

Reading Deng Xiaoping

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Revolutionary spirit is a treasure beyond price. Without it there would be no revolutionary action. But revolution takes place on the basis of the need for material benefit. It would be idealism to emphasise the spirit of sacrifice to the neglect of material benefit (Deng 1978f, 146; 1978b, 156).

Deng Xiaoping Theory (*lilun*) is the 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,¹ or one may find often wayward biographies, histories and political assessments (following Western models) of his all-important leadership and legacy (Goodman 1994; Shambaugh 1995; Vogel 2011; Pantsov og Levine 2015), but one struggles to find outside China a careful consideration of his thought.² 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.³ The advantage of this approach is that Deng's thoughts arose from practice,

1 A good example is the 'white cat, black cat' saying, which is often taken as an expression of 'pragmatism', or given even more sinister connotations. The original text, which concerns strategies for reviving agriculture, indicates nothing of the sort: 'When talking about fighting battles, Comrade Liu Bocheng often quotes a Sichuan proverb – "It does not matter if it is a yellow cat or a black cat, as long as it catches mice it is a good cat"' (Deng 1962c, 323). The point: taking advantage of given conditions in battle and at times coming up with unconventional methods should also be used in agriculture.

2 Occasionally, one finds a non-Chinese writer admitting that they ignore Deng's texts due to the curious 'reason' that they were produced collectively or have been 'doctored' by later editors of his published works (Whyte 1995, 107).

3 Deng was characteristically self-deprecating in a late comment: 'Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth. I haven't read too many books, but there is one thing I believe in: Chairman Mao's principle of seeking truth from facts (Deng 1992b, 382; 1992a, 370).

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*]’ (Pan og Yang 1999, 30; G. Chen 2000, 4; Yong 2004, 3). Deng was through and through a Marxist, and the tradition – Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought – was the horizon of his thought and action.⁴

The following 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 (Deng 1978f; 1978b).⁵ The speech was seen at the time as a clap of ‘spring thunder [*chunlei*]’ (Cai og Pan 2008, 188), 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 (Pan og Xu 2003, 49), 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.⁶

Liberating Thought (*jiefang sixiang*)

We’ll be ashamed to go to see Marx if we fail to solve this problem well (Deng 1979d, 193; 1979g, 200).

4 Thus, it erroneous to hypothesise that Deng dispensed with ‘ideology’ and took a ‘pragmatic’ approach, or indeed that he had no theoretical content for his policies (Pye 1995, 24; Chang 1988, 9–10).

5 For an overview of the background leading up to the speech, see Wang and Han (2008, 10–11).

6 Not unexpectedly, the research in China on Deng Xiaoping Theory’s philosophical foundations is immense, but one may usefully consult a number of comprehensive surveys (D. Wang og Cheng 2002; J. Ma og Tan 2004).

Liberate thought, emancipate the mind, use one's brains – Deng Xiaoping uses various expressions to emphasise this central idea, which I will analyse in some detail. In his key speech from 1978 on this topic, Deng implicitly distinguishes between liberation *from* and liberation *for*.

Liberation From

Deng identifies four reasons why people have stopped using their brains, and then three outcomes.⁷ The four reasons: 1) ideological taboos leading to 'blind faith'; 2) over-centralisation and the undermining of democratic centralism; 3) a distortion of right and wrong through a false or 'phony [*jia*]' Marxism so that people lost their bearings and stopped thinking; 4) force of habit of small production, with the suggestion of a resort to much older feudal practices of small peasant production, following old conventions and unwilling to accept anything new

The immediate context is a need to come to terms with the disruptive deviation of the Cultural Revolution (T. Liu 1999, 21–22). While the Gang of Four (*sirenbang*) bears a good deal of the blame, especially in the last few years as Mao's health deteriorated and he retreated even more, Mao himself is not without blame.⁸ As Deng puts it a little later, the Cultural Revolution witnessed an emergence of feudal, patriarchal practices in Mao's later years (Deng 1980c, 347; 1980b, 344–45). Later, I will have more to say concerning Deng's effort to recover the line Mao took before his later years, so let us consider the three outcomes, which have a direct bearing on liberating thought since they lead people to stop using their brains, asking questions and innovating.

To begin with, people had begun to act according rules and regulations, veering with the wind, and book worship.⁹ 'Rules and regulations

⁷ This section is relatively brief, since I am more interested in the substantive contributions that are to come.

⁸ The best account is a candid interview on such matters with the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci (Deng 1980c; 1980b).

⁹ Each begins with the phrase, *sixiang yijianghua*, where *jiang* refers to what is stiff and motionless, and thus what is ossified and stereotyped.

[*tiaotiao-kuangkuang*]’ is a pejorative term, with the sense of outmoded conventions, restrictions and taboos. In other words, one is encircled (*kuang*) by regulations (*tiao*). Further, ‘bending with the wind’ comes from a popular saying: grass on top of a wall sways this way and that with the wind (*qiangtoucao, suifengdao*).¹⁰ The point is that grass on top of a wall has little soil for its roots. A tuft may find some nourishment, but it is unable to grow deep roots and so it sways this way and that way, depending on the direction of the wind. Finally, the criticism of ‘book worship [*benben zhuyi*]’ is an old theme that we find consistently in Mao’s works as well (see more below on ‘truth from facts’). The problem is not careful study as such, but that it does not proceed from actual conditions (*bu cong shiji chufa*). The focus here is not so much the tradition of formulaic Chinese scholarship (the proverbial ‘eight-legged essay’), but more dogmatic Marxists who rely exclusively on what is said in the works of the founders, official documents or leader’s statements.¹¹ The twist here is that despite Mao’s warnings, his own works became the subject of such book worship. As Deng observes a little later: ‘even if we paid constant lip-service [*koutou shang daijiang yonghu*] to Mao Zedong Thought, we would actually be going against it’ (Deng 1978j, 118; 1978g, 129).

¹⁰ *Suifengdao* is literally to turn upside down (*dao*) or be inverted by the direction of the wind.

¹¹ One is reminded here of a parable told by Stalin (1926b, 93–94; 1926a, 97–98): ‘It was at the time of the sailors’ and soldiers’ revolt in the Crimea. Representatives of the navy and army came to the Social-Democrats and said: “For some years past you have been calling on us to revolt against tsarism. Well, we are now convinced that you are right, and we sailors and soldiers have made up our minds to revolt and now we have come to you for advice.” The Social-Democrats became flurried and replied that they couldn’t decide the question of a revolt without a special conference. The sailors intimated that there was no time to lose, that everything was ready, and that if they did not get a straight answer from the Social-Democrats, and if the Social-Democrats did not take over the direction of the revolt, the whole thing might collapse. The sailors and soldiers went away pending instructions, and the Social-Democrats called a conference to discuss the matter. They took the first volume of *Capital*, they took the second volume of *Capital*, and then they took the third volume of *Capital*, looking for some instruction about the Crimea, about Sevastopol, about a revolt in the Crimea. But they could not find a single, literally not a single instruction in all three volumes of *Capital* either about Sevastopol, or about the Crimea, or about a sailors’ and soldiers’ revolt. They turned over the pages of other works of Marx and Engels, looking for instructions – but not a single instruction could they find. What was to be done? Meanwhile the sailors had come expecting an answer. Well, the Social-Democrats had to confess that under the circumstances they were unable to give the sailors and soldiers any instructions. And so ... the sailors’ and soldiers’ revolt collapsed’.

In sum, the immediate problem was coming to terms and dealing with the disruptive deviation of the Cultural Revolution, which had the consequence that thought was captured and not liberated. Indeed, Deng addresses the question directly a little later in the speech, insisting on thorough historical and scientific analysis. Significantly, Comrade Mao was ‘not without shortcomings [*quedian*] or mistakes [*cuowu*]’, for to ‘demand’ such of a revolutionary leader would be inconsistent with Marxism (Deng 1978f, 148–49; 1978b, 158). Thus Mao’s many achievements are indispensable and primary: his role in establishing the CCP, leading the long revolutionary struggle towards Liberation and the New China, and providing the foundations in terms of Mao Zedong Thought. His mistakes, especially in his later years, were secondary. But to assess these mistakes properly, one needs sober historical and scientific study, which takes time.¹²

Liberation For

After identifying what thought should be liberated *from*, Deng shifts to devote most of his attention to liberating thought *for* the socialist project, for human liberation itself, from colonialism, imperialism and oppression (Tong 2017, 59–60). Deng’s main points may be summarised as follows: 1) liberating thought is the correct ideological line; 2) it requires a healthy exercise of socialist democracy, both political and economic; 3) it is the basis of the proletarian world outlook and is embodied in seeking truth from facts; 4) in providing the impetus to innovation, to generating new ideas and new ways, it entails a dialectical transformation of liberating the forces of production and economic planning.

Each of these points entails a contradiction, which should be approached from the perspective of contradiction analysis, as it was initially elaborated by Mao Zedong. At the intersections between the long tradition of Chinese thought and Marxist philosophy, Mao developed – initially in his

¹² Later assessment has made it clear that the Cultural Revolution was a potential collapse and defeat of the revolutionary path, which at the last moment averted. It was a glimpse into the chaos of an abyss – a ‘bitter struggle in the dark’ – that had been China’s reality for decades leading up to 1949.

1937 Yan'an lectures (1937a; 1937b) – a multifaceted analysis that he later revised and published (1937c), along with a crucial follow-up piece on correctly handling contradictions among the people (1957a). For our purposes, the following features of Mao's analysis are pertinent: each contradiction contains an opposition that is also complementary; while contradictions under a capitalist system are antagonistic and lead eventually to revolution, under socialism contradictions should be non-antagonistic; any situation has multiple contradictions and their relations to one another constantly change in light of changing circumstances, so one always needs to assess the situation carefully and scientifically so as to be able to manage these contradictions. Let us see how Deng deals with the contradictions embodied in each of the points summarised above (see also Xiang 2009, 38–44).

The first contradiction: liberating thought is all about the correct 'line of thought [*sixiang luxian*]', or – as the official English translation puts it – the correct ideological line. To quote Deng: the 'debate about the criterion for testing truth is really a debate about the theoretical line [*sixiang luxian*], about politics, about the future and the destiny of our Party and nation' (Deng 1978f, 143; 1978b, 153).¹³ Obviously, we are far from any Western liberal free-for-all, a thought-for-thought's sake that is supposedly free from any ideological interference (except the ideology of liberalism itself). Instead, for Deng liberating thought is at one and the same time the correct theoretical line, particularly if we keep in mind that the line in question is the living tradition of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought (H. Chen 2001, 63).¹⁴ We may understand this approach in terms of three related aspects: a) the very definition of the tradition is to liberate thought, for it is a living tradition rather than one ossified and dogmatically fixed on texts of the past; b) one

¹³ Or, as he puts it slightly later: 'What does liberating thought mean? It means that, guided by Marxism, we should break the fetters of habit, subjectivism and prejudice, and study new situations and solve new problems. In liberating thought, we should never deviate from the Four Cardinal Principles or impair the political situation marked by stability, unity and liveliness' (Deng 1980i, 279; 1980a, 278).

¹⁴ See also: 'it is necessary to liberate thought, that is, to study new situations and solve new problems by applying the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought' (Deng 1979b, 179; 1979h, 187).

can liberate thinking only on the basis of Marxist-Leninism; c) only through liberating thought can this tradition, this theoretical line develop even further. New problems demand new solutions, which Marx and Engels, and indeed Lenin and Stalin, did not experience and could not foresee. It is not for nothing that liberating thought is the 'beginning point' or 'primary task' [*shouxian*]: 'When it comes to liberating thought, using our heads, seeking truth from facts and uniting as one in looking to the future, the primary task is to liberate thought' (Deng 1978f, 140; 1978b, 151).

A specific and sharp example may help in understanding this contradiction: Deng's invocation of the Yan'an Rectification Movement of 1942-1945. As Deng writes, 'Comrade Mao Zedong said this time and again [*fanfu*] during the rectification movements [*zhengfeng yundong*]' (Deng 1978f, 143; 1978b, 153). Said what? Mao too urged repeatedly the danger of ossified thinking and book-worship (Mao 1942g; 1942f; 1942b; 1942d), observing at one point: 'a prerequisite for maintaining close links with the masses and making fewer mistakes is to examine one's baggage, to get rid of it, and to emancipate one's spirit [*ziji de jingshen huode de jiefang*]' (Mao 1944b, 947; 1944a, 173). The anticipation of liberating thought should be obvious, although Mao uses *jingshen*, spirit or vital energy, rather than thought (*sixiang*). Let me put it even more sharply: liberating thought requires periodic rectification. Without such exercises, the correct line of thought risks being lost and thus the opportunity to liberate thought also risks being lost. In light of my earlier observations on the need to deal with the Cultural Revolution, the invocation of Mao's rectification campaigns is yet another effort to connect with Mao (and indeed the Marxist-Leninist theoretical line) before the deviation of the Cultural Revolution. In other words, Deng argues strongly that he is continuing the correct line that runs not only from Mao before his deviation, but also from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. And it is precisely this line, this tradition, which requires periodic rectification and even purging, to provide the foundation for and foster liberated thinking, which in turn becomes the primary means for enabling the line to continue on its creative path.

The second contradiction concerns socialist democracy, which is embodied in the term ‘democratic centralism’, and even more sharply – in Mao’s reinterpretation of the dictatorship of the proletariat – in ‘democratic dictatorship’ (Mao 1949a; 1949b; 1950c, 28; 1950a, 114–15). Earlier, I mentioned briefly that one of the problems during the Cultural Revolution had been a breakdown of democratic centralism, in which a turn towards greater centralism – of a patriarchal and feudal nature (Deng 1980c, 347; 1980b, 344–45) – had undermined centralism itself through the waning of democracy and the reluctance of people to speak for fear of offending the leadership.¹⁵ As in the political sphere, so also in the economic, where the power of economic management was ‘over-concentrated [*guoyu jizhong*]’ (Deng 1978f, 145).

My interest here is in Deng’s constructive proposals for democratic centralism. The core of the theory is not difficult to grasp,¹⁶ especially in light of its longer history from the Soviet Union onwards (W. Li 2010; Z. Li og Wang 2018), although Mao gives it a distinct formulation in terms of contradiction analysis:

Both democracy and freedom are relative, not absolute, and they come into being and develop in specific historical conditions. Within the ranks of the people, democracy is correlative with centralism and freedom with discipline. They are the two opposites of a single entity, contradictory as well as united, and we should not one-sidedly emphasize one to the exclusion of the other. Within the ranks of the

¹⁵ We already see Deng’s wariness of this tendency in the rather different situation of the early 1940s (Deng 1941a, 8–11; 1941b, 21–23).

¹⁶ Foreign observers who cannot see beyond the Western bourgeois horizon consistently fail to understand democratic centralism and the nature of socialist democracy. Often they assume an either-or approach, in which it is either centralism or democracy (understood as bourgeois democracy), which is usually cast in the useless authoritarian-democratic distinction (Whyte 1995, 120–21). At a specific level they fail to understand how socialist democratic practices actually work. A good example is the development of local village elections, which they postulate arose in the 1990s in response to political pressure, but which ‘failed’ to bring about the perceived need for bourgeois democracy (Fewsmith 2012, 52–55; Weller 2012). These superficial analyses (often based on newspaper articles) fail on a number of counts: organic democracy is the oldest form of democracy known to human societies and has been transformed – as Engels already foreshadowed – in light of socialist governance; in the early communist period in the late 1930s and 1940s, it was already practised in areas under communist sway (Deng 1941a, 7; 1941b, 19–20); it works within a larger structure of direct and indirect elections; and it is a clear embodiment of democratic centralism.

people, we cannot do without freedom, nor can we do without discipline; we cannot do without democracy, nor can we do without centralism. This unity of democracy and centralism, of freedom and discipline, constitutes our democratic centralism (Mao 1957a, 209; 1957b, 389).

As for Deng, in the speech under consideration he makes a number of points, each of which seems somewhat lapidary on the surface, but has significant implications: a) an over-emphasis on centralism requires a correction in the direction of greater democracy; b) on economic democracy, greater decision making powers, and thus innovation, should be devolved to enterprises, provinces and counties; c) greater scope should be given for elections, management and supervision by workers, which would lead to greater responsibility; d) a comprehensive legal system should be developed that enshrines democratic realities and responsibilities.

To begin with, the correction towards greater democratic involvement may, on a cursory reading, suggest a ‘golden mean’ approach, in which one searches for a reasonable balance between two poles of a contradiction. Not so, For Deng actually points out that centralism is not strengthened but weakened without a healthy dose of democracy. Therefore, ‘we must exercise democracy to the full so as to enable proper centralism’ (Deng 1978f, 143).¹⁷ Obviously, we are in the territory of contradiction analysis, where the one strengthens the other by its full exercise. A little later, Deng would – again invoking Mao – elaborate on the contradictory unity of democratic centralism: ‘We practise democratic centralism, which is the integration of centralism based on democracy with democracy under the guidance of centralism’. While this integral element of the socialist system focuses on the collective and the greater socialist good, it entails a unity of contradictions, a ‘unity of personal interests and collective interests, of the interests of the part

¹⁷ This was by no means the first time Deng had emphasised the dialectical nature of democratic centralism. For example, in 1962 he observed: ‘without democracy, there can be no centralism, and centralism cannot be truly or correctly realized unless it is based on democracy’ (Deng 1962b, 304; 1962a, 300).

and those of the whole, and of immediate and long-term interests' (Deng 1979b, 175–76; 1979h, 183).

Further, the emphasis on economic democracy, on the responsibility system, and on creative decision making at different levels (see also Deng 1979a, 195, 197; 1979e, 202–3; 1980i, 280; 1980a, 278–79),¹⁸ should be seen in light of the interactions between the two components, or institutional forms, of market and planned economies in a socialist system. This point anticipates not only the section on liberating the forces of production (see below) but also a full study of the socialist market economy (which Deng assiduously promoted). Here the key is that while a planned economy may give greater scope for centralised planning, a market economy has a greater tendency to foster decentralised initiative.

As for elections and responsibility, we now broach the fascinating development of de-politicised elections, which will be analysed further in my chapter on socialist democracy. By 'de-politicised' elections – a concept that derives from Marx and Engels (Boer In press) – is meant the fact that elections are not the manifestation of class conflict in antagonistic political parties, but elections based on qualifications, expertise and merit for positions. Finally, there is the matter of a legal framework, concerning which the deeper issue is captured in Deng's observation that formerly 'what leaders say is taken as the law and anyone who disagrees is called a law-breaker'. Such a 'law changes whenever a leader's views change' (Deng 1978f, 146; 1978b, 156). The response: socialist democracy is unthinkable without a socialist legal system (Deng 1980f, 359; 1980h, 355). Here Deng is anticipating the whole development of a socialist rule of law (*fazhi* - 法治), which – again – I will discuss in detail later. The key opposite term is 'rule of a human being' (*renzhi*), which would come to be equated with 'rule by law' (*fazhi* - 法制). Clearly, Deng finds the latter unacceptable, at least in the late 1970s with the experience of some 30 years of the construction of socialism. Rule by a

¹⁸ For a comprehensive earlier analysis of the need for and workings of economic democracy in stimulating innovation, see Song (1999, 4–8).

human being and thus rule by law had once again come to the fore during the Cultural Revolution and by this caused untold havoc. Hence the urging for developing a comprehensive legal system.

We have reached an inflexion point: thus far, I have dealt with two features of Deng's crucial speech on liberating thought, focusing on the contradictions of liberating thought as the correct theoretical line, and the exercise of (economic and political) democracy as the means to strengthen democratic centralism. On the way, I have flagged items that will be developed further in subsequent chapters, especially since Deng in many ways set the agenda for what was to come in the development of the Reform and Opening-Up. Two topics from the speech on liberating thought remain to be analysed: seeking truth from facts, and liberating the forces of production.

Seek Truth From Facts (*shishiqiushi*)

Comrade Mao Zedong wrote the four-word motto 'Seek truth from facts' for the Central Party School in Yan'an, and these words are the quintessence of his philosophical thinking (Deng 1977a, 67; 1977d, 80; see also 1977g, 45; 1977c, 58).

The third contradiction brings us to truth from facts. It is an ancient¹⁹ four-character phrase that deploys three homonymic characters. *Shíshì* (实事)²⁰ refers to what is an actual happening, a fact, but the word also includes the senses of action and what is practical. *Qíúshì* (求是) joins the character for 'seek', *qiú* (求) with another *shì* (是), now with the meaning of what is and so what is true. Thus, one must seek truth from actual conditions, what is actually taking place, from – as a breakthrough article in *Guangming Daily* (Hu 1978) put it – social practice.²¹ Let me pause for a moment to emphasise

19 The phrase goes back 2000 years to the Han Dynasty, although there it is more of scholarly approach (Yuan 2000, 18; Gao og Zhang 2013, 108; J. Li 2015, 50).

20 I have added tone markers to indicate how the characters sound.

21 The article was originally published anonymously ('a special commentator') and went through many revisions in order to ensure maximum impact. Later revealed to have been written by Hu Fuming, it was written as a direct challenge to the 'two whatevers'. Deng refers to the article on a number of occasions as having 'settled the question' (Deng 1978f, 152; 1978b, 152–53; 1979d, 190–91; 1979g, 197–98; 1980j, 244; 1980o, 245–46; see also C. Yang 2008, 4–5).

this point: truth from facts is not a version of vulgar empiricism, in which scientific investigation must seek to conform with material reality; instead, the facts in question concern social practice (*shehui shijian*) in all its complexity and contradictions (Xixi Chen 2008, 4). This specific concern should be kept in mind in the following elaboration.

Although the centrality of the slogan is usually attributed to Deng Xiaoping, it actually goes back to Mao Zedong, who first wrote it down while lecturing in Yan'an during the immensely creative period in the second half of the 1930s (J. Li 2015, 51). In his published texts, Mao referred to this principle not infrequently, although the focus tended to be on 'a "seeking-truth-from-facts" work style' (Deng 1962b, 299; 1962a, 296). To quote Mao: 'To take such an attitude is to seek truth from facts'. In more detail, "Facts" are all the things that exist objectively, "truth" means their internal relations, that is, the laws governing them, and "to seek" means to study' (Mao 1941a, 801; 1941c, 22; see also 1937f, 296; 1937e, 308; 1942a, 836; 1942e, 58). Again and again, we find an emphasis on the style of commendable party work by cadres: hard work and plain living, upright and honest in word and deed, able to cooperate with others and resist undesirable practices, acting boldly and resolutely in an experienced and professional manner, integrating theory with practice, and seeking truth from facts through close contact with the masses (Pan og Xu 2003, 48–49; Jin 2005, 1–2; J. Li 2015, 50–51). This is, as Deng points out, the 'Party spirit' (Deng 1977h, 75; 1977e, 88),²² so much so that it continues today to embody what it means to be a comrade, a member of the Communist Party.²³

However, in the late 1970s there was a distinct shift, when truth from facts was raised from being a feature of a cadre's work-style to a central principle of not only the Reform and Opening-Up, but also the Chinese spirit

²² As Mao puts it already in 1941, 'seeking truth from facts and closely combining theory with practice is the basic attitude of a Party member with a strong Party spirit [*dangxing*]' (Mao 1941e, 361; see also 1942c, 458; 1950b, 57).

²³ This emphasis appears throughout Deng Xiaoping's texts (Deng 1950a, 170; 1950b, 173; 1956a, 247; 1956b, 248; 1961c, 287–88; 1961a, 284–85; 1961d, 293–95; 1961b, 291–92; 1962b, 298, 302, 304, 315; 1962a, 295, 298, 300, 310; 1978i, 106; 1978h, 117; 1978j, 124; 1978g, 134–35; 1979b, 159, 162; 1979h, 169, 172).

(*jingshen*) and of Marxism-Leninism itself (Yuan 2000, 21–22). The moment that marks the shift was a speech at an all-army conference on political work, on 2 June, 1978 (six months before the important speech on liberating thought).²⁴ Here, Deng (1978j, 113–18; 1978g, 124–29) elaborates precisely on what is meant by truth from facts, and he does so by digging deep into Mao Zedong's earlier material.²⁵ In a slightly later speech, Deng provides specific historical examples of how Mao applied truth from facts, whether changing tactics to encircle the cities from the countryside (following Lenin's principle of the weakest link in a different context), or shifting from a struggle against imperialism, colonialism and racism, to focusing on peaceful coexistence and working with other countries to ensure peace, or the change in focus from class struggle as the key to liberating the forces of production (Deng 1978c; 1978d).

A major reason for engaging so extensively with Mao's writings and his actual practice was a struggle over the legacy of Mao Zedong Thought (S. Yang 2004). Would it be letter or spirit? Would it be the 'two whatevers [*liangge fanshi*]', as in 'we will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave'.²⁶ For Deng and others this was a betrayal of Mao, as of Marxism as a whole: 'Neither Marx nor Engels put forward any "whatever" doctrine, nor did Lenin or Stalin, nor did Comrade Mao Zedong himself (Deng 1977b, 38; 1977f, 51).²⁷ Instead, the key is seeking truth from facts, for

24 See the later recap of the process – not without opposition and some struggle – of promoting seeking truth from facts and liberating thought, in a discussion with Kim Il Sung (Deng 1982c, 9–10; 1982b, 20–21).

25 The texts by Mao Zedong that are cited and discussed are, from 1929 to 1958: 'Draft Resolution of the Ninth Congress of the Communist Party in the Fourth Red Army'; 'Oppose Book Worship'; 'Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War'; 'On Practice'; 'On Contradiction'; 'Preface and Postscript to *Rural Surveys*'; 'Reform Our Study'; 'Rectify the Party's Style of Work'; 'Oppose Stereotyped Party Writing'; 'Combat Bourgeois Ideas in the Party'; 'Strengthen Party Unity and Carry Forward Party Traditions'; 'Sixty Articles on Working Methods (Draft)' (Mao 1929b; 1929a; 1930a; 1930b; 1936b; 1936a; 1937f; 1937e; 1937c; 1937d; 1941b; 1941c; 1941a; 1941d; 1942g; 1942f; 1942a; 1942e; 1953; 1953a; 1956f; 1956e; 1958a; 1958b).

26 The 'two whatevers' were proposed in an editorial entitled 'Study the Documents Well and Grasp the Key Link'. It appeared simultaneously on 7 February, 1977, in three newspapers: *Renmin Ribao*, *Hongqi* and *Jiefangjun Bao*. It may be found at www.wendangku.net/doc/bd9fab3f27284b73f24250fc.html.

27 The struggle to assert truth from facts against those who promoted the two whatevers in the wake of the Cultural Revolution is discussed in some detail by Yang (2008, 4–6).

Marxism is not a dogma, as Engels already observed, but a guide to action (Engels 1886a, 578; 1886b, 531–32; 1895a, 428; 1895b, 461). Only in this way is one able to restore the ‘original features [*benlai mianmu*] of Mao Zedong Thought’ (Deng 1979b, 165; 1979h, 175; see also 1979d, 190; 1979g, 197; 1987b, 253–54; 1987a, 249–50). Let me put it this way: Mao Zedong Thought, up until the late 1950s, was a genuine development of the Marxist-Leninist tradition, but the Cultural Revolution and its attendant ‘Maoism’ that captured many in the Western Left was a deviation into ‘phony’ Marxism that was not really Marxism at all (Fu 2004, 5–7). Thus, Deng Xiaoping’s recovery of Mao Zedong Thought was actually a recovery of the Marxist-Leninist line (Z. Yu 1995).

As for Deng’s own argument, there are a number of layers. The first of which is the scientific: socialism is also a scientific endeavour. It is nothing less than scientific socialism, as first formulated by Engels (1880b; 1880a). Thorough investigation of the data, formulation of a theoretical framework in response, and then further investigation. Nothing remarkable here, one might think: does not all modern science operate in the same way? The answer is yes and no, for everything turns – and this is the second layer – on the theoretical framework one uses to interpret the scientific data, and indeed on how the framework is transformed in the process (Xixi Chen 2008, 5–6).²⁸ For Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Deng, the framework is of course Marxism.²⁹ As for the third layer, the method entails a constant dialectical interaction between facts and truth, between data and theory, between practice and philosophy – in short, dialectical materialism (Weng 1999, 30–31; Gan 2004, 31–32; Rao 2011, 8–9). The ‘integration [*xiang jiehe*] of theory with practice’ entails that the theories developed in order to solve problems should be ‘tested by being applied in social practice’, even to the extent that

²⁸ This question also applies to what facts are important in the framework of social practice. In Deng Xiaoping’s texts, we find the following: the mass line (Deng 1977g, 45; 1977c, 58), dealing with a comrade’s mistakes (Deng 1980i, 274; 1980a, 273–74), even Mao’s mistakes, although they are secondary to his major contributions (Deng 1980e, 292, 301; 1980m, 291, 300; 1980c, 347; 1980b, 344–45; 1980f, 365–66; 1980h, 360–61), the realities of the capitalist systems of Hong Kong and Taiwan in formulating the one country-two systems approach (Deng 1984d, 101; 1984b, 107), and, most commonly, China’s specific conditions as a whole.

²⁹ By now it should be obvious that the charge of unreconstructed empiricism, occasionally directed at Mao Zedong at least, is unfounded (Bulkeley 1977; Womack 1982, 32, 77; see the reply by Knight 1990, 24–30).

instructions from higher units – up to the Central Committee – should be integrated with ‘actual conditions’ (Deng 1978j, 116–18; 1978g, 127–28). In sum, this is a process of ‘proceeding from reality and of integrating theory with practice in order to sum up past experience, analyse the new historical conditions, raise new problems, set new tasks and lay down new guidelines’ (Deng 1978j, 118; 1978g, 128–29).

A further level entails inveighing – as did Mao (1930a; 1930b) – against the constant danger of ‘book worship [*benbenzhuyi*]’, which in another parlance may be called ‘Marxology’. The image of those who are fond of trotting out selected texts from Marx, Engels, or even Mao himself instead of actually engaging in some serious investigation of the situation in question may seem like a caricature, but let us pause for a moment and ask: how often does a ‘Western’ Marxist like to cite Marx’s euphoric description of the Paris commune and use it to judge the supposed ‘failures’ of Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese or North Korean socialism? Not only is this habit selective and ignorant of Engels’s important contribution (in which the commune is equated with the hard edge of the proletarian dictatorship), and not only is it made by those with no concrete experience in the arduous task of constructing socialism, but it so often falls into the utopian and well-nigh messianic tenor of ‘Western’ Marxism (Losurdo 2017). For those who would peremptorily dismiss China’s effort at constructing socialism, Deng’s invocation to seek truth from facts has a distinct pertinence. Or, as Mao put it in 1930: ‘no investigation, no right to speak’ (Mao 1930a, 109).

The final level of Deng’s extended treatment is embodied best in Mao’s observation: ‘Our party has a tradition of seeking truth from facts, which is to combine the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism with China’s reality’ (Mao 1961, 237; see also 1940, 662–63; 1955b, 498; 1960).³⁰ In other words, truth from facts is a basic tenet of socialism with Chinese characteristics, if not its very

³⁰ Or, as Deng puts it: ‘What is the ideological line? To adhere to Marxism and to integrate it with Chinese realities – in other words, to seek truth from facts, as advocated by Comrade Mao Zedong, and to uphold his basic ideas’ (Deng 1984c, 62; 1984a, 72).

embodiment (S. Ma 2000). I will have more to say on Chinese characteristics in the conclusion, save for the following point: if one investigates the specific facts of a situation and seeks to develop an approach that is sensitive to these conditions and their history, then one has an approach – Marxism – that has specific characteristics (G. Chen 2000, 5–6; Xin og Zhou 2000, 71; Xu 2009).³¹ This is an obvious instance point of materialist dialectics (Y. Song 1999), but it needs to be asserted in light of the many mystifications surrounding socialism with Chinese characteristics. But does this approach mean we have merely an ‘application’ of Marxism? Not at all, for truth from facts is ‘the basis [*jichu*] of the proletarian world outlook [*wuchan jieji shijieguan*] as well as the theoretical basis [*sixiang jichu*] of Marxism’ (Deng 1978f, 143; 1978b, 153).³² It is the point of departure (*chufadian*), the most fundamental point (*genbendian*), the basic component (*jiben zuchengbufen*), and what summarises (*gaikuo*) Marxism itself and thus Mao Zedong Thought.³³

We come at last to the core of the contradiction in question: if seeking truth from facts means to integrate theory with reality, then liberating thought entails ensuring that thought conforms with reality. Some may ask: how can integrating theory with reality mean the liberation of thought? It sounds like another way of restraining thought: instead of being tied to dogmatism and book worship, it is now bound to reality, to facts. Not only is such an objection framed by an idealist and individualist approach, but it also misses the crucial point: thought needs to be liberated *from* dogmatism and *for* creative engagements with factual reality.

31 A historical point is also pertinent: when the CPC was finally able to determine its own path and put aside the influence and direction of the Comintern, it became necessary to distinguish the specific development of Marxism in light of Chinese conditions. Although this process had already been underway in the late 1920s, as Mao built up a red area in Jinggangshan (where he was met by Zhu De and the soldiers who had taken part in the Nanchang Uprising), it was not until the all-important Zunyi Conference that the decisive shift took place. The conference took place in January of 1935, during the Long March, and Mao finally became the chairman of the CPC. Only then did his approach to revolution come to the fore, focusing on China’s conditions.

32 Already in 1956 Deng observed: ‘To proceed from reality and seek truth from facts is our fundamental stand as materialists’ (Deng 1956a, 243; 1956b, 244).

33 These terms appear throughout Deng’s texts (Deng 1978j, 114; 1978g, 126; 1980i, 278; 1980a, 277).

By now it should be obvious that the separation of liberating thought and truth from facts into two parts is actually somewhat artificial, for Deng is always keen to stress their intimate interconnection: ‘Seeking truth from facts is the content and requirement of liberating thought’ (Gan 2004, 31).³⁴ Deng may have said that liberating thought is ‘primary [*shouxian*]’, but he also connects it closely with seeking truth from facts. For example, in the quotation with which I began the analysis of liberating thought, Deng says: ‘Only if we liberate thought, seek truth from facts, proceed from reality [*shiji*] in everything and integrate [*lianxi*] theory with reality [*shiji*]...’. Three of the four phrases concern what is actually happening, reality and practice (*shiji* can mean both). This intimate connection is expressed even more clearly in another text:

Liberating thought means making our thinking conform [*xiangfuhe*] to reality – making the subjective [*zhuguan*] conform to the objective [*keguan*] – and that means seeking truth from facts. Henceforth, if in all our work we want to seek truth from facts, we must continue to liberate thought (Deng 1980f, 364; 1980h, 359).

The real problem, then, is to be locked into old ways, old dogmatisms developed under different circumstances. One might study carefully – always a useful undertaking – the texts of Marx and Engels, or indeed Lenin, Stalin and Mao, but the risk is that one takes them as iron-clad prescriptions or models for all situations (P. Liu 2004, 35). Deng’s point here is that such an approach is actually a betrayal of Marxism, for the key is the method itself rather than the specific results arising from the method in specific situations. Marx and Engels sought to analyse the situation in Europe of the second half of the nineteenth century, while Lenin and Stalin did so in Russia (and then the Soviet Union) in the first half of the twentieth century. Mao’s extensive writings responded to and analysed the situation in China in the early to mid-

³⁴ Or, as Wang and Cheng (2002, 45) put it, ‘Comparatively speaking, “emancipating the mind” emphasises human subjectivity, while “seeking truth from facts” includes human subjectivity while emphasising the objectivity of the world’.

twentieth century, while Deng Xiaoping faced new challenges as the overwhelmingly planned economy ran into contradictions (Weng 1999, 28). On the way, all of them developed not only solutions to specific problems, but also a robust method that may be described as a historical and dialectical materialist approach of seeking truth from facts.³⁵

Liberating the Forces of Production (*jiefang shengchanli*)

Deng Xiaoping is a great proletarian revolutionary and politician ... the main body of his philosophical thought is a social-historical view based on the liberation and development of productive forces (Yingzi Wang og Ma 2005, 13).

In elaborating on the final contradiction – between planned and market economies – let me begin with the following quotation from another text by Deng:

Not liberating thought is out of the question, even to the extent of including the question of what socialism is also requires the liberation of thought. If the economy remains stagnant for a long period of time, it cannot be called socialism. If the people's living standards remain at a very low level for a long period of time, it cannot be called socialism (Deng 1980n, 312).³⁶

I have begun with this quotation, since it raises more sharply the connection between liberating thought and liberating the forces of production (Y. Yu og Song 2005, 6), and thus the whole process of the Reform and Opening-Up (Xiao og He 1999, 13–14; Gan 2004, 32; Cai og Pan 2008, 191).

35 Or, as some have suggested, seeking truth from facts may be described as 'practical materialism [*shijian de weiwuzhuyi*]' (Cui 2004).

36 My translation. See also: 'Liberating thought should be accompanied by really solving problems ... We don't yet have many comrades who carefully study fresh situations and solve fresh problems and who really use their minds to think out ways of accelerating our advance, the development of the productive forces and the rise in national income or of improving the work of the leading bodies' (Deng 1980i, 279–80; 1980a, 278). Note also that once thought is liberated, 'only then can we ... fruitfully reform those aspects of the relations of production and of the superstructure that do not correspond with the rapid development of our productive forces, and chart the specific course and formulate the specific policies, methods and measures needed to achieve the four modernizations under our actual conditions' (Deng 1978f, 140–41; 1978b, 151).

One of Deng's signal contributions was to emphasise a feature of Marxism – liberating the forces of production – that was too often lost in the initial moves after a successful proletarian revolution. Given the prior realities of bourgeois and landlord ownership of the means of production, the primary task for a Communist Party in power had been to expropriate such owners and claim the means of production for workers (both rural and urban). This measure was necessary also to deal with the inevitable counter-revolution, and it enabled in all countries that began the process of constructing socialism an initial economic surge. However, the focus became too fixed in the realm of the relations of production, on ownership of productive forces. This imbalance inevitably led to new contradictions between the forces and relations of production, with stagnating economic initiative and lack of improvement (Deng 1982a, 16; 1985a, 148; Yunjing Wang og Yang 1994, 105).

So Deng's emphasis was resolutely on the other – often neglected – side, on the forces of production.³⁷ Socialism is all about the liberation of the forces of production: 'The development of the productive forces ... is the most fundamental [*zui genben*] revolution from the viewpoint of historical development' (Deng 1980n, 311; 1980p, 310; see also Cao 1998; J. Chen 1994). There is no point to 'poor socialism'; socialism means nothing if it does not liberate the forces of production, stimulate the economy and the improve the living standards of all people. Later, on his famous 'Southern Tour' of 1992, Deng defined socialism in terms of what are now called the 'three benefits': 'whether it is conducive to the development of the productive forces of a socialist society, to the enhancement of the comprehensive national strength of a socialist country, and to the improvement of people's living standards' (Deng 1992b, 372).³⁸

37 We do find this emphasis from time to time in Mao's works (Mao 1945a, 1079; 1945b, 301; 1956c, 1–2; 1956d, 17–18; see also H. Li 1999).

38 My translation. Deng's effort (1978e; 1978a) to redefine socialism in light of Marxism also acknowledged the importance of the definition first developed in the Soviet Union: from each according to ability, to each according to work (Boer 2017). Communism would then entail to each according to need. But with his resolute emphasis on liberating the forces of production, Deng also went beyond the early experience of the Soviet Union.

Obviously, this emphasis requires a distinct liberation of thought, a freeing of the mind from past dogmatisms so as to bring about a redefinition of socialism. Or, rather, it requires a recovery of an oft-forgotten feature of the Marxist tradition, which assumes that material productivity is the basis of all social and spiritual life (G. Chen 2000, 8). It remains to see to how this re-emphasis entails a contradiction. It does so at two levels. The first is between the forces and relations of production. In response to efforts in the early stages of socialist construction in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to suggest that the contradiction had been overcome and that socialism was all about the relations of production and ownership, which could determine economic development, Stalin (1952) argued that the contradictions between forces and relations of production continue under socialism (see also Mao 1957a, 214; 1957b, 393). Should one dimension outpace the other, economic policy required an adjustment in favour of the laggard (Weng 1999, 31–33; Xie 2008, 32). In China too, the problem had been an over-emphasis on the relations of production, which initially through a fully planned economy enabled an economic boost, but it had by the 1970s begun to stifle economic improvement. Hence the resolute emphasis on liberating the forces of production and on the ‘three benefits’.

This liberation was achieved through a socialist market economy, which will be discussed in detail in a subsequent chapter. The point to be made here is that planned and market economies – as components or institutional forms (*tizhi*) of an overall socialist system (*zhidu*) – do not cancel each other out in a Chinese context, for both enable the liberation of productive forces (Jiang 1992, 22; T. Song 1999, 2; Y. Yu og Song 2005, 8). How is this possible? Do not planned and market economies negate one another? In the Western Marxist tradition this may be the assumption, although in such an assumption Western Marxists unwittingly share the view of the godfather of neo-liberalism, Count Ludwig von Mises (1932, 142): ‘the alternative is still either Socialism or a market economy’. But not in Chinese Marxism, and certainly not in the theory and practice of Deng Xiaoping, or

indeed in the further developments that followed in his wake. It is not a case of either-or, as is the tendency in the Western tradition, but both-and: ‘things that contradict each other also complement one another’. Thus, at the time of writing we find the emergence of arguments that the Chinese approach is enabling a dialectical sublation (*yangqi*, the Chinese translation of *Aufhebung*) or transcendence (*chaoyue*) of old-fashioned socialist planning and the capitalist market economy (Zhang 2009, 139; Zhou og Wang 2019, 41). In other words, planning has by no means disappeared with the socialist market economy, but has achieved a whole new level of complexity and flexibility (Heilman og Melton 2013).

With this observation in mind, we may understand the emphasis on planning in the final section of Deng’s speech on liberating thought (which has been the focus of this study). Deng introduces this material with the observation: ‘In order to look forward, we must study the new situation and tackle the new problems in good time; otherwise, there can be no smooth progress’. He goes on: ‘In three fields especially, the new situation and new problems demand attention: methods of management, structure of management and economic policy’ (Deng 1978f, 149; 1978b, 159). In what follows this quotation, we find an emphasis on overcoming bureaucratism in management methods, on strengthening the work responsibility system by not relying (and here he quotes Lenin) on collegiate excuses³⁹ but on rewards and penalties, and on a deliberate policy of uneven development, in which some regions would experience the benefits of liberating productive forces so as to provide role models for others. The third item has its obvious dangers, with resultant discrepancies between richer and poorer regions and the rising polarities that were a distinct problem in the 1990s and 2000s. With the warning bells of a rising Gini coefficient at 0.45 and the ratio of urban-rural differences rising to 3.1:1, the seventeenth (2007) and especially the eighteenth Congress (2012) of the CPC stressed ‘achieving prosperity for all

39 Or indeed on the incentive-destroying ‘iron rice bowl’ or, in Chinese parlance, ‘eating from the same big pot’ (see the chapter on the Reform and Opening-Up).

over time' (Zhu 2013, 108–9). It fell to Xi Jinping's tenure to make poverty alleviation a primary focus, especially in light of the first centenary goal of achieving a *xiaokang* society by 2021.⁴⁰ Of course, this target requires comprehensive and detailed planning.

Conclusion: Chinese Characteristics

We have advocated Marxism all our lives. Actually, Marxism is not abstruse. It is a plain thing, a very plain truth (Deng 1992b, 382; 1992a, 370).

To sum up: liberating thought is both a liberation from (book-worship, the whim of the leader, distortions of right and wrong) and liberation for socialism, which entails an extraordinary concern with innovation for the sake of socialist construction (Xiaoming Chen og Zhou 2000, 10–11; Gan 2004, 33). It also a thorough example of implicit contradiction analysis, in which liberating thought is the correct theoretical line, the manifestation of a healthy democratic centralism, seeking truth from facts as the basis of a proletarian world outlook and the Marxist method, and the liberation of productive forces at the intersection of planning and market. Deng would return to this core theme on many occasions, whether in terms of education, writing and artistic production, rural policy, party and state leadership, and from 'right', 'left' and 'feudal' straightjackets (Deng 1977a, 67, 71; 1977d, 80, 84; 1979j, 208, 213; 1979f, 214, 218; 1980g, 316; 1980k, 315; 1980d, 326, 336; 1980l, 325, 334; 1980f, 355, 357; 1980h, 352, 353; 1981a, 379; 1981b, 373).

Let me close with a consideration of three topics: Chinese characteristics; the heresy of poor socialism; and Deng's relation to the Marxist tradition. Deng is of course well-known for popularising the phrase 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Earlier, I indicated how this reality is intimately connected with seeking truth from facts, but here I would like to deal with the question directly. This much misinterpreted phrase actually has its seeds in Mao Zedong (Mao 1938a, 657–59; 1938b, 537–39; 1945a, 1093–94;

⁴⁰ For a full discussion, see the chapter on seeking a *xiaokang* society.

1945b, 314; 1956a, 42; 1956b, 304),⁴¹ but it is also disarmingly straightforward: Marxism has a universal method and principles, but it can become concrete only by taking into account the specific conditions, the particular history, culture and social conditions. As Deng observes, in ‘building socialism, each country should adopt policies commensurate with its particular conditions [*ziji de tedian*]’ (Deng 1980n, 313; 1980p, 312; see also 1978j, 113; 1978g, 125). There is nothing mysterious about this approach: it applies as much to the developments of Marxism in Russia,⁴² Latin America, Eastern and Western Europe, as it does to China. One cannot apply a template that may have worked elsewhere (most notably the Soviet Union) to quite distinct conditions. An obvious point, for Marxism always prioritises the specific conditions in which it takes root. Some may object: Marxism began as a Western European project, arising from that tradition, so is it not ill-fitted for a very different context and its distinct tradition? To put it another way, does the idea of ‘Chinese characteristics’ transform Marxism beyond recognition? My answer: I have noted for some time the notable fit between Marxism and China’s culture, more so indeed than many other places on the globe. This is because there is an inherent suspicion of the flights of metaphysical fancy, of ontological transcendence, and a preference for the realities of this world of human existence. The specific and verifiable conditions of this world resonate, so much so that ‘truth from facts’ is as much an expression of Marxism as it is of Chinese culture (Tong 2017, 62–63).

Further, Deng Xiaoping was resolutely opposed to the idea of ‘poor socialism’ or ‘poor communism’. In the more immediate context, this was the standpoint promoted by the Gang of Four (*sirenbang*), that poor socialism was better than rich capitalism. But the idea has a much longer history: in

41 In the 1945 text, Mao observes: ‘There is no such thing as abstract Marxism, but only concrete Marxism. What we call concrete Marxism is Marxism that has taken on a national form, that is, Marxism applied to the concrete struggle in the concrete conditions prevailing in China, and not Marxism abstractly used ... consequently, the sinification of Marxism – that is to say, making certain that in all its manifestations it is imbued with Chinese characteristics, using it according to Chinese peculiarities – becomes a problem that must be understood and solved by the whole party without delay’.

42 Deng makes precisely this point in his observations on Lenin and Russian Marxism (Deng 1983a; 1983b; see also Z. Chen 2012, 96–98).

Western Europe, this was ascetic communism, with a distinctly feudal and Christian dimension, against which Marx and Engels already set themselves (Marx og Engels 1848a, 483–84; 1848b, 508; Engels 1880b, 553; 1880a, 287). In China, with its distinct cultural history, this type of ‘poor socialism’ took a different path, but Deng found it absolutely unacceptable, especially for a country had already experienced more than enough poverty (Yong 2004). In his eyes, no-one would be satisfied with socialism if it entailed grinding poverty.⁴³ Such a situation would not be socialism at all, which is concerned with improving the material and spiritual lives of the vast majority, the rural and urban workers. Deng was very clear: ‘we do not want capitalism, but neither do we want to be poor under socialism [*pinqiong de shehuizhuyi*]’. Even more: ‘What we want is socialism in which the productive forces are developed and the country is prosperous and powerful’ (Deng 1979c, 231; 1979i, 235; see also 1980n, 310; 1980p, 310–11; 1985c, 116; 1985b, 122; 1987b, 254; 1987a, 250). Most fully:

There cannot be poor communism, nor can there be poor socialism. So to get rich [*zhifu*] is no sin. However, what we mean by getting rich is different from what you [the interviewer] mean. Wealth [*caifu*] in a socialist society belongs to the people. To get rich [*zhifu*] in a socialist society means common prosperity [*gong tong zhifu*] for the entire people. The principles of socialism are: first, development of production and second, common prosperity [*gongtong zhifu*] (Deng 1986a, 172).

Two themes emerge from Deng’s many criticisms of poor socialism and his proposal of the alternative, a strong socialistically modernised country. The first is the need to show the superiority of socialism over capitalism. A socialist system’s superiority is predicated on its ability to improve the lives of the common people, rather than the relatively few under a capitalist system (Deng 1984c, 64–65; 1984a, 73–74). Deng held a long-term view of this process, which would certainly take much longer than his

⁴³ In a major speech on the four cardinal principles, Deng makes it clear that the poverty being experienced in China in the late 1970s was not due to the socialist system, but to the lingering effects of the pre-Liberation history of imperialism and feudalism (Deng 1979b, 166–67; 1979h, 176).

eventful lifetime. But he was adamant that the foundations needed to be laid by ‘emancipating our minds, seeking truth from facts, proceeding from reality and integrating theory with practice’ (Deng 1979d, 190–91; 1979g, 198).

The second theme is even more important: if communism entails the principle of ‘from each according to ability, to each according to needs’, then one needs to provide the necessary socio-economic conditions for such an eventuality. In China, the reality was that the communist revolution took place in a country that was extremely undeveloped and exceedingly poor. In this context, ‘poor socialism’ was no answer. Thus, ‘in building socialism we must do all we can to develop the productive forces and gradually eliminate poverty, constantly raising the people's living standards’. Only when this outcome is achieved will it become possible to begin the shift the communism: in the ‘advanced stage of communism, when the economy is highly developed and there is overwhelming material abundance, we shall be able to apply the principle of from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’ (Deng 1982c, 10–11; 1982b, 21).⁴⁴ The point is clear: liberating thought and thus liberating the forces of production is the inescapable foundation for communism, as a distinct stage for which socialism is the preparation (Cao 1998, 17; Yuyao Wang 1995, 50).

The final question concerns Deng Xiaoping’s relation to the Marxist tradition. Already there have been enough indicators that Deng was clearly continuing the tradition: the Reform and Opening-Up was certainly not a path to a capitalist system, but rather through socialism to communism; Marxism entails not merely the lifelong study of writings by the founders, but is above all a guide to action, premised on seeking truth from facts; Mao Zedong Thought – as a continuation of Marxism-Leninism – needs to be upheld while also identifying its mistakes in the 1960s and 1970s; one must always maintain the correct theoretical line, for this line is the only way to

⁴⁴ Note also: ‘The main task in the socialist stage is to develop the productive forces, keep increasing the material wealth of society, steadily improve the life of the people and create material conditions for the advent of a communist society’ (Deng 1986a, 171–72; 1986b, 174).

liberate thought and constantly renew the tradition. But I would like to draw on an intriguing piece from 1989, entitled ‘Let Us Put the Past Behind Us and Open a New Era’ (Deng 1989a; 1989b). The ‘past’ in question actually concerns the complex and difficult Sino-Soviet relations of the 1960s and 1970s, but in the process, Deng points out that we cannot expect Marx ‘to provide ready answers to questions that arise a hundred or several hundred years after his death’, or indeed Lenin some fifty or one hundred years after his death. Why? Conditions change, even more rapidly in the recent past, and neither Marx nor Lenin could foresee what the new conditions might be. For example, could Marx possibly ‘predict that the October Revolution would take place in backward Russia’, or could Lenin foresee that the Chinese revolutionaries would ‘win by encircling the cities from the countryside?’ As for the construction of socialism after a successful revolution, a country must not follow fixed models and conventions from elsewhere, but undertake construction in light of its own conditions (*ziji de tiaojian*). Does this mean that Marx and Lenin, or indeed Engels and Stalin are irrelevant in new circumstances? Not at all, for a ‘true Marxist-Leninist must understand, carry on and develop Marxism-Leninism in light of the current situation’ (Deng 1989a, 291–92; 1989b, 284–85). In this light, Zheng and Guo (2009, 24–25) observe that liberating thought and seeking from facts in Deng Xiaoping’s hands constitute a ‘new era [*xin shiqi*]’ in the history of the sinification of Marxism.

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