

Chapter 5: Seeking a *Xiaokang* Society, or Socialist Modernisation

In 1979, Deng Xiaoping observed: ‘The four modernisations we are going to achieve are those with a Chinese style [*Zhongguo shi*]’. Further, ‘our concept of the four modernisations is not a concept of modernisation like yours, but a concept of a “moderately well-off family [*xiaokang zhi jia*]”’, which he later clarified in terms of a ‘moderately well-off country [*xiaokang de guojia*]’ (Deng 1979j, 237–38). The timing was auspicious for two reasons: first, it came soon after the audacious and potentially risky launch the year before of the Reform and Opening-Up (*gaige kaifeng*); second, it drew on a term – *xiaokang* – with an ancient pedigree. The word comes from the Confucian classics and designates a moderate or acceptable time of health, well-being, prosperity and peace. Deng sought to reinterpret the term, also used in everyday parlance, within a Marxist framework. In other words, it was yet another example of the sinification of Marxism (*makesizhuyi zhongguohua*), or Marxism made concrete and set on its feet in a Chinese context. There is another feature of Deng’s observation: his reference to the ‘four modernisations [*sige xiandaihua*]’. It is precisely these modernisations that he seeks to define in terms of a ‘Chinese style’, or a *xiaokang* society. Why this specific reference? It entails a distinct emphasis on continuity, for the four modernisations stem from Zhou Enlai in 1963 and were affirmed by Mao Zedong.

The following analysis begins with an analysis of the four modernisations – in agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology – through the initial proposals of Mao Zedong and especially Zhou Enlai, and then its explication with Deng Xiaoping. The crucial question here is what gives these modernisations their distinctive Chinese characteristics. In order to answer this question, I analyse the reinterpretation of *xiaokang*, which will be left in transliterated form since it is almost impossible to translate. This task entails what may initially seem like a detour: an examination of the Confucian tradition’s notion of *datong*, or ‘great harmony’. As the highest stage of social development, it would come to be reinterpreted – through Mao Zedong – in light of communism. Before the stage of *datong* comes *xiaokang*, a more moderate and achievable middle ground, above chaos and disorder but not at the same level as the great harmony. It was specifically Deng Xiaoping who reclaimed the term *xiaokang* and reinterpreted it in light of socialism, the stage – according to orthodox Marxism since Lenin – before communism. The analysis closes with a consideration of the ‘comprehensive *xiaokang* society’, which has become a core feature of Chinese government policy.

The Four Modernisations

In early 1963 at a meeting in Shanghai, Zhou Enlai proposed: 'If we want to build a powerful socialist country, we must modernise agriculture, industry, national defence, science and technology' (Zhou 1963a, 387; 1963b, 427). This statement would become the recognised form of the 'four modernisations [*sige xiandaihua*]'. Yet, this was by no means the first occasion at which 'modernisation' or indeed their numbering were mentioned, for both Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong had been developing the idea since the 1950s.¹ It is not my task here to delve into a detailed history of their emergence and clarification (Xu and Chen 1998; Han 2006). Instead, I am interested in how they are articulated, in how they are different from 'modernisations' elsewhere. In other words, what gives these four modernisations their distinctly Chinese characteristics?

The answer to this question already appeared almost ten years earlier, in Zhou Enlai's work report – since then a typical task for the premier – at the inaugural National People's Congress of 1954. In his presentation, which offered a preliminary list of four modernisations,² Zhou points out that the task before them is to overcome backwardness and poverty (*luohou he qiongkun*), brought about by the 'three mountains' of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. The method: to liberate productive forces (*jeifang shengchanli*) and focus on economic development. The aim: to improve the 'people's material life [*weiwu shenghuo*] and cultural life' and strengthen the 'nation's independence and security [*anquan*]' (Zhou 1954a, 132; 1954b, 142; see also Xu and Chen 1998, 443–45). We may summarise as follows: to overcome China's chronic poverty through liberating the forces of production so as to raise the level of material and cultural (or 'spiritual [*jingshen*]') life so as to secure China's strength.³ Or, as Zhou Enlai puts it later in the same

1 In the lead up to the constitution adopted at this National People's Congress, Mao had spoken more generally of 'socialist industrialisation' and the 'socialisation and mechanisation of agriculture' in order to make China a 'great socialist country' (Mao 1954a, 326, 329; 1954b, 143, 145–46). A few years later, he spoke of developing a 'socialist country with modern industry, modern agriculture, and modern science and culture' (Mao 1957a, 207; 1957b, 387). By 1959, 'modern national defence [*xiandai guofang*]' had returned to the list (Zhou 1959, 408; Mao 1960, 162).

2 Here they are industry, agriculture, communications and transport, and national defence. This speech is the beginning of a process of clarifying the more general theme of modernisation, which was central to Zhou Enlai's economic writings (1993). The references in relation to this process of clarification are comprehensively cited by Xu and Chen (1998, 432–34).

3 This core theme would be reiterated in later elaborations of the four modernisations, with further details on how they are integrated, on the role of science and technology, on the necessary stages, and on showcasing the creativity and superiority of China's socialist system (Zhou 1963a; 1963b; 1964a; 1964b; 1975b; 1975a).

speech (1954a, 142; 1954b, 152): 'the sole aim [*weiyi mudì*] of a socialist economy is to satisfy the people's material and cultural needs'.

Turning to Deng Xiaoping, it is striking how his renewed emphasis on the four modernisations is in marked continuity with Zhou Enlai (and Mao Zedong) from the 1950s. By now this continuity should not be a surprise: we have already seen how Deng and his comrades strove to pick up and enhance the line of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought from the 1950s and even the early 1960s. By contrast, the 'Maoism' of the 'Cultural Revolution' was a deviation. A comparable point applies to the four modernisations, which the Gang of Four in particular disparaged. They saw the modernisations as a path to capitalism, opposed developments in science technology, and advocated 'poor socialism' in their place (Deng 1978h, 86; 1978f, 98–99; 1979d, 233; 1979h, 237; 1980g, 311–12; 1980i, 310–11). In the wake of the 'Cultural Revolution', Deng and his comrades strove mightily to recover the four modernisations and take them to a whole new level.⁴

In his many invocations of the four modernisations Deng connects a wide range of topics,⁵ so much so that the modernisations become an alternative term for the Reform and Opening-Up. But what is the point of the whole process? 'By achieving the four modernisations, we mean shaking off China's poverty and backwardness, 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 humankind' (Deng 1979j, 237; 1979a, 240).⁶ The continuity with Zhou Enlai's identification of the nature and purpose of the four modernisations should be obvious, with an added emphasis on an international dimension in relation to China's status in world affairs – especially as a socialist country in deep affinity with developing countries that were

4 The methods to achieve the four modernisations may have differed due to circumstances. Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai advocated a uniform planned economy, along with collectivised industry and agriculture. This approach – as we have seen earlier – was needed in the early stages of the construction of socialism and produced remarkable economic results. However, by the 1970s bottlenecks had begun to appear and the economy was stagnating, to which the Reform and Opening-Up was the answer. But the aim remained the same in terms of the four modernisations.

5 Too many are the references to cite here, but if one reads through the second and third volumes of Deng Xiaoping's *Selected Works*, one will find – in relation the four modernisations – mentions of education (science and technology), unity in the CPC and countrywide, trade unions and the working class, socialist democracy, the legal system, nationalities, writers and artists, a new generation of cadres with professional knowledge, enthusiasm, and energy.

6 Similarly: "In sum, the political line of the Party at the present stage is to work with one heart and one mind for our country's four modernisations ... The growth of the economy, increasing the national income, gradually improving the people's standard of living, and the corresponding consolidation and strengthening of our national defence – all these hinge on the success of the four modernisations' (Deng 1980d, 276; 1980a, 274–75).

formerly colonised (Deng 1978e, 112; 1978d, 123). In fact, in the sentence preceding the text I have quoted, Deng explicitly invokes Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Elsewhere, Deng stressed similar themes in relation to the four modernisations: China's backward economic condition and the need to overcome poverty (Deng 1978h, 91; 1978f, 103; 1979c, 164; 1979g, 173), the resolute focus on economic construction and the productive forces (Deng 1978b, 134–39; 1978g, 145–49; 1979b, 194–95; 1979e, 201; 1980e, 240–41; 1980h, 242–43), and the need for a materially advanced socialist civilisation with a 'rich and diversified [*fengfu-duocai*] cultural life inspired by high ideals [*gaoshang*]' (Deng 1979i, 208; 1979f, 214).

When he came to provide more specific details, Deng spoke of China's advantageous conditions, notably the abundance of natural resources in terms of minerals and energy, a firm material foundation in the development of industry (despite follies committed), the hard work, wisdom, and creativity of Chinese people who are experienced in struggle, and an opening-up policy that will enable principled engagement with other countries that are more advanced in terms of science and technology (Deng 1978e, 111–12; 1978d, 122–23; 1979d, 232–34; 1979h, 236–37). Further, when addressing the modernisation of science and technology, he specifies that these are productive forces in their own right. In this case, Deng invokes not only China's achievements in this area in the past, but also the need to develop this core area in the modern world so that China would once again take the lead, albeit in light of a socialist system in which mental labour is of service to rural and urban workers (Deng 1978h, 86–91; 1978f, 99–103). None of this would be easy – far from it. The modernisations will entail much toil and struggle, especially in light of the need to keep to the socialist road. In a more philosophical vein, he observes that the 'four modernisations represent a great and profound revolution in which we are moving forward by resolving one new contradiction after another' (Deng 1978c, 152–53; 1978a, 162). In order to enable the four modernisations, Deng specifies the struggle involved in structural reform, in constructing a socialist civilisation with a high cultural and ideological level, in combating economic crime and corruption, and rectifying the CPC's work style, organisation, and leadership (Deng 1982c, 403–4; 1982b, 395).

Clearly, Deng Xiaoping took the four modernisations to a whole new level (as we have already seen with other policies from before the deviation of the 'Cultural Revolution'). He was also resolute on the role of the CPC as the vanguard of the New China, which required a firm and consistent political line, political stability and unity, hard struggle and a pioneering spirit; and cadres who had both resolute socialist orientation and professional competence (Deng 1980e, 248–65; 1980h, 249–65; see also 1978h, 96–100; 1978f, 108–11). Deng was also clear that the four modernisations with eventually prove the

superiority of a socialist system (Deng 1980g, 311; 1980i, 310; 1980b, 322; 1980f, 321) and that they would enable China – and indeed other countries – to counter ‘hegemonism [*baquan*]’ or to ‘struggle against hegemony [*fanba douzheng*]’ (Deng 1978e, 112; 1978d, 123; 1980e, 239–40; 1980h, 241; 1980d, 275; 1980a, 274; 1982d, 415–17; 1982a, 407–9).⁷ I will return to this theme in a later chapter, suffice to note here that this term functions as a replacement for the anti-colonial struggle. China has had more enough of bullying and hegemonism by countries that followed the European model of colonial depredation, and it is certainly not going to allow such a situation again.

In closing this analysis of the four modernisations, let me return to the key question: how do they evince a Chinese ‘style [*shi*]’ or Chinese ‘characteristics [*tese*]’? For Zhou Enlai, these characteristics entailed overcoming China’s backwardness through economic development so as to improve material and cultural life. We may rephrase this answer as follows: the purpose of capitalist modernisation – enabled through imperialist plunder and colonial domination – is to enrich a small percentage of the population, specifically those who hold the reins of industry and trade, and who monopolise scientific and technological development. The vast majority of rural and urban workers continue to struggle, mostly missing out on the gains made. By contrast, socialist modernisation is – in the long term – for the improvement of the material and cultural lives of this vast majority. As we have seen, Deng Xiaoping agrees,⁸ elaborating much further as he sought to identify the four modernisations with the Reform and Opening-Up itself. But Deng also made a distinctly new contribution as to what gives the four modernisations their distinctive Chinese characteristics. Initially, he observes, the aim was to realise the four modernisations by the end of the twentieth century. However, Deng and his comrades realised that this aim was too ambitious: ‘Later we changed the goal to “Chinese-style [*Zhongguoshi*]” modernisations, intending to lower the standard a little’ (Deng 1979b, 194; 1979e, 201).⁹ A lapidary and pragmatic answer, is it not? But it contains a more profound meaning. This lowering of the standards entails the deployment of a term hitherto not used: *xiaokang*. As the quotation with I began makes clear, modernisation in China means

7 ‘*Baquan*’, translated here as ‘hegemony’ is a word rich with connotations. The semantic field of ‘*ba*’ includes a leader of feudal lords, a tyrant or despot, a hegemonist power, and to dominate and tyrannise – in short, to rule by might rather than right.

8 As Deng observed in 1986: ‘Since our victory in the revolution, in the course of construction we have again integrated the fundamental principles of Marxism with the concrete practice of China. We are striving for the four modernisations, but people tend to forget that they are four socialist modernisations’ (Deng 1986a, 173; 1986b, 175).

9 Deng uses an idiom here, contrasting ‘*dakou*’ with ‘*xiaokou*’. Literally, they mean ‘large mouth’ and ‘small mouth’ with the senses of a large or small mouthful of food. A comparable English idiom for ‘*dakou*’ may be ‘bite off more than one can chew’.

a *xiaokang* family, a *xiaokang* country. Or as Deng observes elsewhere: ‘The primary task we have set is to achieve by the end of this century the initial goal of modernisation, that is to say, to reach the level of *xiaokang* (Deng 1982d, 416–17). It is to meaning of *xiaokang* that I now turn.

Datong: From the Confucian Tradition to Mao Zedong

In order to understand *xiaokang* and why Deng Xiaoping reappropriated this term from the Chinese tradition, we need to step back and deal with the question of *datong* – with the core meaning of great unity, togetherness or harmony. The tradition as a whole is notable not for its lengthy discourses, but for the brevity and sparseness of its key moments. It is as though the weight of the moments has increased precisely because of this brevity.

The Book of Rites (Liji)

The first articulation of *datong* – and thereby its locus classicus – appears in the ‘Cycle of Rites [*Liyun*]’ chapter of *The Book of Rites (Liji)*, compiled in the third to second centuries BCE:

When the Great Way [*dadao*] was practiced, all-under-heaven was as common [*tianxia wei gong*]. They chose men of worth and ability [for public office]; they practiced good faith and cultivated good will [*xiumu*]. Therefore, people did not single out only their parents to love, nor did they single out only their children for care. They saw to it that the aged were provided for until the end, that the able-bodied had employment, and that the young were brought up well. Compassion was shown to widows, orphans, the childless, and those disabled by disease, so that all had sufficient support. Men had their portion [of land], and women, their homes after marriage. Wealth they hated to leave unused, yet they did not necessarily store it away for their own use. Strength they hated not to exert, yet they did not necessarily exert it only for their own benefit. Thus selfish scheming was thwarted before it could develop. Bandits and thieves, rebels and traitors did not show themselves. So the outer gates [*waihu*] were left open. This was known as the period of the Great Unity [*datong*] (translation by Nylan 2001, 196).¹⁰

A few observations are in order. To begin with, the Chinese text is very concise, with one character often functioning as a whole word. Translators are tempted to fill in the meaning for readers. For example, *dadao* is literally the big road, but metaphorically the

¹⁰ I have chosen the translation by Nylan for the sake of consistency, with one modification in the first sentence. Each translation has of course its benefits and drawbacks. One may compare James Legge’s classic translation (1885, 364–66), which may also be found at <https://ctext.org/liji/li-yun>, and that of Watson (1960, 176).

Great Way – think of Daoism or *daojiao*, the teaching of The Way. One may seek to expand the meaning by calling it the Great Way of virtue, but this adds even more layers of interpretation. The text explains *dadao* as one in which ‘all under heaven was’ – literally – ‘as common [*weigong*]’. How one interprets the phrase, which comes down to us through millennia of interpretations, says as much about the translator as the text. It may be expanded to mean that something serves or acts as common, or the common good. Some translations go further, offering ‘public good’, ‘a public and common spirit’, ‘public-spirited’ or ‘one community’. All may offer angles on the initial phrase, but it is important to keep in mind that the focus of the text is primarily on the common, so I have rendered the two characters in terms of ‘as common’.

Further, this social reality is simultaneously envisaged as an expanded family and one that undermines the family by focusing on the common good. Thus, the primary concern is not one’s immediate parents and children, but all in society – including the widowed, childless, orphans, and sick. All should have opportunities in life and appropriate care, although distinct roles were still appropriate for men and women. The text reinforces this common good with a powerful image: the ‘outer gates’ of the family compound were left open. The character for gate or door – *hu* – also bears the meaning of family or household. If the outer gate is open, it means not merely that households are connected with another, but that the very sense of household expands well beyond the gates so that the family itself is not primary.¹¹ While the vision may be an ideal, the overall framework is from a ruling perspective. This appears initially with the phrase *tianxia*, a traditional imperial term for all under the ruler’s sway. In this context, it meant China, however large or small it may have been, although it also came to be seen as encompassing the known earth. Further, the setting for this brief description of *datong* has Confucius saying the words to a certain Yan Yan as they stood on a balcony after a ritual. Confucius sighs over the current State of Lu, offering his vision of what might be. The discourse is primarily for rulers’ ears, who should be worthy (*xian*) and have ability (*neng*), exerting power not for their own advantage but for others, able to bring about the common good, or – as the final word has it – *datong*.

He Xiu’s Revision: Datong as Topos

Crucially, in *Liji* the *datong* is viewed as a past era, as the opening phrase of the following stanza indicates: the way has ‘fallen into disuse and obscurity [*jiyin*]’. *Datong* lay

¹¹ Further, the phrase for cultivating harmony or good will (*xiumu*) means to cultivate friendship with neighbours, which entails peace and harmony.

in the past, so one had to do the best in the current circumstances. The next significant moment in the tradition reworks this assumption, appearing in a commentary on a commentary. More precisely, it is the commentary of a certain He Xiu (129-82 CE) on one of three commentaries (*Gongyang*) on the Spring and Autumn Annals (*Chunqiu*). While the annals themselves are sparse indeed,¹² the commentaries explore every possible implication, based on the assumption articulated by Mencius that Confucius was the author or editor and had compiled the annals according to specific criteria, embedded through ‘subtle phrasing [*weiyán*]’, which had to be unearthed through careful exegesis. Of the three commentaries – by Guliang, Gongyang and Zuo – the one by Gongyang is the most intriguing.¹³ It is this tradition, which came to be called ‘New Text’ (see more below), to which He Xiu added his layer of commentary.

Briefly put, He Xiu distinguished three ages, with one superseding the other: the ‘decayed and disordered [*shuailuan*]’ world; one of ‘rising peace [*shengping*]’; and one of the ‘great peace [*daping*]’ (Li and Ma 1999, 25–26).¹⁴ At this point we need to be careful, since He Xiu is not commenting on the *Liji* and its mention of *datong*. Instead, he is adding a layer of commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals. Thus, he does not speak of *datong* directly, but instead refers to *daping*, the great peace (later to become *taiping*, the greatest peace). We may equate *datong* and *daping* in light of later developments with Kang Youwei (see below), especially since they speak of a very similar desired reality, but this is a later development. More importantly, He Xiu identifies three ages, moving through chaos, rising peace, to the greatest piece. In other words, he reverses the sequence: Confucius may have seen *datong* as in the past, as a lost world that provides to model to which one should aspire; He Xiu sees *daping* as yet to come. At the same time, there is a risk that He Xiu’s three-age sequence takes on a purely evolutionary sense, rising from chaos and disorder to the great peace. Scholars have been keen to stress other criteria, such as legitimacy, virtue, and ethics rather than inheritance as the criterion for office, a cyclical process in which the closer one comes to *datong* the greater is the risk of chaos, or – relatedly – the possibility of moving in either direction, especially if one juxtaposes Confucius’s sense of loss in *Liji* to the progressive schema in He Xiu’s interpretation (Li J. 2013; Chen H. 2016).

¹² The annals record events of the Zhou Dynasty of the state of Lu (concerning which Confucius uttered his reflections on *datong*), from 722 BCE to 481 BCE.

¹³ For a useful introduction to the three commentaries and thus of the central role of *Chunqiu* in Chinese tradition, see Nylan (2001, 257–306).

¹⁴ The text may also be found on a number of websites, such as www.guoxue123.com/jinbu/ssj/gyz/index.htm.

Nonetheless, the most important contribution of He Xiu's commentary lies elsewhere: the world of great peace is not of the imagination, of rumour and innuendo, but one that can be seen and is thus verifiable. To explain: He Xiu follows an earlier interpreter, Dong Zhongshu, who distinguished between two types of meaning: inner and outer. In He Xiu's hands, this becomes a threefold schema of words and worlds that are 'rumoured [*suochuanwen*]', heard of or 'recorded [*suowen*]' and 'seen [*suojian*]' (Li J. 2013, 58–59). Now for the breakthrough: for He Xiu, these become the characteristic features of the three eras.¹⁵ Thus, what is 'rumoured' becomes the 'decayed and disordered [*shuailuan*]' world, one of chaos in which the heart is 'course and unrefined [*cucu*]', the country is broken up into small states and the records virtually non-existent. Rumours abound of skulduggery, assassination, intrigue, and inappropriate behaviour in light of established rituals. By contrast, the 'recorded [*suowen*]' or reported world has records and it unites all of the Chinese people so that outside are the foreign tribes (*Yidi*). This is known as the time of 'rising peace [*shengping*]: although not ideal, for it still has leaders and people engaging in less than appropriate behaviour, it is a distinct improvement. The 'seen [*suojian*]' world, one directly experienced, becomes the great or indeed greatest peace and tranquillity (*daping* and *taiping*). Here the world is one, whether distant or nearby, large or small, while the heart (*xin*) or inner being is now deep and thoroughly known (*xiang*).

This insight provides a significant contrast between Chinese and 'Western' philosophical assumptions concerning 'utopia'. Let me put it this way: He Xiu's interpretation valorises the 'seen' as the most ideal world, in contrast to what is 'rumoured' and for which no records exist. The ideal world is precisely the one that is fully recorded; in short, it is a world that one experiences directly and can thus be empirically verified and studied. The unrecorded and unseen world, of which only rumours and hearsay exist, is the world of chaos and disorder. This approach provides a stark contrast with 'Western' theologically-inspired philosophical assumptions concerning ontological or external transcendence (*waizaichaoyue*),¹⁶ for here it is precisely what is unseen and unknown that is the ideal world, of which the known world is only a poor copy. This external ontological transcendence, with its polar opposite in immanence, runs through Western European

¹⁵ As one would expect, scholarship on the development of He Xiu's 'three worlds' is immense, so I cite here only some of the more notable recent works (Jiang Q. 1995; Chen Q. 2007; Wang 2007; Xu X. 2011; Gao and Chen 2014; Chen H. 2016).

¹⁶ In Chinese scholarship, the contrast with 'Western' external transcendence (for which God, or at least a placeholder for God, is the ultimate cause) is 'internal transcendence [*neizaichaoyue*]', which is 'life-focused' and seeks to improve one's current social situation through an ethical order. This 'internal transcendence' and its related 'heaven and human beings are one [*tianren heyi*]' are quite distinct from the transcendence-immanence opposition in 'Western' philosophy (Ren 2012; Shen 2015; Guo X. 2016; Xu T. 2016).

assumptions at many levels (from religion, through politics, to culture), but how does it influence perceptions of utopia? To put it sharply, for a 'Western' tradition the ideal world is a transcendent one, a utopia so distant that it is beyond human experience and knowability; by contrast, for the Chinese tradition examined thus far, *datong* and *taiping* constitute a topos, a known and verifiable place.¹⁷ While the 'Western' tradition assumes that the unreachable 'no' place (*utopia*) is also the 'best' place (*outopia*), the Chinese tradition should – if we use such terminology – be called a 'topian' one, focused on a verifiable *topos*.

Kang Youwei's Confucian Reformism

The next major step would come many centuries later with Kang Youwei (1858-1927). In order to understand the path to his core text, *The Book of Datong (Datongshu)*, let us return for a moment to the two main traditions that arose out of the commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals.¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, the Gongyang commentary became the source of the 'New Text' tradition, which came into favour during the early Han Dynasty, only to fall into disfavour due to a perceived esoterism. From the late Han (25-220 CE) the more rationalist 'Old Text' school, based on the commentary by Guliang, was at the forefront, forcing the 'New Text' tradition into the background for a while. The rival traditions were nearly always at loggerheads, with one or the other dominating for a time, and rulers keen to see that neither was completely dominant for long (Nylan 2001, 262). However, with the imminent collapse of the whole dynastic system and ensuing profound turmoil, the 'New Text' tradition gained a new lease of life in the work of the Confucian reformer, Kang Youwei (Wong 2000).

This was precisely the tradition to which He Xiu had made his daring contribution many centuries earlier. The following quotation from Kang Youwei will indicate both how much he is indebted to and how he seeks to reinterpret this tradition:

The divine sage-king, Confucius, gave thought to and worried over this problem from early on. Therefore, he established the law of three governments [*santong*]¹⁹ and three ages [*sanshi*]:

¹⁷ Noteworthy here is that while the Chinese tradition obviously has perceptions of a better world (as I have been examining), the Western concept of 'utopia/outopia' required a loan-word adaption, as *wutuobang*, which bears both the meaning and sound structure of the original. Intriguingly, 'dystopia' becomes *fanwutuobang*, 'anti-utopia' – a distinctly different opposition.

¹⁸ It is well-nigh impossible to do justice to the centuries of detailed commentary concerning the *Gongyang* tradition's 'three worlds' in a few sentences (Tong and Lin 2002; Xu and Wang 2008).

¹⁹ *Tong* (統) has the sense of uniting, interconnecting and governing.

after a world according to disorder [*luan*] it will change into ascending peace [*shengping*], and then into the greatest peace [*taiping*]; after *xiaokang* it will advance to *datong* (Kang 1935, 6).²⁰

Once again, the text is brief indeed, although Kang Youwei offers later a comprehensive table of the main features of each age (Kang 1935a, 43–52, 60–62). Yet, this sentence makes the profoundly influential connection between the Confucian text of *Liji* and the Gongyang commentary by He Xiu. The latter's terms appear first, with the three ages of disorder, ascending peace and greatest peace; immediately following are the two terms that appear in the *Liyun* chapter of the *Liji*: *xiaokang* and *datong*.²¹ Indeed, Kang makes explicit the slight shift from the 'great peace [*daping*]' of He Xiu's commentary and the 'greatest peace [*taiping*]' by which it is usually known.²² The connection between Confucius and He Xiu is crucial: ascending peace (*shengping*) is thus explicitly connected with *xiaokang*, while the greatest peace (*taiping*) expands upon *datong*.²³

Kang Youwei's influence lies primarily with these connections, but there are two further relevant issues. First, the major problem to be overcome concerns the current world's many boundaries. The bulk of the work is devoted to the method of overcoming the boundaries of nation, class, race, sex, family, occupation and private ownership, unequal laws, and suffering itself. The question that arises is whether the resulting age of *datong* is one of homogeneous commonality, without any differences. His answer is no, but he comes at the problem through competition (*jingzheng*), which is both necessary for improvement and potentially destructive. Without competition laziness ensues, but competition also leads to strife and a return to disorder. Further, if everyone receives equal pay and is equal on all counts, little incentive would be found for further innovation. Kang concludes:

Now, the way of heaven [*tiandao*] is not peaceful; not being peaceful it is disorderly [*luan*]. The human way [*rendao*] is afflicted by the misfortunes of disorder [*luan huo*]; therefore, they decide to assist one another and make every effort to achieve peace. But having arrived at the time of peace, then misfortunes also arise! (Kang 1935a, 127)²⁴

20 My translation. Lawrence's translation (Kang 1935b) over the work as a whole is patchy at best, expanding some parts significantly while skipping large sections elsewhere, with only summaries in their place.

21 Kang adheres closely to the texts in question, for only two terms appear in *Liji* and there is no equivalent for the age of disorder.

22 The Chinese differs only by one small point: from 大平 (*daping*) to 太平 (*taiping*).

23 As the argument of *The Book of Datong* proceeds, the threefold schema is reiterated on a number of occasions: disorder (*luan*), rising peace (*shengping*) and great harmony (*datong*) or greatest peace (*taiping*) (Kang 1935a, 17, 54, 65, 78–79, 92, 97–99, 124, 133–34, 136–37, 139).

24 My translation.

The problem concerns not only the cyclical – or better dialectical – risk that the closer one comes to *datong* the greater is the risk of chaos returning, but also the need for differences. Kang seeks a way to continue the fostering of competition and innovation, offering as a solution three criteria: striving for excellence; encouraging knowledge; and encouraging *ren*. But the very need to foster competition indicates the continued need for differences even in the era of *datong*. How such differences might relate to one another is a problem he did not solve. For that we need to await Mao Zedong and the category of non-antagonistic contradictions.

Second, assessments of Kang Youwei's overall project vary considerably. Those keen to see Kang as a preeminent reformer and visionary do so from the perspective of Western liberalism and bourgeois ideals (Hsiao 1975; Tay 2010; A. Chen 2014). The underling reason for this praise should indicate an alternative and persuasive assessment from a Chinese Marxist perspective. In this case, we find a greater emphasis on Kang's 'Western' influences (Ding 2008), particularly the liberal tradition in which bourgeois parliamentary democracy is the highest order. Indeed, Kang equates at a political level the age of *datong* with this historical form of democracy, seeing constitutional monarchy – which he advocated for China at the time – as the achievement of *xiaokang* (Lin 2001; Fang 2016). Philosophically, Kang may have espoused Confucian reformism, but this was infused with liberal idealism so that even the core category of '*ren* [仁]' – with the basic sense of 'two-person mindedness' (Sun 2014, 4) – was equated with 'universal love [*ai*]' as the condition for *datong* (Kang 1935a, 136; Hu L. 2000). Needless to say, these liberal evolutionary assumptions put Kang Youwei at odds with not merely the Republican movement of Sun Zhongshan (Yat-Sen), but especially the revolutionary communist movement (Tong and Lin 2002, 73–74).

To sum up, while Kang Youwei's connection between the text of *Liji* and the contribution of He Xiu has been deeply influential, his legacy in China and abroad is quite mixed. Perhaps we may put it this way: Kang repeatedly deploys the four-character phrase *tianxia wei gong*, all under heaven is as common. As the short-hand definition of *datong*, the phrase is from the initial articulation of *datong* in *Liji*. But Kang's understanding of this term was very much in the imperial tradition, in which the emperor viewed all under his sway. By contrast, Sun Zhongshan (Yat-sen) also invoked the term, but in a rather different way: he drew it towards socialism in light of the terminology found in the *Liji*, with its image of education of the young, care of the old, and appropriate work for all (Xu Y. 2014, 29). Kang Youwei and Sun Zhongshan were by no means the only ones propagating such ideas at the time. As the last imperial dynasty stumbled into oblivion and as China still felt the sting of colonial humiliation, many such ideas and their interpretations flourished. For

example, another influential piece of literature was Cai Yuanpei's short story, 'New Year's Dream' (Cai 1904; see also Liu T. 2010; Li G. 2013).²⁵ The story, with its revolutionary tone and invocation of the Confucian three eras – as mediated by He Xiu – became widely popular, even if it was the only fictional text published by its author.

Mao Zedong: Datong and Communism

It would fall to Mao Zedong to reinterpret *datong* in light of communism, although he was not the only one to do so. For instance, in 1925 the communist writer Guo Moruo published a short story entitled 'Marx Enters a Confucian Temple'. It tells of a conversation between Marx and Confucius, in which Marx is asked to explain his idea of a communist society, Marx does so, after which Confucius is unable to contain himself, clapping his hands and crying out: 'Your ideal society and my world of *datong* coincide with each other'. Thereupon, he quotes the text from *Liji* (see above). In reply, Marx calls Confucius an old comrade (*lao tongzhi*) and observes, 'Your opinion is completely consistent with mine' (Guo M. 1925, 164, 166; see also Yan 2013).

Given this wider context, it should be no surprise that Mao Zedong also favoured the use of *datong* in his writings, although he took somewhat longer to connect it explicitly with communism. In his pre-communist phase, he writes 'the great harmony [*datong*] is our goal'. Confucius, Mao acknowledges, explored this idea, setting up 'the great peace [*taiping*] as his goal', although he 'did not do away with the two realms of chaos [*luan*] and ascending peace [*shengping*]' (Mao 1917, 89). Clearly, the language is not that of Confucius but of He Xiu and Kang Youwei, although they both assumed that they were explicating the thought of Confucius.²⁶ After Mao's turn to communism, *datong* continues to appear, although now he begins to elaborate further: acknowledging that it was a central aspect of the revolutionary program of Sun Zhongshan (Mao 1926, 144), he observes that it must be built on the national self-determination of all Asian countries afflicted by colonialism (Mao 1920, 560). Further, the relation between a 'movement for world *datong*' and the national anti-colonial struggle in China is not a contradiction, but a dialectic in which the

25 It was first published in 1904 as 'Xinnian meng' in the magazine, *Eshi jingwen* [Alarming news about Russia], in the February issue, pages 1-20 and 24-25.

26 In 1917, Mao could not have read Kang Youwei's *The Book of Datong*, since it was published posthumously in 1935. However, Kang had already elaborated such ideas in *Zhongyong zhu*, *Mengzi wei* and *Liyun zhu* (Kang 1987), although the ideas were relatively widespread at the time and Mao may have encountered them elsewhere, such as the work of Cai Yuanpei, author of 'A New Year's Dream' (see above). Cai became president of Beijing University, revised its educational philosophy and structure, appointed Chen Duxiu and set up the work-study program in France. Mao's notes the influence of Cai on the 'Strengthen Learning Society' (Mao 1919).

only way for China to participate in the international movement is through being independent and liberated (Mao 1937, 484).²⁷

Finally, on the eve of liberation, Mao makes the clearest connection with communism. Explicitly acknowledging Kang Youwei's Book of *Datong*,²⁸ Mao points out that Kang' reformism was unable to find a way to *datong* (Mao 1949, 1471). How does Mao define *datong*? It entails working towards the 'conditions in which classes, state power and political parties will die out very naturally [*ziran de guiyu xiaomie*]', so that humanity can enter *datong* (Mao 1949, 1469). The allusion is to Engels's coining of the phrase in the third edition (1894) of the deeply influential *Anti-Dühring*: 'The state is not "abolished". It dies out [*er stirbt ab*]' (Engels 1894, 535; see further Boer In press). But Mao also follows what was by now Marxist orthodoxy: since Lenin (1917a; 1917b) it has become received practice to distinguish between the stages of socialism and communism. The latter may eventually lead to such a natural dying out, but socialism is a time of struggle and development, needing to deal with internal and external foes. This entails a dialectic of strengthening the state, for only when all opposition had been overcome on a global scale could one begin to move to communism, or *datong* (Mao 1949, 1475–76).

The reflections in Mao's 1949 text open up the role of contradiction analysis and thus dialectics.²⁹ There is no need to reiterate the whole framework of such analysis, since I have already done so in the second chapter, but the invocation of contradiction analysis here relates directly to Mao's engagement with Kang Youwei. As we saw earlier, Kang had been keen to avoid the abolition of all differences and competition, although he was fearful of the risks posed: the planning for *datong* may unleash forces that would lead to its undoing and thus return to chaos and disorder. While we may see this effort in terms of a nascent dialectical analysis, Kang is unable to solve the problem. For that solution he would have required the whole category of non-antagonistic contradictions, which Mao derived from the Soviet Marxist philosophy he was studying in the 1930s. Of course, he took it to a whole new level in light of the Chinese tradition, which he was able to stand on

27 Occasionally, Mao would use the term in a low-key way to designate cooperation, whether in terms of the anti-colonial struggle (Mao 1940, 676) or labour unions (Mao 1921, 6).

28 See also a brief note from 1967, where Mao acknowledges Kang Youwei, but also the *Liyun* chapter of the *Liji* (Mao 1967, 308). Again, caution must be exercised with these Red Guard publications during the 'Cultural Revolution', since it is difficult indeed to verify the text.

29 An intriguing foreshadowing of this development may found in Mao's pre-communist marginal notes on Friedrich Paulsen, which had been translated by none other than Cai Yuanpei. Here Mao invokes *datong* and *pingan*, peace. But he observes that under *datong* competition (*jingzheng*) and resistance (*dikang*) would arise, so much so that an era of greatest peace would be unbearable. Cycles of order and disorder (*luan*), war and peace, are more creative and the norm (Mao 1918, 184–86). The notes on Paulsen constitute a crucial transformative period for Mao, for he would soon throw his heart into communism.

its feet in light of Marxism. My point here is that *datong* too would not entail an abolition of all differences and contradictions, not a utopian ‘perfect world’ characteristic of ‘Western’ traditions in which difference and struggle is overcome. Instead, contradictions would be very much present in *datong*, but they will need to be managed so as to be non-antagonistic, or – as the term itself suggests – harmonious. Perhaps it is only then that unity will prevail over the struggle of opposites, in terms of a dialectical *yangqi*, or *Aufhebung* (Bu 2016).

***Xiaokang*: From the Book of Songs (*Shijing*) to Xi Jinping**

All the same, the age of *datong* is not yet, and will not be for quite some time to come. As the third era of *taiping*, as a toposian *datong*, as a dialectical *Aufhebung* of the struggle of opposites, or indeed as communism, it requires far more preparation than most are willing to admit. Would this realisation lead to disappointment, to abandoning the whole project as simply too difficult, or indeed falling into a ‘Western’ fatalism in which the project becomes too ideal, too unknown, and thus impossible? The Chinese tradition in particular has an answer and it was Deng Xiaoping’s genius that drew upon that tradition for the sake of Marxism. Let us return to the lapidary observation from 1979: ‘Later we changed the goal to “Chinese-style [*Zhongguoshi*]” modernisations, intending to lower the standard a little’ (Deng 1979b, 194; 1979e, 201). This Chinese style or characteristic, this slight lowering of the standard, was expressed as *xiaokang*. To understand this term, we need once again to return to the beginning of the tradition, to *The Book of Rites* no less. As we do so, it is worth noting that Mao Zedong never refers to *xiaokang* in his many writings.³⁰ This was Deng Xiaoping’s distinct move.

The Book of Rites and the Book of Songs (Shijing)

The pertinent section of *Liji* is the paragraph following the one concerning *datong*. Confucius is reported to have said:

Now the Great Way [*dadao*] has fallen into obscurity, and all under heaven is as family [*tianxia wei jia*]. Each loves only his own parents and cares only for his own children. Wealth and strength they consider to exist only for their own advantage. Hereditary succession among the great men [the lords of the land], they take to be a sufficient rite. Inner and outer walls, ditches, and moats, they take to be adequate defenses. As for the rites and duties, they think them the main structures by which to rectify relations between ruler and subject, to

³⁰ As noted above, on one occasion in 1917 Mao referred to ‘ascending peace [*shengping*]’, found in He Xiu and Kang Youwei, but he does not mention *xiaokang*.

consolidate relations between father and son, to induce concord between elder and younger sibling, to induce loving harmony between husband and wife. By them, they set up institutions and measures; by them, they lay out fields and hamlets; by them, they judge men of courage and understanding to be worthy; by them, they consider merit to accrue to men's personal advantage. Thus selfish schemes are invented. Warfare derives also from this ... This was known as the period of *xiaokang* (translation by Nylan 2001, 196).³¹

According to this text, the difference between *datong* and *xiaokang* may be captured by the contrast between two four-character sayings: in contrast to 'all under heaven is as common [*tianxia wei gong*]', we now find 'all under heaven is as family [*tianxia wei jia*]'. For those who would charge Confucian thought will an overwhelming emphasis on (wider) family, the contrast is instructive. Under *datong*, the family is subordinate to the common good of society, even if the latter is conceived in extending family terms to the social whole. By contrast, under *xiaokang*, one focuses primarily on one's family – a lesser good, for it leads to the pursuit of personal gain, to a focus on inheritance, moats, and ditches. Ordering society according to appropriate relations between ruler and subject, elder and younger, husband and wife – all these lead not to peace, but to personal advantage (*wei ji*), scheming, and war.

Not a particularly positive image, even if this seems to be the time of Confucian ethics. Is this what Deng Xiaoping had in mind when he first invoked *xiaokang* in 1979? Perhaps not, for an even earlier text from the tenth century BCE – the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*) – presents a somewhat different picture (Gu 2015, 62). In the section called 'The People are Hard Pressed [*Minlao*]', from Part III, Book 9, it presents five stanzas stressing the alleviation of intolerable burdens on the people. I quote the first eight characters of each stanza:

The people indeed are heavily burdened,
But perhaps a little ease [*xiaokang*] may be got for them.

The people indeed are heavily burdened,
But perhaps a little rest [*xiaoxiu*] may be got for them.

The people indeed are heavily burdened,
But perhaps a little relief [*xiaoxi*] may be got for them.

The people indeed are heavily burdened,

³¹ As with the previous quotation from *Liji*, I have followed Nylan's translation (apart from the last sentence, which I have added). One may compare those of Watson (1960, 176) and Legge (1885, 366–67), which may also be found at <https://ctext.org/liji/li-yun>.

But perhaps a little repose [*xiaokai*] may be got for them.

The people indeed are heavily burdened,

But perhaps a little tranquillity [*xiao'an*] may be got for them (translation by Legge 1871, 495–98).³²

The purpose of quoting these lines is to indicate the meanings attached to *xiaokang*. The repetition of the lines enhances the variation, which is only with the final character. That is, each of the following stanzas begins with the exactly the same characters, with only the last character changing: *kang*, *xiu*, *xi*, *kai*, *an*, or ease, rest, relief, repose and tranquillity. Even so, to give single translations of the terms loses their richness. For example, *kang* can mean health, well-being, prosperity and peace, while *an* has the senses of peace, calm, stillness, contentment, safety and security. The remainder of the stanzas speak of robbers and oppressors, the wily and obsequious, the unconscientious, noisy braggarts, the multitudes of evil and the parasites – from whom the people seek at least some relief. In short, for the *Book of Songs*, *xiaokang* is clearly a distinct improvement on tough lives.

Clearly, the *Book of Songs* provides a more positive image, of people relieved from the burdens of struggle and from those seeking to deceive and rob them (rulers included). Yet, the differences between the two explications of *xiaokang* may in part be explained by their different foci: *Liji* sees this time as a decline from *datong*, while the earlier *Book of Songs* sees *xiaokang* as a noticeable improvement. Clearly, Deng Xiaoping's invocation draws more from the sense of the most ancient picture of *xiaokang*.

Deng Xiaoping and Xiaokang Shehui

Now we can return to the text with which I began this chapter, quoting it more fully. Deng had been asked by the Japanese prime minister, Masayoshi Ohira, concerning the four modernisations. He replied:

The objective of achieving the four modernisations was set by Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai. By achieving the four modernisations, we mean 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. Backwardness will leave us vulnerable to bullying.

The four modernisations we are going to achieve are those with a Chinese style [*Zhongguo shi*]. Our concept of the four modernisations is not a concept of modernisation like yours, but

³² Legge's translation may also be found at <https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/min-lu>.

a concept of a 'moderately well-off family [*xiaokang zhi jia*]'. Even if we realise the four modernisations by the end of this century, our per capita GNP will still be very low. If we want to reach the level of a relatively wealthy country of the Third World with a per capita GNP US \$1,000 for example, we have to make an immense effort. Even if we reach that level, we will still be a backward nation compared to Western countries. However, at that point China will be a country with a moderately well-off condition [*xiaokang de zhuangtai*] and our people will enjoy a much higher standard of living than they do now...

Some people are worried that if China becomes richer, it will be too competitive in world markets. Since China will be a moderately well-off country [*xiaokang de guojia*] by that time, this will not be the case (Deng 1979j, 237–38).

Three features of this important text should be noted. To begin with, Deng sees *xiaokang* as a distinct improvement from woeful conditions. He speaks of China suffering from poverty, backwardness, and bullying, with a clear allusion to China's long humiliation at the hands of foreign powers. Such humiliation had continued after 1949, with international sanctions, destruction of new industrial facilities, and refusal to acknowledge the People's Republic. Only a few years earlier the situation had begun to change, suggesting that the arduous task of achieving *xiaokang* had begun.

Further, Deng uses *xiaokang* in three formulations: a moderately well-off family (*xiaokang zhi jia*), condition (*xiaokang de zhuangtai*) and country (*xiaokang de guojia*). The initial use of 'family [*jia*]' has less to do with the Confucian focus in *Liji* on the primacy of family relations during the era of *xiaokang*, when 'all under heaven was as family [*tianxia wei jia*]', and more to do with the popular or folk (*minjian*) understanding of having enough food, clothing and shelter (Xiao and Qiao 2018, 14–15). But Deng seeks to go much further, emphasising not merely the family, but China's condition or situation, and above all the country as a whole (*guojia*). It is, as he puts in 1987, nothing less than a 'xiaokang China' (Deng 1987f, 226). The reinterpretation is significant, for the focus on the social whole is a feature drawn from the Confucian notion of *datong*, although to put this way suggests that Deng's approach is determined by the framework of the Confucian heritage. As Lv Shuzheng emphasises (2000, 48), the concept may have come from this tradition and it may have been a phrase used among the common people, but Deng's primary framework was not Confucianism (or indeed Kang Youwei's liberal reformism), but Marxism and the long road to communism. In this light, the Confucian tradition was stood on its feet.

Finally, Deng's concern is at this point resolutely economic. He speaks of the four modernisations (agriculture, industry, national defence, and science and technology), quadrupling output and raising per capita GNP to US \$1000 (later modified to \$800) by the

end of the century, of making life relatively comfortable even if China would remain a relatively backward country and very much a developing country. It is precisely this primary concern that distances Deng's reinterpretation of *xiaokang* from that of Confucius in *The Book of Rites* and from Kang Youwei's liberal Confucianism (Feng 2009, 14). Instead, it is directly related to a number of systemic emphases specific to a socialist system (Huang 2017, 46) that I already identified in previous chapters: a) socialism has nothing to do with poverty; b) liberating the forces of production and economic development are crucial to the socialist project; c) the transition to communism requires a significant level of prosperity for all; d) the Chinese Marxist approach to human rights sees the right to economic well-being as the core (see Chapter Eight), a right that remains a key driver of the Reform and Opening-Up. At the same time, Deng was fully aware that while socioeconomic well-being is the basis, it is not the only criterion: as Gu Hailiang (2015, 64–65) indicates, Deng paid also close attention to what may be loosely translated as 'spiritual civilisation [*jingshen wenming*]'.³³ This term includes the intangible influence of a long tradition, cultural and social life, ecological realities, and the need for peace and stability – what would later become known as 'in an all-round way [*quanmian*]' (Xu Y. 2014, 31; Xiao 2015, 63).

Xi Jinping and the Centenary Goals

Deng Xiaoping's preferred usage was 'moderately well-off level [*xiaokang shuiping*]',³⁴ but it was not this phrase that would enter into the lexicon of the CPC. Instead, it was a relatively minor usage by Deng, 'moderately well-off society [*xiaokang shehui*]' that would become the norm (Deng 1984a, 54; 1984b, 64; 1986c, 161; 1987b, 216; 1987f, 226; 1988, 278).³⁵ Even so, it was not until Jiang Zemin's speech at the sixteenth congress of the CPC in 2002 that it became part of official policy positions (Jiang Z. 2002b; see also 2002a). Jiang Zemin broke ground by using the phrase *xiaokang shehui* in the title of his speech, now adding comprehensive or 'in an all-round way [*quanmian*]'.³⁶ So central

33 Here translation breaks down somewhat: *jingshen* (精神) embraces what gives a culture its vitality, essence, and socio-psychological structure, while *wenming* (文明) refers not to the 'civification' entailed in 'civilisation' but the clarity of wisdom produced by a written tradition.

34 So frequent is the usage that I can give only a sample of references (Deng 1980e, 259; 1980c, 356; 1982d, 417; 1984b, 64; 1984d, 77; 1984e, 88–89; 1984c, 98; 1984f, 102; 1985b, 105; 1985a, 109; 1985d, 117; 1985c, 143; 1987g, 210; 1987b, 218; 1987c, 224; 1987d, 250; 1987e, 256).

35 On one occasion, Deng uses the full combination, 'the level of a moderately well-off society [*xiaokang shehui de shuiping*]' (Deng 1987a, 233).

36 For a study of how the term developed, from the 'adequate food and clothing [*wenbao*]' or the basic necessities of life, through an 'overall [*zongtixing*]' *xiaokang* society', to an all-round or 'comprehensive [*quanmian*]' *xiaokang* society, see Zhang Yi (2014).

did the full term – well-off society in an all-round way – become that we also find it in Hu Jintao’s speeches at the seventeenth and eighteenth congresses of the CPC (Hu J. 2007; 2012), and in Xi Jinping’s major speech at the CPC’s nineteenth congress (Xi 2017a).

A detailed comparison of the speeches and decisions is beyond the remit of this study (Zhang H. 2015; Xiao and Qiao 2018, 14–16), save to emphasise a particular item: the gradual fixing of dates. From Deng Xiaoping’s initial ‘three steps’³⁷ to Xi Jinping’s detailed clarity (Shi 2018),³⁸ we find the following:

2000: The achievement of basic *xiaokang*, focused on economic conditions.

2020: Attainment of a *xiaokang shehui* in an all-round way by the centenary of the founding of the CPC.

2049: A strong ‘socialistically modernised country [*shehuizhuyi xiandaihua guojia*]’ on the centenary of the People’s Republic of China.

The Confucian three ages have been entirely reframed in terms of Marxism. Thus, rising from chaos and disorder to *xiaokang* (and ascending peace, *shengping*) becomes the long period of constructing socialism. But most interesting is the clear fixing of dates. Is this not unwise for politicians, who routinely have the habit of failing to achieve stated goals? This clarity may be quite difficult to understand for those steeped in the Euro-American bourgeois tradition. In this tradition, politicians are wary of any targets, not merely because they know opponents will undo them at the first opportunity, but also because political spin entails that one promises nothing while pretending to promise everything. More to the point, this tradition is wary indeed of any project that seems too ‘utopian’, too transcendent and thereby unknown and vague.

In order to understand the very different approach of the Chinese government, we need to remember not so much the great emphasis on continuity and stability of long-term plans, but the point first made by He Xiu: both the greatest peace (*taiping*) and ascending peace (*shengping*) are eras that can be seen and recorded. They are empirically verifiable, rather than falling into the realm of vague promises and rumour. The ‘two centenary goals [*liangge yibainian*]’ should be understood in this light: as the date of 2020 drew nearer, we found ever greater detail concerning what a *xiaokang shehui* in an all-round way means and what needed to be done to ensure it had been achieved. Thus, Jiang

³⁷ While most of Deng’s focus was on achievements by the turn of the century, he also spoke of 30 and 50 years into the 21st century in a number of steps or stages, when China would have reached the level of a moderately developed country and the superiority of socialism would become apparent (Lv 2000, 50–51; Xiao 2014; Shi 2015).

³⁸ Apart from the speech at the nineteenth congress, see also the three volumes called *The Governance of China* (Xi 2014; 2017b; 2020).

Zemin interprets ‘all-round way’ to mean socialist democracy, the legal system, ideological and ethical standards, and sustainable development. By the time of Xi Jinping’s speech, we find advanced science and education, thriving culture, greater social harmony,³⁹ a better quality of life, poverty alleviation, medical cover for all, improved education, and environmental health. In speech after speech, Xi Jinping continues to elaborate on what these items entail, with the ensuing resources, detailed and tailored planning,⁴⁰ implementation and assessment. All of the many resources available have been deployed in such a process, with research, plans, assessments for the sake of improvement, and ways to deal with obstacles (Feng 2009, 13–14; Gu 2015; Zhou and Fu 2015; Huang 2017, 48–50; Xiao and Qiao 2018, 17–18). If one seeks to ‘change the world’ – as Marx famously put in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach – then such detailed planning is necessary (Li B. 2004). For what purpose is the world to be changed? Xiao Guiqing puts it best:

Whether a *xiaokang* society can be completed in an all-round way depends not only on the proof of the per capita data, but also on the personal experience of the broad masses of the people and their satisfaction arising from a happy life [*xinfu shenghuo*]. The ultimate goal of completing the building of a *xiaokang* society is to realise the people’s all-round development, and to realise and protect the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people (Xiao 2015, 64).

A final question: what has happened to *datong*, which since Mao Zedong has been reinterpreted in light of communism? Has it been replaced by a strong socialistically modernised society, thereby relegating *datong* to an imaginary ‘utopian’ future? The answer lies elsewhere: the stage of socialism precedes communism, which may take a long time indeed to achieve. Thus, the Chinese Marxist logic is that socialism includes the achievement of achieving *xiaokang*, which is characteristic of the primary or initial stage of socialism (Fang 2016, 15). Let me put it this way: Xi Jinping has identified three core issues as markers of attaining *xiaokang*: managing profound risks, poverty alleviation and environmental health. Without these, one cannot speak of a moderately well-off, healthy and peaceful society. With them, one may speak of a ‘new era [*xin shidai*]’ of socialism, a socialistically modernised society. But not yet a verifiable and carefully recorded communism.

39 It is beyond my remit to analyse here the complex terms of security (*anquan*), harmony (*hexie*) and stability (*wending*), which run through all material since Deng Xiaoping. On the connection between *xiaokang* and harmony (*hexie*), see Liu Chunlan (2010).

40 For example, in regional areas – such as Xinjiang – that have lagged behind due to uneven and imbalanced development, the nature of planning for a *xiaokang* society must take local conditions as the basis (Hu and Wang 2013).

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