the first to pick and reinterpret the old Confucian category – from the *Book of Rites* and the *Book of Songs* – of *xiaokang* in light of Marxism, with the sense of being moderately well-off, healthy and peaceful. It is a more achievable aim than *datong*, the ‘Great Harmony’, at least in the foreseeable future, although both terms (through He Xiu and Kang Youwei) are intimately connected. If we move forward in the more recent tradition, Deng’s insightful move led to a ‘moderately prosperous society in all respects’ becoming central to the Chinese socialist project under Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and especially Xi Jinping. Indeed, the year 2021 – following hints from Deng – has been set as the ambitious but achievable goal for a *xiaokang* society. What are the benchmarks? Xi Jinping has identified three: managing profound risks, poverty alleviation and environmental health. The last section of the chapter considers each of these items, with a focus on the impact of lifting more than 800 million rural and urban workers out of poverty since 1978 and the noticeable advances in achieving an ‘ecological civilisation’.

Chapter Six: Socialist Democracy

This chapter begins with a relatively unknown fact: China has more elections annually than any Western bourgeois state. But what type of elections are they? Inner-CPC elections are held to elect local branch secretaries, as well as those in more central bodies,

¹ The original four modernisations are: shaking off China’s poverty and backwardness [*pinqiong luohou*]; gradually improving the people’s living standards; restoring a position for China in international affairs commensurate with its current status; and enabling China to contribute more to mankind.

through to the general secretary. In society at large, annual elections are held for local governing bodies, whether in villages where the land is held collectively or for local governing bodies in the cities. These elections are held directly and candidates may be CPC members, members of the eight other political parties, or non-affiliated candidates. From regional governance structures through to the state-wide National People's Congress (NPC) and Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC), elections are indirect. People are elected from the lower and local bodies, and are subject to assessment as to whether they have the appropriate skills and experience. Thus, the national NPC and CPPCC require significant electoral processes each year. Thousands of representatives from across the country, from all classes, minority nationalities, religious groups and other sectors of society, are elected to the two bodies. Now we come to the crucial question: do these elections have a political character in the sense of antagonistic political parties characteristic of the Western bourgeois system? No, for the system is known as a 'multi-party cooperation and political consultative system [*duodang hezuo he zhengzhi xieshang zhidu*]', which designates that the system of elections that is not based on class conflict but on non-antagonistic relations among the different groups and their representatives.

On the basis of this analysis, the chapter investigates further features of socialist democracy as it is practised in China. This treatment includes the three categories initially developed by Mao Zedong: new democracy, democratic centralism, and democratic dictatorship. Mao continually stressed that each of these historical forms of democracy are of and for the people. Since Mao's time and from Deng Xiaoping onwards, there have been numerous developments in China's approach to democracy, including the importance of choosing the form of democracy suitable to China's conditions and characteristics; the mass line and adherence to the Marxist position that the people are masters under the leadership of the CPC; the system of people's congresses; the institutions of multi-party cooperation and political consultation; regional autonomy of minority nationalities; the nature of grassroots urban and rural democracy; and the role of the government and judiciary. The conclusion points out that 'democracy' is not an absolute or abstract term, for it takes specific forms in light of particular characteristics. Thus, China's socialist democracy is a reality and not an aspiration.

Chapter Seven: From the Multinational State to Peaceful Coexistence

The Chinese constitution observes: 'The People's Republic of China is a unified multinational state [*tongyi de duo minzu guojia*] founded by the Chinese people of all nationalities'. The term used here, *minzu*, is better translated as 'nationality', since 'ethnic group' is a misleading term of Western provenance that suggests ethnicity is the primary

determining factor. But what does a 'multinational state' mean? The Soviet Union was the first socialist country to develop a comprehensive minorities policy, so much so that it was crucial in the very formation of the Soviet Union and was embodied in the constitution and structures of governance. Much was learned, from both successes and failures. The Soviet Union was also the first country to see the intrinsic connection between an internal minorities policy and the international anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle. It supported most of them, from logistics and weapons to initiating declarations in the United Nations (especially the 1960 'Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples', which forced France, the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands, among others, to give up their colonies for the sake of independence).

But what did the minority policy entail? China initially adopted the Soviet policy after 1949, adapting it and strengthening it in light of their own conditions. This 'preferential policy [*youhui zhengce*]' fosters minority languages, cultures, education, governance, and – above all – economic development as the basis for all the others. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the 1990s the policy was strengthened in terms of contradiction analysis: minority rights and incentives were enhanced significantly, precisely as way of ensuring the inviolability of China's borders. To give a sense of how this policy works, I deal with two pertinent case studies: Tibet and Xinjiang. In both cases, we find short-term and long-term programs. Short-term: enhanced fostering of security (*anquan*), stability (*wending*) and harmony (*hexie*), in order to counter the effects of separatism, extremism and terrorism. Long-term: renewed and revised projects to improve the socioeconomic well-being of all who live in Tibet and Xinjiang. At this point, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plays a significant internal role, with marked results in the six years or so of its implementation.

The BRI brings us to the question of international relations. Here we find a distinct development: while material from the 1950s and 1960s still used the terminology of anti-colonial struggle, it substantially disappears from use thereafter. Why? Already in the late 1950s, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai had proposed the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', which was taken up with enthusiasm by Deng Xiaoping: 'We have gone on from opposing imperialism, hegemonism, colonialism and racism, working to safeguard world peace, and actively developing relations, including economic and cultural exchanges, with other countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' (1978). China continues to seek not confrontation but peaceful development, although it is always ready to defend its own path and has much closer relations with formerly colonised countries due to a shared common history. The more recent manifestation of this emphasis appears with Xi Jinping's promotion of a 'community of shared future for

humankind [*renlei mingyun gongtongti*], concretely manifested in the BRI, and the policy – as an alternative to the Western European liberal emphasis on ‘zero-sum’ – of ‘both win, many win, all win’. Or simply, ‘win-win’.

Chapter Eight: Socialist Rule of Law

‘Governing the country according law [*yifazhiguo*]’ – this four-character phrase encapsulates a range of permutations, from the new Social Credit system, through core socialist values, to the ‘one country, two system’ approach. However, it also has a distinct history that enables us to understand what it means in China, specifically as a socialist rule of law. Although traces of usage appear in much older texts, the key development is precisely during the Reform and Opening-Up.

Initially (1978-1996), most of the debate centred around the opposition between ‘rule of human beings [*renzhi*]’ and ‘rule of law [*fazhi*]’, after which the latter became the agreed-upon position. Subsequently (1997-2011), the relationship between ‘rule of law’ and ‘legal system [*fazhi*]’ (sometimes misleadingly translated as ‘rule by law’) was debated, with the two clearly demarcated. Thus, while ‘legal system’ is the basis and concrete manifestation of ‘rule of law’, ‘rule of law’ is itself the ultimate framework and goal of the legal system. During this time, ‘governing the country according to law’ entered the 1999 revision of the Constitution. Finally (2012 to the present) we find increasing clarity of more and more aspects of rule of law, along with its consistent and impartial application. Tellingly, in 2018, the Constitution was revised further, replacing ‘improve the socialist legal system’ with ‘improve the socialist rule of law’.

Theory is crucial, but so is practice. The final part of the chapter examines some concrete manifestations of the rule of law in China: the Social Credit System as an effective and creative way to ensure rule of law at all levels; core socialist values as the positive side of the anti-corruption campaign; and the implementation of a consistent rule of law in Hong Kong under the dialectical ‘one country, two systems’ approach. In all of this, it should be remembered that we are speaking of a socialist rule of law, which is a crucial bulwark of China’s socialist system and is distinct from a capitalist rule of law.

Chapter Nine: Sovereignty and Human Rights

This chapter offers a comparison between two traditions concerning human rights, through the prism of state sovereignty: the Western European liberal tradition and the Chinese Marxist tradition. It does so as follows. The first part introduces the distinction between false and rooted universals. A false universal forgets the conditions of its emergence and asserts that its assumptions apply to all irrespective of context, while a

rooted universal is always conscious of and factors into analysis contextual origins, with their possibilities and limitations. With this distinction in mind, the next part deals with state sovereignty. In a Western European context, the standard narrative of this development has two main phases: the initial Westphalian definition (1648) and its significant restriction after the Second World War. The main problem with this narrative is that it largely neglects what drove the shift: the success of anti-colonial struggles in the first half of the twentieth century (the last phase through the United Nations under the inspiration of the Soviet Union). In light of this global perspective, it becomes clear that in formerly colonised and semi-colonised countries the very definition of sovereignty is far from a Westphalian position, since it is transformed into an anti-colonial definition.

The next two parts of the argument deal directly with human rights. Initially, it focuses on the Western European tradition, which is predicated on the identification of human rights as private property and their restriction to civil and political rights. Here is the risk of another false universal: the assertion that this specific tradition applies to all, irrespective of context and of anti-colonial sovereignty. The final topic is the Chinese Marxist tradition of human rights, which arises from the intersections of Confucianism and Marxism. In this tradition, anti-colonial sovereignty is a prerequisite but does not determine human rights, and the core human right is the right to socioeconomic well-being, through which civil, political, cultural and environmental rights arise.

Chapter Ten: Xi Jinping on Marxism

Xi Jinping has confounded international observers, who have ignored much of the material I have discussed in the previous chapters and concluded that China had abandoned Marxism. But Xi Jinping's resolute emphasis on Marxism makes perfect sense if we keep these developments in socialism with Chinese characteristics in mind. At the same time, it is true that Xi Jinping has also re-emphasised Marxism at its many levels, so much so that the CPC is stronger and more united than it has been for quite some time. Older members are once again proud of the party and what it has achieved, while young people are once again keen to join and study Marxism.

How did this happen? While Xi Jinping's many writings and speeches (in the good tradition of communist leaders, he is also a thinker and writer) cover a wide range of topics, my focus is on his direct engagement with Marxism. The core piece for analysis is his major speech on the 200th anniversary of Marx's birth, delivered on 5 May, 2018. While the speech deals with Marx's biography (as an engaged intellectual), the basic premises of Marxism, its history as a living tradition and its emergence to sustained leadership in China, the main part of the speech elaborates on nine topics of relevance to China's

situation. Calling on all to 'study Marx' once again, he begins each sub-section with quotations from Marx and Engels and then elaborates on what they mean for the time after the communist revolution, during the complex and often difficult process of constructing socialism. The topics are: development of human society; sticking to the people's standpoint; productive forces and relations of production; people's democracy; cultural construction; social construction; human-nature relationship; world history; and Marxist party building. These topics open out to a series of other dimensions of Xi Jinping's writings, with which I deal when analysing each section.

Conclusion

Given that most of the material in this book concerns material already known in China, it may be of interest to Chinese readers who wish to see what a foreigner engaged with and working in China thinks about socialism with Chinese characteristics. But I anticipate that it will mostly be of use to non-Chinese readers whose minds may already be somewhat open, or perhaps should be washed and opened, to what such a socialism actually means in theory and practice. Thus, the conclusion summarises the main points of the book and offers guidelines for proceeding with further study.