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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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THE IDEOLOGICAL “SPECTERS AND GHOSTS”

The Two-Level Diplomacy, Democracy, And Socialism With Chinese Characteristics

I am delighted to publish the Rising Asia Foundation’s Distinguished Annual Lecture by Professor Roland Boer, continuing the journal’s tradition of exhibiting excellence in scholarly research. Boer, an Australian “foreign talent professor” in the School of Philosophy at Renmin University of China in Beijing, is an authority on theology and Marxism. Since 1994, he has published twenty-seven monographs and more than 300 academic articles, and his research has been translated into many languages. In 2014, he was awarded the Deutscher Memorial Prize for the five-volume work, *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*. More recently, he has focused on Marxist Philosophy in China, publishing *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (2021), and *Socialism in Power: On the History and Theory of Socialist Governance* (2023).

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A philosopher, Boer's lecture is based on his study of China's model of "two-level" diplomacy: state-to-state diplomacy and party-to-party diplomacy. While both levels try to hold to the principles of mutual respect and mutual non-interference, they differ in a key respect, he argues. On the one hand, state-to-state diplomacy seeks to be as depoliticized as possible, in the sense that the political orientation of a country's government should not hinder relations between states. On the other hand, party-to-party diplomacy seeks to connect more closely with like-minded political parties across the world, as well as any political party that seeks to engage and cooperate with the Communist Party of China. In his lecture, he explains that in order to understand how such diplomacy has risen and how it works, we need to consider: (a) the political system in China from which two-level diplomacy arises; and (b) how this approach to diplomacy has developed historically. Boer explains that understanding both of these aspects—political system and history—enables us to deal with the present, especially in terms of what is clearly a new stage of such diplomacy that is emerging against the backdrop of the significant global changes that are underway today.

Where Socialism With Chinese Characteristics Came From

Yet "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" is not new.¹ In a certain form, it was espoused by the CCP Chairman Mao Zedong, and in another form the idea predates Mao, as this commentary will show. Mao often refused to accept the idea of European supremacy and continually argued against it in various ways, seen in his obsessive drive to overtake Britain in steel production and to rescue Chinese history from the clutches of

¹ A part of this article is drawn from my graduate cognate paper on Mao's effort to liberate Chinese history from Western control (Department of History, McMaster University), and a part of it is taken from my article on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics published in *The Calcutta Journal of Global Affairs*.

“imperialists” such as United States Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Interestingly, Mao’s plan to make history by overtaking Britain in steel production was not an original idea, but like many of his economic concepts, it was borrowed from Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and the Soviet Union’s policies. It resulted in the Great Leap Forward.



President Xi Jinping, Karl Marx, and Mao Zedong in this AI generated image.

Marx and Lenin held the view that the European race would guide the Marxist revolution. After them, traditional Marxists assumed that a revolution led by workers would not take place in an Asiatic historical environment. They argued that industrialized Europe possessed a working-class population to drive a revolution, and Asia’s peasant society did not.

Mao did not subscribe to the idea that Asians were inferior to Europeans, and constantly exhorted the Chinese people to learn from foreigners, but to do so selectively and wisely. He said in January 1958:²

If we are to have drive, if we are to see to it that the Western world is left far behind, do we not have to rid ourselves of bourgeois ideology? . . . Now our enthusiasm has been aroused. Ours is an ardent nation, now swept by a burning tide . . . Our nation is like an atom . . . When this atom's nucleus is smashed the thermal energy released will have tremendous power. We shall be able to do things which we could not do before.

Mao was aware of China's industrial inferiority vis-à-vis the industrialized West. He told American journalist Edgar Snow in December 1970 that the Russians "looked down on the Chinese and also looked down on the people of many other countries."

Mao had talked about the Sinification of Marxism back in 1938, and he continually warned against the wholesale imitation of Soviet practices, especially following the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s. He complained that he could not have eggs or chicken soup for three years because an article in the Soviet Press said they were harmful for health. In the circumstances, Mao extended a cautious welcome to the comments made by Khrushchev against Stalin in 1956. The attack on Stalin may have come as a relief because China had suffered from Stalin's errors, and the fact that Mao had to defer to the Soviet supremo. Mao said:³

² "Speech at the Supreme State Conference," Excerpts, 28 January 1958, in *Chairman Mao Talks to the People: Talks and Letters: 1956-1971*, ed. Stuart Schram (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 92-93.

³ *Chairman Mao Talks to the People: Talks and Letters: 1956-1971*, 101.

When Stalin was criticized in 1956, we were on the one hand happy, but on the other hand apprehensive. It was completely necessary to remove the lid, to break down blind faith, to release the pressure, and to emancipate thought. But we did not agree with demolishing him in one blow.

Earlier in the same speech, Mao stated: “When Chinese artists painted pictures of me together with Stalin, they always made me a little bit shorter, thus blindly knuckling under to the moral pressure exerted by the Soviet Union at that time.” Once again, Mao invoked the communist gospel to show that “Marxism-Leninism looked at everyone on equal terms, and all people should be treated equally.” He did not miss an opportunity to criticize inequalities in American society: “Capitalist society isn’t all that pure either, and even in more advanced capitalist societies there is also a backward part . . . there was the slave system in the southern United States.”⁴

Mao warned against the indiscriminate borrowing of foreign ideas. “There are two methods of learning: one is merely to imitate, and the other is to apply the creative spirit. Learning should be combined with creativity. To import Soviet codes and conventions inflexibly is to lack the creative spirit,” he declared.⁵

Soon he returned to this theme, saying that classics must be respected but not followed blindly. “Marxism itself was created, not copied or lifted straight from books,” he said.⁶ Three months later, he cautioned Chinese military leaders, saying: “With X it is mainly a case of blind faith in foreigners. He has an inferiority complex. He hasn’t been

⁴ Ibid., 227.

⁵ Ibid., 96.

⁶ Ibid., 115.

able to rid himself of this blind faith. He doesn't regard our own experience as of primary importance."⁷

Marxism, he believed, must be adapted to Chinese conditions.

The Party Reevaluates Mao under Its “Resolution” of 1981

After Mao's death on September 9, 1976, criticism of his policies, principally the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, became more frequent, but the first candid and comprehensive assessment of his career was not made until the adoption of the *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China* at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee on June 27, 1981. Mao's relentless campaign to retake Chinese history from imperialist control had now come full circle.

The new supreme leader Deng Xiaoping had overseen the writing of a critical version of Chinese history since 1949. It was a history in which Mao emerged as a heroic figure only until 1949, and for only a few years after. However, it was a history that would not forgive Mao his mistakes during the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution. The 1981 Resolution blamed Mao's general line for socialist construction for neglecting objective economic laws, and said that this lapse led to “left” errors such as setting excessively high targets, issuing arbitrary directives, and stirring up a “communist wind.” These errors, it stated, were due to the Chinese leaders' lack of experience in socialist construction. It added:⁸

⁷ *Chairman Mao Talks to the People: Talks and Letters: 1956–1971*, 127.

⁸ “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China” at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee on 27 June 1981, in *The People's Republic of China, 1979–1984, A Documentary Survey, Volume 1*, ed. Harold C. Hinton (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1986), 95, 96.

More important, it was due to the fact that Comrade Mao Zedong and many leading comrades, both at the centre and in the localities, had become smug about their successes, were impatient for quick results and overestimated the role of man's subjective will and efforts. After the general line was formulated, the 'Great Leap Forward' and the movement for rural people's communes were initiated without careful investigation and study and without prior experimentation.

Mao's entire basis for the Great Leap—the general line and the setting up of the communes—was denounced in a single sentence. The demolition of Mao was performed under the Dengist administration in words similar to those in which Defense Minister Peng Dehuai had criticized Mao's policies just before he was purged.

But the 1981 Resolution made a small concession to Mao in declaring that following the Great Leap disaster, Mao led the Party in correcting the errors. The Resolution added that Mao erred in criticizing Peng and then launching a party-wide struggle against "right opportunism." The Resolution credited Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping for putting in place correct measures to reverse the policies of the Great Leap. In the end, the Resolution attributed the successes and the failures to the collective leadership of the Party headed by Mao. "Although Comrade Mao Zedong must be held chiefly responsible, we cannot lay the blame on him alone for all those errors," the Resolution clarified.

The Resolution mitigated some of Mao's weaknesses by broadening the historical canvas on which he operated, and placed him on a world stage alongside the great men of history. It said:⁹

⁹ *Resolution on CPC History, 1949–81* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981), 95.

However, Comrade Mao Zedong had his shortcomings and mistakes just like many other outstanding figures in the forefront of the march of history. Chiefly in his later years, having been admired and loved for so long by the whole Party and people, he became over-confident and more and more divorced from reality and the masses and, in particular, from the Party's collective leadership, and often rejected and even suppressed correct opinions that differed from his.

The Resolution concluded that after evaluating Mao's life as a whole, his contributions to China far outweighed his errors. Yet, Deng had irrevocably initiated a process of de-Maoification. When asked by a Yugoslav newspaper correspondent to comment on what Mao's chief mistakes were, Deng explained the errors not as those committed by Mao, the man, but under the aegis of Mao Zedong Thought, which was the crystallization of the Party's ideology. Deng stated: "He made a number of mistakes in his declining years, and some of them were even great mistakes."¹⁰

One of the major mistakes, I argue, was that the Great Leap was imposed on peasants and workers. They were misled by the CCP leadership into believing that they would grow prosperous, and that their country would soon rival Britain in the production of industrial goods. The farmers' almost blind faith in Mao led them to follow the innovations of Soviet agriculturists whom the great helmsman still supported, even though he had rejected the Soviet development model. In arguing for close planting, Mao claimed that seeds of the same kind would not fight each other for nutrients, and in Guangzhou farmers were told to plant ten times the normal number of seeds. As a result of close

¹⁰ *The People's Republic of China, 1979-1984, A Documentary Survey, Volume 1*, 68.

planting, grain choked and failed to grow, and eventually rotted. Judith Shapiro quotes an agriculture professor as saying: “During the leap, the leaders mixed political and scientific questions up together. You could only report high figures, or you would be labeled as right leaning. Some county leaders were purged for ‘being suspicious of rushing ahead.’”¹¹

Mao’s haste was driven by his desire for China to break out of the shackles of Asian poverty. Toward this end, he rejected Soviet economic dogma and charted his own course. Mao’s authorship of Chinese history developed its own peculiar language: the slogans that drove his political campaigns: *duo, kuai, hao, sheng* (“more, faster, better, and more economical”) were the key images that powered the leap. *Fanmaojin* (“opposing rash advance”) was heavily criticized by Mao at the outset of the Great Leap.

I have argued that the Great Leap was driven by Mao’s desire to dignify the history of China, and to position China as an equal of the industrialized West. There are several conclusions to be drawn:

Recovery of Chinese History: Mao’s efforts to recover his country’s history from imperialist control, and to transform that history into a saga of a newly liberated country’s drive to become economically prosperous, was grounded in the logic of anti-imperial behavior. Even Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi in neighboring India were constantly engaging Britain in a war of words as they sought India’s independence.

Struggle Against the Bourgeois Idealist Conception of History: As Mao saw it, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson adhered to the bourgeois idealist conception of history, and ignored the role of oppression and exploitation of the working classes in China in the development of the

¹¹ Judith Shapiro, *Mao’s War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 78.

Chinese revolution. It was from such bourgeois Western ‘history’ that Mao was determined to rescue his country, and his ideas would eventually be put into practice during the Great Leap when the first concerted effort was made to erase the “three great differences” between town and countryside, between labor and peasantry, and between mental and manual work.

The Great Leap was not the End of History: I draw the inference that if China had successfully made the transition from socialism to communism, Chinese history would have come to an end, thus fulfilling a Marxist prophesy. However, the Great Leap disaster derailed the transition, and the process of organizing Chinese society was arrested.

Faults in the “Two Winds” Thesis: By the late-1950s, although imperialism and colonialism were ebbing, there was no indication that socialism had become superior to them. Mao claimed capitalism was weakening, but in fact the capitalist economies were actually benefiting from the post-Second World War economic reconstruction of Europe.

Mao’s Tolerance of the Loss of Human Life and “Disorder”: Leaders of communist countries were shocked by the incredible lightness with which Mao talked about the destruction of half the world’s population in nuclear war, and then painted a scenario in which socialism would rise from ashes. Such extreme views help explain his tolerance for the loss of human life during the Great Leap, and why the leap was allowed to take an extreme route.

Continuities and Discontinuities: Mao could have reshaped Chinese history without putting the country through the Great Leap. By performing the counterfactual exercise of splicing the pre-Leap and post-Leap periods into one seamless period of time, it can be seen that the economy would have maintained the sustainable growth rate of the

pre-Leap years on the basis of land reforms, investments in irrigation, and the mechanization of agriculture.

The Great Leap Was Not a “Natural Calamity”: There was nothing “natural” about the mistakes that led to the foodgrain shortage and ensuing famine. The crisis was the result of a series of mistakes at the highest levels.

Domestic Opponents of Mao’s Historical Vision for China: Mao fought conservatives on the domestic front, and they constrained his push for rapid economic growth. They were an obstacle confronting his historical vision.

The Last Word in Twentieth Century Chinese History: Mao’s vision of New China and his version of history were revised by the CCP under Deng Xiaoping. The official history of the Party, contained in the Resolution of 1981, thoroughly reassessed Mao’s role in Twentieth Century Chinese history. In the reassessment, Mao emerged as a hero only till national liberation in 1949, and as smug, headstrong, and uncompromising in the following years. The heroic leader was de-sanctified, and his *yundong* (campaigns) were denounced. History did not end in China; Mao’s version of it did.

Following The Trail of Socialism With Chinese Characteristics

The early communist leaders of China adapted Marxism to suit the un-European conditions prevailing in China. A process of cultural translation enabled Marxism to be Sinicized under Mao. As a product of translation, Sinicization can be understood by signposting the postcolonial concept of hybridity: a process of joining together of Eastern and Western cultures that assumes many forms—linguistic, cultural, political, and racial. The CCP under Mao was conscious of the need to

liberate China from the remnants of bourgeois ideology and class divisions in society, leftovers from China's past. In this manner, hybridity acted as a tool to challenge the remaining structures of class oppression within China.¹² Mao effectively created a new space, a hybrid one, for his type of translated Marxism to exist.

The current CCP ideology, "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," made a belated entry into the Party's parlance in the late 1980s under the reforms of Deng Xiaoping. Deng first used the phrase in his opening remarks at the 12th National Congress in September 1982 that were published in the People's Daily.¹³ It was the defining maxim of his astonishingly bold reforms, and an effort by Deng to distinguish it from Mao's style of socialism.

Before the congress began, the rural commune system had been shut down, and the mantra of the market economy adopted. It was a stratagem or, as the Chinese described it, a "basket": on the outside the reforms were acceptable to the conservatives, but inside the basket was a vision of radical change. The Party declared that the congress sought to define a correct road, a strategy, and principles and policies for conducting socialist modernization—after "eliminating the negative effects of the chaos of the cultural revolution."

The nucleus of Deng's formula was not "socialism" but "Chinese characteristics." By emphasising the latter, Deng was able to shape the concept to fit prevailing conditions, and to prepare the Party to embrace

¹² Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical Inquiry* 12. 1 (1985): 144–165.

¹³ Alessandra C. Lavagnino, "From 'Chinese Characteristics' (Zhongguo Tese 中国特色) to 'Chinese Dream' (Zhongguo Meng 中国梦): The Chinese Political Discourse Today," in *Understanding China Today: An Exploration of Politics, Economics, Society, and International Relations*, eds., Silvio Beretta, et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2012), 280–281.

unprecedented economic liberalization. The term had not appeared in the political report of the general secretary, Hu Yaobang, to the 12th Congress. It entered the political discourse only after Deng, Hu, and Zhao Ziyang presented their vision for such unparalleled reforms at the congress.

The phrase reappeared in the report of the acting CCP general secretary, Zhao Ziyang, at the 13th Congress, from October 25 to November 1, 1987. His report entitled, “Advance Along the Road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” was the earliest detailed reference to the phrase.¹⁴ At the congress Zhao not only pointed out the special colours (*tese*) or characteristics of socialism in China, he also used the metaphor of a road to progress.¹⁵

Enlivened by images of “baskets” and *tese*, the Party prepared the cadre to accept the coming reforms. The Party internalized the adapted form of Marxism and then projected it both inwards in its domestic policies, and outwards in its foreign relations in both the communist and non-communist countries.

Sinicizing Marx In The Present Era

The effort to Sinicize Marx predates the era of Mao. Mao had called for the “Sinification of Marxism” as early as 1938, but several years earlier the newly-formed CCP had already begun to informally Sinicize many of

¹⁴ Zhao Ziyang, “Advance along the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics,” October 25, 1987, *Beijing Review* 30.45 (November 9–15, 1987): 23–49; Chao, Tzu-yang, *Advance along the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics: Report delivered at the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 25, 1987* by Zhao Ziyang (Beijing: *Beijing Review*, 1987); Kwok-sin Li, comp., and Mary Lok, trans., *A Glossary of Political Terms of the People’s Republic of China* (Hongkong: Chinese University Press, 1995), 399; and The 12th Party Congress, *China Daily*. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-07/10/content_6142010.htm

¹⁵ Lavagnino, “From ‘Chinese Characteristics’ (Zhongguo Tese 中国特色) to ‘Chinese Dream’ (Zhongguo Meng 中国梦).”

the theoretical concepts of Marxism through translation. Some of the earliest and most important discussions on the need to translate Marxism into the language of the masses were provided not by Mao, or even Maoists, but by Qu Qiubai, an earlier secretary of the Party and a literary theorist.¹⁶

These ideas were developed by Mao and further adapted by Deng to the new social and economic conditions, and has found a prominent place in the Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, simply known as Xi Jinping Thought.

Although Karl Marx's "proletariat," the principal actor in his theory, represented the factory worker living in Europe in appalling conditions generated by early nineteenth-century industrialization, its translation into Chinese was *wu-ch'an chieh-chi* and *wu tzu-ch'an chieh-chi*, denoting "propertyless class" who could be living either in the city or the countryside.¹⁷ The proletariat of Europe was, thus, reconfigured as the poor peasants or landless laborers of China. It marked a significant departure from Marx in the application of the doctrine when it was spread among ordinary Chinese people.

The CCP's cultural translation of Marx's idea of "feudalism" stripped it of its industrial revolution milieu, and located it within the confines of an ancient Chinese empire. The Party's domestication of "feudal" (*feng-chien*) differentiated it from Marx's conception of European history. *Feng-chien* denoted the fragmentation of national sovereignty during the period of the Warring States (403–221 BCE) just

¹⁶ Arif Dirlik, "Postsocialism: Reflections on 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,'" *Critical Asian Studies* 21.1 (January 1989): 33–44. Also see, Paul Pickowicz, *Marxist Literary Thought in China: The Influence of Ch'u Ch'iupai* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981).

¹⁷ John King Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution, 1800–1985* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 250.



before the unification of China by the Qin emperor in 221 BCE. In classical Chinese thought, the term referred only to the structure of central or decentralized government before 221 BCE, and to the exploitation of peasants by landowners that had existed for two thousand years. Given the ancient connotations of the CCP's conception of feudalism, the term differed sharply from the Marxian use of the term, and could not, therefore, be applied to China. Neither could the past two-thousand-year history of China be described by the simplifying sweep of the term, feudal. These kinds of parameters were created soon after the birth of the CCP in July 1921.

Another source of foreign borrowing comprised the Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin and the Second World Congress of the Communist International in July 1920 that had laid down the ideological basis and practical conditions for assisting communist parties in China and in other colonized states. Soviet guidelines provided a platform for the existence of the CCP.

In 1921, China was beginning its journey out of the old world into the modern. Although a socialist party had existed for fifty years in Europe and for twenty-five years in Japan, these were small parties and were not particularly influential compared to the massive size and the peasant power of the CCP.

The dilemma of the policy of the Sinicization of Marxism was the foreignness of Marxism itself. Mao and his party colleagues addressed the question of how much of European theory to adopt, and they concluded that foreign ideas must be wholly adapted to Chinese conditions. Mao's thought was essentially Chinese, and he automatically incorporated Marxism into the Chinese tradition. Mao had first proclai-

med the slogan of the “Sinification of Marxism” in his report of October 1938 to the Sixth Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPC.¹⁸

A communist is a Marxist international, but Marxism must take on a national form before it can be applied. 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 abstractedly used. If a Chinese communist, who is a part of the great Chinese people, bound to his people by his very flesh and blood, talks of Marxism apart from Chinese peculiarities, this Marxism is merely an empty abstraction. Consequently, the Sinification of Marxism—that is to say, making certain that in all of its manifestations it is imbued with Chinese peculiarities, using it according to these peculiarities—becomes a problem that must be understood and solved by the whole Party without delay.

Mao’s prescient use of the phrase “Chinese peculiarities” three times in just this one extract would eventually become a commonly used phrase in Chinese society and particularly among scholars. Mao’s employment of “Chinese peculiarities” was also the conceptual origin of the maxim “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” which is its synonym.

Sinification served at least two immediate purposes: making the language of Marx accessible to the Party and the common people, and ensuring that the Party cadres were well-versed not just in Marxism but more importantly in Chinese history. Under Mao, the CCP internalized

¹⁸ Extracted from *On the New Stage* (Lun hsin chieh-tuan, Chieh-fang She, 1939), Chapter 7, A Report to the Sixth Plenum of the Sixth Central Committee in October 1938.



the precepts of the Sinicized Marxism in both its domestic and foreign policies. Schram explains that for Mao, Sinification meant that its practitioners needed to have a profound knowledge of Chinese history, and the ability to relate the present to the past. Mao fervently believed that Marxism was useless and even non-existent without its practical applications, underscoring his view that each country must approach its revolution in its own way.

On the one hand, Mao urged the Party to transform abstract Marxism into something much more concrete that could be used in Chinese conditions and, on the other hand, he viewed Marxism as a concept of such fluidity and suppleness that he could sculpt it easily to China's needs. So, we have a co-existence of opposites within the same theme—concreteness and fluidity—that fruitfully enabled the Chinese communists to apply Marxism in a very practical manner in the cities and the countryside, and concomitantly gave them the ideological flexibility to fine-tune their policies over the long term.

For Mao, the concept was malleable, even ambiguous, and open to constant renovation in step with the specific conditions of China, or Chinese peculiarities. It is this fluidity that runs through the entire slow evolution of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, whose strength lies within its adaptability to change of every kind—economic, social, educational, cultural, and in military affairs—and a flexibility enabling the concept to shape and reshape itself repeatedly in response to both internal and external needs.

And yet, as Schram reminds us, Mao was not just Sinicizing Marxism, but he was also Sinicizing the Marxists of China. In this way, Mao was rejecting the abstractedness and abstruseness of Soviet ideologues who claimed to lay down prescriptions from Moscow for how the outside communist world ought to conduct its revolution. Mao, at

these times, was urging the Party cadres to attempt to become theoreticians—but not blind theoreticians—in his talk “What is a Theoretician”:¹⁹

If we have only read this theory [Marxism-Leninism] but have not used it as a basis for research in China’s historical and revolutionary actuality, have not created a theory in accordance with China’s real necessities, a theory that is our own and of a specific nature, then it would be irresponsible to call ourselves Marxist theoreticians. . . . If we only know how to recite Marxist economics or philosophy, reciting from the first to the tenth chapters until they are thoroughly familiar, but are completely unable to apply them, can we then be considered Marxist theoreticians.

Amid laughter from an enthusiastic audience, Mao raised the question: “What type of theoreticians do we need?” And he provided the answer, that China needed theoreticians

. . . who are able to explain correctly the actual problems issuing from history and revolution, who are able to give it a scientific interpretation and theoretical explanation of the various problems of Chinese economics, politics, military affairs, and culture. This is the type of theoretician that we need.

In the same speech Mao prioritized the Chinese intellectuals, declaring “we should strive to attract a broad spectrum of the intelligentsia,” and that “an attitude of welcome [should] be adopted towards them.” Mao

¹⁹ Mao’s speech, “Reform in Learning, the Party, and Literature,” delivered at the opening of the Party school in Yenan on February 1, 1942, *Chieh-fang Jih-Pao*, April 27, 1942.

grappled with making Marxism relevant to China: “how can Marxist-Leninist theory and the reality of the Chinese Revolution be united?” He offered an analogy of a target and an arrow. “The relation between Marxism-Leninism and the Chinese Revolution is the same as between the arrow and the target.” He bemoaned: “However, some comrades shoot arrows recklessly without a target. . . The arrow of Marxism-Leninism must be used to hit the target of the Chinese Revolution.”

How Chinese Scholars Have Portrayed Chinese Socialism

Scholars have theorized Chinese socialism in different ways. Li Zehou characterizes the integration of socialism and “Chinese characteristics” as a dual paradigm under which China aims to achieve “enlightenment” (*qimeng*) and “national salvation” (*jiuwang*) simultaneously.²⁰ For example, in the early twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals pursued a single-minded commitment to national salvation because they desired to make China stronger in order to survive foreign aggression.

Mao’s reinterpretation of Marxism as a practical manual for Chinese Marxists paved the way for Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. The new formula, argues Yeonsik Choi, featured both Marxism and Chinese traditions. But these two equations could have pulled in different directions, and could have upset the entire formula.²¹ If Marxism were to be given greater weight, the role of Chinese traditions would shrink. Or, if Chinese traditions were to be emphasized, the Marxist approach would have lost some of its power. It was therefore predicted—erroneously—that Socialism with Chinese Characteristics may exhibit inconsistencies.

²⁰ Li Zehou, *Zhongguo xiandai xiangshi lun* [Essays on Contemporary Chinese Intellectual History] (Hefei: Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 1999), 823–866.

²¹ Yeonsik Choi, “The Evolution of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: Its Elliptical Structure of Socialist Principles and China’s Realities,” *Pacific Focus* XXVI. 3 (December 2011): 385–404.

Such predictions were proven wrong because of the inbuilt flexibility that animated the concept.

An enduring contribution of Mao was to usher in a diplomatic revolution, so to speak, in China's relationship with the United States. Mao had sought a rapprochement with Washington, which he achieved.²² In October 1971, China secured membership of the permanent five of the United Nations Security Council. The normalization of relations with the United States occurred in 1972 when Mao and the prime minister, Zhou Enlai, took the decision to restore economic relations with the outside world. China's foreign trade had already begun to grow before Mao's death, and foreign investments in China expanded rapidly from 1985 onwards. The United States and China now began consulting, as equals, on regional and global issues. From 1984, China began to participate in international institutions and to subscribe to international agreements, and it eventually joined the World Trade Organization in 2001.

Specters and Ghosts: Post-Marxist Theory In Chinese Scholarship

The Chinese response to the theory of "post-Marxism," developed by Western thinkers, appeared both in theoretical and practical form. Around the time that Deng Xiaoping was pushing China into its post-socialist history, Western theorists were formulating the concept of post-Marxism, which is essentially a diversified reworking of Marxism that began in the late 1970s. It was a reaction to classical Marxist materialism, economism, historical determinism, anti-humanism, and class reductionism, and it was influenced by poststructuralism and postmodernism. Post-Marxism rejected the meta-narratives of classical Marxism itself. These new ideas were developed by French theorists

²² Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 265, 380.

Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Michel Foucault, the Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau, the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, and the Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall.

From the 1980s, post-Marxism turned its back on classical Marxism and embraced feminism and postcolonialism, venturing into these new and exciting realms. The innovative theory no longer treated class, society, and history as cohesive, universal, and discursive. Under post-Marxism there was no uniform class consciousness. Post-Marxism also refers to an abandonment of Marxism by many former Marxists after the collapse of Soviet communism in Eastern Europe in 1989–91, when the Marxism which had informed cultural studies in the 1960s and 1970s was widely disavowed. Unlike traditional Marxism, which emphasizes the priority of class struggle and the common humanity of oppressed groups, post-Marxism explores the sexual, racial, class, and ethnic divisions of modern society.²³ Exploitation, therefore, does not operate exclusively within the economic relationship between laborers and capitalists, but it appears more often in the relationship between the genders, and between both races and ethnicities.

Chinese academics have responded spiritedly to post-Marxism. The Chinese Marxist philosopher, Wei Xiaoping, explains in his seminal article on the “collision” of the French theorist Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction theory with China’s Marxism, arguing that Derrida has drawn the interest of Chinese Marxist scholars through his way of separating the spirit of Marx from the “specter” of Marx.²⁴ All those

²³ Philip Goldstein, *Post-Marxist Theory: An Introduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).

²⁴ Wei Xiaoping, “The Collision of Marxism and Derrida’s Deconstruction in China,” *Diogenes* 57.4 (2012): 56–62. Also see, Wei Xiaoping, “The Collision of Derrida’s Deconstructionism with China’s Marxism,” paper presented at the Congrès Marx international VI, septembre 2010.

elements interpreted by Derrida as “specters” have in fact been practiced in China since 1949.

Wei explains that since China’s began its economic reforms in 1978, Derrida’s “specters” such as public ownership, and allocation according to contribution, have been replaced by multiple ownership or stock ownership, and by allocation according to contribution combined with allocation according to profits accruing from capital investment.

A “collision” is occurring in China between the theory and the practice of Marxism. The predictable result, Wei explains, is that the Marxist ideal of income equality both in theory and in practice has now led to great income difference. The phenomena of “specters and ghosts” stand opposed to Marx’s ideal of equality as well as the critical spirit of Marx.

When Derrida identified those elements as “specters” he presumably meant they could never be actualized. So, when they actually disappeared in China, people believed that they were only “specters” and could not be objectified or actualized, while what actually could be practiced is the critical spirit of Marx. Chinese scholars are attracted by Derrida’s deconstructive method, and by the paradox of the “specters” and the spirit of Marx to the actual situation of China. Wei concludes that “no matter how confusing or mysterious the concepts that Derrida has used are, they, to some extent, help us to further ‘rethink Marxism’ in our era.”²⁵

Chinese scholars have been attracted to Derrida since 1978, the year Deng’s economic reforms began, and liberalization spread from economics to culture, and also, to a degree, into the ideological arena. During this period, all the major schools of Marxism abroad were

²⁵ Ibid.

introduced into China. Apart from orthodox Soviet Marxism, China imported what its scholars call Western Marxism, both schools being different. The Chinese understanding of Western Marxism is based on the theories of the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, the German Marxist theoretician Karl Korsch and the Hungarian theorist George Lukacs, among others. There are many disagreements about how Western Marxism should be interpreted.

The Chinese scholars, moreover, focus on the German philosopher and founder of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Max Horkheimer, and other school members such as the German-American psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, and his compatriots, the critical theorists Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. For the Chinese, Marxism is normally represented by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, existentialist Marxism by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, and Analytical Marxism by the English-speaking social scientists G.A. Cohen, Jon Elster and John Roemer.

The scholar Wei argues that Derrida, as a deconstructionist philosopher, was not normally regarded as a Marxist, but after his book, *Specters of Marx*, was published in 1993 his ideas are now regarded as belonging to the so-called “post-Marxism.”²⁶ The German critical theorist, Jürgen Habermas, was regarded as belonging to the third generation of the Frankfurt school, but now he is widely seen as also belonging to “post-Marxism.”

Wei explains that no sooner were the theories of Western Marxist scholars introduced into China than Chinese scholars, especially the younger ones, embraced them. Some students began to take Western Marxism as their main subject which, in turn, enlarged its influence in

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

China. They were drawn to researching Western Marxism because, first, the combination of economic globalization and China's transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy with Chinese characteristics meant that China's Marxists needed to face the same problems as Western Marxist scholars. Wei argues that while Western Marxist scholars had faced the problems of capitalism and market economy over a long period of time, Chinese Marxist scholars have been exposed to those problems only since economic transformation in 1978, and especially since 1992 when the actual situation in China became strikingly similar to the Western world.

Secondly, while the research work of Marxist scholars abroad is not guided by official political criteria or by governments, Chinese Marxists are affected by official political considerations, including official ideology, but they are less affected by different schools of Marxism or academic disciplines. Over the past three decades, alongside the so-called official Marxism in China, academic Marxist studies of two types have made an appearance: one is concerned with researching Western Marxism and New Marxism, and the other is focused on researching the thoughts of Marx based on his own texts.

Derrida's Deconstructionism, however, has riveted the attention of those Chinese scholars who study Western Marxism, and those who belong to the Chinese schools of academic Marxism. Nonetheless, Chinese scholars who have researched Derrida's post-Marxism find it a very confusing concept in their extensive surveys comparing it with Marx after Marxism, and the idea of the Return to Marx. Chinese scholars are conversant with the storyline: that Derrida's Deconstructionism is also regarded as "post-modernism" because he only turns to Marxism after formulating his view of deconstructionism, and that his treatment of Marxism is labelled "post-Marxism."

As the Chinese see it, there are at least two common points that Derrida shares with post-Marxism: first, both seek freedom from the “fundamental concepts of labor, mode of production, social class, and consequently the whole history of its apparatuses (projected or real).”²⁷ Secondly, they face the same period of post-industrialization, which is the economic basement of post-modernism. In this environment, the social structure is different from that of Marx’s time.

Some Chinese scholars accept Derrida’s post-Marxism as they share the idea of giving up orthodox Marxism, which Wei calls “dogmatist Marxism,” while still insisting on the critical spirit of Marx. This view is also shared by scholars who subscribe to “After Marxism,” but it is different from post-Marxism because “After Marxism” does not challenge the basic concepts of Marx.

As the Chinese scholars understand it, the concept of post-Marxism means going back to Marx from the traditional or orthodox interpretation of Marxism which is based on the textbooks produced in the Soviet Union and distributed to other fraternal socialist countries. Rockmore’s *Marx after Marxism* has helped Chinese scholars grasp the nuanced changes in Marxism.²⁸

Chinese scholars see a convergence of views between Derrida and the “Return to Marx,” or “Marx after Marxism.” On the one hand, Derrida tries to distinguish between Marx and Marxism by separating the spirit of Marx from the Soviet interpretation of Marxism, with his comment:

²⁷ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 88–89.

²⁸ Tom Rockmore, *Marx After Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

We would be tempted to distinguish this spirit of the Marxist critique [as critique of liberal capitalism and its ills], which seems to be more indispensable than ever today, at once from Marxism as ontology, philosophical or metaphysical system, as ‘dialectical materialism,’ from Marxism as historical materialism or method, and from Marxism incorporated in the apparatuses of party, State, or Workers’ International.²⁹

But “Return to Marx” or “Marx after Marxism” do not share the same meaning with “Post-Marxism” in the sense of the latter’s challenge to Marxist theory. The former only emphasizes returning to Marx from Russian orthodox Marxism, which interpreted Marx mostly through Engels’ writings. On the other hand, all of them call back the spirit of Marx.

Derrida confuses ghosts with specters when he questions Marx’s usage of the term ‘specter’ in 1848 in opposition to Derrida’s own deployment of the same word in the 1990s.³⁰ And so, Derrida says: “Where I was tempted to name thereby . . . the return of the dead which the worldwide work of mourning cannot get rid of . . . Marx, for his part, announces and calls for a presence to come.”³¹

As the Chinese scholar Wei sees it, the concept of the “Return to Marx” has another meaning that goes further than “After Marxism”: it not only emphasizes reading Marx through the texts of Marx himself in Chinese translation, but also to read Marx in the original text in his own language which became possible with the publication of the new *Marx-*

²⁹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 55.

³⁰ Terrell Carver, *The Postmodern Marx* (Manchester University Press, 1998), 13–14.

³¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 99.

Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA2), the complete and largest collection of the works of Marx and Engels.³² The older edition of MEGA in China was translated mainly from a Russian edition. After the release of MEGA2, a very small group of Chinese scholars began reading Marx through his own language. Wei explains that the original German text has brought out a Marx that is different from the traditional translated one. Within MEGA2, there are some words and concepts that cannot be expressed exactly in another language, and some of Marx's concepts could be understood better in his own language.

Wei explains that these developments do not indicate that a linguistic transition in Marxist studies has happened in China, but it shows that Chinese Marxist scholars have begun reading Marx in the original language, using linguistic technique. Chinese scholars, thus, have arrived at a point close to what Derrida tried to do with his linguistic deconstruction.

Chinese scholars, and indeed many others, have found it difficult to comprehend the difference between Derrida's use, in his *Specters of Marx*, of the concepts of "ghost" and "specter" to explicate Marxism and Marx. Derrida got these concepts mainly from two documents: in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels employ "ghost" to refer to a spirit that is welcomed by some and feared by others. "Specter" has its origin in Shakespeare's tragedy, *Hamlet*.

The Chinese understanding is that for Derrida "ghost" or "specter" do not have a single meaning, rather they possess multiple meanings. As

³² *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, MEGA2 (Amsterdam: Internationale Marx-Engels-Stiftung).

Derrida argued, “the figure of the ‘ghost’ is not just one figure among others. It is perhaps the hidden figure of all figures.”³³

Wei contends that although the “ghost” or “specter” which Derrida invokes is confusing, they could be metaphors for good or bad, or they could be seen as two characters, one with a positive connotation, and the other negative in meaning. Derrida uses these words to refer both to Nazis and fascists, and Leninists and Stalinists, to convey either a negative meaning or a positive one.³⁴ For the Nazis and fascists the connotation is negative. But for Leninists and Stalinists, what Derrida has in mind is perhaps a positive “ghost” that tries to objectify itself into actual “being,” but as only a “ghost” that cannot fulfil its project in actuality because Derrida explains, “to haunt does not mean to be present.”³⁵

Applying Derrida’s and Marx’s apparitions to China’s efforts to adhere to Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, Wei believes that when the traditional model of socialism was replaced by a socialist market economy, the negative “specters” such as private ownership and social differences took the place of the positive “specters” such as public ownership and social equality. The critical spirit of Marx is not only concerned with negative “specters” which are now haunting us, but also with the positive “specters,” and why they cannot stay longer, and why Derrida treats them as only “specters.”

It is in this sense both Derrida and Chinese Marxist scholars think that there should be an open, self-critical, transformative, re-evaluative

³³ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 119–20; and also see, Ib Johansen, *Walking Shadows: Reflections on the American Fantastic and the American Grotesque from Washington Irving to the Postmodern Era* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015), 226–227.

³⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 104–5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

and self re-interpretive spirit towards Marx, and that Chinese Marxists could develop Marxist theory with greater theoretical engagement. Wei argues that those characteristics of socialism such as public ownership, income equality and social community, may now be also accepted by some Chinese as “specters” because they come and go, just like “specters” as it is not easy for them to stay longer. Wei explains that Derrida regarded them as “specters” because they could never be actualized. As soon as they are actualized, they become a different thing, so they are always hanging on somewhere. Derrida’s understanding of communism is: “communism has always been and will remain spectral; it is always still to come.”³⁶

And when Marx criticized those “specters” of capitalism such as private ownership, income differences, and social conflict, he believed that they behaved like “specters” in the sense that they did not really disappear under certain circumstances and came back again under other circumstances. They just hang around like “specters.”

“Post-Marxism,” especially Derrida’s “post-Marxism,” could still be spread wider among China’s Marxist scholars while the country is on the way to the next phase of modernization not just in reducing income inequality but in several social spheres as well. For example, what post-Marxists critique is not the economic relationships engendered by capitalism, rather they argue that the main social differences are not only derived from economic sectors, and that income differences are not only the result of capital investment, but are the outcome of individual competence. This has challenged some basic principles of Marx. It is in this sense that some Chinese Marxist scholars have accepted Derrida’s deconstructionism, as well as other “Post-Marxist” critiques.

³⁶ Ibid., 191.

If the negative “specters” in China are different from those “specters” that Marx had criticized, how should Chinese scholars understand Marx? Wei explains that these theoretical approaches “really confuse” many Marxists in China as they do Western scholars. But Chinese Marxists may be even more concerned about these questions, not only because Marxism is the dominant ideology of China’s economic reform, but also because the negative “specters,” even in their new form, are still regarded as negative elements which need to be criticized.

The dilemma of Chinese scholars is that Derrida himself is not very clear how the world should be critiqued during times of financial crises that are typically caused by the “specters” of advanced capitalism. What makes analysis murky is that such crises do not arise from industrial overproduction, but from excessive banking debt in the financial system. Wei explains that a similar situation exists in present-day China where private ownership comprises almost ninety percent of the economy, and income differences are increasing. So, how should Chinese scholars read Marx. “If we accept the ‘anti-foundational’ way of reading Marx, what should the critical spirit of Marx point at?” Wei wonders.

Wei argues that Derrida’s emphasis on the critical spirit of Marx not only points to the outside world but also to the theory itself, and it has to some extent opened the mind of Chinese scholars to further “rethink Marxism” at the present historical moment.

The Party In Motion

The post-postsocialist moment arrived suddenly. After the death of Mao, Deng executed unprecedented economic reforms during his tenure from 1978 to 1989, overseeing the refinement of the policy of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics which became the CCP’s official ideology. As it evolved, the CCP explained that the ideology encompassed not just

Marxism-Leninism adapted to Chinese conditions, but an entire creed spanning Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, Three Represents, Scientific Outlook on Development, and most recently Xi Jinping Thought, all of which aimed to make the country strong and prosperous. The rapid economic growth unleashed by the Deng reforms created the justification for staying the ideological course that was reaffirmed at successive congresses.³⁷

The 19th Congress in October 2017 witnessed the emergence of Xi Jinping Thought. In his report to the congress, Xi explained that Socialism with Chinese Characteristics was entering a new era, and that the present moment was “a new historic juncture in China’s development.”³⁸

It is here that Xi and the Chinese Marxist scholars share common concerns over growing income inequality. Xi has cautioned the Party about the emergence of a “contradiction between unbalanced and

³⁷ For more details on the Party Congresses’ affirmation of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, see, The 13th National Congress, *People’s Daily* online. <http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/>; the 14th National Congress, *People’s Daily* online. <http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/>; the 15th National Congress, *People’s Daily* online. <http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/>; the 16th National Congress, *People’s Daily* online. <http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/>; the 17th National Congress, *People’s Daily* online. <http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/>; and the 18th National Congress, China.org.cn. http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/node_7167318.htm. Also see, Chansheng Rong, “Analyzing the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” *Asian Social Science* 5.10 (October 2009), 134–136; Pamphlet of Xi Jinping’s Speech Published, November 20, 2012, Xinhua, *People’s Daily* online. <http://en.people.cn/90785/8025853.html>; and Xi Jinping’s remarks to the Press, November 15, 2012, China.org.cn. http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-11/16/content_27130032.htm.

³⁸ Xi Jinping speech, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017, ChinaDaily.com http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm.

inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life," and he urged the Party to address such imbalances and inadequacies.

In a case of practice coming before theory, post-Marxist theory—with its focus on gender and race—seems to have caught up with the CCP, which had emphasized the elevation of the status of women, and harmony between the various ethnicities, ever since the creation of the Chinese state in 1949.

But is there still a role for Marx in the years after his 200th anniversary on May 5, 2018? When Xi paid glowing tributes to the theorist on that day, the answer was in the affirmative. Xi celebrated Marx at a grand gathering in Beijing to celebrate the 200th anniversary of his birth, describing him as the "teacher of revolution for the proletariat and working people all over the world, the main founder of Marxism, creator of Marxist parties, a pathfinder for international communism and the greatest thinker of modern times."³⁹ In the post-postsocialist period, China's leaders and its Marxist scholars have continued re-imagining Marx.

³⁹ "Marx's theory still shines with truth: Xi," Xinhua, May 4, 2018.