

Rosa Luxemburg in the People's Republic of China

Friday 2 February 2007, by [LE BLANC Paul](#) (Date first published: 31 March 2006).

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Rosa Luxemburg has the well-deserved reputation as being one of the most radical defenders of democracy and one of the most uncompromising critics of the market economy in the labor movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Peoples Republic of China has the reputation as having one of the strongest authoritarian governments and as embarking on one of the most sweeping advances of the market economy in the early 21st century.

Yet a well-funded, well-organized, well-attended "International Conference on Rosa Luxemburg's Thought and Its Contemporary Value" (March 20-22, 2006) has recently taken place at one of China's most prestigious educational institutions, Wuhan University, under the sponsorship of the similarly prestigious Philosophy School and Institute of Marxist Philosophy. This paradoxical development is a matter of some significance.

I was fortunate to have been invited to present a paper at this conference, and doubly fortunate to be able to do just that. This informal report seeks to explore the conference's significance by connecting a description of the conference with a discussion of contemporary China. It also shares impressions drawn from my interactions with some of the students who constitute one of that country's greatest resources.

Making Sense of China

I am by no means an expert on China, but I do know something of that country. It seems only right that I indicate some of the things that shape my understanding before sharing my perceptions.

Over the years I have read a number of valuable works of reportage, scholarship, and analysis by Edgar Snow, Nym Wales (Helen Foster Snow), John K. Fairbank, Benjamin Schwartz, Stuart Schram, Merle Goldman, Stanley Karnow, Les Evans, Gregor Benton, Pierre Rousset, and others, various articles in the pages of *Monthly Review*, fictional works by Lu Xun (Hsun) and Ding Ling (Ting Ling), not to mention Andre Malraux's classic novel *Man's Fate*, as well as writings by Mao Zedong (Tse-tung), Deng Xiaoping (Teng Hsiao-ping), and other leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, and such dissident revolutionaries such as Chen Duxiu (Tu-hsiu), Wang Fanxi (Fan-shi), Peng Shuzi (Shu-tse), and Chen Bilan (Pi-lan) whose works are worth consulting in libraries and, in regard to the

Chinese revolutionaries, on-line at <http://www.marxists.org/index.htm>.

To prepare for this trip I viewed an excellent three-part, six-hour documentary originally aired on public television, "China: A Century of Revolution," surveying the period of 1911-1997. I also watched the remarkable Chinese film "To Live" (1994), which reflects the hopes, tragedies, and achievements of that country's turbulent history from the 1940s to the 1970s. This skillfully crafted, beautifully acted work of art portrays the terrible corruptions and inequalities of pre-revolutionary China, the violence of the civil war between Nationalists and Communists, the tremendous idealism and some of the problematical realities associated with the Revolution that triumphed in 1949, the immense hopes and terrible sacrifices of the Great Leap Forward, the enthusiasm and tragedy of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and through it all the creativity, the humanity, the endurance and strength of the Chinese people. While Mao is associated with the victories over the old order that resulted in great gains for the popular masses, he is also seen as riding rough-shod over his more practical-minded comrades and pushing through what turned out to be devastatingly destructive policies (Great Leap and Cultural Revolution).

The dramatic shift in the direction of capitalism, gradually engineered under the leadership of the Communist Party since Mao's 1976 death, was discussed by an excellent panel on China which I attended at the 2006 Global Left Forum in New York City one week before my trip to China. (The four panelists were Professor Cheng En Fu, who teaches Finance and Economics at Shanghai University, David Kotz, Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts, Minqi Li, who teaches political economy at York University, and Richard Smith, whose UCLA dissertation focused on contradictions of China's bureaucratic system.) Also of value have been two other items: a recent on-line report, "China Copes with Globalization: A Mixed Review," by U.S.-based Chinese researcher and activist Dale Wen, and the slim and fact-packed book by Martin Hart-Landsberg and Paul Burckett, *China and Socialism: Market Reforms and Class Struggle*, just published by Monthly Review Press, which I read on the plane to China.

One of the most important sources for my making sense of China, however, was my actual experience there, and my interactions especially with some of the vibrant and wonderful students whom I got a chance to meet and talk with at Wuhan University's vast, beautiful, and fairly modern campus.

The China I was able to see was a revelation to me. The Beijing Airport and the Wuhan University campus were teeming with people of various ages who look like the inhabitants of a very modern, "Westernized" culture. They seemed quite similar to their counterparts whom I have seen at airports and university campuses in the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America. They are relatively prosperous, educated, seemingly from either entrepreneurial or "white collar" or professional occupations (or students headed for such occupations), fairly confident and assertive, well-dressed (in some cases downright stylish), many with cell-phones. I am aware that a majority of the people in China do not frequent airports and universities - although I did see some on the margins whose manner and attire were different from those I have described, and who appeared to me to be manual workers engaged in physically maintaining the airport and university.

How many people enjoy the relatively prosperous lifestyle in China? When asked, one young student emphasized that she didn't know for sure, but that her impression is that perhaps 10 percent are rich, 40 percent are "middle class" like her and her family, and 50 percent are poor. (The poor are associated mainly with those living in the countryside.) A more knowledgeable slightly older student said that about 10 percent are well-off - embracing the airport and university layer - and the other 90 percent are quite poor, with inequality on the increase. From other sources, I understand that those who are well-off and more or less "Westernized" constitute from 30 to 50 million people, roughly 5 percent of the 1.3 billion population of China. I am told that the China that I did not see is

comparable, to a large extent, to a relatively impoverished “third world” country. One of China’s outstanding characteristics is the fact that it has an industrializing market economy which is growing dramatically, transforming the country and its place in the global economy, and creating great wealth that is unevenly distributed.

Two Westerners who have been living in China for a while told me that China’s urban youth are incredibly materialistic – as much as the most materialistic youth in the U.S. They also told me that the two primary characteristics among these young people are being very polite (and generally telling you whatever they think you want to hear) while all the time looking to advance their own self-interest. I think this may be true in some cases, but my experience convinces me that in many cases it is not true. It seems to me that reality is generally more interesting and complex than any sweeping generalizations.

My own impression of the students I met (mostly those assigned to help with the Rosa Luxemburg conference) is that they are very bright, thoughtful, generous, energetic, more often than not blessed with poise and humor. It was a pleasure to get to know them and to spend time with them.

Each of the students whom I asked, it turned out, is a member of the Chinese Communist Party (which has a membership of 70 million). With each, one or more of their parents, and one or more of their grandparents, were Communists, in some cases with membership stretching back to before 1949. My understanding of what it means for them to be a Communist is that they attend a Party meeting once a month and sometimes participate in community service projects. At Party meetings they receive information on national Party decisions and policies, discuss politics and world events, and make decisions on the goals and implementation of their service projects. Conveyed matter-of-factly, with perhaps an underlying tone of modest idealism, this information did not seem linked to the sort of intensity, activist enthusiasm, or critical engagement (or in some cases self-deprecating humor) often exuded by young members of small left-wing groups in the U.S. This is hardly surprising, since the Chinese Communist Party is definitely “the Establishment” in China. But the link of these students to this institution struck me as a civic-minded connection with a proud family and national tradition more than simply “a smart career move,” nor did it seem to embody an absence of critical or creative thought.

Those whom I asked told me that their parents worked in service and clerical occupations, were teachers, or in one case a judge. One student told me that his father had been born into a peasant family, had moved to the city and became a factory worker, later being given the chance to go to the university, from which he graduated to become a teacher. Now the son is attending one of the China’s “top ten” universities, majoring in one of the country’s three best philosophy departments. He hopes to enter government service or to get a position with a multinational corporation – commonly-stated goals of most students I asked, though one, expressing a love of children, said she would especially like to become a teacher.

There is a tendency, among human beings, to think we know more than we actually know, and to see reality through the distorting lens of preconceived notions. Even when there is some element of truth to these notions, they can blind us to realities that are often more complex and far more interesting than what we think we are actually seeing.

A good example of this, as I have already suggested, has to do with how different Chinese students are in comparison to how I was told they would be. Another example has to do with the central organizer of this conference, a senior faculty member in the Philosophy Department at Wuhan University, He Ping.

One Western participant in the conference, shortly after I arrived (and before the conference

actually started), speculated to me that He Ping was a bureaucrat who would only express the official ideology of the Chinese Communist Party leadership. I imagine that this speculation was rooted in an assumption that only a “loyal Communist Party bureaucrat” would be allowed by the government to organize such a conference. In any event, I also imagine that the person who speculated to me about He Ping was soon forced by reality to see her in a very different way.

He Ping is a diminutive woman of middle age, with a soft face that radiates genuine charm and warmth. From the nature of the conference, and from her words and actions, it seemed to me that she is interested in the expression of diverse and challenging viewpoints. I think she played such a central role in conceiving of and organizing the conference because she believes strongly in the value of Rosa Luxemburg and feels that a Chinese engagement with Luxemburg’s ideas, and with international scholars who are interested in those ideas, can be a good thing.

I had a chance to see He Ping interacting with her students in the classroom (which I visited to make an interactive presentation on Luxemburg’s challenging views), and it was clear to me that she is a caring, dedicated, capable teacher for whom her students feel respect and affection. “She is like a mother to us,” one told me.

Interactions with Students

I made a special point of spending time talking with Chinese students – between conference sessions, at meals, in the evenings, during a field trip, at the evening conference sessions with students, at a special presentation I was able to make to a combined audience of the Philosophy Club and a philosophy class, etc.

While sometimes there was the kind of reticence that I had expected in a country ruled by a one-party Communist state, there was also far more openness than I had anticipated – an interest in engaging with new ideas, thoughtful reflections, critical thought.

Early in the visit I indicated to a bright young graduate student that I believed there were probably some limits on freedom of expression in China, that someone who went beyond such limits would get into trouble. She told me that there are no such limits, that I would find I could express myself fully and freely. What if I stayed in China, I asked, in order to help organize Chinese workers around the radical ideas of Rosa Luxemburg? She agreed that this might get me into trouble. Of course, I couldn’t stay in China to help organize workers — but I did find that I could express myself fully and freely. In my classroom presentations, in conversations with groups of students over dinner and lunch, in one-on-one discussions, in my formal address at the conference “The Challenge of Revolutionary Democracy in the Life and Thought of Rosa Luxemburg,” I found that people listened, responded, engaged.

In one of the evening sessions for students, I defined democracy as “rule by the people” (emphasizing that this was not simply rule in the name of the people) and emphasized the importance of freedom of expression, including being able to express disagreements with those in positions of authority, in order to make democracy real. A student began hesitantly, “Maybe this is not the right thing to ask,” and then she made reference to students who had initiated struggles for freedom and democracy in the 1980s – but they didn’t get what they had hoped for, and things turned out badly for them. They became discouraged, and later others felt discouraged, about seeking such changes. What, she wanted to know, did I think about that?

I said that my studies and my own experience have shown me that bringing about positive changes is difficult. In working-class struggles, in struggles against racism, in struggles for women’s rights, in

struggles against war and imperialism, and in other efforts to overcome oppression, there have been many defeats before there have been victories. But people who are struggling for something positive often keep struggling, learning lessons from past struggles on what to do and what not to do. People learn from terrible and discouraging defeats how to struggle more effectively, and through learning such lessons people can eventually win. It is possible to lose, and lose, and lose – and then win. That was the experience of the Chinese Revolution, I added, and also of the American Revolution.

People were very interested in the United States. I emphasized that we have certain freedoms and living standards in the United States which had been won through great struggles, but that there are also problems. More than once I shared these statistics regarding family ownership of wealth in the United States: the top 1 percent have 40 percent of the wealth, the next 19 percent have 40 percent (which means that the top 20 percent of families own 80 percent), leaving those of us in the bottom 80 percent with only 20 percent of the wealth. Eyebrows invariably went up at this news, although one of my boldest and best informed listeners shot back, “Those figures are also the same for the world as a whole.” Which is basically true.

Someone wanted to know if there was political repression for those having radical ideas. I said that sometimes there had been such systematic repression – for example, during the so-called “McCarthy period” in the 1950s – but that today there is significant freedom of expression and freedom to organize opposition. There are still instances of dissenters being victimized, in one way or the other, by the authorities, but freedom of expression, not political repression, is the dominant reality. I also noted, on the other hand, that great concentrations of wealth translate into a substantial concentration of political power, and into substantial control over the news media, and that in my opinion this blocks genuine democracy. Our culture is distorted by this political-economic inequality, and by a terrible commercialism, yet there is a significant degree of cultural freedom and creativity.

A student told me she likes Hollywood movies very much – more than Chinese movies. She very much wants to see “Brokeback Mountain” because it has such beautiful scenery. She really liked “Forrest Gump” and said she thought it showed positive American values. I agreed with her but told her I thought there were other aspects of American life – for example, racism – that are shown more clearly in other movies, such as “Crash.” She responded that she had just seen this movie and thought it was really good and had urged her mother to see it.

Development “with Chinese Characteristics”

Early in my visit to Wuhan, one student came to my room to discuss and ask questions about the Italian political and cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci. He brought with him a slim volume edited and annotated by Carl Marzani, the very first volume of Gramsci’s writings to be published in the U.S. – *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci* (1957). He wanted to know how to comprehend this passage (from page 59):

There is a question whether the reciprocal translation of different scientific and philosophic terms is a key element of all world views including Marxism, or whether Marxism alone can achieve such translation, while other world views can do so partially or not at all.

Translation of idioms into one another presupposes that a given period of civilization has “basically” an identical cultural expression, even if the idioms of the nations in that civilization are quite different, since they are each determined by a specific national development, culture, philosophic systems, etc. ...

In Marzani’s notations, the reader is told that “to avoid misunderstanding, we are using the word

'idiom' to indicate the cultural ensemble, the ways of thinking and acting in a country at a given time. By corollary the word 'translate' means to transpose, to find correspondence or differentiations among 'idioms' of various countries, or of different periods in the same country."

Gramsci expressed the view that "only in Marxism is such 'translation' possible in an organic manner, whereas in other world views this translation is only a schematic game" (60). One could argue, however, that the cultural and political (not to mention linguistic) differences between the contexts of a Gramsci or a Luxemburg and of a Mao Zedong or a Deng Xiaoping naturally generated quite different understandings of what is meant by "Marxism." Clear communication in even the face-to-face discussion between this student and myself required great attention to the cultural specifics of his society and how these did or did not correspond to those of Gramsci's society (or mine).

Even more so did this pose a difficulty in some of the discussions between Chinese and non-Chinese scholars at the Rosa Luxemburg conference. One obvious aspect of this difficulty was posed by the uneven results of the earnest and hardworking students who heroically sought to provide simultaneous translation of unfamiliar words and concepts during the conference. (Even the name of the person who was the focus of the conference was sometimes translated, from Chinese to English, as "Rosemburg." On the other hand, I have difficulty pronouncing the unfamiliar names of my new-made Chinese friends with whom I had such intense contact - and some of them kindly suggested easier English names or words, such as "Frank" instead of Fu Ke Xin, or "Minus" instead of Lin Xianlan.) Aside from such technical challenges, there were often such differences in ways of thinking that it sometimes felt as if portions of the conference involved a dialogue of the deaf. In the end, my assessment of the conference ended up being far more positive than that, as I will indicate later in this report. But dramatic differences in our respective political cultures definitely posed a challenge.

This is related, it seems to me, to the great stress - in official Chinese pronouncements as well as in some conference presentations - on the need for China to undergo modernization "with Chinese characteristics," to develop Marxism "with Chinese characteristics," and to fashion a market economy "with Chinese characteristics." Also I believe that between one or another person who uses this formulation, different meanings may be intended.

One aspect of "Marxism with Chinese characteristics," for many, was the particular interpretation of Marxism developed by Mao Zedong. In the late 1960s, the ideology employed in China's revolutionary process was tagged by the Chinese themselves as "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought" (M-L-M) - which, to be quite frank, strikes me as a blend of rigid dogmatism and opportunistic flexibility, revolutionary Marxist ideals and dictatorial Stalinist strictures, and a swirling together of universal with specifically Chinese perspectives. It was used as a rationale for such dubious things as the extremist disasters of the Cultural Revolution. Recently "Deng Xiaoping Theory" has been added, reflecting the new, pragmatic shift away from the extremist policies, and also related to the introduction of capitalism as a growing component of the Chinese economy, representing the very different orientation of a man who was Mao's comrade, victim (during the Cultural Revolution) and successor. Consequently, the ideological acronym for the country's official ideology now is "MMD," referring to Marxism, Mao and Deng.

There were some speakers at the Rosa Luxemburg conference whose presentations were permeated with MMD - with such predictable formulations as "grasping the proper relationship between masses, class, party, and leader," and whose touchstone was the authority and wisdom of the regime. At one point, a young student at the conference turned around and showed me something she had just written down in her notebook: "I am so sick of MMD. They talk about it all the time in our classes and it is so boring!" She was especially interested in how I would define the word "freedom" and in the relationship of freedom and democracy in Rosa Luxemburg's thought. There

was another student, however, who very much liked the things I told him about Rosa Luxemburg but was very supportive of the policies of Deng Xiaoping. I asked him what he thought Red Rosa would think of Deng Xiaoping Theory. Without hesitation, and with quite genuine sincerity, he said: "She would support it one hundred percent!"

In some ways, the more important issue involves not different understandings of social theory, but a distinctive historical and socio-economic development taking place in China. This came through most clearly in a substantial discussion I had with yet another student who had an unusually edgy sense of humor and seemed especially bold in his thinking and formulations. When I asked him about Chinese realities, he seemed very frank and well-informed. Only a small minority of the Chinese people are well-off, he told me. The majority are very poor. Inequality is growing and is likely to get worse. The cause of this is the economic development and modernization being driven forward by the introduction of capitalism in China. But the suffering of the great majority is necessary today, he emphasized, so that future generations of China will be able to live a good life.

Both capitalism and socialism must be developed "with Chinese characteristics," he stressed. Chinese civilization has existed for many thousands of years, and its patterns have influenced - and will continue to influence - present and future developments. Down through the centuries, Chinese society was organized as an incredibly durable social order under an all-powerful Emperor who was served by a substantial and highly educated layer of administrators known as the Mandarins. The Mandarins were highly organized, sharing a common ideology, and strictly subordinated to the Emperor. Poor peasants, approximately 80 percent of the population, accepted the absolute authority of the Emperor and his Mandarin administrators because they coordinated life, labor, public works, defense, and other vital activities of the masses of people in China in a way that provided a harmonious life. Over thousands of years, China had sometimes been conquered by less civilized outsiders - but the conquerors had always been absorbed into the more durable system and civilization of imperial China. Today's "Emperor" is the central leadership of the Communist Party; today's "Mandarins" are the contemporary educated, modernized, well-off layer of administrators and professionals (positions for which the students are being groomed). The masses of people are those whose labor and sufferings will be necessary today in order to make possible a good life and harmonious society for all in the future. First capitalism has to be used to build up the wealth of the country, I was told. After this has been accomplished, socialism can be used to share the wealth among the people.

My understanding is that this is consistent with the thrust of Deng Xiaoping Theory.

A good question was one posed by a female student independently in a different conversation with me: "If we build a capitalist economy today, what will make it turn into a socialist economy later. Won't the people who are benefiting from capitalism want to keep it that way?"

Regardless of what happens in the future, the present in China is certainly far from harmonious. In 1980 the top 10 percent of China's people had less than 20 percent of the national income, but in 1995 they had 37 percent, and today they enjoy 45 percent of the China's income. The bottom 10 percent of the people have slid from getting 1.87 percent of national income in 1995 to 1.4 percent today - with the "middle" 80 percent declining roughly from 51 to 45 percent of the income. The great majority of the people live in rural areas, and while 85 percent of these had health care in 1978, more than 80 percent now have no health care. While 70 percent of rural youth finished high school in 1976, by the late 1990s less than 10 percent achieved this. Two hundred million people have migrated to become workers in the cities, although manufacturing jobs fell by 15 percent (from 98 to 85 million) from 1995 to 2002. For that matter, at least 100 million yuan (\$12 billion) are owed to the workers in back wages. In response to the view that China is a socialist country, one angry labor dissident snapped: "Well, hearing such nonsense would reduce a pig to tearful fits of

laughter.”

Such realities suggest that perhaps there is a basis for Gramsci’s contention to be vindicated – that the critical-minded variant of revolutionary Marxism that he, Rosa Luxemburg, and others in “the capitalist West” articulated in the face of oppressive capitalist developments, might find ready translation and resonance in China under today’s conditions.

A front-page story in the *New York Times* (March 12, 2006) has reported, in fact, that the Communist Party national legislature is embroiled in “an ideological debate over capitalism and socialism.” The article speaks of the rise of leftist opposition inside the Chinese Communist Party and also “the continued appeal of socialist ideas in a country where glaring disparities between rich and poor, rampant corruption, labor abuses and land seizures offer daily reminders of how far China has strayed from its official ideology.” The inequality between average incomes of urban and rural residents – which has risen to about 3.3 to 1 – is one of the highest in the world, the Times reports. “Riots have become a fixture of rural life in China – more than 200 ‘mass incidents of unrest’ occurred each day in 2004, police statistics show – undermining the party’s insistence on social stability.”

According to Shanghai University Professor Cheng En Fu (in his panel presentation at the Global Left Forum in New York), some proponents of Deng Xiaoping Theory want China to copy the United States in the same mechanistic manner that many Chinese Communists had once sought to copy the USSR, not facing the fact that U.S. achievements are connected to U.S. social problems. Professor Cheng explained that within the Chinese Communist Party two critical currents have emerged. One involves “traditional Marxists” (presumably “traditional” in the sense of inclining more toward Mao Zedong Thought) hostile to the market reforms and to China’s “opening to the West.” The other critical current is “the new Marxist school” (with which he identifies) that favors further opening to the outside world and the utilization of some market mechanisms, but which argues that capitalist development has gone too far in China today. He says that a privatized economy cannot lead to a “harmonized society,” concluding that the People’s Republic of China should pursue a course of “autonomous innovation.”

For that matter, the *New York Times* reports, Chinese President Hu Jintao has, since becoming head of the Communist Party, “also tried to establish his leftist credentials, extolling Marxism, praising Mao, and bankrolling research to make the country’s official but often ignored socialist ideology more relevant to the current era.”

The Conference

This is the general context within which the “International Conference on Rosa Luxemburg’s Thought and Its Contemporary Value” took place at Wuhan University on March 20-22, 2006.

My estimate is that approximately 100 people were involved in the conference. This includes 53 formally registered participants representing, in addition to China, ten countries: Austria, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Japan, Poland, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In addition to fifteen participants from these countries, there were 38 Chinese participants that included people from eight universities as well as from academic journals and other institutions. There were also a substantial number of students serving as translators and conference aides, and these plus some others sat in on daytime sessions, as well as evening sessions that were organized especially for interested students.

Why was this conference taking place? It seems likely to me that there was more than one reason.

One theory circulating among the international participants was that, in fact, the conference was related to differences within the Chinese Communist Party over the market reforms and their impact. Discussing Rosa Luxemburg's debate with Eduard Bernstein over theoretical revisionism and over his strategy of accommodating to capitalism could be a way of confronting similar questions in contemporary China. The same could be said regarding other questions with which Luxemburg dealt – the accumulation of capital, imperialism, democracy, etc.

The fact that Luxemburg was a Marxist revolutionary who had received praise from Lenin (this praise was cited and quoted many times by Chinese participants at the conference), and yet had publicly expressed certain disagreements with both Marx and Lenin, also may help to legitimize the creation of greater theoretical-ideological space – both for those enthusiastic about the direction of market reforms and for those who are critical. The simple fact of bringing an array of international scholars into dialogue with Chinese scholars is certainly consistent with the Chinese government's desire to advance further its opening to the West and the world.

In addition, academic departments and institutions are often inclined to enhance their authority by showcasing substantial scholarly events, such as international conferences. Nor should one shrug-off the possibility that there is a sincere desire among Chinese scholars to advance scholarship and knowledge.

The poster advertising the conference accurately indicated some of the themes touched on:

1. Rosa Luxemburg's Accumulation of Capital;
2. Rosa Luxemburg and Marx & Lenin;
3. Rosa Luxemburg and Western Marxism;
4. Rosa Luxemburg and the theory of today's socialism and imperialism;
5. Rosa Luxemburg on the process of world history;
6. Rosa Luxemburg and China;
7. Rosa Luxemburg's politics.

Monday and Tuesday contained two morning sessions and two afternoon sessions – each lasting for almost two hours and involving three 20-minute presentations, one 10-minute commentary, and approximately 20-30 minutes of questions and discussion. On Wednesday there were two morning sessions plus a tour of the nearby lake area, then a banquet. While the tastes of the marvelous dishes served at the banquet are difficult to describe here, I do want to give at least a taste of the presentations and discussions at the conference sessions, although it will not be possible to do justice to any of them (or even to summarize all of them) in this brief report.

More than one Chinese presentation sought to bridge any gap between Rosa Luxemburg and Deng Xiaoping Theory. For example, one speaker stressed that the Chinese Communist Party absorbs all positive thinking and opportunities to develop Marxism. But this must be “Marxism with Chinese characteristics,” and the “Washington Consensus” (in favor of “neo-liberal” economic policies) is paralleled by the “Beijing Consensus” in which positive market reforms are being correctly implemented – and the study of Rosa Luxemburg would certainly add to this process. But there was, of course, greater variety than this among the presentations. For example, Li Gonzhen (Professor from Wuhan University) provided a very capable biographical sketch of Luxemburg, then went on to

emphasize that her democratic thought is very important to China as the country opens up to the development of capitalism, and also that her democratic can be helpful for analyzing and learning from the collapse of the USSR and the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe.* While Rosa Luxemburg's democratic and political thought had been criticized by official sources in the Communist countries, he concluded, now is the time to become acquainted with and make use of her ideas.

At a particularly interesting panel on "Rosa Luxemburg's Philosophy of Politics," an eminent scholar from Japan, Professor Narahito Ito (Professor Emeritus of Tokyo's Chuo University and chair of the International Rosa Luxemburg Society) offered comments on Luxemburg's distinctive rejection of nationalism, opposing to this her own internationalist and universalist standpoint; in contrast to Lenin, she refused to interweave support for "self-determination of oppressed nationalities" with a commitment to the struggles of the working class, seeing nationalism as something that divided laboring majorities and drew them into destructive wars – a view that Professor Ito saw as relevant to our own time. A much younger scholar, Estrella Trincado (from Complutense University of Madrid), perceptively suggested that Luxemburg because she was an "outsider" who (as a woman, as a Pole, as a Jew) was so often excluded, would naturally be out of sympathy with such naturally exclusionary ideologies as nationalism, but also sought to explore Luxemburg's general approach to the question of "liberation" from the standpoint of feminist sensibilities. The third presentation of this session was by Lin Yuping (associated with the Rizhao Broadcast TV Station in Shandong), and the translation of his talk was difficult for me to understand, but its title is worth reproducing: "Insisting on the Unification of the Steadfastness of Faith and the Possibility of realizing the Ideal Society – the Revelation Received in the Dispute of the Different Viewpoints between Rosa Luxemburg and E. Bernstein."

It was interesting to see that – unlike most discussions of Rosa Luxemburg – this conference had as one of its primary focuses an intensive exploration of Luxemburg's economic thought. She was the author of a major and quite controversial work on economics, *The Accumulation of Capital*, which sharply criticizes the second volume of Marx's *Capital*, lays out a pioneering analysis of aspects capitalist reproduction that is different from what one finds in Marx, and offers a bold analysis of imperialism that is at odds with that of Lenin and other prominent Marxists. Paul Zarembka (Professor of Economics at the University of Buffalo), proved an ardent champion of Luxemburg's economics, explaining at length and in depth her superiority on the issues in question to Marx, Lenin, Hilferding, Kautsky, Bukharin, Bauer, etc.

Luxemburg-as-economist had other partisans as well. One of the most interesting was Tadeusz Kowalik (Professor of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw). Working in the tradition of famous left-wing economists Oskar Lange, Michal Kalecki, and Josef Steindl, Kowalik's judgment was that Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* was "probably the best book produced by a Marxist and socialist thinker since Karl Marx's magnum opus." (At least as interesting as his comments on Luxemburg's economics, however, was Kowalik's biography: he was a long-time member of the Polish Communist Party until he was expelled for his dissident views — back in the 1950s, he and others like him had covertly circulated, and taken inspiration from, Luxemburg's radical-democratic critique of the Bolsheviks, and later he was a respected advisor to the Solidarity movement in the early 1980s, whose trajectory, however, left him sorely disappointed.) An associate of his, Jan Toporowski (a Research Associate from Cambridge with some practical experience in the banking world), weighed in on "Rosa Luxemburg and the Socialization of Financial Risk," and a dynamic young Riccardo Bellofiore (Professor of Economics from the University of Bergamo) spoke with considerable erudition on "the circuit of money capital" in Luxemburg's economic studies.

Among the Chinese participants, He Ping stressed that Luxemburg and Marx represented two different approaches in analyzing capitalism. Marx "looks at capitalist world development as the

development of productive forces,” whereas Luxemburg “looks at capitalist world development as the expansion of capital and the process in which capitalism captured markets [in non-capitalist regions] in order to survive.” He Ping’s conclusion was that Luxemburg’s thought – while representing a critique and revision of an aspect of Marx’s work – “doesn’t deny Marx’s judgment about the essence of capital accumulation,” but develops it to “disclose profoundly the economy and the politics of the imperialist period.” She saw Luxemburg’s concerns around capital accumulation as relevant to recent Chinese developments and also to the process of globalization.

More polemical in tone was the presentation by Yao Shunliang (Professor from Nanjing University), who argued that Luxemburg “raised a fake question” about, and supplied “a naïve answer” to, an alleged problem in the second volume of *Capital*, where Marx discussed the capitalist economy as “a closed system” which Luxemburg felt was at variance with reality. That is, she misunderstood the fact that Marx was working at a level of analytical abstraction, assuming that he was instead attempting to offer a more empirical description of living reality; what’s more, her own solution of the alleged “problem” was itself a poor description of the living reality. On the other hand, more in line with He Ping’s comments, he believed that Luxemburg was “wrestling with a real problem behind the fake question,” and that the methodology she developed in this effort “can be used to help develop an analysis of globalization.”

Professor Yao Shunliang’s approach seemed to overlap with that of Arndt Hopfman (Director of the Regional South African Office of the Berlin-based Rosa Luxemburg Foundation), although a far more negative critique of her economic thought was well-articulated by Michael Kratka (Professor at the University of Amsterdam), who explored debates around her ideas as involving an important stage in “Marxian Macroeconomics,” and who clearly preferred the approach Marx (and those hewing more closely to that approach) to what he viewed as a mistaken direction taken by Luxemburg.

A very interesting panel focused on Rosa Luxemburg and Western Marxism, with three presentations from Chinese scholars – Ye Ruzian (a somewhat older Professor from Sun Yat-sen University), Li Dianlai (a dynamic Assistant Professor from Wuhan University), and Xiong Min (who is working on her Ph.D. at Wuhan University). The presentations were all of fairly high quality. Ye Ruzian commented that the development of Stalinism had blocked the development of Marxism (especially variants following the lines of Luxemburg’s thought) in certain countries, but that such development had advanced in non-Soviet Europe and has come to be known as “Western Marxism.” He then presented a very capable summary of Perry Anderson’s minor classic *Considerations on Western Marxism* overview, although he indicated that criticisms should be made of Anderson’s work, and that the study by well-known March scholar David McClellan, *Marxism After Marx*, is also worth consulting. Li Dianlai focused on Luxemburg’s conception of democracy, noting that it “comes from her probing into the revolutions in Russia and Western countries” – including her critique of Lenin – and that it influenced such early “Western Marxists” as Karl Korsch, Georg Lukacs, and Antonio Gramsci; he concluded that it adds up to a conception of revolution that is permeated by radical democratic perspectives. Xiong Min provided a thoughtful exploration of the theoretical relationship between Luxemburg and Lukacs (especially dealing with the way Luxemburg is dealt with in the latter’s *History and Class Consciousness*), with attention given to “taking Marxism as a method” and “rebuilding Marxist philosophy,” and probing issues of cultural psychology, class-consciousness, etc.

There were a number of other presentations certainly worthy of note. Fritz Weaver (an Austrian intellectual of great charm, and a prominent member of the International Rosa Luxemburg Society), walked us through “China in the Classic Theory of Imperialism.” Also present were the two editors of the excellent new *Rosa Luxemburg Reader* recently published by Monthly Review Press, Kevin Anderson (Associate Professor of Political Science at Purdue University) and Peter Hudis (Adjunct Lecturer in Philosophy at Chicago’s Oakton Community College), both of whom are especially

influenced by Raya Dunayevskaya's Marxist-Humanist orientation. Anderson offered an excellent overview of "Marx and Luxemburg on Non-western and Pre-capitalist Societies." Hudis presented an interesting comparative analysis of the thought of Luxemburg and Marx. For both Anderson and Hudis, some of Marx's insights are more profound than Luxemburg's, although both would embrace the concluding comment of Hudis that "when the legacy of Luxemburg is explored as part of rethinking what Marx's Marxism means for today, the vibrancy and humanism of her visionary perspective can come to life."

Ottokar Luban (General Secretary of the International Rosa Luxemburg Society) presented something that is typical of him - an incredibly careful, thoughtful, well-documented piece of scholarship. This one was on Rosa Luxemburg's critique of Lenin (1904) and of the Russian Revolution (1918), in which he capably laid out Luxemburg's ideas and laid to rest the myth that she had repudiated her important critique of the Bolsheviks before her death in 1919. (I should add that in the discussion I expressed a dissent regarding what I believe is often an overly sharp opposition of Luxemburg to Lenin - I believe the revolutionary-democratic orientation of each is much closer than is commonly acknowledged.)

The panel on "The Democratic Thought of Rosa Luxemburg" was the one in which I gave my own presentation. The first speaker was given by Ding Junping (Professor at Wuhan University), who commented that "people are creators of history," and that (in regard to the formula "mass-class-party-leader," the only role of the leader is to rouse the masses to carry out their historic task. She emphasized Luxemburg's conception of "the self-centralization on the base of democracy" for the working-class party, and she also said that "if there is no democracy, there will be no freedom in our country." In line with this, she drew attention to Luxemburg's insistence on the need for general elections combined with the free discussion of views. My talk, entitled "The Challenge of Revolutionary Democracy in the Life and Thought of Rosa Luxemburg," overlapped with these points but in some ways went further. There was, when I finished, what seemed to me a pregnant moment of silence before the applause. (This talk can be found on-line at <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/leblanc140306.html>.)

On the other hand, there was the third talk of this session, given by Huang Biao (doctoral candidate at Wuhan University), in which different points were made. Employing a passage from Luxemburg's early essay "Stagnation and Progress in Marxism," he asserted that Marxism is a unified, titanic whole which should not be fragmented, but that it should continue to evolve. Such Marxism has been the achievement of the Chinese Communist Party, through Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory. Only such a party, representing the interests of the majority, is undefeatable. It is especially important to grasp the key relation between leader-party-class-masses. The leader is the representative of the masses' interests, the executor of the masses' will. Of course, leaders should not stand aloof from the masses or act like some kind of overlord. Rosa Luxemburg's thought is certainly worth studying - "even when she is wrong, her words have the glitter of truth."

The commentator for this session happened to be Wang Xinyan, Assistant Dean of the Philosophy School and Director of the Institute of Marxist Philosophy. Expressing gratitude to the three speakers, he noted that in our quest for the contemporary significance of Rosa Luxemburg, we were products of different societies, that each of us came from different backgrounds, and that this was reflected in the different viewpoints expressed - a solid Marxian-Gramscian which, after capably summarizing the presentations, he repeated as the conclusion of his remarks.

In the closing session, He Ping emphasized that China - as it moves in the direction of the market economy and capitalism - is in crisis, and that in an era when China enters of World Trade Organization, it is worth examining Rosa Luxemburg's discussion of the nature of international capital. China's problem is the problem of the world. It is important, in this context, for scholars to

communicate on challenging problems. The discussion has just begun.

What Would Rosa Luxemburg Have Thought?

I don't know what Rosa Luxemburg would have thought of the conference, but I am confident that as a dyed-in-the-wool "trouble-maker" who was always challenging existing power structures, she would have much to say about China and the world.

She would, of course, be a powerful advocate for full freedom of expression, especially "for those who think different," and for the right of those who think differently to be able to organize in order to win others to their ideas. She would favor the most radical democracy, with a full array of free and independent publications, social movements, trade unions, opposition parties, democratic councils in workplaces and communities, etc. She would strongly favor democratic control over the economic resources, institutions, and policies of society. She would press for approaches consistent with the basic human needs for freedom (self-determination), community, and creative labor. She would insist on the utilization of the economy for the purpose of providing sufficient food, clothing, housing, health care, and education for all people in society. She would insist, at the very same time, that this be done in a manner that is consistent with the preservation of our planet's thin film of life.

Related to this last point, she would find it unacceptable that seven of the ten most polluted cities in the world are in China, that 60 percent of China's rivers are classified as unfit for human contact, that 300,000 lives are lost each year as a result of air pollution. She would argue that this is a consequence of undemocratic and market-driven forms of economic development, and that through such means - environmentally speaking - it will not be possible for the majority of China's people to some day live "the good life" currently enjoyed by the top 5 percent without destroying the environment that sustains life on our planet. She would extend this critique to the economic dynamics of the over-consuming, "throw-away" cultures of the advanced capitalist countries. The radical-democratic (socialist) future that Rosa Luxemburg stood for - she would argue - is far more than simply a "nicer" alternative to the status quo: it is necessary for the survival of humanity.* And she would continue to insist, as she always did, that the life-affirming radical-democratic goals can only be realized through life-affirming radical-democratic means.

Such things make Rosa Luxemburg dangerous for all existing power structures, it seems to me, and they also make her incredibly relevant to people in all countries, today more than ever.

Pittsburgh

March 31, 2006